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## Imprisonment and Enforced Confinement in *One Day in The Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*: Internalisation of Discipline or Systemic Injustice?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper inspects the depiction of imprisonment in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) and Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) through a multi-theoretical lens, drawing on Foucault's ideas of the carceral system and docile bodies and Althusser's ideological state apparatuses. While the former depicts literal political confinement within a Stalinist labor camp, the latter portrays a socially constructed captivity through the geisha system in Japan. Both protagonists, Shukhov and Sayuri, navigate their respective "prisons" via ritual, surveillance, and internalised discipline. This study argues that these narratives reveal shared mechanisms of control across cultural and institutional divides, showing how justice vacuums enable confinement: either through juridical violence or through socio-economic and gendered subjugation. Ultimately, the internalisation of discipline transforms resistance into perseverance, and captivity into identity

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### Introduction:

Through *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn presents an unadorned and starkly disturbing picture of life in Russian concentration camp. He traces one day in the Life of a camp prisoner, Ivan Denisovich Shukov, from reveille to lights out. On the other hand, Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* represents the coming to age of a poor girl, Chiyo Sakamoto, who is sold to an



okiya (geisha boarding house) in Gion, the most prominent geisha district in Kyoto. Later she is given the name Sayuri and becomes the most famous geisha.

In both these instances, we see that the protagonists are being imprisoned in some way or the other. In the case of Ivan, the laws of the land imprison him within the confines of the camp, but in the case of Sayuri, it is the social notions and rules that forces her to be within the chains of the society. The interesting thing about their existence is that they both have accepted their own conditions and are living inside a prison of a kind. In this paper I would like to present how the imprisonment of human lives can be analysed through Foucault's idea of prison and 'docile bodies' as presented by him in his book *Discipline and Punish*. Through the examples of Ivan and Sayuri's character and their acceptance of their position they are put into, I will show how, in the absence of social justice and through the internalisation of the social discipline, whether in the East or West, the imprisonments take place.

The content of *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is naturally limited in time and place because it deals with one day in the life of a camp prisoner, but it develops a picture which gives an extraordinary vitality and fidelity to the truthfulness of the characters. What is dealt with here is one of the most ordinary days in the life of a camp prisoner but the day is not ordinary to the prisoner because one day passed means one day closer to their freedom. Whether they would be able to return to their near and dear ones after the term, is a different question, as another term of imprisonment may be imposed upon them to be spent in the camp. In decoding the novel structurally, we can see that, this novel represents no literary innovation; its style and form are conventional, following the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian tradition of "social protest novel", which tells the story of little people trapped in merciless political system. Thus, structurally it is confined to the accepted ways of narrating a story, and it is within the conventional forms of narrating, the writer is presenting the usual ways of imprisonment of non-conformist human lives within prisons.

In the book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents how with time there has been a transformation in the ways sovereign powers exerted their authority, from punishment as a public spectacle to formation of a modern disciplined society which is constantly under surveillance and self-regulation (Foucault, 1995, p. 195). This Panopticon is epitomised through the prison camp, in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, not by the overbearing physical form but by its psychological propensity. The prisoners are conditioned to behave in such way that they are always under surveillance even when the guards are not present. Ivan's controlled acquiescence in taking accurately the exact allotted amount of bread, working just hard enough to avoid punishment, reflects how the internalisation of the rules shapes their existence



in the camp. Foucault describes this as “docile bodies” shaped to fit the needs of the institution (Foucault, 1995, p. 136).

In a similar manner the okiya is presented as a disciplinary space cum institution in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Though it is not a punitive institution but the geisha house operates under constant observation by its matron, Mother, and senior geisha creating a hierarchy of surveillance all throughout. This enables Sayuri to anticipate criticism and learn how to navigate through the odds, she adjusts her manner of walking, speech and even the gaze before the authority orders her to do so. In this novel the Foucauldian mechanism of self-surveillance is gendered and aestheticised: it is not the barbed wire that achieves control but it is achieved through appropriate beauty standards and ritualised behaviours.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

