



Barred Lives: Prison Writing by Women
Cross-Listed Undergraduate Elective
Fall Semester

Course Information:

Course Code – LLFA05-BLL-ENGL-1130

Course Duration: 15 weeks

Credit Hours: 4 Credits

Meetings:

Prerequisites: None

Equivalent Courses: None

Exclusive Courses: None

Instructor Information

Dr. Nida Arif, Assistant Professor of English, JSLL

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Office Hours: By appointment

Faculty Biography: Nida Arif received her PhD from Department of English, University of Delhi. Her Doctoral thesis “Literature of Resistance: A Study of Ghassan Kanafani’s Selected Works” is a study of Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani’s critical and fictional works as “Literature of Resistance”.

Homepage: <https://jgu.edu.in/jsll/faculty/dr-nida-arif>

1. Course Description

The carceral experience has long served as a crucible for some of the most urgent and visceral literature in the Western canon, from Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* to the civil rights-era epistles of Martin Luther King Jr. Yet, within this tradition of ‘prison writing,’ the voices of incarcerated women have occupied a historically marginal, often misread, position. Dominant narratives of prison literature—shaped overwhelmingly by male authors such as Oscar Wilde, Jack London, and Eldridge Cleaver—have tended to frame incarceration as a heroic, if tragic, journey of political awakening, solitary masculine rebellion, or existential transcendence. Women’s prison writing, by contrast, emerges from a distinct set of material, social, and ideological conditions: the hyper-surveillance of gendered and sexualized bodies, the systematic severing of maternal bonds, the prevalence

of carceral responses to trauma and survival economies, and the prison's function as a regulatory apparatus for punishing departures from normative femininity. To write from a women's prison is thus not merely to adapt a pre-existing genre, but to forge a poetics from a position of radical intersectional precarity. Women's prison writing constitutes a distinct literary genre defined by a specific dialectic: the struggle for subjective voice against institutional and patriarchal erasure.

2. Course Intended Learning Objectives

a. Course's Intended Learning Objectives/ Aim:

- Familiarize students about basic terminology around women prison writing.
- Familiarize students with theoretical and critical writing around the presence of prison systems in modern states.
- To teach students to distinguish between various forms of literature based on their conditions of production and to learn to study each form based on it.

b. Teaching and Learning Activities:

- Discussion of contextual backgrounds before each text
- In-class reading of texts, may include assigning parts to students and asking them to critically respond to it.
- Encouraging students to look other sources such as newspapers and pamphlets.
- Group Discussion

c. Assessments/ Activities:

- Analytical Pieces
- Response Pieces
- Group Presentation

3. Scheme of Evaluation and Grading

Evaluation breakup: 70% internal assessment; 30% end-semester examination

Internal Breakup: 3 Analytical Pieces (30%), 2 Response Pieces (20%), 1 Group Presentation (10%)

External breakup: Closed-book written examination (30%)

Grade Definition

Letter grade	Percentage of marks
O	80 and above
A+	75-79
A	70-74
A-	65-69
B+	60-64
B	55-59
B-	50-54
P1	45-49
P2	40-44

4. Academic Integrity

- Academic Honesty, Cheating, and Plagiarism: All assignments for this course are closed-book. Exceptions may be made, in which case the student will be informed accordingly. Since answers are intended to test subjective analytical skills, no use of third-party software (such as ChatGPT) is allowed. Students may cite secondary material (essays, scholarly books, Internet resources) with due signposting. Students will be alerted to these at the beginning of the course.
- Participation/Attendance Policy: A minimum attendance of 75% must be maintained. Absences arising out of medical reasons should be informed to the JSLI Office (jslloffice@jgu.edu.in) with supporting documentation (medical certificates from an established clinic or doctor's chamber) within 2 weeks of the absence. Students are expected to participate in class discussions.
- Use of phone/texting/laptop: Students may use their laptop devices to take down notes and to write assignments. Texting and phone use while class is in session are best avoided and may be penalized if distracting to the instructor.

5. Keyword Syllabus

6. Course Material

Unit 1: Introduction to Women's Prison Writing

Essential Reading:

Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*. Vintage.

Scheffler, Judith A. (eds.) 2000. *Introduction to Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings 200 to the Present*. The Feminist Press.

