
Behind Bars: The Unheard Voices of Women Prisoners in *Apradhini*

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Abstract

The multifaceted experiences of inmates are marked by confinement, loneliness, and deep psychological and social significances. Apradhini: Women without Men, a collection of seventeen stories portraying the life of women living in jail in the absence of their male counterparts. It offers an influential lens through which to examine the lived realities of women inmates. This research paper explores the personal, familial, and social conditions that lead to women in imprisonment, foregrounding the agony, grief, and emotional turmoil they endure both within and beyond prison walls. The study provides a close understanding of the structural and emotional intricacies shaping their lives through the experiences of Shivani. The key objective of this paper is to give voice to the marginalized and often unheard experiences of women prisoners as represented in Apradhini: Women without Men. The study is notable in drawing attention to the gendered nature of punishment and confinement, even though highlighting the need for emotional, communal, and formal support for the rehabilitation and reestablishment of women into society. In this paper the life of imprisoned women is analysed with the theoretical frameworks of feminist criticism, existential alienation and gender studies which shows that women's suffering is not their personal but closely rooted within man-controlled structures which outline, confine, and marginalize them.

Keywords: Alienation, Confinement, Imprisonment, Rehabilitate, Reestablishment.

A collection of seventeen sketches, *Apradhini* is a mix of non – fiction and fiction in which extra ordinary lives of ordinary women who were thrown away to the fringes of society compelled by fate, circumstances or social laws have been portrayed. *Apradhini* is a translated work, originally penned in Hindi and published in a serialized form during the 1960s and 1970s in the popular Hindi weeklies *Dharmayug* and *Saptahik Hindustan*. The unusual nature of this work of Shivani is highlighted by Mrinal Pande in the P.S. section thus: “Published in 1972 as a collection of interviews - this was perhaps the first book of its kind in which a popular Hindi writer had tried pains takingly to profile the lives of indigent women behind bars” (P.S.).

Nearly four decades later, Shivani’s younger daughter Ira Pande translated *Apradhini* into English, adding some more stories of Shivani based on the extra ordinary lives of ordinary women. The translated work of Shivani was published in 2012 by Harper Collins under the title *Apradhini: Women Without Men*. As one of the most commiserative voices of Hindi Literature, Shivani’s stories raise question on traditional views of crime, morality, and femininity based on her firsthand meetings with these imprisoned women. It is critical to

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study of female convicts' narratives in a literary world where gendered experiences within the prison system are frequently ignored. While prison writing in India has traditionally concentrated on the regular routine of prisoners in jail—shaped by patriarchy, poverty, and social stigma—have gotten little scholarly attention.

Pande's translation of *Apradhini* is brought it into the worldwide conversation about gender, justice, and literature. It helps to those readers who live outside of India to grapple with the complexity of Indian women, caste relations, and the connection of law and ethics. These stories were written that time when India was dealing with post-independence social reforms such as changes to the legal status of women, prison reform, and ponderings about gender justice. Shivani's work shows how these paradoxes, providing a firsthand account of how these changes affected ordinary women. Her stories are real experiences—rare, terrible, and normally unsolved.

Many of the women in *Apradhini* are real woman prisoners whom Shivani interviewed while some are those with whom the author was acquainted while the rest are fictional characters. What however connects all these women or women characters is that they are all “women without men” – they have faced the odds of life all alone. As Mrinal Pande succinctly observes in the P.S. section:

When Shivani created a rare portrait gallery of women without men, she did not seek to avenge her own humiliations. She only wished to highlight women who were different like herself. The strange wandering women she met and befriended from Almora to Gujarat, or the female prisoners she talked to as a young girl in Rampur and Orchha and later in Lucknow, are neither good nor bad. They are just some of the millions of rudderless individuals who subsist in the moral and physical decay of Indian society. (P.S.)

Most of these women have faced marginalization in one form or the other. As prisoners, they have been pushed to the margins of society or even outside it, in the sense that during the period of their confinement, they are outside the pale of normal society. A literary environment created by Shivani in which transgression becomes a means of opposition and silence which is converted into voice by using real-life stories of women categorized as “criminals.” It focuses on three major themes: transgression and agency, patriarchy and punishment, and identity and salvation.

Transgression views as a challenge to patriarchal norms in this collection, rather than just a legal violation and the characters have violated socially acceptable restrictions for women, such as escaping foul marriages, claiming sexual independence, or retaliating against abuse. These activities, while criminalized by law, are frequently demonstrations of authority. The

first part of *Apradhini* is based on Shivani's interviews with women prisoners. It is imperative for us to know the reason of crime, to understand the pain and agony of women prisoners. The first woman Chanuli was a simple young Kumauni woman who was imprisoned on the charge of murdering a fellow woman of her village. Incidentally, the face of Chanuli had such a "pristine innocence" that the writer herself was unable to understand how such an innocent looking person could have committed the heinous crime of murder. But as Chanuli narrated her past to the author, How her husband had fallen in love with Chanuli when he saw her for the first time and decided to marry her. "His mother never forgave him for choosing his own bride and refused to accept Chanuli as her daughter - in- law" (24).

Soon after her marriage, the Indo – Chinese war broke out and her husband was called to border. He never returned. He was presumed to be dead. His death further aggravated the feelings of animosity harboured by Chanuli's mother - in - law towards Chanuli. She was constantly taunted and humiliated by her mother-in-law who virtually turned into a human cannon and spewed abuses on Chanuli night and day (24). "Kulanchchini, you cursed creature, she yelled, "You are the cause of my son's death" (24).

Not only this, Chanuli is taunted by all the other women of the village also, as she still wore her mangal sutra. Chanuli had some intuitive feeling that her husband was still alive and that he would return some day. As wearing bangles and mangal sutra by a widow is prohibited in a traditional society, the villagers heaped abuses on Chanuli. One day when a woman called Chanuli a 'whore', Chanuli could no longer control herself. She flung her sickle in anger towards the woman, which killed her. Chanuli was terrified to see how in a fraction of a second, she was turned into a murderer, though she had flung her sickle towards the accusing woman only after extreme provocation. But the ugly fact before Chanuli was that she did commit the murder and hence she was imprisoned on charges of murder.

Chanuli herself is filled with deep remorse as the woman accidentally killed by her sickle was a brahmin by caste and Chanuli constantly blames herself for 'brahminhatya '. As Chanuli narrated her story to the author, the latter was extremely touched by the purity of her gaze which was as pure as the Bhagirathiriver. "But unfortunately, neither her beauty nor her touching innocence was enough to absolve her of her crime" (26).

Chanuli was sent to Naini Jail, then to Lucknow. She became an outcaste in the eyes of her family and society. But there was another twist in her fateful story. One day Chanuli's husband came back from war, miraculously alive. As soon as he learnt about Chanuli's imprisonment, he appealed to High Court to commute his wife's life imprisonment as she did not commit the murder deliberately; she committed this act under extreme provocation. The

High Court, convinced by the defence counsel's arguments, reduced the prison term of Chanuli. Chanuli's husband wanted to meet her in the prison but was forbidden by his mother, though he did write to her. Only his letters were reason enough for Chanuli to go on living. But then, letters also stopped. Chanuli was by now convinced that her husband must have remarried by now.

When Chanuli was narrating her story to Shivani, she asked Shivani that if her husband did not intend to take her back, why did he fight her case and had her prison term reduced to four years out of which, two were already over: only two more years remained. One question constantly haunted Chanuli as to where would she go, once she was released from prison. From a brief recapitulation of Chanuli's searing story, it is clear that she is a woman who has been completely marginalized. She doesn't even want to go back to her parents' home either, as she doesn't want to bring bad name to her father. Her feelings of guilt and shame due to her being accused of a murder and her imprisonment have been faithfully recorded by Shivani. When Shivani asked Chanuli the name of her native village, she said, "Why name a village that has ostracized me, Didi!" she replied, "I have shamed my father and I swore the day they took me away that I would never show him my face as long as I lived, nor bring the name of the village to my lips" (28).

Many studies have been undertaken worldwide to understand, analyse and assess how marginalization due to imprisonment affects the physical and mental health of prisoners, how they fall prey to depression, morbidity and low self-esteem. The reasons for these prisoners/ persons' imprisonment may vary from person to person but the impact on their mental health is broadly the same: most of them are plagued by depression and low self-esteem. It is not only society that has marginalized them, they themselves have marginalized their own selves from society: it is a kind of internal marginalization or voluntary marginalization.