Foucault builds a case for the idea that prison became part of a large “carceral system” that has become an all-encompassing sovereign institution in modern society (Foucault, 1995, p. 192-200). Prison is a part of a vast set-up including schools, military institutions, hospitals and factories which build a panoptical society for its members. This system creates “disciplinary careers” for those locked within its boundaries (Foucault, 1995, p. 211). So, we get that the sovereign institution is after creating “disciplinary careers”, obviously which would be in line with their way of thoughts. The type of the career does not matter but the discipline is most important. So, whether one is convicted and staying within a prison or one is living outside the so-called confinement of a prison, in a space for innocent (not convicted) people, they all have to follow a career which is sanctioned by the system, or at times forced on them. So, the existence of Sayuri must be within the “disciplinary career” of a geisha. Though she does not like the place but she is forced to live in the geisha boarding house as she has been sold there, forced by poverty. She has no right over her own existence as she is now valued only by money that has been spent on her to buy. But before one accepts the career chosen for them there is always a kind of revolt in order to keep one free from the confined existence, this is true for Sayuri too. She tries to find her elder sister and flee from the okiya (Golden, 1997, p. 166), but she gets increasingly bound to the okiya because of the money spent on her due to her misadventures and she is made docile by the punishments given to her. Thus, she is in a way, imprisoned first by money. Besides, it is told in that Geisha’s cannot love a man of their choice, their sole goal should be to find a *danna*, a man, who would be paying the highest amount to the okiya in order to make the geisha his personal geisha (Golden, 1997, p. 259). Therefore, not only her body but also her emotions are imprisoned by the social norms. While in the Russian novel, we observe that under Stalin’s rule, people should abide by the rules endorsed by the party, any deviation from that will give the



people ten years detention term in a forced labour camp. According to the novel, the new rule from 1949 onwards increased the sentence from ten years to twenty-five. A man can survive ten years, as Shukov has already completed eight years (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 12) and is hopeful that he can survive rest of the term, but for Kilgas, his fellow inmate, who is given 25 years (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 42), his possibility of coming out alive from the camp is almost impossible.

Foucault's disciplinary institution is seen being implemented in the labour camp in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* with its strict timetables, uniform clothing, fixed activities, and constant regulation and supervision to produce "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1995, p. 138). The survival strategies used by Shukhov, such as working systematically to conserve strength or subtly bending the rules, show how power is never absolute but is negotiated daily between authority and subject.

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Sayuri is trained to maintain an image of charm, elegance and allure under the watchful eyes of not only her okiya mistress, but also her patrons and the wider geisha community. This proves that surveillance is not institutional but social and the gaze here is both literal and figurative. Aligning with Foucault's idea that power operates by making individuals monitor themselves, Sayuri's performance of refinement becomes a form of self-surveillance.

### **Resistance and Survival:**

Surviving in the camp is the survival of the fittest and only those inmates can survive in the camp/ prison, who have been made "docile" by installing the discipline. Whether it is okiya or a labour camp or any prison, the doctrine followed is installing discipline within the inmates, who have revolted or are found at odd positions with respect to the order of the authority. Sayuri and Shukov are both imprisoned, their place of origin is different, their way of imprisonment is different, but irrespective of the East-West divide and the disparity in social position between them, one thing is common in both these cases, these imprisoned selves are treated within the prison to create "docile bodies".

Foucault's argument is that the discipline within the "carceral system" creates "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1995, p. 135) - as is done in labour camps from reveille to lights out, each and every work is laid out by the authority in power, in the form of a manual which would create a grossness among all prisoners. As in case of labour camp – from forming 'fives' (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 25) in the morning till counting again in barracks at night; and in Japan, the elaborate process of becoming a geisha – from learning the art form, to being able to carry a kimono and finally disregarding one's emotional attachment, whether it is love for a man or family, and completely serve one's *danna*, all are the process of installing discipline



and creating “docile bodies”. Why are these docile bodies required? Wasn’t only punishing enough for the prisoners of any kind? These “docile bodies” are important because they are ideal for the new economics, politics and warfare in modern industrial age. These are the bodies that function in factories, take orders in military regiments and are the masses in school classrooms.

In order to construct “docile bodies” the disciplinary institutions must follow two processes: firstly, it should constantly observe and record the bodies they control (Foucault, 1995, p. 144). In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, first it was in the house where Sayuri was living, where she was under constant gaze and from the time Sayuri met the chairman, it might be possible that her record was being kept by the chairman, as we come to know by the end of the novel that it was the chairman who sent the lady to take Sayuri out of the okiya she has been living in since childhood in order to train her especially to be a geisha. In *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the prisoners are always under surveillance. It is not just the authorities, who are kept by the government doing the monitoring, but the power structure is brought down to fellow prison inmates, the camp leader and the deputy and even through “squealers”, all are used to pass information to the authorities and control the prisoners. Though the camp leader of 104<sup>th</sup> (Shukov’s camp), Tiurin, is always in favour of the prisoners, it has also been stated ‘in a prison, camp leader means everything’ hinting that if the camp leader is found to be an extended hand of the power, then the lives of the prisoners would be devoid of hope.

