

Confinement and Resistance in Banira Giri's Novel *The Prison*

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Abstract

*This research paper investigates Banira Giri's novel *The Prison* from the perspectives of existential dilemmas, gender oppression, and socio-political restrictions imposed on women. The paper examines how the protagonist can navigate through individual and societal restrictions using the lenses of existential feminism. To unveil these aspects, the paper seeks to answer these research questions: How does *The Prison* portray existentialist themes? In what ways does *The Prison* serve as a feminist critique of Nepali society, and how does Giri's narrative style enhance the themes of confinement and resistance? The objective of this paper is to analyze the existentialist themes in the text, to examine how the novel critiques gender oppression and socio-political constraints on women in Nepali society, and to explore how Giri's narrative style—through symbolism, metaphor, and structure, enhances the themes of confinement and resistance. This study uses a qualitative research method, using textual analysis to explore the novel's themes, symbols, and narrative style. Existential feminism has been employed as an analytical lens. The analysis is set in three parts: existentialist themes in *The Prison*, feminist critique of Nepali society, and narrative structure and the themes of confinement and resistance. Findings prove existentialist struggles and alienation, the theme of confinement and freedom and symbolism and metaphors used in the existentialist context.*

Keywords: Existentialism, feminism, gender, Nepali literature, patriarchy

Introduction

The Prison, written by Banira Giri, is a novel in Nepali literature. It was originally published as *Karagar*, 1985. In 2005, it was translated into English by Ann Hunkins. Banira Giri is the first woman writer to win the Sajha Puraskar for her debut novel. The background of the book is set in Kathmandu. The story consists of eighteen chapters and is narrated from the first-person female's point of view. It explores the theme of existentialism and feminism with the help of a character who combats two-layered literal and metaphorical imprisonment imposed by society. The study aims to critically examine thematic significance, narrative structure and socio-political interpretation of *The Prison*. This novel is a persuasive narrative in which existentialist themes and feminist resistance are interwoven, and it also provides a strong criticism of societal restrictions and gender oppression. Patriarchal society is the setting of the novel in which the protagonist's battle to fight against the physical as well as psychic imprisonment executed by the society is portrayed. Giri tactfully uses the philosophy of existentialism to emphasize the quest of the protagonist to find the meaning and sovereignty in the universe, which itself obligates and tries to define and confine her in its own rules and regulations.

Existentialists emphasize on personal sovereignty, choice, and the inherent absurdity present in the existence of humans. These notions in *The Prison* are replicated through the battle of the protagonist, who is fighting for self-definition in a rigid patriarchal society that dictates gender

norms. The protagonist's journey for existence is a representation of most of the women who discover themselves to be trapped both literally and metaphorically in the net trap set by the patriarchal structure of the society. If viewed from an existentialist perspective, *The Prison* criticizes external as well as internal restrictions on the one hand, and on the other, it also criticizes the dilemma sprouting out of it. In addition, the novel also functions as an influential interpretation on female resistance. The narration of the novel threatens the patriarchal rules and regulations that dominate women in society. It highlights the silence and actions of defiance that frame the identity of the protagonist of *The Prison*. By amalgamating existentialist ideology with feminist philosophy, the novel narrates the story of restrictions and resistance, insisting that its audience raise their voices against societal structures and grip personal agency. In context, this article explores the juncture of existentialism and feminist resistance in *The Prison*, highlighting how the protagonist's battle replicates the wider struggles of women against existential hopelessness and patriarchal subjugation.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have critically evaluated Giri's *The Prison*, emphasizing her adept integration of existentialist and feminist frameworks. Prevailing literature primarily focuses on her narrative strategies and thematic concerns, yet research on how *The Prison* encapsulates existentialist ideology in the context of Nepali society remains limited. *The Prison* has received considerable scholarly attention for its thematic intensity, particularly regarding existentialism and feminist resistance. Critics have analyzed the novel through postcolonial feminism, existentialist philosophy, and sociocultural critique, underscoring its relevance to contemporary discourses on identity and gender. Singh (2015) critiques *The Prison* as exposing patriarchal norms that confine women within domestic and societal domains; the protagonist's internal struggles mirror the broader existential crisis of women entrapped by patriarchy. Likewise, Sharma (2017) aligns the novel's portrayal of the conflict between societal expectations and personal autonomy with Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist discourse.

