

A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Incarceration in Popular Media: Understanding the Emotional, Mental, and Physical Struggles of Prisoners.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This paper delves into how incarcerated individuals are portrayed in mainstream media, particularly focusing on the emotional, mental, and physical trauma they endure while imprisoned.

Objectives: By examining two films and two television shows from each country, this study explores how media influences our perception of

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incarceration and highlights the diverse impacts of imprisonment on individuals.

Methods: Using a narrative analysis approach, the research compares depictions of prisoners across media from five distinct cultural contexts: the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, and South Korea. The aim of the current research is to uncover common threads as well as cultural differences in how trauma is represented.

Results: Findings of this research suggest that, while themes of violence, isolation, and psychological strain dominate across cultures, the way these struggles are portrayed is shaped by the social, political, and cultural values are unique to each society.

Conclusions: Through these narratives, one understands how media plays an important role in shaping public perceptions of the criminal justice system and the human cost of incarceration, urges viewers to reflect on the moral and ethical implications of punishment.

INTRODUCTION

Incarceration has long been a central theme in many films, TV shows, and documentaries and often used to highlight not only the punitive nature of prison systems but also the severe psychological, emotional, and physical toll that imprisonment takes on individuals and their lives. Media representations, though often exaggerated, provide an opportunity for us to reflect on the consequences of being incarcerated. Beyond the loss of freedom, prisoners often face profound emotional and psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD. These portrayals serve as cultural commentaries that reflect societal values surrounding crime,

punishment, and justice. A significant portion of the prison population is composed of individuals who suffer from mental health disorders, as highlighted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2013). Symptoms such as poor decision-making, impulse control issues, paranoia, and a general inability to trust others often contribute to the likelihood of criminal behavior among those with mental illnesses. Unfortunately, the prison environment exacerbates these issues, creating conditions that make incarcerated individuals more susceptible to developing or worsening psychiatric conditions. It is well-documented that prisons are not designed to support mental health, and individuals with pre-existing psychological disorders are more

likely to experience a decline in their mental well-being while incarcerated. In his 2004 review, Anderson observed that substance dependence is among the most common mental health issues faced by prisoners, with other psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia becoming more prevalent, and their incidence continuing to rise. Anderson also emphasized that the early stages of incarceration are particularly challenging, as prisoners are often faced with adjustment disorders, a situation worsened when solitary confinement is used. In such an environment, inmates are twice as likely to experience severe mental health issues. The absence of proper mental health care is largely responsible for the deterioration of mental conditions in these individuals.

One prominent psychological theory that explains criminal behavior comes from British psychologist Hans J. Eysenck. He proposed that criminal actions result from the complex interaction between an individual's neurophysiological traits and the environment in which they live. Eysenck's theory suggests that criminal tendencies are not innate but are developed through a combination of biological and environmental factors. His research, alongside that of Eysenck and Gudjonsson (1989), pointed to the interaction between the central nervous system, upbringing, and environmental circumstances as key contributors to criminal actions. Eysenck identified three key personality traits: extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism—that are linked to criminal behavior. Socialization plays a crucial role in the manifestation of these traits, with inadequate socialization leading to increased risk of antisocial actions. Eysenck argued that individuals with high levels of neuroticism and extraversion are more likely to engage in criminal activity due to their inability to manage emotional responses or read social cues appropriately. Research conducted by Hollin (1989) further validated these ideas, showing that criminals often score higher on psychoticism and neuroticism tests, which are linked to greater criminal tendencies.

