

Invisible Sentences: Structural Violence and the Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children in *The Mars Room* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Saranika.S,

Ph.D Research Scholar (FT),
Department of English (SF),
PSG College of Arts & Science,
Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.

Dr. J. Sripadmadevi,

Assistant Professor,
Department of English (SF),
PSG College of Arts & Science,
Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.

Abstract

The paper examines contemporary literature as it depicts the often marginalized trauma of children of incarcerated individuals in the context of structural violence. Through the lens of two texts, Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the paper conceptualizes incarceration in terms of those who are often most impacted by it, the children of incarcerated persons. The paper discusses the "invisible sentence" of emotional, social, and psychological punishment on a child of a prisoner despite his or her legal innocence. Ultimately, both novels depict incarceration as more than a simple legal application. They portray a city, region, or state that uses incarceration as a representation of social conditions as a part of the socio-political context that essentially criminalizes candidates. By employing theories of structural violence, the paper questions how incarceration supersedes the physical act of containment as intergenerational trauma or systemic erasure. This cross-cultural and comparative analysis offers the child an absent presence in texts and discourses about incarceration, taking the first step by using narrative analysis to depict the nature of the narrative as competing with naturalized realities of justice versus punishment by further calling attention to the paid human cost of incarceration. In conclusion, the paper calls for an expansive and humane notion of justice that includes those who inherit punishment without committing a crime, as the silent sufferers.

Keywords: Structural Violence, Parental Incarceration, Intergenerational Trauma, Narrative Analysis, Invisible Sentence.

The central hypothesis of the study is that *The Mars Room* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* illustrate that when parents go to prison, their children experience similar hardships in silence. Though the children themselves have done no wrong, they endure suffering, isolation, and neglect by society. These narratives show the dimension of the justice system that doesn't just punish one person; it can also punish their families, especially their children.

The research problem identified by the paper indicates that, for academic and legal discussion in this area, the known discourse has focused on the people being incarcerated, but not on the trauma experienced by their children, who are also often made invisible as victims of incarceration. Literature in both Western and South Asian contexts indicates how children experience and suffer from structural violence through systems of poverty, caste, gender discrimination, and state control. This aspect of the impact of incarceration remains largely absent from the literature and sociological analysis.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the representation of children impacted by their parents' incarceration in chosen literary texts.
2. To analyze and disentangle the concept of the “invisible sentence” as a literary and sociological form of suffering.
3. To explore issues of structural violence (as theorized by Paul Farmer and Johan Galtung) as a way to reveal how poverty, caste, gender, and political repression have further added to the suffering of families who are already suffering from incarceration.
4. To compare the socio-political meanings of incarceration in the U.S. and India through contrasting justice systems with a similar aim of imprisonment as a criminalizing punishment, and the implications for the family or the custodial parent, especially as it relates to the practice of separation from children.

Literature Review

Recently, literary studies have explored the idea that incarceration is not merely a legal process, but a socio-political phenomenon with intergenerational repercussions. Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* (2018) has received particular praise for her raw portrayal of contemporary life inside the American prison-industrial complex. Scholars like Schreiber assert that Kushner's novel “makes visible the muted consequences of incarceration as it relates to families, especially children, who are abandoned by a punitive and unconcerned system” (Schreiber 210). Likewise, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) operates at the intersections of caste, gender, religion, and state violence, emphasizing children who are abandoned or unnoticed because of the marginalization or criminalization of their parents. Both novels contest the logic of imprisonment, where the child is simply acknowledged as the victim of structural violence. In this way, *The Mars Room* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* provide important literary interventions into discussions of incarceration, family separation, and invisible trauma, priming the readers to rethink ideas of justice in light of those who have been sentenced by someone else. This research uses a qualitative, interpretive literary approach to investigate how contemporary fiction narrates the trauma of children impacted by parental incarceration. The two texts selected for analysis, *The Mars Room* by Rachel Kushner and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy, afford a qualitative understanding of children's experiences of trauma based on their mothers' being imprisoned. The analysis methodology will be grounded in structural violence theory (Paul Farmer, Johan Galtung), which highlights ways in which social and political systems of care and protection can indirectly harm children by separating them from their incarcerated parents.