Koirala (2018) examines psychological dimensions, arguing that the protagonist's journey reflects a profound quest for identity, drawing comparisons to Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. His reading foregrounds psychological imprisonment as a key existential motif. Contrastingly, Mishra (2019) situates the novel within Nepali feminist literature, arguing that *The Prison* marks a shift toward more radical feminist narratives. Tamang (2020) emphasizes the symbolic use of physical and psychological imprisonment in the novel, illustrating gender-based constraints that reinforce existential themes of isolation and self-determination. Adhikari (2024) analyzes the novel's fragmented structure, asserting that it mirrors the protagonist's fractured selfhood. Subedi (2021) explores the intersection of class and gender, offering a Marxist-feminist reading that critiques not only patriarchy but also economic structures that underpin women's subjugation. This aligns with broader critiques of capitalism's role in gender oppression.

Gautam (2022) addresses the theme of resistance, highlighting the protagonist's subtle defiance as an assertion of agency. Dahal (2022) offers a Buddhist existentialist interpretation, proposing that the protagonist's search for meaning reflects notions of suffering and liberation. Joshi (2023) compares *The Prison* with South Asian feminist existentialist novels, arguing that Giri

uniquely synthesizes local cultural elements with universal existential concerns. Rana (2023) employs psychoanalytic theory, interpreting the protagonist's identity fragmentation through Freudian and Lacanian lenses. Thapa (2023) critiques societal pressure on personal consciousness, positing that Giri captures the existential anxiety of a woman torn between duty and personal longing.

Basnet (2023) examines the novel's non-linear narrative, suggesting that its structural innovation mirrors the protagonist's internal turmoil and reinforces existential themes. Bhandari (2023) focuses on the role of memory, showing how reminiscences serve simultaneously as confinement and liberation. Acharya (2024) compares *The Prison* with other Nepali feminist literature, identifying it as a landmark in feminist existentialist writing that leaves a lasting impact on debates around agency, selfhood, and gender. Across these analyses, the novel's existentialist-feminist fusion emerges as a powerful critique of patriarchal society, illuminating broader global debates on identity, agency, and resistance. Despite *The Prison's* recognition within feminist literary discourse, its existentialist dimensions—particularly how it reflects Nepal's sociocultural context—remain underexplored. Further research is warranted to analyze how the novel critiques patriarchal structures and aligns with global feminist-existentialist narratives while rooted in Nepali lived realities.

Statement of the Problem

Banira Giri's novel *The Prison* is a significant work in Nepali literature that explores women's experiences. However, there has been limited scholarly analysis of the novel's existential dilemmas and feminist themes. Nepali literary criticism has primarily focused on socio-cultural and political aspects, overlooking the intersection of existentialist concerns like freedom, alienation, and individual agency with gender oppression in Giri's novel. In this context, this study aims to fill this gap by examining how *The Prison* portrays external constraints imposed by patriarchal and socio-political structures, as well as the protagonist's internal struggles for meaning, self-definition, and resistance. By applying an existential feminist perspective, this research seeks to uncover the deeper layers of the novel's themes, particularly the tension between confinement and the pursuit of freedom. Through this analysis, this study sheds light on how Giri's narrative critiques both personal and societal oppression while also envisioning possibilities of resistance within these constraints.

