

Pedagogical Explorations: Unveiling Narratives in Iranian Prison Literature and Human Rights Education

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This article is dedicated to the memory of the 71 Iranian prisoners, visitors, and guards killed in the Israeli bombing of Evin prison in June 2025—a place long notorious for holding political dissidents, students, women, and activists under the Islamic Republic. May their lives, silenced first by repression and now by war, remain part of the historical record and the ongoing struggle for justice and freedom.



“Why do you focus on teaching about Iran’s prisons, torture, and pain? Couldn’t you highlight Iran’s beautiful classical poetry instead?” is a question I frequently encounter. In response, I emphasize that despite the emotional toll it may take on both myself and my students to delve into texts about torture and injustice, teaching about Iranian prisons serves to illuminate our common humanity and shared experiences of being human.

Teaching prison literature is a profound and emotionally charged experience that delves into the raw realities of incarceration. It entails navigating through narratives that unveil the struggles, resilience, and humanity of individuals behind bars. The emotional toll is palpable as students confront the harsh conditions and societal issues depicted in literary works. Since fall 2017, I have been teaching a 200-level undergraduate course on “Iranian Prison Literature” at UNC Chapel Hill,

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conducting the course three times, including an international collaboration with an Iranian university in 2020. As students confront the harsh conditions and societal issues depicted in these works, I emphasize the often-overlooked human side of prisoners, fostering empathy and understanding while challenging their preconceived notions about the incarcerated. This is doubly important when discussing a country like Iran, which, for a generation shaped by post-9/11 narratives, has largely been portrayed as evil. By highlighting the humanity of Iranians (incarcerated or otherwise) in these stories, I aim to dismantle the stereotypes and encourage a more nuanced understanding of Iranians. Hence, by exploring Iranian prison literature in the classroom, we embark on a transformative journey that not only sheds light on the complexities of the human experience within the confines of the criminal justice system in a global sense, but also challenges the long-held stereotypes and preconceived notions about Iran.

However, the teaching of Iranian prison memoirs is not only about fostering empathy but also about helping students engage with the cultural and political specificities of Iran. The focus of the course is on literature written within prisons or about prisoners, primarily under the Islamic Republic (1979-present), with some insights from the Pahlavi era (1924-1979). Hence, understanding the historical context of the 1979 Revolution is crucial for interpreting the texts. Thus, students are guided through discussions that connect their readings with Iran's socio-political landscape, making the pedagogical approach both specific and deeply tied to the subject matter. Throughout the semester, students engage with relevant documents to comprehend the historical perspective of human rights and their violations in Iran. But more than everything, the course encourages critical thinking and reflection as well as communication, as we analyze complex themes related to justice, morality, and societal issues, fostering a deeper understanding of the world around us. Through class discussions, film screening, panel discussions, and writing assignments, I help students enhance their communication (both verbal and written) and interpretation skills, empowering them to articulate their thoughts and emotions effectively and critically.

In this piece, I will delve into the two central objectives of the course: 1) how authors craft compelling narrative about humanness; and 2) the significance of literature in engaging with human rights. My goal is to illustrate these objectives with examples from readings, assignments, and activities undertaken in the class. I will discuss how I integrate several pedagogical themes to create a rich and engaging learning environment. By employing critical pedagogy, I encourage students to question dominant narratives and challenge preconceived notions about justice in Iran, fostering an atmosphere of inquiry and open dialogue. Empathy development is central to our discussions, as we delve into the personal narratives of incarcerated individuals, allowing students to connect emotionally with the texts and understand the complexities of their experiences. I prioritize culturally responsive teaching by acknowledging the diverse backgrounds of my students

and incorporating their perspectives into the discussions. Collaborative learning is facilitated through group discussions and student-led presentations, empowering them to take ownership of their learning. Additionally, I emphasize the importance of narrative and storytelling as powerful tools for conveying human experiences, while incorporating interdisciplinary approaches to provide context and depth to the literature.

Through the readings, I invite students to engage with the emotional and lived experiences of individuals facing oppression. This interaction fosters a deeper understanding of complex social realities, transforming education into an engagement with diverse narratives. Through these stories, students not only learn about the challenges faced by their Iranian counterparts but also reflect on their implications for their own lives and communities. I encourage reflective practice through writing assignments and discussions, guiding students to examine their biases and emotional responses. This focus on social justice education drives our exploration of themes such as human rights and resistance, while also recognizing the role of literature as a form of resilience. Ultimately, these pedagogical themes work together to create an emotionally engaging and intellectually stimulating classroom, promoting personal growth and critical awareness among students.