Among many of the female prisoners portrayed by Shivani in *Apradhini*, these feelings of low self-esteem, depression and loneliness can be seen. One such notable example is that of 'Janaki' whom Shivani interviewed in Lucknow jail. The details of Janaki's crime as they are slowly unravelled by her in her interaction with Shivani are almost blood chilling, The author wondered how such a normal looking woman had conspired to kill her own husband with her lover's help. But as Janaki was ushered in Shivani's presence and the latter expressed her desire to hear the story of her past, she (Shivani) "could find no trace of emotion in her that carefully composed Janaki's face" (33). This means Janaki has withdrawn herself into a kind of shell after that heinous murder; she doesn't want to open up at all. Haunted by her neighbours, she was brought to the prison. As soon as Shivani reminded Janaki how even her

own daughter had called her ‘disgusting’ after she discovered her mother Janaki with her uncle, Janaki’s smile suddenly vanished. Shivani notes:

She shrank into a shell and her neck disappeared into her shoulder. So the smile was just a mask, I realized she had retreated from me and it was futile to proceed with questions about the past, for it was obvious that she had no wish to reopen the old wounds. Haunted by the memories of articles in newspaper, the lawyer’s and her own family’s accusation she had decided to become an unfeeling ice berg. (34)

Shivani has presented a fine psychological analysis of the changed attitude of such prisoners: how they adopt different persona inside the prison in order to survive. In fact, this is clearly visible in the case of Janaki who appears in different moods. Sometimes cool and composed, at other times shy and reluctant and sometimes “startled and angry stung like a cobra” (35). The colours on her face change like chameleon.

Shivani also refers to the famous Sanskrit writer Kalhan’s observation in his book *Rajtarangini* that a writer should be able to uncover the emotional disease of his characters. A writer is like a surgeon. Just as a surgeon lances the tumour of his patient, the author too should be able to uncover the emotional diseases of his characters. Only then can the emotional healing be achieved.

A remarkable feature of Shivani’s pen portraits of these women prisoners is that she never ever becomes judgemental about them. She has a deep knowledge about the nasty, brutish and heavily exploited lives of women without men, “They have been beaten, cheated and bullied by men all their lives, but like addicts craving a fix, most of them turn to men again and again, making the same mistake twice, thrice, a hundred times. Shivani is here the witness and fellow traveller become historian” (P.S.).

Apradhini’s central theme is the unequal punishment of women which endure when they challenge traditional gender roles. The legal and social structures collaborate to suppress female sovereignty. Women are not only confined within the walls of jail but also imprisoned by cultural expectations of obedience, chastity, and silence. The jail itself becomes a symbol of the broader societal cage. Her portrayal of imprisonment shows how women are stripped of self-respect and individuality, yet within these restrictions they discover ways to assert themselves—through the strong bond with fellow inmates. Despite marginalization, they remain resilient. These stories explore how women reconstruct their sense of self after transgression, suggesting that redemption lies not in external approval but in personal transformation.

Some characters find comfort in religiousness, while others embrace loneliness or creative appearance. Author depicts these moments of self discovery with compassion, emphasizing that character is fluid and reclaimable even after refusal. One of her most striking narrative strategies is her deep empathy for her characters rather than portraying them only as case studies, she listens to them with sympathy and awareness. This approach allows the reader to see the women as complex personalities rather than as criminals. She never passes any judgment on the women's actions but instead try to find to understand the circumstances that led them to transgress. It creates a space for nuanced reflection, inviting readers to question their own assumptions about crime, justice, and femininity.

How imprisonment affects the psyche of prisoners has been discussed and documented by several researchers, social activists, and writers. One such writer Bellapu Anuradha (a woman activist) has written extensively about her own experiences in prison. She writes:

Out in society, they start by asking your name to get to know you. In prison, they ask, 'What's the case?' even before ask your name. As for me, I used to say, 'Maoist,' because it was easy to understand. No one would understand if I said 'political prisoner'. However, I noticed that when I was introduced to someone, they would refer to me as '17 CL'... we are a party case; that means 17 CL. (Prison Notes12)

B. Anuradha further remarks that imprisonment leaves a scar on the prisoners' sense of identity which adversely affects their mental health. It's not good for prisoners' mental health because they lose their identity. Some of them commit crime because of some reason but some are forced to commit crime or become victims of a pre-planned crime by their family members, in whom they had blind faith. Among prisoners, there are many who come from poor economic background, they are worried for the economic condition of their family. They feel hesitation to share their feelings with others because they have lost their trust in others. There are many reasons behind their ill mental health: loss of their identities, separation from their families, lack of privacy, insecurity about their future etc. Driven by such factors, some of the prisoners even commit suicide because of guilt.