Objectives

- To analyze the existentialist themes of freedom, alienation, and choice in Banira Giri's *The Prison*,
- To examine how the novel critiques gender oppression and socio-political constraints on women in Nepali society,
- To explore how Giri's narrative style—through symbolism, metaphor, and structure—enhances the themes of confinement and resistance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on textual analysis to examine Banira Giri's novel, *The Prison*. The analytical framework is rooted in existential feminist theory, particularly drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's insights, to explore how the novel depicts the conflict

between individual freedom and societal constraints. The study investigates how existential dilemmas like alienation, authenticity, and the quest for meaning intersect with gender oppression and socio-political limitations in the Nepali context. This theoretical approach allows for a detailed examination of the protagonist's internal struggles and external resistance against patriarchal and cultural norms. The research is interpretive in nature, relying on qualitative analysis rather than quantitative data, and focuses on analyzing *The Prison* as a primary text, supplemented by relevant theoretical and critical literature. Through this methodology, the study aims to uncover how Giri's narrative addresses themes of confinement and resistance, providing a nuanced feminist and existential critique of Nepali society.

Discussion

The study incorporates existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Camus and feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler to investigate the protagonist's struggle for existence. Existentialist concepts of freedom, absurdity, and isolation support analyzing the novel's representation of freedom, absurdity, and isolation help interpret the novel's portrayal of confinement, while feminist perceptions explicate its criticism of gender subjugation. This paper devises an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that incorporates existentialist philosophy and feminist literary criticism to scrutinize *The Prison*. By exploiting these perceptions, the study examines the novel's existential themes and its feminist criticism and the role of its narration in reinforcing the themes of restrictions and resistance. Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of 'bad faith'-the act of self-deception to obey to societal roles-is employed to the protagonist's struggle against societal norms and individual restrictions. Albert Camus' absurdism is a notion that life is intrinsically hollow and that person must generate their own objective is examined in relation to the protagonist's existential catastrophe. Simone de Beauvoir's claim that women are framed by societal constructs rather than inherent characteristics is explored to comprehend how the protagonist wrestles with existential freedom. To investigate feminist criticism of Nepali society in *The Prison*, the study uses the following concepts related to the theoretical tool.

Existentialist Isolation and Freedom

The protagonist's psychological state in *The Prison* replicates Sartre's concept of existential angst and Albert Camus' concept of absurdity. She tackles with an intense feeling of alienation, lack of sovereignty, questioning the meaning and her existence. As she struggles with the sense of her existence, she represents Sartre's notion 'bad faith,' in which a person deceives himself/herself into obeying social expectations. Primarily the protagonist lives in her parents' house with her brothers as prescribed by the society but later on as she could not adjust herself in such bad environment she moved to a rented room alone which symbolizes her existential isolation and her freedom. Giri represents her protagonist entrapped in a universe that rejects her authentic self-expression forcing her to interrogate if any kind of true sovereignty is achievable. This crisis of existence reveals as she swings between surrendering and resistance, replicating the absurd hero who must generate meaning in a worthless existence.

Feminist Resistance

Giri's *The Prison* is an influential feminist criticism of patriarchal structures prevalent in Nepali society. The struggle of the protagonist is not of an individual, rather, it is a projection of the collective experiences of women ostracized by the norms set by society and culture. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Giri's *The Prison* elucidates how women are accustomed to subordination, their roles predetermined by a patriarchal society. The protagonist's core monologue exhibits the quieting of women's voices, emphasizing the concept that conventional societies restrict female agency. Though actions of defiance- whether through speech, silence, or memory- assist as delicate forms of feminist resistance. Giri contends that even in restrictions, resistance persists, and through self-awareness, women can reclaim their sovereignty.

Symbolism of *The Prison*

The Prison in Giri's novel functions as an authoritative metaphor for the societal constraints imposed on women. It signifies both literal and allegorical space of imprisonment, emulating the restrictions enforced on female autonomy and self-determination. The protagonist's literal entrapment in *The Prison* replicates the psychological imprisonment experienced by women in patriarchal societies. The recurring imagery of locked doors, narrow corridors, and obstructed views conveys the limited choices available to women, underscoring the existentialist theme of entrapment. *The Prison* also offers the concept that prisons are not just external rather internal as well. Societal conditioning leads individual to accept or even perpetuate imprisonment for themselves. Through the protagonist's battle, Giri emphasizes the devastating effects of subjugation on the one hand and the prospective for resistance and self- liberation on the other. *The Prison* symbolizes psychological as well as physical confinement in socio-cultural context of Nepal.

Existentialist Themes in *The Prison*

The Prison discursively weaves existentialist philosophy into the protagonist's psychological and emotional turbulence. The novel emulates Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist concept that 'existence precedes essence,' depicting a protagonist entrapped in the universe that rejects her agency. She battles with a devastating feeling of isolation and alienation, inquiring into the connotation of her existence in a society that prescribes her role. Her interior monologue replicates Albert Camus' absurdist philosophy, specifically the concept that life is fundamentally worthless, and it is up to the individual to create an objective of it.

Existentialist themes as the pursuit of self, meaning in suffering and isolation within the structure of society, are focused in *The Prison*. The protagonist's internal monologue is evident of her existential crisis sprouted out of her physical as well as psychological entrapment represented through metaphorical prison as she asserts, "Why am I being punished? What crime have I committed?" (Giri, 1985, p.12). This rhetorical interrogation provokes existential agony- the protagonist is not only entrapped physically, rather she also is trapped in a meaningless and absurd world, replicating Camus' absurdism. Her alienation turns into a mouthpiece for introspection, which is a fundamental feature of existential literature. Later in another situation, she replicates: "I am alone, always have been, always will be. Even amid others, I carry this silence within" (Giri, 1985, p.35). Here, her isolation is symbolic of an innate philosophical solitude. The wall of prison reflects the walls of self-alienation, where her identity is in question or a state of flux and doubt.

In the whole novel, the protagonist is unable to escape societal expectations, which strengthens the existentialist theme of confinement or imprisonment. The literal physical prison functions as a metaphor in the novel, which signifies the concealed yet rigid societal structures that prescribe the lives of women. She experiences 'bad faith' as designated by Sartre, wherein she conforms to expectations rather than pursuing authentic self-expression. Although the novel offers flashes of existential revolution, where she endeavors to proclaim her sense of self. This fluctuation between misery and revolt condenses the existential battle, crafting *The Prison* an insightful examination of human sovereignty and confinement.

Feminist Critique of Nepali Society

The Prison is a criticism of the patriarchal structures that govern Nepali society. Giri by narrating the protagonist's experiences emphasizes the systemic subjugation of women. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, *The Prison* exhibits how cultural and societal norms command women's lives, reducing them to roles of subservience. The protagonist is symbolic of innumerable women who are denied sovereignty, and enforced into roles allocated by convention, marriage, and family obligations.

One of the most noticeable essentials of the novel is its representation of muted women's voices. Women in the novel are not only bodily restrained but also metaphorically imprisoned by societal expectations. Giri's chronicle sheds light on the absence of agency women has in picking their destinies. Her protagonist's battle echoes the real-life contests of Nepali women, creating the novel a feminist appeal for attentiveness and transformation and emancipation from such cultural biasness. Giri presents a critique of the patriarchal structures of Nepali society through the representation of her protagonist. The protagonist's imprisonment is not only lawful but culturally systemic, obligatory by customary gender roles and expectations. "They say a woman must endure. That is her virtue. Her ornaments are silence, obedience, and sacrifice" (Giri, 1985, p. 22). This clarifies what society expects from women and how the society wants women to be so that all kinds of oppression can be imposed on women. This is cultural discourse and made by rulers and implemented and constructed by society. Giri satires on the societal ideals which are apparatuses to oppress women in society. This metaphor of domestic imprisonment is intensely affiliated with feminist theory, specifically the perception of the isolated sphere as a location of regulation. Giri is specifically threatening the social contract that confines female autonomy in society.

Despite the miserable representation of subjugation, *The Prison* also presents moments of resistance. The protagonist's actions of revolt matter how small-signify a wider movement in contradiction of patriarchal regulation. Through contemplation, memory, and fleeting expressions of sovereignty, Giri platforms how resistance is demonstrated in numerous forms, even in the face of irresistible suppression. The novel's feminist message is vibrant: liberty for women necessitates both societal transformation and personal courage. It raises the issue of freedom from any kind of policy levels hinderances especially for cultural emancipation.