The second process to construct “docile bodies” is by ensuring that after the internalization of discipline, (Foucault, 1995, p. 208) the discipline must come about without excessive force, through careful observation. In *Memoirs of a Geisha* – it is through internalization of discipline; she should listen to her prospective ‘*danna*’ by giving in to the American commander (Golden, 1997, p. 446). I would say, besides showing gratitude, Sayuri is also following the discipline a geisha needs to abide by. In *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, it is the internalization of the discipline that leads Ivan wake up at revile without any delay (except for the day described in the novel). It is the internalization of the discipline that stops prisoners from revolting or even from raising their voices when the guards make counting mistakes during their return after work. Similarly, it is the internalization of discipline which stops the Captain from protesting against the decree of his ten days detention in the guardhouse (Solzhenitsyn 24). He calmly asks the number of days and quietly follows the guard.

So, the process of making them “docile bodies” starts with reducing them to a number like S854 (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 10), Shukov’s number and ends with labour camp becoming their home. The inmates used to say “We are going home. That’s what everyone used to say: ‘Going home’. We never



had time to think of any other home” (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 77). For Sayuri it starts with her removal from her home and family and accepting the okiya to her home after failures of her escape plans and receiving several punishments. But not everyone accepted the rule so submissively, and those who didn’t, there was public torture and execution, which was a method the sovereign deployed to express his or her power and it was done through the ceremony of execution. In the novel *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the ceremony of execution is sending the prisoners to guard house, (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 24) where there is hardly any warmth in comparison to the normal barracks. In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Sayuri as a child has to do all the household jobs of the okiya, like carrying waters in buckets to the terrace to fill the tanks, hold umbrella for Hatsumomo, the geisha of the okiya, during rains, while she herself is completely drenched, and waiting for Hatsumomo to return at night. All these are followed in order to tame the rebellious Chiyo so that she gives in to the rules constructed by the society.

### **Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses:**

The concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) by Louis Althusser emphasises more on the understated reproduction of power through educational, religion and cultural institutions than direct coercion (Althusser, 1971, p. 143). The camp, in Solzhenitsyn’s novel, functions both as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) through the work customs, routine drills and propaganda-laden speeches and as a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) through physical enforcement. As a result, over the course of time, the line between imposed labour and internalised duty is blurred to the prisoners who interiorise the idea that their work is their “obligation”.

In the geisha tradition itself lies entrenched the ISA in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. What naturalises the gendered servitude of the geisha is the traditional narrative that a geisha is an artist, dedicated to entertaining influential men. Sayuri’s training in shamisen dance and witty conversations is a form of ideological conditioning. The fact that she eventually accepts this role and moulds herself accordingly is what Althusser calls “interpellation,” which is the process by which individuals recognise themselves in the social roles allotted to them (Althusser, 1971, p. 174). Both the novels demonstrate how ideology sustains oppression without continuous physical coercion.

### **Postcolonial Outlook:**

The postcolonial lens shows that both the settings are shaped by larger political and social hegemonies. The Soviet Gulag system, in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is depicted as a political instrument for stifling opposition and upholding ideological purity, in addition to being a penal mechanism. A



feature of many authoritarian regimes, the greater injustice lies in the methodical denial of due processes and not simply wrongful imprisonment. The subtle narrative technique emphasizes the pervasiveness of such injustice. Ivan never lashes out against the system since there is no justice around him to which he can appeal.

The postcolonial angle in *Memoirs of a Geisha* shifts to Japan's pre- and post-war transition, where the geisha tradition, operating within an internal hierarchy is also impacted by the Western stimulus after the Second World War. A shift is discernible with the arrival of American soldiers. Alternation in benefaction, taste, and the commodification of Japanese femininity for foreign consumption is palpable. With this, Sayuri's world becomes doubly colonized, first, by the patriarchal Japanese norms and second, by the foreign occupier's gaze. Sayuri must adapt to these changing power dynamics in order to gain personal freedom, which makes "justice" in the Western liberal sense, vague.

