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Voices from Behind Bars: Identity in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich”

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Abstract

This study investigates the issue of identity in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisowicz”, a foundational work of prison literature that shows the daily hardships of a prisoner in a Soviet labor camp under Stalinist oppression. This study concentrates mainly on how the story shows the psychological and existential struggle for identity inside the degrading boundaries of imprisonment. Utilizing a thorough analysis of Ivan Denisovich Shukhov's experiences, the paper discusses how the book addresses the loss of personal autonomy and the strategies by which inmates establish and keep their sense of self during great persecution. Using sociology, psychology, and literary analysis, among other academic frameworks, the study investigates how inmates negotiate their identities in the face of systematic assault, humiliation, and forced labor. It also examines the role of solidarity among inmates and how personal agency and story formation could be weapons for survival and resistance. Finally, highlighting the issue of identity in prison literature helps giving voice to the universal human battle for dignity and autonomy, the psychological complexity of incarceration, and how it affects personal identity.

Keywords: identity, prison literature, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.



أصوات من خلف القضبان: الهوية في رواية "يوم في حياة إيفان دينيسوفيتش" لألكسندر سولجينتسين



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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة مسألة الهوية في رواية "يوم في حياة إيفان دينيسوفيتش" لألكسندر سولجينتسين، وهي عملٌ أساسيٌّ في أدب السجون، يُظهر المصاعب اليومية لسجين في معسكر عملٍ سوفيتيٍّ تحت وطأة القمع الستاليني. تُركّز هذه الدراسة بشكلٍ رئيسٍ على كيفية عرض القصة للصراع النفسي والوجودي من أجل الهوية داخل أسوار السجن المهيمنة. باستخدام تحليلٍ مُعمّقٍ لتجارب إيفان دينيسوفيتش شخوف، تُناقش الورقة البحثية كيف يُعالج الكتاب فقدان الاستقلالية الشخصية والاستراتيجيات التي يُرسّخ بها السجناء شعورهم بذاتهم ويُحافظون عليه خلال فترات الاضطهاد الشديد. باستخدام علم الاجتماع وعلم النفس والتحليل الأدبي، من بين أطرٍ أكاديميةٍ أخرى، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تفاوض السجناء على هوياتهم في مواجهة الاعتداء المُمنهج والإذلال والعمل القسري. كما يتناول دور التضامن بين السجناء، وكيف يمكن للفاعلية الشخصية وتكوين القصص أن تكونا سلاحين للبقاء والمقاومة. وأخيرًا، يُسهم تسليط الضوء على قضية الهوية في أدب السجون في إبراز النضال الإنساني العالمي من أجل الكرامة والاستقلال، والتعقيد النفسي للسجن، وتأثيره على الهوية الشخصية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية، أدب السجون، ألكسندر سولجينتسين، يوم في حياة إيفان دينيسوفيتش.

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العمل الأصلي بشكل صحيح

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1. Introduction

The literature on prison is a corpus of creative works revolving around incarceration that has been studied exhaustively from various perspectives, such as sociology, psychiatry, and history. This body of literature is written mainly by those who have been or have known people subjected to imprisonment. With its distinguished ability to portray lives torn from their natural courses, this literature exposes imprisoned lives, taken out of the usual environment. Producing its modes, symbols, and language, it alludes uniquely to the estrangements of the prison environment. The result is a critical chorus raised against the legitimacy of the penal order. Literary figurations of prison feature a social death that finds a self in its initial formation stage. Civil death exacerbates the resocialization process of 'penal subjects.' It is arduous to imagine the jangle of keys, the shouts of guards, and the clamor of prisoners outside poems, novels and plays. Thus, the various manifestations of imprisonment within literature and arts are not contiguous to the authentic oppressive experience of the prison. (James, 2023)