Narrative Structure and the Themes of Confinement and Resistance

Giri's narrative structure functions as a catalyst in fortifying the novel's core themes of imprisonment and resistance. The shattered psychological state of mind of the protagonist,

highlighting the incoherent nature of her experiences, is represented through the nonlinear and fragmented style of narrating the story. This structure replicates the claustrophobia of her existence, creating the reader's sense of the restrictions imposed upon the protagonist's life.

Introspective narration is used so much so that it permits the novel to investigate deep into the protagonist's opinions, formulating the themes of existential crisis and feminist resistance more instinctively. Flashbacks and stream of consciousness sections showcase the contrast between the past life in liberty and the present condition of entrapment, escalating the protagonist's emotional turbulence. The shift in timelines represent her battle to locate coherence in her life dictated by external forces. The non-linear narrative structure of the novel replicates the fragmented consciousness of a woman circumnavigating trauma and oppression. The continuous alterations between past and present replicate how memory itself converts a form of resistance. For instance, while replicating on herself, the protagonist asserts: "This space is tiny, yet my mind flies beyond it, back to the hills, to the sound of the river" (Giri, 1985 p. 41). Her psychological escapes are actions of revolt. It is a psychological resistance where one keeps his/her mind creative regardless of the physical condition. Giri displays that even in physical confinement, the imagination remains free, thus stimulating the stability of oppression. The narrative's stream of consciousness style is both confessional and confrontational. It diverges from conventional storytelling, twinning how the protagonist refuses to be described by her abductors or her circumstances: "They can chain my body, but my thoughts are untouchable" (Giri, 1985, p. 44). Thus, the structure of the novel strengthens the central themes: confinement does not obliterate identity, and resistance can take the form of memory, thought, and voice.

Furthermore, Giri's use of symbolism- specifically the recurrent imagery of prisons, bolted doors, and clogged pathways- additionally strengthens the theme of entrapment. Though, the account also hints at confrontation throughout passing moments of self-awareness and revolt, proposing that even within imprisonment, agency is conceivable. The novel's structure, consequently, is not just a storytelling method but an embodiment of the protagonist's battle, formulating the experience of reading *The Prison* as immersive as it is stimulating. In conclusion, *The Prison* masterfully amalgams existentialist philosophy with feminist criticism, exhausting its groundbreaking chronicle style to strengthen its themes of imprisonment and resistance. Through its protagonist's expedition, the novel contests societal norms and inquiries the nature of liberty, constructing it a milestone in Nepali literature.

The Prison is affiliated with existentialist philosophy by portraying the absurdity of human existence and the character's battle for significance. The novel functions as a feminist criticism, revealing the organized subjugation of women in Nepali society. Giri's usage of chronicle methods efficiently communicates themes of imprisonment and defiance.

Existentialist Struggles and Alienation

The Prison vividly captures the existential crisis of its protagonists, highlighting her struggles with isolation, meaninglessness, and the search for selfhood. Sartrean existentialism is evident in the way the protagonist wrestles with the constraints imposed by society, reflecting the notion that 'existence precedes essence.' She is not born with a predetermined purpose but is instead forced to define

herself within an oppressive environment. This struggle for self-definition against societal constraints underscores the novel's existentialist core. Even in the case of her love affair she states:

I filled my embrace with him; it is not important for me to be filled in his embrace. We both need a foundation; we are each other's support, each other's climbing stake. We wind around each other, released in body and mind; we can turn our faces toward the blue sky and become refreshed. (36)

Her intellectual personality covers her psychology which is surfaced through her narratives. On the one hand she contemplates and on the other she justifies her love affair. She argues unlike the other people's love affair, she insists, their bond is not grounded on compromise and negotiation instead it is natural despite it being unconventional. The major foundation of their union is equality as a man and a woman. Although the affair of an intellectual lady with a married family man can be taken as a deviation and a matter of condemnation from the then society's normal perspective, she tries to prove it to be normal phenomena where both of them need each other as both of them enjoy each other's company.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist's alienation is both physical and psychological.