The Invisible Sentence

When parents are incarcerated, the effects extend well beyond prisons and produce what thinkers variously term “invisible sentences,” unrecognized harm experienced by children who are not transgressors or victims in the lexicon of the viable justice system. These children often experience personal, relational, and institutional consequences, where there is little scholarship regarding child victimizers in this paradigm, both in penal scholarship and subsequently in literary criticism. The paper explores how literary fiction shows the effect of parental incarceration on children’s undergoing trauma through the fields of structural violence (James Galtung, 1969; Paul Farmer, 2004), trauma studies (Cathy Caruth, 1996; Judith Herman, 1992), and critical penal theory (Michel Foucault, 1977; Angela Davis, 2003). *The Mars Room* (2018) by Rachel Kushner, set in the American prison system, and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, which examines various forms of state violence in the Indian socio-political landscape, both contemporary novels focus on the child protagonists who undergo trauma of exile and a broken identity because of parent’s incarceration or disappearance. The respective novels take place in unique geopolitical spaces but share in representing children as collateral damage of institutional injustice.

Carceral Motherhood and the Silent Sentence

Through the character of Romy Hall, Rachel Kushner analyzes the destructive breaking of motherhood in the context of imprisonment in *The Mars Room*. Romy’s prison sentence constitutes an invisible sentence on her son, Jackson, which whispers-prisoner shriek of silence becomes an anguished form of imprisonment. Romy’s reflection, “I’d left my son behind... I would never get him back” (Kushner 49), captures the irreversible maternal dismemberment the penal system enforces. Jackson, even in death, cannot “escape” the shrinkage of his existence; analogously, Romy is never truly “free” to move on from the emotional chains the prison system binds her to. Jackson, who is now “disappeared” under state custody, emerges as a spectral subject of systemic neglect; he is a casualty of state-sponsored parental abandonment. Jackson’s exile into foster care epitomizes what Galtung would characterize as “structural violence,” violence inflicted on individuals as a direct outcome of a social system (Galtung 167). Kushner steers clear of drama, maternal erasure is persistent and systemic: “They said I was an unfit mother, but I was never even asked how he was” (Kushner 143). Children stripped of a voice due to litigation apathy endure an “invisible sentence” akin to emotional imprisonment. Through Kushner’s narrative, the carceral system appears not only as a zone of bodily confinement but also as a system of social and systemic erasure, reinforcing a cycle of social abandonment and muted anguish.

The Child as an Absent Presence: Erasure, Surveillance, and Abandonment

In *The Mars Room* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the children of incarcerated and castaway parents occupy a contradictory condition: they remain foremost in the thoughts of the caregivers, yet socially and institutionally erased. In *The Mars Room*, the legal scrimmage surrounding Romy’s son, Jackson, reveals the almost total absence of emotional consideration and legal negotiation. The system not only physically separates them but also symbolically severs the umbilical link. Treating the child as a logistical problem, a box to be checked rather than a relational bond shaped by a mother. “I was not allowed to know anything about him,” Romy describes (Kushner 116). Institutions not only enforce a punitive erasure, but also enforce a severing of the relational identity of motherhood. Though Jackson is

seldom spoken of, his absence is rendered as a ghostly presence, and throughout the novel, it underscores how the child, while not criminalized, is disciplined by proxy. Using the perspective offered by Galtung on structural violence, Jackson's trauma is viewed as not stemming from direct abusive action, but rather from systemic neglect and the absence of relational rights (Galtung 171).

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* similarly explores forms of violence in abandonment and erasure of identity. The novel presents Miss Jebeen the First and later Miss Jebeen the Second, who is another child whose parents are either absent or lost to conflict. These children are not simply orphans. They are the result of a sociopolitical context that considers children of outcasts, revolutionaries, or transgender mothers as administratively disposable. "Miss Jebeen the Second was not born, she was found," which Roy uses to showcase a narrative of erasure where the origin story is replaced by state failure. Anjum's maternal care, richly emotional, remains unofficial and unfit, revealing how the state's recognition of legitimacy and approval is suffocated by narrow, rigid boundaries. This chapter contends that both novels portray childhood not as a time of innocence but rather, a facsimile created by a silent, unrelenting, emotional, and surveillance-driven punishment.

