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A Critical Study of Torture in Chandrakumar's *Lock-Up*, a Novel and
Vetrimaaran's *Visaranai*, a Film

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Abstract

Torture is one of the practices used by the state to extract information and a confession from the victims under war trials. This paper is an attempt to explore torture and analyses the relationships between the state and torture, torturer and the victims, and the experience of pain and the emotions that arise from this in the Tamil novel, *Lock-Up* (2017) by Chandrakumar and *Visaranai* (2016), its film adaptation by Vetrimaran. How does the state act as the producer of torture as well as the regulatory authority in all forms of government? How does a modern secular and liberal state, as in India, use torture as a tool to extract the information or confession from the victims in the name of democracy? The present paper seeks to respond to these questions.

Key words: Modern State, Lock-Up, Torturer, Victims, Torture, Democracy, Secular, Pain, Fear, Darkness.

Torture is one of the human practices, and an institution plays a vital role in sustaining practices of torture. Torture has been employed as a technique of domination and oppression in varied ways in most countries. Torture may give rise to feelings and emotions. Emotions are heterogeneous, and consist of various psychological phenomena such as joy, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, and surprise. Torture is one of the tools used by all forms of modern states such as monarchic, autocratic, theocratic, fascist, communist, totalitarian, authoritarian, anarchic, democratic, secular states and so on to extract the information or to find out the truth; either it may be used on a war prisoner or someone captured by the state.

India, a secular democratic country, is an amalgamation of multiple states and also known as a federal union. South India is a region with its distinctive cultural, social, and linguistic identities. The region comprises the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamilnadu and Telangana. The first four of these states were formed on the basis of linguistic identities. South Indian languages have a rich body of literature in several genres.

Chandrakumar, a contemporary Tamil writer published his novel, *Lock-Up: Samaniyanin Kuripugal* (2006) and it was translated into English by Pavithra Srinivasan as *Lock-Up: Jottings of an*

Ordinary Man (2017). *Lock-Up* was made into a film, *Visaranai* (2016) by Vetrimaaran, a well-known director in Tamil cinema. *Visaranai* means interrogation in Tamil. This paper considers English version of the novel and its film adaptation. *Lock-Up* was based on Chandrakumar's own experience of torture in jail and his experiential understanding of pain during 1980's under police custody. Almost twenty five years later, Chandrakumar recalled this experience and wrote this novel. Both the film and the novel may be seen as an illustration of how the police use their power to violently destroy the lives of four innocent people under custodial trial. The state used the police as a tool to carry out torture and violence on individual body in a organized and systematic manner.

Throughout the history, the state has used torture methods to display power and maintain order in society. Talal Asad (2009) says "In Premodern societies of the Kind Foucault called classical, "torture" was carried out unapologetically and in public. It was the object of exposure but of display" (p. 105). In the transition to modernity, Talal Asad (2009) argued that public discourse of inflicting pain on a prisoner is entirely differentiated from pre-modern to modern, thus "The rhetoric of denial, which is the other side of rhetoric of accusation, is typical of modern or modernizing governments, and is linked to a liberal sensibility regarding pain" (p. 105).

The story of *Lock-Up* revolves around its protagonist, Pandi. The police arrest innocent Pandi, and his friends Kumar, Ravi, and Afzal, who hail from Tamil Nadu and live in the streets of Andhra Pradesh as daily wage workers. The aim of the police is to make these innocent young men accept the responsibility for a high-profile burglary. In *Visaranai*, firstly, the police arrested one of the victims, Afzal and tortured him to extract information on the whereabouts of his friends, and this led to their arrest.

Those who are vulnerable or marginalized communities, culturally outsiders, are frequently subjected to suspicion and even tortured. Socially vulnerable communities are persecuted due to their race, religion, caste and class. The nature of vulnerability provides a vivid relationship between state and individual. For instance, this can be seen in how the police speak to the victims, follows as, "No, these men have understood something: these dogs are orphans with no one to care, no one on their side, no one to demand their rights. Pound them into submission, into confession, and extort whatever you can" (Chandrakumar, 98).

In *Lock-Up*, a stereotypical notion of socially constructed images of a certain degree causes one to assume that he/ she should be a victim. How do we conclude immediately to have an immediate conclusion? Who is allowed to undermine the torture structurally? In the film, a conversation between the police and Afzal is carried out in the language of Telugu and Tamil respectively. The following exchange shows the stereotypes that lie behind the police's approach to the victims, who are not from the locality.

Police: *Yekkada nunchi vastunnav?* ("where do you come from?")

Afzal: *Padam pattutu vara sir* ("I am coming from after watching a movie")

Police: *Yem peru?* ("what's your name")

Afzal: Afzal Sir,

Police: *Alkaiita na IS aha?* ("Whether you are from al-Qaeda or ISI?")