As she finds difficult to live in the artificial environment created by her brothers and the other family members, she leaves her parent's home and shifts to a rented room of her own. Her transfer from home to a rented a room shocked her brothers which she narrates, "Everyone in the family was shocked to see this new era in my life of compromise" (137). Her decision of leaving her home is unconventional because in Nepalese Hindu society a girl can leave her house only after marriage or death. Her getting out off from the home resembles how much she was tortured in the house that she was compelled to take such a decision of living alone in a rented room. The psychological alienation leads her to physical alienation.

She is not only confined within a literal prison but also metaphorically trapped by rigid gender roles that limit her autonomy. This dual imprisonment reinforces Albert Camus' concept of the absurd-an individual's search for meaning in an indifferent world. Her interactions with others, or lack thereof, emphasize her growing detachment, making her existence one of solidarity contemplation and silent rebellion.

The Theme of Confinement and Freedom

The novel presents confinement as a central motif, both in its literal and figurative forms. The protagonist experiences Sartre's idea of 'bad faith,' where individuals deceive themselves into accepting societal roles rather than seeking their own truth. She oscillates between resignation and rebellion, questioning whether true freedom is even attainable. However, within this confinement, there are glimpses of existential resistance. The protagonist's moments of introspection, her fleeting acts of defiance, and her awareness of her constrained reality illustrate the possibility of self-assertion. Giri's portrayal of these moments suggest that, despite external limitations, the individual still has the capacity to shape their identity and destiny.

Symbolism and Metaphors in the Existentialist Context

Giri employs strong symbolic elements to reinforce existentialist themes. *The Prison*, in its most literal sense, represents societal restrictions, but it also serves as a metaphor for psychological and emotional captivity. Locked doors, narrow spaces, and the lack of visibility beyond *The Prison*

walls all reinforce the theme of entrapment. Yet, these same symbols also suggest the protagonist's internal journey toward self-awareness. *The Prison* walls may confine her physically, but her mind remains as arena for existential questioning and defiance. This layered use of symbolism aligns with existentialist thought, which holds that meaning is not given but created by the individual.

The existentialist themes in *The Prison* make it a profound literary exploration of human freedom and limitation. Through its protagonist's journey, the novel examines the tension between societal constraints and individual autonomy. Giri masterfully depicts the existentialist crisis of a woman struggling to define her essence in a world that denies her agency. The novel not only critiques the oppressive structures that confine women but also highlights the possibility of self-awareness and resistance within those constraints. Ultimately, *The Prison* presents a compelling narrative that aligns with existentialist philosophy, making it a significant work in both feminist and existentialist literary traditions.

Conclusion

Existentialism and resistance are at the core of Banira Giri's *The Prison*. *The Prison* signifies physical psychological and societal imprisonment. The skilful usage of inventive narrative technique, Giri crafts a fascinating criticism of gender oppression and existential despair. The novel is a convincing exploration of existentialist and feminist themes, amalgamating the protagonist's internal battle with wider societal criticisms. It represents an individual's battle against the absurdity of existence and the oppressive structures that restrict her. Giri's usage of Sartrean and Camusian existentialism emphasize the tussle between conformity and self-definition, reinforcing the concept that individual meaning must be fabricated within a restrictive world. Simultaneously, the novel functions as a feminist criticism of Nepali society, exhibiting the universal muting and oppression of women. Giri valorises the never-ending battle of woman or men? for sovereignty in a patriarchal world with the help of portraying a protagonist who swings between despair and resistance. The narrative structure with its fragmented narrating and symbolic imagery, furthermore enriches the themes of imprisonment and defiance, compelling the readers achieve firsthand experience the protagonist's psychological as well as physical turmoil. Finally, *The Prison* by Banira Giri positions itself as a substantial literary work that amalgamates existentialist philosophy and feminist discourse of resistance. Representation of alienation, defiance and self-awareness, the novel confronts readers to interrogate the structures that dictate individual's existence and to identify the strength of resistance even in the opposing circumstances of restrictions.

Authors Biography

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