Amy Morin highlights the mental condition of prisoners in "The Mental Health Effects of Being in Prison", "A 2020 study looked at the rates of recidivism among individuals who were released from prison. Those who reported poor mental health in prison were more likely to recidivate than those who had average mental health during their sentence. The rates of recidivism were between 33% and 68% higher for people with poor in-prison mental health than for their peers" (qtd. in Amy Morin). The irony is that even after their prison term is

over, the ex- prisoners are still treated as social outcasts due to their past which deeply affects their psyche.

Another noteworthy fact about these stories is that Shivani's visit to these prisons (where she interviewed the women prisoners) were not the result of some government initiative, rather it was made possible due to the kind efforts of a prison doctor who, moved by the painful stories of some of these prisoners, requested Shivani to interact with them. As these women prisoners sat before Shivani, they were deeply convinced that here was an empathetic listener to their stories of pain. Before her they could unlock their incarcerated hearts, thereby experiencing a kind of catharsis of their pent - up emotions of pain, regret, sorrow, anger, frustration and retribution, as they knew that she would forgive all their sins.

What lends authenticity to these stories is that Shivani was present there as a witness and as a recorder/ writer. As Mrinal Pande notes: "The stories in this volume are remarkable in that whatever is said here is validated by the fact that the writer has been there herself, both as a witness and storyteller" (P.S.).

So far as the question of these stories being Shivani's own life experiences is concerned, nothing can be said for sure, but what however is clear that while recording these stories, her own deep sense of hurt and humiliation co-existed with her 'composure as the narrator' (Pande). As a fatherless daughter and later as a widow, Shivani had also faced harsh criticism or even censure from society without ever being given a chance to explain herself. That's why she understood what Mrinal Pande calls 'the unspoken anxieties of women without men'. She listened and recorded their tales whenever she could. She knew how society mostly chose to ignore women's own experiences and how families could be exclusively obsessed with the social propriety of the actions and speech of women alone. So she turns again and again to record for posterity the unmentionable truth of experiences misjudged, disinherited and lonely women all ages have had. (P.S.)

An analysis of the crimes committed by some of these female prisoners brings out the yearnings of the female body which startle us as is revealed in the story of Janaki who murders her own husband in connivance with her paramour – her brother-in-law. Shivani in those stories focuses on women 'who lived in isolation self-imposed or forced:

In *Apradhini*, prison and the robes of a nomadic female sanyasin are the petri dishes upon which Shivani lays her specimens and studies relentlessly how women may survive without men, often in spite of them. The exercise is rooted in the timeless quest of artists to uncover the secret of the irreverent, timeless vitality of certain exiled species, who continue under the most adverse circumstances and even outlive mighty empires. If fashion and medicine give

the female body a centrality, prisons make them invisible and sanyas makes them irrelevant. Dressed in coarse prison garments, all women prisoners begin to look alike after a while. And the saffron robes of an itinerant sanyasin like Alakh Mai efface gender completely. (P.S.)

Through these stories of *Apradhini* Shivani again and again turns to the world of ‘social pariahs’ or socially marginalized persons. When she decided to record the experiences of these women prisoners, she didn’t seek to avenge her own humiliation, “She only wished to highlight women who were different” (P.S.). While writing about them, Shivani never pronounces her judgement upon them as good or bad. For her, they are just some of the millions of rudderless women of Indian society who reveal its moral decay. As criminals, they have been facing punishment in the form of prison terms but very often they are unable to make any sense of these laws, as does the female protagonist in the story ‘Chanuli’.

Thus, it is evident that in *Apradhini* one comes across different types of marginalized characters. These are mainly female prisoners who are pushed to the fringes of society due to their crimes. They are marginalized both in a physical sense as they are serving their prison terms within the walls of prison but they are also marginalized in a different sense as some of them have voluntarily imposed a kind of self-marginalization upon themselves, as Shivani has so aptly remarked “. . . there is no jail on earth that can shackle a free spirit and no spirit so free that its feet cannot be bound in chains we cannot see” (80).

Apradhini: Women Without Men is deeply embedded in Indian cultural contexts. She uses local dialects, traditions, rituals and working environments to ground the tales on lived realities and this way offers an ethnographically informed context that gives the story some validity. The examples of marriages, caste hierarchy, and religious customs are not strange exotic artifacts but the fundamental cultural signatures, which enlighten women, their decisions, and situations; it is the socio-cultural variables that a serious feminist literary study should question.