Afzal: *Sir, Illa Sir, naa Tamilnatula iruntu vela seyaratukaga vanturuka sir*

("No, sir, I come from Tamil Nadu to work here")

Police: *Aite LTTE aha* (or LTTE - Liberation of Tigers Tamil Eelam)

Afzal: *Sir, illa sir, Tamil Sir* ("No, sir, I belong to Tamil Nadu"; my trans.: Vetrimaaran 00:19:48 to 00:20:06).

The torture is directed towards socially vulnerable and marginalized bodies with regard to any community, caste, religion, and so on. Despite, India is constitutionally democratic and secular country; even then practices of torture are used along undemocratic, casteist and communal lines. The state machinery itself, including the police, is biased against certain communities--for example, marginal castes, Muslims etc. This questions the practice of secularism and democracy by the Indian state. The torture serves to uphold the might of the state over the body of others. For instance, marginalized/powerless people are used as a tool by the state to undermine torture in *Lock-Up*; similarly, in the USA, racial differences are used as a tool for the state to indulge in torture.

As we saw, torture seems to be as old as the history of human civilization. Firstly, records of torture could be found in the Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu in the 21st c BC and Babylonian code of Hammurabi 18th c BC during the water-ordeal. The modern secular countries, the place of religion varies. For instance, both the citizens and state follow a secular in France, the population is religious and the federal state is secular in America, and India consists of secular constitutions and functions in a liberal democratic manner. Even though frequently communal riots have occurred in India and the religion has been a source of violence. The state does not hesitate to do violence on its citizens. In a democracy, the police, military, and secret services are monitored by national and international human rights organizations, public and judges. As a consequence of it, the state does torture in closed rooms or inside prisons. Fearing the scrutiny of the civil society and the pressure of the international human rights organizations, interrogators use torture to inflict pain on the body but leave no marks using clandestine methods that does not cause physical harm. Such methods of tortures include water boarding use of ice or spices, excessive noise, drugs, sleep deprivation, electro-torture, continuous interrogation, and so on.

Modern states have marked torture as uncivilized, unethical, undemocratic, and illegal to control its non-citizens. When torture is carried out in secret, it is often linked to the extraction of information or confession. The purpose of the torture is to intimidate, to extract false confessions, to gather accurate security information in order to intentionally kill individuals, groups, communities, and to do torture during situations of war. Darius Rejali (2009) argues that in democratic countries, torture is usually used on three models: The National Security Model, The Juridical Model, and The Civil discipline Model (p. 22).

Torture is not only an instrument used by the state but also obtain the truth to demonstrate the power of the state. What does 'torture' mean? We would begin by explaining the torture. One of the Iranian-born American academicians, specialized in torture, Darius Rejali (2009) defines torture as "the systematic infliction of physical torment on detained individuals by state officials for police purposes, for confession, for information, or intimidation" (p. 35).

The torturer dominates the prisoner both in physical acts and verbal acts as accessories to the physical acts of torture, and weapons or implementation of torture may be seen as forming the basic units of the scene of torture of the police station such as room, ceiling, lathi, walls, window, table, chair and so on. In *Lock-Up*, the room where the act of tortures is performed does not have natural light, except the little that filters through the windows in the daytime. During the night, the room remains dark. In both the novel and the film, torture takes place predominantly in the darkness only. The verbal act consists of two parts, the question and the answer. The police use their tone and form as a weapon to bring about truth or else, a confession, "Get up, dog, let us deal with you. Ha, we will drag the truth out tomorrow, you will see...Mm, confess now, you rogues - I will thrash you to death - Poda, go, walk around that tree,' and he raised his lathi again" (Chandrakumar, 50).

Darius Rejali, in his interviews with the Brazilian torturers, suggests that torture has a varied relationship to manliness. In *Lock-Up*, until the end, the police being unable to extract a confession from the victims became more hostile and continued torturing in order to prove their manliness and display

their ego. According to Sartre, torturers want “the secret of everything” (Rejali 2007, 155) so that the torturer can be assured of his omnipotence. To a certain degree, torturer does not want information, and it goes beyond the humanity to do torture. The torturer is police, and the victims are Pandi, Murugan, Kumar, and Afzal. When it comes to victims, they are meager object in torture. The police control the body, scenic of the torture as follows,

Sada-sada-sada! Fell the blows here, there, without mercy. Ayyo! Amma! I could feel cried thudding through my heart... One of them stretched Nelson’s legs; made sure his back was flat against the wall, and stamped on his thighs, nudging the base of his stomach. The other clamped Nelson’s feet together and turned them around to his convenience, hitting furiously. At least twenty blows, accompanied by continuous screams, and ‘Tell; Tell; speak,’ – again and again and again. (Chandrakumar, 31)

In the film, the shoe and head are captured in the single footage of the camera. It represents victims' heads beneath the police feet, and also the structural power of the police, and common people are an object for them, not a human being. Pain is about how a particular kind of terrible feeling can be inhabited and enacted. Talal Asad argues that all feelings of bodily pain can be classified into two: internal – muscular, biochemical, and external – especially hear-able, such as voice, demeanor, and the manner of walking (p. 83).

Pain is used as an instrument by an individual, social group, and community. Pain is not an action but itself is a kind of action. Pain is something that happens to the body or afflicts the mind. Pain is private and a thought destroying event. Pain is understood by one’s own experiences rather than those who represent it. Physical pain is marked in a body but mental pain is not visible. The victims did not commit any crime and inflicted pain forced them to confess in court both the *Visaranai* and *Lock-Up*.

The human body is a site of agency and the agent engages with pain and suffering. Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* illustrates that “the utter rigidity of pain itself” is universally reflected in the fact that “its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidentals or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is” (Asad, 80). Sounds and cries are made by the people before the language is learned. Bodies have been used to inflict pain on a person until she/he breaks at the weakest point.

Here, an analyzing the relationship between the state and the torture – the state machinery functions through institutions such as military, police, bureaucracy, and judicial. Elaine Scarry argues that the torture includes a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, a verbal act, and the interrogation (p. 28). The world is a universal one, and it is broad and wide open, but when it comes to torture, the world reduces into a single room or set of rooms. The torture room is called “guest rooms” in Greece and as “safe houses” in the Philippines (Elaine Scarry, 40). In India, the torture room is called “Lock-Up or prison.” Initially, Victims hesitated to enter into *Lock-Up*, but later, they are more comfortable to stay in the Lock-Up rather than coming outside. Thus, “It seemed like the Lock-Up was much better than the outside. Now, we were terrified of stepping out of the room” (Chandrakumar, 34).

Torture is described as an action carried out by an agent of the state. Primarily, torture is not only an individual, but also torture is practiced/exercised within the different social parameters or contexts. The function of the state depends on the concept of We and Others, where it begins with the torture. For instance, Murugan and his allies were arrested due to their non-Telugu identity.

An analysis of how the state functions while adopting a torture: the human body has been used by the state to mark the torture, and the torture takes place on the body only. Indeed, the intention of torture is striving towards the truth or confession of the prisoners. In Coetzee’s novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one of the characters, Colonel Joll, claims *pain is truth*. Colonel Joll speaks with the Magistrate regards the truth, thus: “First I get lies, and you see this is what happens first lies, then lies, then more

lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth" (Coetzee, 10).

Pain is not applicable in the context of *Lock-Up*. Kumar, a protagonist, and his friends did not commit any crime, and they were arrested by the police and tortured to extract a confession of the burglary. If there is no truth, how does it become pain is truth, and it may be something else, but not the truth? Even if they accept that, though it is not the truth, it is a kind confession for the inability to bear the torture. According to Talal Asad, sometimes, 'My is truth, and myth has been used synonym for the irrational and non-rational' (p. 23). in this way of thinking myths stands in contrast to secular. The modern secular state assumed to be secular and rational but in fact, it rests on myths and violence. Paul de Man and Benjamin argued, "Secular is opposed to mythical" (Asad, 65).

Due to absence for the practical function of torture to extract the truth, it becomes a self-indulgent brutal act and destroys another body, not to find the truth. The police hanged four people up and down and began to torture them. Its scenic descriptions followed as:

The two policemen conferred; and one police went outside and returned back in a short while with three stout white ropes the thickness of a little finger; each was at least ten feet long. When they tied up upside down, there are five feet distances between us. Before torture, how the arrangements made by the police to control body: "the police twined the rope once between my legs, making sure they lay in the midst of the two ends, checked to see if the lengths were right... One end of the rope was raised and tied to the window grill, seven feet above. My feet had risen until my back rested on the floor. The other end of the rope was pulled taut above my head and tied to the roof. Now, the two ends of the rope were split like a V; my legs were raised and my feet spread out, like a flower . . . Our head and backs lay on the floor while our legs, from our hips downwards, were raised, turning our bodies into an L shape. (Chandrakumar 45)