Thus, imprisonment in both the texts are presented as cultural, more than physical or institutional. This cultural imprisonment is implemented through societal expectations, a web of norms and historical forces that imposes restrictions on the individual's choices. In both cases, survival necessitates a blend of endurance, strategic conformity and selective resistance.

### **Comparative Analysis:**

Another aspect of this torture is that the torture was meted publicly in order to create fear in the people, in case of the novel *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, among fellow inmates, and to force them to participate in the method of control by agreeing to the verdicts given by the ruling class. In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the prison for Sayuri is larger than Shukov. The whole society is a prison for her. She is not just confined to the okiya she has been sold to, but she is confined in the prison of society, where the social rules won't let a Geisha live a life other than that of the assigned one, she cannot love, she cannot have a family, she cannot marry (Golden, 1997, p. 258). The only thing that she has in her life is lack of social justice leading to imprisonment, followed by torture, coercion, acceptance of her situation, internalization of the captive existence and mould her life to be a geisha. But she will always remain imprisoned, first by the okiya and then to the 'danna' because social injustice does not provide the likes of her freedom to climb the social status and live a life which is not imposed on her. Similarly, Shukov is imprisoned because he is accused of becoming a spy after being captured briefly by the Germans as a prisoner of war during the World War II. He is innocent, but is sentenced to ten years of imprisonment in a forced labour camp.



“According to his dossier, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov had been sentenced for high treason. He had testified to it himself. Yes, he'd surrendered to the Germans with the intention of betraying his country and he'd returned from captivity to carry out a mission for German intelligence. What sort of mission neither Shukhov nor the interrogator could say! So, it had been left at that--a mission. Shukhov had figured it all out. If he didn't sign, he'd be shot. If he signed he'd still get a chance to live. So, he signed.” (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 42). It is the lack of justice that leads Shukov to be confined in a camp and later his acceptance of his situation and giving in to the process of creating ‘docile bodies’ leading him to become a docile body, internalize or accept his captive state to remain imprisoned within the labour camp.

Both *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* focus on characters navigating repressive systems that refuse to give them autonomy, although the novels differ geographically, culturally, and historically. In spite of the oppression, the novels portray resistance, not as open upheaval but as a cautious, often indistinguishable, negotiation with power.

Shukhov, in Solzhenitsyn’s novel, is aware that he cannot pull apart the Gulag system, but what he can and what he does is silently shield his own self-esteem through small acts like stretching out his work to preserve energy, hiding a piece of bread in his mattress and refusing to be disloyal to fellow prisoners. This ethic of resistance through skill and pride is best highlighted through his cautious workmanship in building the wall in the freezing cold, treating each brick “as though it were for himself” (Solzhenitsyn, 1998, p. 145). Shukhov’s strategies are definitely not ground-breaking but they are significant as they proclaim his humanity in a system designed to erase it.

The “prison” in Sayuri’s context, in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, is not a literal camp but a financial and gendered dependency which is equally hierarchical. To operate resistance, she makes use of well-planned self-fashioning by quietly steering her own narrative arc while simultaneously performing submissiveness. For example, Sayuri reframes her stance as an active agent from a passive victim when she manipulates the situation to get Mameha to be her mentor. Golden conveys how Sayuri's survival depends on appearing obedient while acting with steady intention underneath the surface by using the language of performance, such as her eyes being "downcast in demureness" (Golden, 1997, p. 211).

### **Conclusion:**

Both the novels present survival ethics where individuals decide which compromises are tolerable and which acts will help preserve a sense of self, thus rejecting simplified narrative of valiant resistance. For



Shukhov, this entails preserving his craftsmanship and his allegiance to specific comrades. On the other hand, for Sayuri it entails preserving her ability for romantic attachment in the face of her commodification, even if it is idealised.

On comparison, we find Shukhov's resistance to be more materially grounded, a tenet of physical integrity and endurance, while Sayuri's battle is performative, concerned with control over her social position and self-esteem. Yet both the characters demonstrate how resistance can be an act of living deliberately, making cautious choices, even in small increments in the face of extreme power imbalances.

Thus, what we see through these two novels is that, irrespective of the East-West divide, the ways in which imprisonment takes place is the same. There is lack of justice in society which leads to confinement and the several mediums of installing discipline leads these confined people to give in to the verdicts imposed upon them, creating a docile imprisoned body.

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