The non-linear form of its stories brings into focus the discrepancy of identities of women psychologically unwell through trauma and social rejection, reminiscence of the structuralist principle that narrative form can be one way of resisting. In this collection, some of the stories start on a medias res, that is, they start with a criminal act and slowly build up to the causal background. To recreate the lives of these marginalized women, the author herself makes use of a variety of literary tools: flashbacks, interior monologues, and stratified narration, thus, tracing the complexity of emotions and psyche of these women, without being discarded to the simplistic concept of guilt or redemption.

The Silence is an effective means of storytelling in the text. Shivani often leaves gaps, uncertain endings, unspoken feelings, unresolved tensions, and thus, he forces readers to actively engage in the process of providing a meaning to the text. Subtext also becomes vital: sexual violence, mental illness, and systemic injustice are never clearly defined, but suggested, therefore, being respectful of the women and avoiding a voyeuristic indulgence. This is an unobtrusive approach to feminist ethic of care that acknowledges the agency of subjects.

Fundamentally, *Apradhini: Women Without Men* explains the patriarchal structures that govern and avert the female behaviour. Shivani reveals how women are not only criminalized because of offense but also questioning gender norms. The law, family set up and even religious laws come together to oppress female self-reliance. Any female that claims sexual independence or avoids homemaking is labeled as immoral, unstable, or unsafe. Shivani prefigures the views of the women in order to reveal the disciplinary force that shapes their actions to challenge the validity of a justice system that punishes women more severely than men in similar offenses- a charge that reflects the modern feminist criticism of patriarchy as a system of mutually supportive institutions and cultural practices.

The intersectional perspective of oppression can be seen through the description of Shivani. The characters differ in rural/urban, upper/lower caste, educated/uneducated, thus, representing overlapping marginalization axes. As an example, a woman of a lower caste can be more severely punished and more stigmatized than a woman of an upper caste doing the same act. Financial instability also drives them towards the desperate acts of survival. The combination of the dynamics with the plot reveals that caste, class, and regional identity are similar determinants of the fate of women, which reflects the intersectional feminist assumption that gender oppression cannot be achieved without other forms of stratification.

The reclaiming the narrative space of women who used to be silenced in history is one of the most radical feminist elements of this work. The female prisoners are either demonised or sentimentalized in mainstream representations turning into caricatures. Shivani upsets this duality by letting the women speak about their experiences. Her narrative approach is dialogic as opposed to didactic: she listens, writes and thinks, thus practicing epistemic humility. Storytelling is even a form of resistance, opposing erasure and stamping its position on marginalized voices to be heard. *Apradhini*, therefore, is not just an anthology of anecdotes but a political statement concerning the property of narratives.

Apradhini: Women Without Men has become part of the history of the Indian feminist literature. It has been extensively cited in academic research on the topic of gender and incarceration and has been taught at universities and colleges on feminist theory,

criminology, and South Asian literature. The humane presentation of the female criminals by Shivani defies the mainstream discourses which compare corruption as the lack of moral standing, especially among the women. The fact that she gives them a communicative agency of their own breaks the traditional hierarchies of storytelling and conforms to feminist demands of participatory, dialogical narrative activities.

The writings of Shivani have empowered and motivated a generation of authors who believe in introducing marginalized voices with respect and nuance to themselves. Similar themes have been addressed by other authors like Mrinal Pande, Mahasweta Devi, and Baby Kamble who concentrate on women who do not live within the respectability. The impact of the book is projected to the documentary cinemas, theatres and short films, hence expanding the culture of the book. Its tales still reverberate in the society where the independence of women is still questioned and the justice system is still highly gendered.

Kimmerle Crenshaw believes that the feminist idea of intersectionality explains why caste, class, and regional identity adds to the marginalization of women. In case, the women of the lower-caste are punished and stigmatized more than the upper-caste women. The question, in a classical formulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Can the subaltern speak? is representative of the view held by Shivani, who allows silenced women to speak their voices, thus fighting against the dominant discourses that silence them. The same criticism of the homogenisation of the Third-World women and the politics of feminism expressed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty can also be echoed: Shivani represents every woman as unique, dependent upon her specific culture and social setting, thereby, not generalising.

It has been a literary, social intervention reclaiming the voices of women who have been long unheard by the family, law, society and history. Shivani argues with patriarchal definitions of crime and morality and provides a subtle view of resilience and agency through a vision of lived experience. The collection helps us remember that there is always a human story behind each person, criminal, prisoner, outcast, the story of pain, strength, and transformation. Being a feminist work, *Apradhini* still speaks powerfully across the generations, challenging the readers to address the issues of systemic injustice and to appreciate the dignity of those women who, despite the marginalisation, are not broken.

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