Suggested Readings:

Foucault, Michel. 1995. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. RHUS

Grass, Sean. 2003. *The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian*. Routledge.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1992. *Prison Notebooks*. Columbia UP.

Unit 2: The Vindicated Self

Essential Readings:

Excerpts from:

El Saadawi, Nawal. 1986. *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. Translated by Marilyn Booth, U of California Press.

First, Ruth. 2009. *117 Days*. Penguin Publications.

Suggested Readings:

Excerpt from:

Azad, Maulana Abul. 2003. *Sallies of Mind*. Shipra Publications.

Wilde, Oscar. 1905. *De Profundis*.

Unit 3: Incarcerated Bodies

Essential Reading:

Aguilar, Mila D. 1996. "Lizard of Bicutan." *Journey: An Autobiography in Verse (1964-1995)*. U of the Philippines Press.

Metzger, Diane Hamill. 2000. "Tapwater Coffee." *Wall Tappings*. The Feminist Press.

Mendelssohn, Anna. 2020. "Abschied." Edited by Sara Crangle. Shearsman Books.

Mendelssohn, Anna. 2020. "Strictly Personal." *I'm Working Here: The Collected Poems of Anna Mendelssohn*. Edited by Sara Crangle. Shearsman Books.

Suggested Readings:

Wilde, Oscar. 1898. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"

Faiz, Faiz Ahmad. 2009. "Evening in Prison." *100 Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. Translated by Sarvat Rehman. Abhinav Publications.

Faiz, Faiz Ahmad. 2009. "Meeting in Prison." *100 Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. Translated by Sarvat Rehman. Abhinav Publications.

Unit 4: Torture

Essential Reading/Viewing:

Rivabella, Omar. 1986. *Requiem for a Woman's Soul*.

Brechner, Alvaro (dir.). 2018. *A Twelve Year Night*.

Suggested Reading/Viewing:

Han, Kang. 2016. *Human Acts*. Translated by Deborah Smith. Granta.

Gibson, Mel (dir.). 2004. *The Passion of the Christ*.

7. Session Plan

Session	General Topic	Readings	Approach/Pedagogy
Week 1	The Carceral	Foucault's <i>Discipline and Punish</i>	Reading & Discussion
Week 2	The Carceral Archipelago	Foucault's <i>Discipline and Punish</i> Grass' <i>The Self in the Cell</i>	Reading & Discussion
Week 3	Women's Prison Writing	Introduction to <i>Wall Tappings</i>	Reading & Discussion Assignment 1: Analytical Think-Piece
Week 4	Gramsci	<i>Prison Notebooks</i>	Reading & Discussion

Week 5	The Self Vindicated	Excerpt from: El Saadawi, Nawal. 1986. <i>Memoirs from the Women's Prison</i> . Translated by Marilyn Booth, U of California Press.	Reading & Discussion
Week 6	The Self Vindicated	Ruth First's <i>117 Days</i> .	Reading & discussion Assignment 1: Analytical Think-Piece
Week 7	The Self Vindicated	Excerpt from <i>Sallies of Mind</i> Oscar Wilde's <i>De Profundis</i>	Reading & Discussion
Week 8	Mila D. Aguilar	"Lizard of Bicutan"	Assignment 2: Analytical Think-Piece
Week 9	Diane Metzger	"Tapwater Coffee"	Reading & discussion
Week 10	Anna Mendelssohn	"Abschied" "Strictly Personal"	Reading & discussion
Week 11	Prison Writing & Poetry	Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"	Reading & discussion Assignment 3: Analytical Think-Piece
Week 12	Prison Writing & Poetry	Faiz Ahmed Faiz's "Evening in Prison" Faiz Ahmed Faiz's "Meeting in Prison"	Reading & discussion Assignment 4: In-class Presentation
Week 14	Torture	Movie Screening: <i>A Twelve Year Night</i>	Reading & discussion
Week 15	Torture	<i>Requiem for a Woman's Soul</i>	Reading & discussion

Week 16	Torture	Han Kang's <i>Human Acts</i>	Reading & discussion Assignment 5: Analytical Think-Piece
Week 15	Revision		Reading & Discussion Assignment 6: Analytical Think-Piece