The "arousal-seeking theory" provides an alternative explanation for criminal behavior, proposing that some individuals react to environmental stimuli differently due to both genetic and environmental factors. This heightened neurological response leads them to seek out arousing experiences. When they

lack sufficient stimulation, these individuals often experience boredom, which can lead to a desire for excitement and risky behavior. This need for stimulation can manifest in criminal activities, including drug use and delinquency (Lee, 1996). Zuckerman (1994) built upon this idea, suggesting that sensation-seeking behavior is rooted in biological factors and manifests as a need for novel experiences, coupled with a willingness to engage in risky behaviors. His studies demonstrated a strong connection between sensation-seeking traits and behaviors such as drug use, sexual risk-taking, and reckless driving. Moreover, research consistently shows that men are more likely than women to engage in sensation-seeking activities, a pattern that has been confirmed in studies by Newcomb & McGee (1991).

The idea of "locus of control," was introduced by Julian B. Rotter in 1954 and acts as a crucial means to understanding criminal behavior. It refers to the degree to which individuals believe they have control over their lives. People with an internal locus of control believe that their actions directly influence their circumstances, while those with an external locus of control believe that external factors such as fate or environmental forces dictate their lives. Although research on the relationship between locus of control and criminality is limited, studies have found that individuals with an external locus of control, particularly those with histories of abuse, are more prone to criminal behavior. External locus of control has also been linked to poorer adaptation to prison life and higher rates of reoffending. Offenders often attribute their successes to external factors like luck, while blaming their failures on internal, stable, and global factors, thus reinforcing a negative self-view. These cognitive patterns can make it harder for individuals to break free from criminal behavior, as they perceive their actions as a permanent part of their identity. Maruna (2004) suggested that shifting these internal attributions toward a more positive self-concept might increase the likelihood of desisting from crime. Further research into the relationships between personality traits, locus of control, and sensation-seeking behavior may provide valuable insights into the psychological profiles of criminals and potential approaches for rehabilitation.

In sum, understanding the psychological, biological, and environmental factors that contribute to criminal

behavior is essential for a more nuanced view of incarceration's impact on mental health. The complex interactions between an individual's mental health, personality traits, and external circumstances shape not only their likelihood of engaging in criminal activity but also their ability to adapt and rehabilitate within the prison system.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to explore how different cultures represent the trauma experienced by incarcerated individuals. By focusing on films and TV shows from five countries namely, the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, and South Korea; this study employs a narrative analysis approach to assess how emotional, mental, and physical distress are depicted in popular media. This analysis also looks at how these representations may vary across cultures and what one can conclude about the societies' views on justice, rehabilitation, and criminality from them.

METHODS

This study uses narrative analysis to examine how the emotional, mental, and physical challenges of incarceration are portrayed in popular media. Narrative analysis is used to understand and analyze the stories that individuals tell to analyze the deeper patterns, meanings and insights of the story. It is effective for understanding the stories told through films and TV shows, especially how they shape viewers' understanding of prison life. By analyzing the structure of the stories, character arcs, and key scenes, we can understand the underlying themes related to trauma and incarceration in the selected pieces of media.

Selection of Media

For this analysis, two films and two television shows were selected from each of the five countries under consideration which were the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, and South Korea. The media chosen represent a mix of genres thrillers, dramas, and crime series to provide a diverse view of how incarceration is depicted. The following selections were made:

United States: *Shutter Island* (2010) directed by Martin Scorsese, and *Oz* (1997-2003) created by Tom Fontana.

United Kingdom: *Starred Up* (2013) directed by David Mackenzie, and *Prisoners' Wives* (2012-2013) created by Sarah Lancashire.

India: *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) directed by Anurag Kashyap, and *Inside Edge* (2017-2022) created by Karan Anshuman.

Pakistan: *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007) directed by Shoaib Mansoor, and *Laal Kabootar* (2019) directed by Kamal Khan.

South Korea: *The Prison* (2017) directed by Na Hyeon, and *Escape from Mogadishu* (2021) directed by Ryoo Seung-wan.

These works were selected for their portrayal of incarceration-related trauma and for their cultural relevance, representing a wide array of experiences and perspectives.