The systematic awareness of possibilities implied by the growth in the prison literature can bring extraordinary, new perspectives to existing works. As commonly acknowledged, the exploratory nature of this paper around a piece of fiction can open up a text to complex hermeneutic and historical dimensions. Critical receptions of any literary piece can aid in rehabilitating the relevance of prison feelings and the fundamental human rights within readerly circulations. Its primary contemporary focus makes newer work particularly fruitful in explicating as yet unaddressed features of texts and circumambience that nurtured them. Similar papers, rich bodies of literature concerning the Gulag archipelago have cast a light on this piece. (Kirk, 2023)

While previous studies have analyzed the narrative's social critique of Stalinist totalitarianism and the Gulag system, there has been insufficient focus on how this literature reflects the struggle for identity and personhood within the confines of oppressive systems. Revealing the terrible reality of incarceration, particularly the psychological and social dehumanizing prisoners go through, prison literature is a necessary instrument. Still, the fight for identity in this setting has not been thoroughly investigated. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisowicz* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn offers a convincing prism to view this problem since it emphasizes the

psychological, emotional, and social difficulties the protagonist, Ivan Denisovich, and other detainees in the Soviet labor camps confront. Examining the junction of prison, personal identity, and narrative construction in Solzhenitsyn's work seeks to bridge this gap.

This research aims to investigate how *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich's* Portrayals of prison life reveals how incarceration affects inmate identity

2.To explore how Solzhenitsyn uses narrative and character development to depict the struggle for individual identity within the dehumanizing environment of the Soviet labor camps.

3.To analyze the broader implications of identity construction in prison literature, comparing the struggles of Ivan Denisovich to those of other incarcerated characters in global literary traditions.

4. To investigate, in the context of social death and oppression, how interpersonal bonds and solidarity could assist by shaping and defending identity.

Emphasizing individual freedom, dignity, and surviving values, one can critically assess the ethical and philosophical questions around imprisonment.

This study is significant for several reasons:

1. Contributing to the understanding of prison literature: By focusing on *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, this research fills a gap in the existing body of literature on prison narratives, particularly about how incarceration affects the sense of self and identity.

2.Elaborating on the issue of identity in literature: Examining identity in the framework of repressive governments is important for clarifying the general human condition under circumstances of great suffering and grasping the psychological experiences of prisoners.

3.Revealing the power of narrative in identity formation: By analyzing how Solzhenitsyn's characters assert their identities through their actions, words, and relationships, this study will show the role of literature in preserving personal autonomy, even in the most brutal circumstances.

4.Interdisciplinary relevance: This results of the study are useful for people in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and political science since they shed light on the psychological coping-by methods used by persons exposed to systematic violence and the degrading consequences of incarceration.

5. Current relevance: This paper offers a relevant analysis of the ethical consequences of prison time and the fight for an individual identity under repressive governments,

given the present debate on political imprisonment, human rights, and the justice system overall.

2. Literature Review

Prison literature has been considered a special category of works that reflects the prison life dire and painful experiences. Due to the lack of scholarly attention, however, prison literature, especially from the perspective of identity struggle, has never been adequately addressed. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is a representative of prison literature that is intended to cast a beam of light on the controversial nature of the Gulag system and the dehumanization of prisoners during Stalinist totalitarianism. Due to the failure of censorship, the work was first ever published in *Novyi Mir* in 1962, the first publication in the Soviet Union focusing on real life in the Soviet labor camps. The portrayal of the malnourished, frozen, and beaten prisoners aroused various criticism from the prison authorities, but it also brought Solzhenitsyn to the attention of the international literary community. *One Day* was transmitted via clandestine copying and circulation, which enabled uncensored awareness and exposure of Soviet political repression (Dobson, 2005). To some extent, this is the first epoch-making Russian contemporary history written by literature.

The psychological ordeal and social criticism in *One Day* are also demonstrated in the literature on prison life. The loss of control over every aspect of life is reflected in Franz Kafka's *Trial* and *Colony*, while the desire to compose (Neal et al., 2021) his own life story enables Daniel Defoe's castaway to recover his grip on his identity. Prisons have, by and large, been designed to erode confidence in choice or esteem for the self. Thus, the writings or narrations of inmates often depict their struggle to maintain something akin to personhood in the world that challenges it. This struggle goes on despite the bold attempt to humiliate and suppress individual will, and it is varied as widely as its participants since it etches abstract and private pain into cultural and social history. (Morán et al.2024)

2- 1 Prison Literature

Several years after the publication of such accounts, the prison literature exposes the human condition at its lowest point, when society has withdrawn its concern for the welfare of the individual. In these dark places, faith, hope, and kinship assume an existential importance in the struggle for the most fundamental needs of being.

