GS/CDS 5110 Methodology

Analyzing An Artcraft Through a Narrative

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Evin In A Date-pits Bracelet

This paper will analyze an artcraft’s picture printed in a book called: *we lived to tell* that consists of the memoirs of three women who were brutally institutionalized in a political prison in Iran right after the Islamic Revolution for many years. To meet the purpose of analyzing the picture of my favorite artcraft printed in this book that is made of three narratives, I need to mention first of all what narratives are. Narratives as well as artworks can be very informative as they have been in the history, since they have created the history of nations, conflicts, wars, institutionalized people all around the world, murders, amputations as a form of punishment, and so on. Narratives are very powerful pieces of information that are collected orally and written to reveal things that haven been covered deliberately for years and sometimes centuries.

Psychiatric survivors for instance, are a very well known group of people who mostly have built their own history by telling their stories from the time they spent in psychiatric institutions. Sometimes, people have died during the World War One and Two to tell their stories and raise awareness between the people of current or next generation. Narratives are made of memories, memories that are retrieved mostly subjectively and in some cases objectively. Narratives are very powerful pieces of information that can have the reader flown through time and space and live in other people’s shoes for a while. In these circumstances, if the reader can relate to the narrative in different ways, the mission is accomplished. This is the case for me regarding this paper, and I’ll explain the reason of its creation toward the end. Narratives are made of people’s feelings, emotions, sufferings, and thoughts, usually most of the things that are suppressed when a person is institutionalized. Evin has lots of stories that we can access through narrative or even artcrafts made by prisoners. Sometimes, there are objects that will recite the story of their owners for us. It is not always verbal communication that tells us the truth; at times this is done by an artwork. The picture that is going to be analyzed is a bracelet made of date pits that is made by one of the authors who has served four years in the notorious prison of Evin in Tehran. First and foremost, this paper is going to describe the artcraft, the reason of its creation, the impacts that it had on the author at the time of her imprisonment, and finally why I have chosen this artcraft to analyze.

A date pit might sound a very ordinary and useless substance in people’s lives all over the world. However, when you are institutionalized, beaten, deprived of sleep and proper food, not allowed to have pen and paper, forced to confess to things you have never done, and finally your autonomy destroyed, the date pits will not carry the same meaning as it would if you were living like other people who are free. The introduced book has approximately twenty pictures of various artcrafts made by prisoners who had to create their artwork hidden from the guards’ eyes, since any activity that could occupy the prisoners’ minds was prohibited. Even, mirror was banned to carry and hold in prison, which means you are not allowed to look at the aging process that is happening to you day by day and the years that are being stolen from you gradually. When we have the context of a political prison, it is easy to think about the chosen artcraft and its significance to one of the authors who created it.

So basically, anything other than the basic objects for living was prohibited to own or lend. In this set of conditions, the prisoners decided to hold on to the most useless things such as a thread hanging from somebody’s skirt, or a little residue at the end of a toothbrush tube. In this way, they were able to make things, own things, lend things, and grant things as gifts to each other. Date pits are not the exception, so Azadeh, one of the authors decided to hold on to every single thing that she thought might come in useful to create something. My own take on this does not let me to summarize all the reasons of maintaining everything in the prisoners’ ultimate desire in keeping themselves busy, in fact I see many other significant reasons for the creation of this bracelet. The first thing to realize in an institutionalized life is that you are the regime’s enemy, and they want to see your mental breakdown by depriving you from everything that might get you happy. Therefore, in this battlefield, you should fight against their desires in order to survive.

The first element to fight for is the prisoner’s identity, which is highly affected by the context she lives in. In prison, everybody wears the same clothes, eats the same thing, and is forced to comply with the same rules. So, the first phenomenon to happen is non-compliance that gives a feeling of identity to the prisoner. Azadeh narrates how she kept stealing the date pits every time they were given dates with camphored tea. It took her quite a while to collect thirty date pits. In addition to that, it is extremely dangerous to hold on to anything when the guards inspect all of your belongings every month to find one thing that might give meaning too your life.

Another component of your identity that you might want to keep alive is your gender. You might want to see yourself a woman, a woman that has a bracelet and looks beautiful even in the worst circumstances of het entire life. This is a substantial point in forming someone’s identity, since the things people wear has a lot to do with whom they are or whom they want to be seen as. Besides, there is a concept of autonomy that can be formed, protected, and kept while creating an artcraft. When someone is a political prisoner in a notorious prison like Evin, she sees herself as a victim of the brutal circumstances imposed to her by closed-minded people who work for a hardliner regime like Iran’s. When you create something, you are forcing your determination out to the existence. No matter how simple a bracelet might seem, it is carrying somebody’s autonomy and existence. That could be a reason for a prisoner to feel alive and creative. A political prisoner can do nothing regarding her life in Evin, such as the term of her imprisonment to the date of her possible execution. Life and death go hand-in-hand in Evin, and people can make no arbitrary decision about their own lives in there. Everything is decided for you. So in this context, if someone decides to become pretty with a bracelet, she is moving against the rules and policies. That itself can create a kind of determination and *power* for the prisoner.