Data Collection

Each selected work was analyzed scene by scene, with a focus on key moments that portrayed the emotional, mental, and physical trauma of the characters. Great attention was paid to how a characters' emotional states were depicted, how physical violence was shown, and how these elements contributed to the overall narrative arc. This close reading allowed for a deeper understanding of how incarceration affected the characters, both internally and in their interactions with the world around them.

RESULTS

American Depictions: Psychological Breakdown and Violence

American media, particularly in *Shutter Island* and *Oz*, portrays incarceration as an event that resulted in an intense psychological breakdown and systemic violence. *Shutter Island* follows Teddy Daniels, whose descent into madness is exacerbated by his time at a mental institution. His emotional instability is a central theme, showing the profound psychological toll of institutionalization on his character. As the film progresses, Daniels' mental state deteriorates, which is especially evident in the scenes where he experiences vivid hallucinations about his deceased wife and the traumatic experiences from his past. These flashbacks depict his guilt and inability to reconcile with his memories, further destabilizing him. For instance, when Daniels confronts Dr.

Naehring, his paranoia peaks as he starts suspecting that everyone around him is part of a conspiracy against him.

Meanwhile, *Oz* offers a much grimmer view of prison life, focusing on the brutal realities of life in a maximum-security prison. Inmates face constant physical violence, manipulation, and psychological trauma. Characters like Tobias Beecher experience emotional breakdowns, forced to navigate the corrupt and violent prison system, which takes a heavy toll on their mental and physical well-being. The physical violence in *Oz* is rampant, from brutal inmate fights to sexual assaults. In one particularly shocking scene, inmate Tobias Beecher (Lee Tergesen) is raped by the violent inmate, Chris Keller (Christopher Meloni), marking a significant physical and emotional trauma for Beecher. This event impacts Beecher throughout the series, leading to a downward spiral in his mental health as he battles shame, fear, and anger. Beecher, initially trying to reform, is crushed by the emotional toll of the violence and corruption around him. In later seasons, he becomes increasingly unstable, culminating in his mental breakdown when he tries to cope with the guilt and trauma of the violence he's been exposed to. Similarly, the character of Augustus Hill (Harold Perrineau), who narrates the series, speaks directly to the psychological toll of imprisonment, stating, "You're never the same once you walk through those doors," which encapsulates the mental erosion that occurs in the face of constant trauma and fear.

British Depictions: Isolation and Moral Corruption

In British media, such as *Starred Up* and *Prisoners' Wives*, the emotional and moral isolation of incarcerated individuals is a key theme. In *Starred Up*, Eric Love, a young offender, is thrust into a violent adult prison where his struggle with isolation and the corrupting influence of the system is at the forefront. The film depicts his psychological and emotional breakdown as he tries to reconcile his violent behavior with his desire to connect with his estranged father. Eric Love (Jack O'Connell), a young inmate sent to an adult prison, is forced to fight for survival from the moment he enters. His violent tendencies are pushed to the limit as he faces constant physical threats from other inmates. One particularly brutal scene shows Eric in a fight that nearly kills him, underlining the harsh and unforgiving environment

he's thrust into. These physical confrontations are reflective of his internal turmoil. Eric's relationship with his estranged father, Neville (Ben Mendelsohn), who is also an inmate, showcases the psychological strain of being in a violent, dehumanizing prison system. The emotional trauma of dealing with unresolved family issues and his struggle to maintain his identity in such a brutal place leads Eric to struggle with anger management and feelings of isolation. His internal conflict is evident as he tries to understand whether his violent actions are a response to his environment or a reflection of who he has become.

Similarly, *Prisoners' Wives* explores the emotional toll of imprisonment not only on the inmates but also on their families, focusing on the wives of incarcerated men and the social stigma they face. The wives of incarcerated men face profound emotional challenges as they try to maintain relationships with their imprisoned partners. One of the central characters, Frances (Nadine Marshall), struggles to keep her family together after her husband is sent to prison. Her emotional journey is marked by feelings of abandonment, shame, and loneliness. She is often depicted dealing with societal judgment, especially from friends and colleagues, making her feel isolated. The emotional toll on Frances leads to a breakdown in her personal life. Her marriage becomes strained, and she begins to question her own identity as she becomes increasingly consumed by the emotional fallout of her husband's imprisonment. The show highlights how the emotional burden on families can lead to profound changes in their mental and emotional well-being.

Indian Depictions: Familial Struggles and Morality

In Indian media, as seen in *Gangs of Wasseypur* and *Inside Edge*, the trauma of incarceration is often intertwined with themes of familial loyalty, moral compromise, and revenge. *Gangs of Wasseypur* presents a world where the violent cycles of crime and retribution are passed down through generations. The prison system is depicted as both a physical and moral battleground, where individuals are shaped by their experiences of violence and betrayal. The characters in *Gangs of Wasseypur* face constant violence, and the prison system is an extension of this brutal world. In one key scene, Faizal Khan (Nawazuddin Siddiqui) is imprisoned and tortured by rival gang members. These physical confrontations leave visible scars on

his body, but also leave deep psychological scars. The use of physical violence is shown as a tool for asserting power and dominance, especially in the unforgiving world of crime and imprisonment in India. The prison system represents a microcosm of the larger power struggles in Wasseypur. Characters like Sardar Khan (Manoj Bajpayee) are shaped by their experiences within the system, where their internal battles for respect, revenge, and justice play out. For example, the young Faizal's evolution from an innocent, shy boy into a vengeful figure highlights the mental toll of living in a world where violence is normalized. His mental shift from despair to ruthlessness is a response to the system's brutality.

Inside Edge explores the psychological challenges faced by individuals navigating corruption and moral dilemmas in the world of sports, showing how incarceration affects their identities and relationships. The emotional strain in Inside Edge is best seen through the character of Zarina (Richa Chadha), whose partner is imprisoned for corruption. She has to navigate the stigma, societal backlash, and constant scrutiny that come with having a loved one in prison. In one episode, Zarina is shown grappling with feelings of guilt, anger, and helplessness, as she tries to keep her personal and professional life intact while dealing with the emotional fallout of her partner's incarceration. The long-term impact of this stress is evident in Zarina's growing cynicism and emotional numbness. She begins to make more ruthless decisions, embodying the emotional toll of constant pressure and stigma. Her arc reflects the emotional devastation of being tied to a system of corruption and the toll it takes on personal relationships and one's identity.

Pakistani Depictions: Social Stigma and Identity Crisis

Pakistani films like Khuda Kay Liye and Laal Kabootar offer poignant portrayals of the emotional and psychological struggles faced by incarcerated individuals, particularly focusing on the social stigma associated with imprisonment. In Khuda Kay Liye, Mansoor's wrongful imprisonment leads to an emotional crisis, reflecting the harsh social judgments faced by those who have been incarcerated. The protagonist, Mansoor (Shan), is wrongfully imprisoned and tortured in a foreign detention facility. His physical suffering, including beatings and mental manipulation, is a direct reflection of the

physical toll incarceration takes on him. The brutal treatment he faces is used by the system as a means to break him, which leaves visible marks on his body and mind. Mansoor's mental struggles are illustrated through his isolation and confusion, as he grapples with his faith, identity, and the injustice of being imprisoned. His mental state deteriorates as he tries to comprehend why he is being targeted, and he begins to question his beliefs and purpose. The emotional and psychological stress of being unjustly detained leads to a deep sense of helplessness and anger. The consequences of Mansoor's emotional and mental suffering are significant. Upon release, he is a changed man, scarred by his experiences. He struggles to reintegrate into society, burdened by the trauma of wrongful imprisonment and the existential crisis it sparks.