Wallace Bacon's concept of "Dangerous Shores" provides a fitting lens to examine the delicate balance between interpretation and elocution in this class. According to Bacon, "Interpretation moves, as it has always moved—and as all the performing arts are always likely to move – between two dangerous shores. One may be wrecked on either. But all the seas between are navigable, and the voyage is wondrous" (152). Here, Bacon refers to the tension between the text on one side and its delivery on the other, where the realms of elocution and interpretation present a risk of running aground, captured in contrasting pairs such as scholarship versus showmanship, reason versus passion, logic versus emotion, and even the classic opposition between the natural and the mechanical. This underscores the enduring dilemma in the art of reading: the challenge of balancing two essential elements, whose union has always been the essence of this art (149-150). Bacon argues that when a student discusses the meaning of a literary text and their responsibility to convey it, they go beyond its lexical meaning, drawing on their deep interest in psychology to attune themselves to the interplay of motives, attitudes, tensions, ambiguities, ironies, and ambivalences within the literature. If we accept that literature is both enjoyable and meaningful, it follows that the most enriching reading experience is also the most pleasurable; when interpretation involves not only awareness of the text but also the student's active engagement through oral reading, it offers the most comprehensive reading experience. However, this engagement must be rooted in an understanding of the text – whether deliberate or intuitive (150). This means that the meaning of a poem, story, or play cannot simply be extracted or abstracted from its literary framework; it must

be fully felt and understood within that structure. While enjoyment might be the ultimate goal, it should stem from a comprehensive, not reductive, perspective, as this pleasurable activity is also deeply instructive. In this way, meaning transcends mere lexical definitions, embracing the full spectrum of the intellect-emotion dichotomy. This understanding is achieved not through “mechanical” methods or “natural” approaches alone, but through a combination of both, incorporating scholarship alongside performance techniques and drawing from both sides of that dichotomy (151-2).

Following Bacon, navigating the complex realities of human rights in Iran, this course embarks on a voyage between two “Dangerous Shores”: the textual and the performative. By integrating literature, film, philosophy, and theory, students explore the intricate landscape of human rights violations in Iranian prisons. This interdisciplinary approach facilitates a nuanced analysis of literary works, philosophical and critical theories, and film, revealing the humanities’ pivotal role in reflecting upon human rights breaches. Through this comprehensive exploration, students scrutinize how literature, philosophy, and related textual practices can reshape discussions on prison torture and human rights violations. They examine the conditions for fiction to function as a social force and dissect the literary structure of testimonies regarding crimes against humanity. As we navigate the complex waters between the textual and performative, our exploration of Iranian Prison Literature humanizes the lives and resistances of those in Iran. Through compassionate and profoundly human narratives, students gain a nuanced understanding of the collective story of Iran, shaped by prisons, authors, and filmmakers. This rich literary and artistic landscape transcends mere knowledge acquisition, instead fostering empathy and critical engagement. Education, particularly in teaching literature, becomes a dynamic interplay between the text and lived experiences. Every reading is informed by prior experiences and perceptions, shaping subsequent engagements with the world. In addition to the readings, by bridging the textual and performative shores, I facilitate activities and assignments that foster active engagement within and beyond the classroom such as the film screening activity, encourage critical connections between course material and lived experiences through collaborations with Iranian University students, cultivate a deeper understanding of human experience complexities through close-readings of the texts and films, and illuminate the power of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the world through comparative analysis of Iranian and US judicial systems. By navigating these complex waters, students develop a richer appreciation for the complexities and realities faced by Iranians, and the broader human context that connects us all through literary and artistic works.

Ultimately, by balancing scholarship and showmanship, reason and passion, logic and emotion, this course fosters a rich understanding of human rights in Iran. The course encourages students to navigate the tensions between natural (emotive, personal) and mechanical (systematic, analytical) approaches, as well

as intellect and emotion in grasping human rights issues. This delicate balance, echoing Bacon's concept, enables students to tackle challenges and innovations in human rights discourse. By traversing these complex realities, students gain a profound appreciation for the intersections between human rights, literature, and performance.