Writing can be the prisoners' final bulwark against despondency and identity loss. (Arturovna2021)

Though he does not address the most famous work in his analysis, Ruth Gould comes closer to the concerns of this study than its title might suggest. Over a four-decade career in scholarship and fiction, he has written extensively on the procreative potentials of what today is called carceral literature. The stories, songs, poems, and plays penned by and legitimized by incarcerated authors are more than merely eyewitness accounts of experiences. They are more than makeshift talismans against violations of constitutional law. Prison literature is nothing less than intransigent confrontation with bare life (Ruth Gould, 2017).

The ongoing discussion has concentrated on the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, particularly analyzing figures including Poe, Dickens, and Quincey. Given his observation that "There had been previous novels and memoirs," stressing the extensive literary background that shaped the works Gould created, it is necessary to identify his literary antecedents.

This fact starkly contrasts how much his minders might wish to excoriate the literary legacy of the nobly born intellectual politico. In this nuanced exploration, he also boosts the creative precedents of the incarceration prose of notable authors, which, notably, remained unpublished during his lifetime. A compelling example is Amina, translated winsomely as *The Blue Castle Outside the Winds*, which highlights the significant contributions made to literature despite the struggles faced by many writers during that challenging era. Furthermore, an enormous corpus of texts exists in both Azeri and Farsi, which were conceived in the crucible of the Islamic Republic's inanity, especially around the tumultuous decade surrounding the time of the Islamic Revolution. These works of literature show the complexity of that historical period and provide strong stories highlighting the critical need for literature to form cultural narratives and preserve historical memory under hardship (Balogh & Klaudia, 2022).

2.2. Historical Overview

As old as prison, prison literature appears in the literature of many societies as early as their first written texts. However, only in historical periods in which prisons became a topical issue of literary discussion prison literature turned into a literary genre. Its institutionalization into an independent literary genre enhances the societal imagination on the topic, parallel to the social perception of confinement. Such periods are characterized by top-to-bottom social critique of confinement. Prison

literature maintains its position as a prominent socio-political cleavage in such periods.

In consequence, prison literature flourishes in counter-cultural environments, too. The examination of classical prison literature shows that the predominant perspective combines imprisonment as punishment and the potential of an unmitigated social critique (Ruth Gould, 2017). In terms of content, the development of prison literature contributes to the comprehension of imprisonment, prison, and punitive institutions (its representation, social perception, sociological interpretation, etc.) since it is distinguished sufficiently from other renderings of the same concept thanks to its consistent reflection, relative endurance, and mutual influence on public perception. Not only are prisons traditionally depictions of desolation and degradation, increasing focus in areas of participants' grim isolation, but they are also sites that confine narrative to the interior, and thieves in confinement correspondingly play crucial roles in prison texts. Throughout the literary tradition, various genres consider the possibilities that confinement in imprisonment dictates to writing—from conversations that occur through latticed windows to novelistic representations of the inhospitable conditions faced more generally. This section explores the recurrence of confinement within literature—verses, tales, and novels written by numerous authors in differing genres and languages—and the cultural narratives created around prisoners, telling both of collaborative creativity and of brutal disenfranchisement (Dobson, 2005). Readers are informed, and the research on incarceration shapes the specifics of lyrical evocations and fiction. (Hall, 2021)

3. The Struggle for Identity

For humanity, the issue of identification has always been rather vital. who am I? For what are we? How did each of us come to be? Besides, who exactly are we and others referring to as "us"? For many fields, these sociological, psychological, existential, and even post-modern discussions have been vital throughout its unintentionally long and checkered past. How someone views his or her image of others and himself influences and also results from the larger picture of what it means to be among others (Kit Tay et al., 2016).

This research seeks to glean how the construction and deconstruction of identity are realized in one work in particular. As indicated in its title, the emphasis of this text to undergo analysis is on people who, through no choice of their own or by

magnificently poor coincidence, have found themselves silencing a considerable number of the messages their vocal cords can produce. It is requested that any critics' barbs aimed at the following observations be constrained to the author and his verbosity on the subject matter along with the adduced text and her interpretive acrobatics on behalf of it. Examining how subaltern voices drown out others when attempting to apprehend a narrative can make self and communal perception more acute when confronting altitude sickness.

The initial question concerns identity construction within and between people subjected to an all-encompassing situation in which all strive to be with as little effort as possible. How can the sense of self be constructed in such a place, and in what ways does one find themselves perturbing the desirably low profile stance that they labor to maintain? Having been a near-constant participant in solitude in the time that has elapsed from the haughty, undergraduate days of misguided masculinity, the data for these inquiries are gravely limited. However, empathy from heavily anthropological readings and the construction and derivation from this lack is the lifeblood of nearly all academic and investigative disciplines. From this piecemeal, inferred knowledge emerges that silence can be catastrophic to identity preservation (Spadafora, 2015). On the flip side of such coinage, a vocalization that radiates louder than the convivial mumble of the masses jeopardizes survival methods in place. The panopticon effects of the camp, then in question the residence of the protagonist Shukhov, demand the respect and delicate touch of an archaeologist rather than the boom of a town crier, for speaking out against such hushed directives can crush the determined individual or group into a splendidly inane pastiche of wafting souls clinging to the barbed, electrified tendrils that still conduct thrice daily sustenance.

3.1. Identity in Prison Literature

Identity is a prevalent theme throughout literature regarding the prison experience in Western and non-Western cultures. This section of the present analysis examines the broader implications of identity in prison literature concerning several works that should interest other writers. This analysis hopes to confront stereotypes about those forced to live behind bars through the exploration of identity. The literature on incarceration consistently presents the idea that life in prison is a cosmic joke – a random chance of the universe to debase those who have run afoul of the law. Repeated discussions of prisoner narratives suggest that the inmate population is heterogeneous – there are murderers and thieves, but there are also political prisoners, prisoners of war, those imprisoned for their beliefs, for defending themselves, and

for defying unjust laws; as such, literary narratives also confront societal perception of prisoners and prisoners' perceptions of themselves as they navigate a world in which they are the lowest of the low – something that must be regulated, controlled, and destroyed (Spadafora, 2015). Individual identity in the face of systemic dehumanization is a theme that may be of interest, and interviews with incarcerated individuals establish that, though survival is paramount, so is self-worth. Like Amal, the incarcerated often find that the attributes they valued before imprisonment become hindrances – Somen, the doctor released years before his sentence ended, ultimately kills himself in despair at the new human he is forced to become. Incarceration imposes discipline on its inhabitants regardless of their guilt, and imprisoned characters negotiate how they may begin to value themselves again in a world that seeks their destruction. This analysis hopes to illuminate patterns in a broader literary discourse by exploring how individuals in diverse narratives quest for self-acceptance and meaning in a reality that excludes such gestures (Devaliant et al., 2018).

The general examination of various texts can concern itself with several questions about how characters negotiate identity in a way only possible in literature. It is interesting that even with the immense disparity in each society's punishment system across time, class, and culture, there is consistent individuality in incarcerated characters – each strives in distinct ways to forge an identity under severely hopeless and precarious circumstances. In discussing identity formation in a 'no-exit' environment, the emphasis is on the active agency of prisoners to become something they consider valid and to wrestle control of self-worth in a world meant to deny they have any. Such transformation is the result of a profoundly ingrained resilience in characters, and it is precisely the improbable forging of bonds in a cesspool of despair that fosters the creation of self-worth and self-definition previously impossible in more complimentary circumstances. Furthermore, there is the transformative power of the storytelling genre on notions of identity as prisoners struggle to assert their narratives and value in a discourse meant to deny they are human. Given rehabilitation's emphasis on a new identity on the Day a sentence is passed, this analysis also hopes to situate the struggle for identity as a critical concern in broader prison literature in hopes of further work. (Addison et al.2022)

3.2. Shukhov's Identity in One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

"How can you be beaten? You're a brick wall," Vdovushkin told him in admiration. Vdovushkin was not there that Day. Ivan Denisovich answered him as though nothing had happened: "Here I am. What can I do?" (Dobson, 2005). The other Zeks were looking at him in surprise. They had not expected him to take it like that. They had never seen such a thing before, someone who could put up with it when people laid into him. That was why everyone called him Shukhov. He could rustle up a small quantity of something for himself in places others had not even looked and never tipped the others off where to find it. The daily life of the Zeks in the camp is brutally organized and disciplined to crush the will and inspire despair. Often in subtle allusions or casual dialogues, Shukhov's battle to keep his identity inside this machine permeates the narrative. One of the most bizarre occurrences in camp life is the slow elimination of personal names. Responding to Fetyukov, Shukhov discloses his real name, Ivan Denisov. A few pages later, asked by the foreman Tsezar, he hides the same secret, signifying an autonomy lost to the government.

His most determined declaration of resistance comes in the last episode, where he refuses the opportunity to become a foreman, to become a hated chief himself. Throughout the story, Shukhov defies the dehumanization imposed by the authorities; he cherishes every proof of his uniqueness and his individual will.

So much has been written on *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* that it is nearly impossible to imagine adding any new response to works of criticism already in existence. It is that rare kind of literature that, when it appeared, tore holes in the ironclad assumptions of many. In discussing the character depiction in the novella, we all know the author's stance on the matter, and it is of characteristic interest that it has not changed in decades. In discussing his two earlier novels, he said: 'In a vast state, it's inadmissible for everyone to regard their own opinion as more important than the opinion of the central administration in all spheres of life... How is it possible that a person placed on trial for himself should put himself above the political parties, the whole country, and the whole world?' The critic or reader, just as desirous of learning, is told almost immediately, 'the author can only be in agreement with the acceptance of the new situation.' Then, too, the author's ideas have not only been widely circulated but also in more recent statements. In this novella, instead of the brutal self-assertion of a person re-echoing the motives of a vast society and the vast state, the author presents Shukhov as one capable of hospitality and ready to be a friend standing in solidarity with his fellow prisoner. However, Shukhov's narrative

displays the dual character that the author points out in his first answer. Halls forbid his Muslim friend from urging Arkhip to remind Miskin to be ready to perform. Nevertheless, when Miskin forgets to open the vent on the lower tier and brags about the fact, Shukhov quite openly tells him about it, and later, Miskin is thankful for preventing him from some injury from some unknown person heeding Shukhov's warning—who knows who might have caused Miskin trouble. A few pages later, Shukhov is also seen running to Miskin when the latter accidentally hurts his hand.

4. Conclusion

In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn argues that humans maintain power over their identity. Reclaiming this power, however, is a perennial struggle. In 1947, while a captain in the Soviet Army, Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to 8 years in Russia's forced labor camps. Upon his release, he wrote *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a chronicle of one Day of a prisoner's life in his "zeks," prisoner camp. Written while imprisoned on false accusations, combines verse and prose, questioning human destiny and the relationship between free will and omnipotence. Both their works share the exploration and understanding of sovereignty and power regarding human identity. At its core, also featured in this literature, is the struggle to maintain control over personal beliefs and live freely within the confines of unjust, totalitarian imprisonment. The characters express this same struggle to understand their own identity behind bars. Through the solidarity and compassion of prisoners around them, in speech, and actions, they learn how to act, think, and ultimately construct who they are in a world unlike their own, like Boethius and Denisovich (Thomas, 2015). Thus, as displayed in this literature, their liberation narratives explore how control may be seized, maintained, and resisted in the prison system.

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