Specters of Separation: Children's Psychic Trauma and Structural Violence

In both *The Mars Room* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the child characters silently carry the trauma caused by the carceral state's hold on their parents. Jackson, Romy Hall's young son in *The Mars Room*, represents institutional abandonment. After Romy is imprisoned, Jackson goes into foster care, cutting him off from his mother. Although he is not a criminal, Jackson suffers because of the state's choices. Romy expresses her pain, stating, "They don't just take away your freedom. They take away everything you care about. They take your kid and act like you never had one" (Kushner 142). Here, structural violence shows itself through bureaucratic neglect.

Arundhati Roy introduces characters such as Saddam Hussain and Miss Jebeen the Second in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, burdened with inherited trauma from caste punishment, displacement, and state violence, even though they have no biological relationship to parents in prison. Raised by Anjum, a hijra and marginalized person, the orphaned baby girl finds a new life in the Khwabgah, a community created out of exclusion. "She had no papers," writes Roy. No name. No formal memory. She had slipped through the cracks (Roy 235). Like Jackson, this child's life is moulded by structural erasure. Carceral systems that punish by absence rather than incarceration have an impact on them. These accounts demonstrate how children experience the psychological impacts of incarceration.

Discussion

To reduce the multi-generational trauma experienced by children of incarcerated parents, this study recommends a multi-faceted, child-centered intervention model that draws upon structural violence and restorative justice principles. The following solutions are suggested to disassemble the covert elements that harm children of incarcerated parents:

1. Alternatives to Sentencing and Policy Change

Primary Carer Consideration: As explored in *The Mars Room*, the legal reforms should consider sentencing alternatives for mothers or primary carers, such as house arrest, community service, or rehabilitative options.

Family Impact Assessments: The court is obligated to provide the court with a “Family Impact Statement” before sentencing a parent. This ensures the interest of the child would not be forfeited for punishment.

2. Mechanisms of Child-Centered Support

The foster care system should be revamped to include psychological counselling, educational continuity, and stable placement as part of trauma-informed foster care.

Education Continuity Programs: Create mentorship and emotional growth programs at schools, specifically targeting children whose parents were incarcerated.

3. Alternatives Based in the Community

Restorative Justice Circles: These circles use indigenous models and promote accountability while maintaining a connection to family. This addresses harm in communities and supports mothers like Romy in *The Mars Room*. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* provides examples of NGOs and neighbourhood organisations that can create safe spaces for kids impacted by structural barriers (such as caste, gender, and proximity).

Summation

This research illustrates how parental incarceration functions as an essentially invisible mechanism of structural violence. It interrupts the psychological, emotional, and social lives of children left behind. Assessment of Rachel Kushner’s novel *The Mars Room* and Arundhati Roy’s novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* shows how state institutions, legal systems, and social hierarchies combine to not just criminalize individuals and the family forms around them.

In both novels, the character Jackson and the unnamed infants in Roy’s story are similarly quiet victims. These “invisible sentences” refer to more than just legal determinations, but seep into everyday practices of neglect, surveillance, and social exclusion. Kushner’s representation of the carceral state’s assault upon motherhood and Roy’s representation of beings pushed to the margins based on caste and gender; carcerality is not a limited event but is a vast system of oppression. Applying structural violence to parental incarceration shows we need to see incarceration not just as a legal outcome, but as a multifocus traumatic social event. Confronting these injustices requires policies that are multi-determined, partially rehabilitative practices for children, and literary re-education that bring these silenced narratives about family, life, and childhood to the fore.

References

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

Gopal, Priyamvada. *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. Verso, 2019.

Haney, Lynne. *Motherhood as Punishment: The Case of Parenting in the US Carceral State*. University of California Press, 2021.

Kushner, Rachel. *The Mars Room*. Scribner, 2018.

- Roy, Ananya. “Rethinking the Ethics of Aid: Structural Violence, Neoliberalism, and Resistance.” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2015, pp. 1056–1072.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin Books, 2017.
- Schreiber, Rebecca. “Carceral Aesthetics and the Politics of Visibility.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2020, pp. 561–589.
- Wakefield, Sara, and Christopher Wildeman. *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Copyright & License: