

**Navigating Unclaimed Trauma: A critical study of Iftikhar Gilani's  
*My days in prison***

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**Abstract:** In the past, the Greek word trauma meant 'a physical wound,' but as knowledge and understanding have grown through scientific and humanities studies, people have come to realise trauma encompasses more than physical ailments. It has taken a long time to comprehend trauma as more than just a physiological condition and '*is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more,*' according to the American Psychology Association. In literary studies, trauma is defined as '*any excitation from outside that is powerful enough to break through the protective shield*' (Freud, 33) in *Behind the Pleasure Principle*. Traumatic events cause emotional, cognitive, and physical pain for those who experience them, in addition to intrusive thoughts, memory lapses, and negative self-talk. The victims show up symptoms like acute fear, anxiety, emotional numbing, mood swings, guilt, insomnia, and panic attacks. The psychological study deals with trauma as a mental ailment and seeks to cure it with medicine. Similarly, in a literary setting, trauma studies address trauma and aid in recovering from it through writing, arts, and narrative.

Trauma studies in literary context is an interdisciplinary field that explores psychological, emotional, and social impacts of traumatic experiences. Numerous studies in both literary and scientific contexts have emerged under this prominent genre. Sigmund Freud is a significant contributor to the development of trauma studies, and his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is among the most important publications in the study of trauma. Freud and his work provided a solid foundation for subsequent trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Bessel Van der Kolk, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felmen, and Gayathri Spivak Chakraborty. Some of the important concepts dealt with in trauma studies are repression, 3-phase recovery (safety, remembrance, and reconnection), unclaimed experiences, generational trauma, complex narrative dispute, holocaust resilience, somatic memory witness, and testimony.

Cathy Caruth is one of the pioneer figures in the field of trauma studies in literary and humanistic approaches. Her works include *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and*

*History, Literature in the Ashes of History, and Listening to Trauma*, through which she provides an in-depth and comprehensive evaluation of every aspect of trauma. The work *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Trauma, offers critical insights into how trauma should be studied. Trauma, according to her, is ‘*the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.*’ (Caruth, 7) The work establishes a solid basis for enlightened conceptions of trauma that are used in the fields of literature, history, and culture. She discusses concepts like the repression of trauma, unclaimed experiences of a traumatic event, collective memory, generational trauma or historical trauma, the importance of ethical listening, and the fragmented narrative of a traumatic event.

Events like war, personal tragedies like losing a loved one, witnessing and experiencing physical and sexual assault, a life-altering accident, and many more can be the source of traumatic experiences. Incarceration is one of the worst physical and mental experiences for inmates and their families. Often the hardships of the inmates are recorded in the form of prison narratives and writings. Compared to other forms of writing, prison narratives are not given adequate critical attention.

*My Days in Prison* by Iftikhar Gilani is a memoir through which the author takes the readers through the days of his imprisonment for seven months. Gilani, the Delhi bureau chief of Kashmir Times, a Jammu-based daily, was incarcerated from 9th June 2002 to 13th January 2003 under the non-bailable act, the Official Secret Act (OSA), with accusations of possessing out-of-date information on Indian troop deployments. The overnight arrest, the proceeding in the case, and the harrowing days of his confinement in the Tihar prison are discussed in the memoir. Using the theoretical insights of Cathy Caruth, the paper attempts to analyse the traumatic experiences of incarceration.

As Caruth discusses in her work *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma Narrative and History*, trauma is an overwhelming experience triggered by a sudden or catastrophic incident. In her words, trauma ‘*is not locatable in the basic violent or original occurrence in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.*’ (Caruth, 4) Caruth emphasises throughout her work that a traumatic event does not occur in a sequential manner but rather appears to be an unclaimed experience or memory that is left unidentified in the survivor's mind, leaving a gap between the event and its response. The response to traumatic experiences ‘*occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.*’ (Caruth, 11) The urge to fill in the gaps is characterized by repetition compulsion, a phrase coined by Freud that describes how the mind unknowingly revisits the past through various mediums such as flashbacks, hallucinations, and dreams. Repetition compulsion is a delayed response, as ‘*immediate understanding may not happen.*’ (Caruth, 11) The mind revisits and recovers from the past at its own pace. The body and the mind keep score of the survivor's traumatic past and serve

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as a medium for the unclaimed experiences to be revisited in an unexpected period of life. Caruth uses this concept to emphasise the importance of mentally experiencing situations multiple times in order to bridge the gap and overcome them. Such unfilled gaps, or unclaimed events, exist in the minds of many convicts, and the majority of them suffer from the haunting past of their incarceration, as well as the influence of the catastrophic experiences they have had behind the walls. Incorporating the above-mentioned ideas into the prison setting, Gilani's *My Days in Prison* can be read to understand the traumatic experiences of incarceration.