Laal Kabootar focuses on the impact of crime and imprisonment on the psyche of both the prisoner and those around them, exploring themes of disillusionment, survival, and identity. Adeel (Ahmed Ali Akbar) finds himself caught in a corrupt system where crime and imprisonment are part of the cycle. His internal emotional struggle is amplified when he becomes involved in the violent world of gangsters. He is conflicted between pursuing a normal life and succumbing to the pressures of his environment. The long-term consequence for Adeel is a complete transformation. The emotional toll of being surrounded by crime, corruption, and imprisonment leads him to abandon his moral compass. His actions become more ruthless, and the trauma he faces from his encounters with the criminal world takes a lasting psychological toll, cementing his place within the vicious cycle of violence and crime.

South Korean Depictions: Survival and Moral Conflict

South Korean media, particularly The Prison and Escape from Mogadishu, presents incarceration as a brutal test of survival. In The Prison, Lee Jung-ho's emotional and physical deterioration mirrors the corrupting influence of the prison system. The character's moral decline reflects the harsh realities of life behind bars, where survival often depends on violence and compromise. The film showcases the violent hierarchy in the prison system, where inmates must fight for power and survival. Lee Jung-ho (Kim Rae-won), a former cop, is thrown into the brutal prison world. In one scene, Lee fights back against the

gang leaders trying to exploit him. He endures brutal beatings and injuries as part of his survival within the prison system. The repeated physical confrontations mark his body and his psyche, symbolizing the toll the environment takes on him. Initially, Lee tries to retain his sense of integrity, but the corrupt prison system forces him to align with the criminals. This moral dilemma eats away at him, and his internal struggle becomes evident when he realizes that his survival is tied to playing by the corrupt rules of the prison. His growing compulsion to assert control, even through violent means, reflects his mental decline as he loses his sense of justice and begins to embody the very system he once despised.

Though not a traditional prison movie, *Escape from Mogadishu* portrays a different kind of confinement. The South Korean embassy workers are trapped in a besieged compound in Somalia during the Civil War. The characters experience constant physical danger, with regular attacks from armed groups and limited resources. In one harrowing sequence, the diplomats try to flee under gunfire, and the physical exhaustion and danger they endure highlight the severe limitations placed on their movements and well-being. The mental toll of being trapped under siege is most noticeable in the growing sense of desperation among the characters. The diplomats, especially the lead characters such as Ambassador Han (Kim Yoon-seok), struggle with the emotional weight of their situation. The stress of knowing that their survival depends on external factors they cannot control wears on them mentally, as they witness comrades being killed and the environment becoming increasingly hostile. Their fear, frustration, and mental fatigue are palpable throughout.

DISCUSSION

The portrayal of incarcerated individuals across different media landscapes reveals both universal and culturally specific themes. Common to all cultures is

the emphasis on emotional isolation, mental strain, and the prevalence of physical violence. However, each culture frames these struggles differently:

In American media, the focus is on psychological breakdown and systemic violence, illustrating the dehumanizing nature of the prison system.

In British media, the moral dilemmas and emotional isolation of prisoners are central, with a focus on the broader impact of incarceration on families.

Indian and Pakistani portrayals often intertwine prison narratives with family dynamics, social values, and questions of morality, presenting a more complex view of how incarceration affects individuals and their communities.

South Korean media places a heavy emphasis on survival and moral conflict in violent environments, portraying a more pragmatic and gritty view of prison life.

These differences reveal how cultural values shape the portrayal of incarceration. American and British portrayals tend to focus on individual suffering and moral corruption, while Indian, Pakistani, and South Korean media emphasize the broader societal and familial impacts of prison life.

The depiction of incarcerated individuals in popular media is rich with themes of emotional, mental, and physical trauma. This comparative analysis across five different cultural contexts highlights both shared experiences and culturally specific portrayals of incarceration. While the emotional and psychological struggles of prisoners are universally portrayed, the nuances of these depictions are shaped by the values, norms, and societal attitudes of each culture. Through these narratives, media plays an important role in shaping public perceptions of the criminal justice system and the human cost of incarceration, urging viewers to reflect on the moral and ethical implications of punishment.

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