Azadeh explains: “Nothing was thrown away in the ward; everything was put to some good use”. The date pits were used to make bracelets, which helped them to calm their nerves, and gave them something to do during the never-ending educational sessions that they were forced to attend. Also, these artcrafts were used as gifts that they offered each other during different occasions. Gift-giving is one of the most vital aspects of being human, so they used those hand-made gifts to express their feelings to each other, remember their promises, and remember those days and conditions that they lived in. The nature of the promises they gave each other has very much to do with the creation of narratives like this. They in many cases, promised each other to write about their experience in Evin one day, and often they gave each other something to remember that promise. For instance, one of the prisoners, Bita made an artcraft for her friend Shadi to remind her of her promise to record an Evin memoir. The artcraft was a card made of a tissue as a base, a thread to make flowers, a little toothpaste as adhesive, and a dark color extracted from bunch of *useless* material to draw a pen to represent the recording promise.

I chose this artcraft, because it reminded me of my own imprisonment in Iran. Immersed in my thoughts, sometimes I used to think with myself: Am I going to get out of here and tell others what happened to me, how unfair everything was, how broken I seemed, and how helpless everybody around me looked. I close my eyes now, and I think of that experience as a non-separable part of my existence. Prisoners always try to bring something out of the prison to be reminded of their time over there, but this is forbidden, so they cannot take anything with themselves except the clothes they walked in with. Therefore, what a prisoner is able to bring out of that context is her narrative.

Friendships are created in a political prison on a “*them against us”* rationale, but afterwards, they might get stronger due to common or even opposite political beliefs.

Friends are all you have in prison. Since you have been separated from your family, there are only your cellmates or wardmates that you can choose from. Prison friendships are very significant at the time of their forming, since they are very different from other relationships that you form when you are not a prisoner. This is because; nobody lives with another person day and night in one room and one place. Cellmates or wardmates that become friends are together all the time without getting separated longer than a bath time. So, this is a very crucial social experience in someone’s life. Moreover, the gifts that they give each other are a very substantial part of their social interaction. Because, they collect the material for their gifts with going through so much difficulty and hardship, spending so much time far from the wards’ eyes creating something meaningful to bring smile on their friends’ faces.

Doing something meaningful per se is so feared by the prison officials. The reason for this is prisoners can survive, stay strong and free inside, even though imprisoned outside if there is something giving meaning to their lives. This is a very dreadful thing to happen from the prison wards’ perspective. Because, they spend so much energy and time to break people down, and cannot stand seeing a phoenix rising from her ashes again. For instance, the coping strategy of two women in Ghezel-hesarprison who were quarantined for a while during the management of notorious head-officer Rahmaniis a great example of giving meaning to your life and surviving no matter how hard the circumstances might be. Rahmani to give a *good lesson* to other prisoners, commanded to quarantine five women who were trying to *organize* other prisoners against the Islamic Republic’s regime. Those women were separated from other women, and beaten up five times a day to death by the Rahmani’s heavy military boots. After a few days, they were transferred to the quarantine cell. There were five boxes that they sat in straight, without being allowed to move or talk. Going to bathroom was allowed three times a day on schedule. Some women went insane after forty days of sitting without being exposed to any auditory or visual stimuli, and they were forced to confess publically to the crimes they have never committed. A couple of those women did not surrender, and tolerated the conditions by giving *meaning* to their lives. They did not confess, and as a result stayed in the quarantine for five months until Rahmani was transferred to another prison, and the head-officer was changed. The two women were transferred to the public ward after that, and one of them disclosed to Azadeh how she coped with the conditions in the quarantine. She said that her uniform had some patterns on it. She decided to make friends with those patterns, giving a name to each of them, and talk to them about variety of topics. This meaningful action, she believes, did not let her lose her sanity and shiver under the stick of brutality.

Therefore, doing what you think is right no matter what the consequences will be, getting your friends happy, giving meaning to your life, and granting identity to a fatigued-self, I can count as the reasons why that beautiful bracelet of date pits was and many other artcrafts like that were created in the prison. Sometimes object can carry selves, narratives, identities, promises, and memoirs in themselves. My chosen date pits bracelet is for sure one of those, since in it I can see Azadeh’s days and night in Evin, and I subconsciously envy her brave soul.

# Reference

Agah, A., Mehr, S., & Parsi, S. (2007). *We Lived To Tell.* Toronto: McGilligan Books.