In the outlook it might appear that the inmates live a normal life after release, but when the experiences of the past come back to haunt them, they are unable to carry out their everyday life. Inside the prison, extremely harsh and brutal punishments are employed to discipline inmates and force them to amend the accusations levelled against them. In the narrative *My Days in Prison*, Gilani, accused of being an anti-national linked with the ISI, is beaten black and blue by jail officials and inmates upon his admission. Physical wounds in the body from violence take a long time to heal. Even after his release, the scars from the physical torture remind him of the days he was treated in prison, producing a horrific recall to the past.

Mental trauma can cause more harm to inmates than physical violence. Gilani's prison memoir discusses the investigation that eventually led to his incarceration and illustrates the mental anguish he faced within the prison. For example, Gilani's house was raided, and he was imprisoned in the early hours of the morning, and the impact continues to exist after his release from prison, as a knock on the door or ringing of the doorbell in the early hours agitates him and causes a sense of terror for a prolonged period. This is an excellent example of how unclaimed experience settles in the minds of convicts and returns unexpectedly to haunt them.

After being arrested, all convicts must face a strip search every time they enter the jail, even if they '*return from the outside world, either from the mulaqat room or from court.*' (Gilani, 45). This type of treatment creates a lasting effect on the convicts' minds since they are mocked and looked down on by every authority in the room. Gilani emphasises how '*torture need not be physical. For many, their threshold of pain may be very high, but the humiliation of being paraded naked in front of members of one's family and friends and interrogators is far more difficult to endure.*' (Gilani, 36) Most inmates suffer with immense psychological trauma as a result of the embarrassment caused by nudity, and many people develop a habit of covering themselves with multiple layers of clothing following their release as a response to the difficult event.

Isolation inside the prison is another ordeal that leads to mental distress and depression. As soon as he entered the Tihar prison, Gilani was taken to the isolation cell in a filthy, stinking, blood-soaked shirt. It was an eight-by-six-foot room in measurement with an uncovered, dirty toilet. The inmates in the isolation cell are not allowed to speak to anyone,

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do not have a view of the other cells of the prison, and do not enjoy the privilege of taking a walk around the prison premises. Staying in such a solitary confinement cell, especially in the night with the agony of unexpected arrest, Gilani affirms how *'the true meaning of socialisation and companionship dawned on me compellingly, and I realized that nothing is more dehumanizing than the absence of human company'* (Gilani, 46). Even after his release, the recollection of his days in isolation and loneliness haunts him, and the fear of losing those around him appears to be the outcome of his difficult past. The depressing, monotonous, and absurd life inside prison is reclaimed through mediums like flashbacks or fragmented thought.

The impact of trauma can be visible in the way the inmates communicate. In general, Caruth defines the fragmentation in the narratives of the victims who experienced traumatic events as quite common, as they lack a free flow in recollecting the harsh experiences they had to undergo. Gilani's work acts as the perfect example of fragmented narratives, as it can be attributed to the traumatic experiences that he underwent in the prison. The memories of those traumatic experiences have a huge impact on the way he narrates his life inside prison. There is constant transition from one incident to another or from one character to another, as he talks about experiences, people, and incidents he had witnessed and suffered in a period as short as seven months. For example, while he explains about his days in Tihar, he drops in the idea of isolation, then moves on to talk about the pickpocket criminals he met inside, and then talks about the plight of transgender people, and from there he goes on to talk about the IGNOU ward for education. These disjointed and non-linear narratives are prominently visible in the life writings of inmates as they continue to carry the baggage of trauma for the rest of their lives.

Further, the harsh and unpleasant conditions inside the prison depersonalise, separate, and alienate convicts from their familiar surroundings as the unclaimed events from the prison days undoubtedly instill a sense of depersonalisation and inescapability in the victims. The agony of waiting for freedom from such hostile conditions continues both during and after release, because they do not believe it or are too overwhelmed to comprehend it. When the dreams of freedom become a reality, *'Everything appeared to be unreal, unlikely, as in a dream.'* (Gilani, 5) The tired bodies and souls of the convicts struggle to accept reality, terrified of losing their freedom again. The familiar surroundings and people appear to be new, and it takes time and space to adapt to the outside world and the individuals who have suffered during their absence.