In accordance with truth, what does exactly mean the truth? The court makes untruth into the truth. When the judge asked Pandi and his friends in Telugu, *Doggatanam cheste oppukuntara?* ("whether you accept the burglary crime or not?") They replied in a chorus (crying voice) in Tamil, *Aiya! Nanga etuvumay pannala, engala adichi adichi oppukka solranga. Nanga etuvumay pannala* ("Ayya, nothing we did. They whipped us to accept the confession. Ayya, we did not do anything"; my trans.: *Vetrimaaran* 00:48:29 to 00:48:43). The judge could not be in a position to believe whatever they said as true, and they showed their marked or tortured body by removing the dress. The judge begins to believe what it means to be the truth. Here, a symbol of marked and tortured body as an embodiment of truth and also the body as an embodiment for carrying a vehicle of truth. Pandi speaks as (Tamil),

Aiya! Illa Aiya! Engala adichi'taya ottuka sonnanka, parunka'ya! Epdi adichirukan'kannu parunka'ya, parunka'ya. cattaiya kazhuttra, adi'chata solra (Mirattum thoniyil) solra, aiya aamanka'ya, parunka Aiya! no! Aiya! (They beat us to accept the truth. Aiya!, Look" here (showing the tortured mark of the body. See Sir, how they have beaten or tortured us and showed his body with wounded marks. Demanding other friends also, remove shirts and they show a marked body while they moaning." (my trans.: *Vetrimaaran* 00:49:07 to 00:49:22)

The natural tendency is that after the torture, wherever the body gets injured, instantly, our hands move towards a wounded place to touch or grope it into getting relieved from the pain. Kumar's hands were tied, so he could not touch the wounded place. It is more poignant than torture as follows

I will kick you, you... but settled for a hard stamp up my penis.' The penis got pain, and the hands were still tied. Due to severe pain, my hands were unable to grope the penis. 'I had to use my thighs to scrunch sand into a tiny mound between my legs and squirm to rest my abused penis on it – and deposit some of my body weight too. And so, I lay prone on the ground. (Chandrakumar, 106)

Questioning on both *Lock-Up* and *Visaranai*, which one gives vibrant effects on the reader or watcher. Based on the forces of beating, screaming and crying sounds would differ. Screaming sounds such as Ohh! Ohh! Ssh! Ssh! Sada! Sada! Sada!, these are piercing the hearts of the viewer. Harsh sounds of the boots are thudding through the heart. The police beat Kumar ferociously between the shoulder and elbow, "this flesh will not exist," (Chandrakumar, 44) and it can be shown visually in the film. Torture is more effective in the visual of a film rather than the novel.

A blow of whipping and an invisible screaming sounds like Ayyo! Aaah! invoke the viewer a more painful understanding of torture. The police do interrogate Afzal through the voice itself, it could be understandable in the film. Voice modulation while doing torture, and exactly it could be expressed in the visual representation of the film rather than in the novel. A single visual footage, victims of the head and boot of the police, is a terrible representation of torture. Due to incessant torture, fear has been stored in the victims mind unconsciously. For instance, if victims hear the sounds of the police boots, the conversation would be paused. Every step of boots sounds would crush victims' bones due to excessive fear, for instance: "Every heavy stomp of boots seemed to crush my own ribcage. I jerked, startled, shaking even when i was awake, for no reason; and others were in the same state" (Chandrakumar, 67).

In *Lock-Up*, the filthiest and foulest language has been used as a weapon does torture accompanied by whipping. In torture, comparing to written language, crying, babbling, and screaming torture would give more effect for the viewer while comparing to the Novel's reader. Sometimes, severe pain does not have a language, pain brings into a domain a language when it is expressed, and blood oozing, screaming, and crying sounds are more effective than the *Lock-Up*. Pain does not have a language, and it is inexpressible. There are many places unable to express their feelings due to over-pouring of torture, so the victims have abandoned the language.

How does torture represent the unbearable pain of the marked body? Unbearable based on the view of the reader or watcher. Both the film and a novel, it is unbearable to understand the injury of the marked body. Every marked has had different stories while torture gets a voice, then it begins to tell the story and the story includes a few narratives based on concepts/ideas. In the film's use: the silence of breathing, ooze sounds, and scream sounds are not able to articulate in *Lock-Up*. Predominantly, the film is not based on language but all sorts of natural sounds made as voices of the language provides more effective for the viewer.

Conclusion

What is important here is to understand the method for the role of torture in the Indian context and how state mechanism allows the police inflict a torture on individual body in a systematic manner. The nature of torture and its prevalent functions are explored in this paper. Despite pressure by human rights organizations and citizens, torture is still practiced. In both the film and novel, torture reveals a representation of a particular society and the way in which a particular society has been practiced a torture. The structure of power is used to regulate the society in its cultural, social and political paradigm. It is injustice to the people in certain cases and it should be regulated based on justice. The only solution is to make awareness of the civil society, human rights organizations and the judiciary. As Darius Rejali stated, "Organized torture yields poor information, sweeps up many innocents, degrades organizational capabilities, and destroys interrogators" (478).

Notes

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