The inmates, along with the family, go through a lot of traumatic experiences during the time of imprisonment and after release. They are *'systematically excluded from full participation in society,'* says Lee Ragsdale, the *director* of the Re-entry Guide Initiative for the Education Justice Project (EJP) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The convicts and their families are subjected to a great deal of suffering as they are never recognised and integrated into society. As convicts suffer inside the walls, so do their families in society. Gilani addresses this issue in his work while describing how his wife was alienated

immediately after his arrest, while she was *'emotionally drained and utterly focused, she went to the balcony and called a neighbour. The lady came out, but immediately her husband summoned her inside. And that's how it was to remain for months... Aanisa's and my children had to live like outcasts in the locality. Doors were shut in their faces, and children pulled away and looked up inside their homes if they dared to venture into the compound.'* (Gilani, 4) When she had come to visit him inside the prison, *'she was looking pale and fatigued'* (Gilani, 58) as *'her life outside was not without problems either. She herself had become a pariah in the neighbourhood.'* (Gilani, 59) The children of the inmates face the wrath of society and are forced to endure the impact and the trauma of the incarceration of the family members. Gilani grieves about how *'the media had scared the whole neighbourhood to such an extent that they did not allow even their children to mix with my four-year-old daughter'* (Gilani, 59).

The impact of trauma is not always just individual, but it is also experienced on a collective level. In the prison context, the inmates, along with the family, go through a lot of traumatic experiences during the time of imprisonment and after the time of release. In most cases, *'the seemingly indefinite incarceration of Muslim convicts, especially those involved in the bomb blasts case, has wrecked them and their families'* (Rajasekaran), according to the article in Frontline, which highlights the biased treatments of the Muslim convict. The impact of each traumatic occurrence can generate identical agony and grief in the minds of those who experience it, even when the problem is different. Extreme abuse is inflicted on some communities of people inside the walls, making their already difficult prison days even more horrifying. Gilani's work points out the problem of communal degradation inside the prison. In a nation where only 15 percent of the population are Islam, the disproportionately double the number of the inmates of the community in Tihar are subjected to different torments because of the minority status associated with them. Besides the physical punishments, they are subjected to constant mental pressure, as any issue in the world outside causes great difficulties inside. Gilani, during his imprisonment, *'was witness to a most shocking incident.'* (Gilani, 92) When a rumour spread that *'a war had broken out between India and Pakistan'* (Gilani, 93), all the Muslim inmates were detained separately for a day. In addition to this humiliation, the two small mosques inside the prison premises were demolished, with ingenious reasons. All these practices are carried out on a general and wrong perception that certain community people are anti-nationals. Gilani's arrest too was based on the most notorious common perceptions, and many are being constantly subjected to incarceration on such a basis, leaving behind an impact on the community as a whole. Gilani, who feared the constant threats and re-experiencing the traumas of the prison, has fled from the country and now lives in Turkey.

Caruth's work emphasises how *'listening to both the language of trauma and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering'* (Caruth, 9) is important in supporting victims in overcoming traumatic situations. She strongly believes that expressing feelings can be an excellent medium for overcoming traumatic experiences. She dedicates a section of her work to the French film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), in which the female protagonist discusses

and demands to be heard about her horrendous days in Hiroshima during and after the blast. Listening and empathising might be the most and least helpful things one can do for someone who is going through trauma or pain, as '*Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival*' (Caruth, 58). Prison narratives are a fantastic way to listen to and empathise with prisoners, allowing them to express their difficult experiences and their survival after such hard experiences. It could be construed that Gilani's documentation of his experiences of prison in the form of a book could have given him a sense of satisfaction vowing to the thought he was listened to adequately and empathetically.

A prison narrative, like *My Days in Prison*, explains how the trauma of jail and its surroundings can be as unpleasant and difficult as any other forms of traumatic events. The mental and physical agony of the prison and its environment that the convicts suffered from occupies a large place in their minds, which lingers unclaimed until the distressing events are relived in the mind over and over again. Caruth's theoretical insights can help delve deeper into the situations described in Gilani's prison narrative.

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