Planning Engaging Learning Environments Through Syllabi Design

Creating an engaging environment and effective assignments begins with the planning of the course and preparing the syllabus. I often include supplementary readings to enhance students' understanding of the contexts. To comprehend the readings of Iranian Prison Literature class fully, we immerse ourselves in the political, economic, and cultural circumstances of the crises in Iran. Research and discussions about the events at that time are imperative. For example, understanding Amir and Khalil's *Zabra's paradise* requires knowledge of the 2009 election crisis, while a deeper comprehension of Shahla Talebi's *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* and Shahnush Parsipur's *Kissing the Sword: A Prison Memoir* necessitate familiarity with the 1979 revolution and the mass prison massacres of 1988. It might be beneficial to provide brief synopsis of each literary work here. *Zabra's Paradise* is a graphic novel set against the backdrop of the 2009 Iranian elections and subsequent protests. The story follows a mother named Zahra, who is desperately searching for her missing son, Kaveh, who disappeared during the protests. As Zahra navigates the bureaucratic and often perilous landscape of the Iranian regime, the narrative explores themes of loss, political repression, and the struggle for justice. The artwork, rendered in a black-and-white style, amplifies the emotional weight of Zahra's journey and the broader societal turmoil. *Ghosts of Revolution* is a memoir that reflects on Talebi's experiences as a political prisoner during and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Talebi recounts her harrowing time in prison, detailing the psychological and physical torture she endured, as well as the friendships she formed with fellow inmates. The narrative intertwines her personal story with broader historical and political contexts, exploring themes of trauma, memory, and resilience. Through her reflections, she addresses the lasting impact of political repression on individuals and society, while also highlighting the strength and courage of those who resist oppression. *Kissing the Sword* is an autobiographical account of Parsipur's experiences as a political prisoner in Iran following the 1979 Revolution, highlighting the brutal realities faced by women and political dissidents under the regime. Through her prose, Parsipur shares her struggles with oppression, her resilience in the face of violence, and her quest for personal and political freedom. The narrative delves into the complexities of identity, gender, and the impact of authoritarianism, ultimately celebrating the strength of the human spirit. Aided by supplemental read-

ings, discussions, and collaborative projects, I facilitate a comprehensive understanding of these historical contexts which students often appreciate as expressed below:

I think the integration of historical education, articles, and films, provided useful context when engaging with the issues of torture and human rights violation. It is difficult to truly grapple with the literature, if you don't have a clear understanding of the cultural and historical context – and the promotion of extra credit events, along with the final class project in which we selected a film to research, allowed for deeper understanding.

This approach is beneficial to students as one student wrote in their end of semester course evaluations: “Professor Yaghoobi's inclusion of diverse materials and genres contributed to a richer understanding of course themes and global affairs, a facet I particularly valued.”

Examining the intersection of cultural narratives, gender, resistance, and identity, we delve into how dominant discourses often erase or distort the experiences of marginalized groups under authoritarian regimes. This distortion necessitates alternative representations such as memoirs that authentically reflect their realities. Through memoirs like Talebi's *Ghosts of Revolution*, we explore the complexities of marginalized identities, particularly in relation to psychological torture and trauma. In facilitating discussions and assignments, I encourage students to critically analyze how cultural representations shape their understanding of resistance and identity. By doing so, students develop a nuanced understanding of how cultural narratives influence identity formation, the impact of erasure and distortion on marginalized communities, and the importance of representation in media. By engaging with these complex issues, students also foster empathy, cultural competence, and a commitment to social justice.

At the outset of each semester, I convey to my students that grappling with literature and culture demands a willingness to confront challenges, urging them to approach the diverse literary and cultural landscapes with open minds. For me, teaching literature transcends the mere transmission of writing styles, genres, and language intricacies; it entails equipping students with the capacity to critically interrogate their biases and resist falling into stereotypical interpretations and to engage not only intellectually but also with empathy. This endeavor, albeit daunting, yields rich rewards, especially when navigating sensitive topics within the context of Iran amid the complexities of our global milieu. Within the course descriptions I add the following statement to declare my top priority for the class: “A year (or more) after this course is over, I want and hope that students will have acquired the necessary knowledge and information to stay away from preconceived notions about Iran/ME.” This is challenging when students approach a text with preconceived notions in mind. In such cases, I try to bring the class back to the text at hand and ask for textual evidence, rather than focusing on overgeneralized claims. Guided by the transformative pedagogy advocated by black feminist

scholar bell hooks, I endeavor to cultivate an environment in my classes where literature intersects with issues of gender, race, and class, fostering a platform for student expression. Through this approach, students are empowered to articulate themselves in informed, critical, empathetic, and creative ways. Embracing the classroom as a site for collaborative knowledge construction, I continuously explore alternative methodologies, drawing from my own lived experiences as an Iranian Armenian American, heterosexual, middle-class woman to illuminate the complexities of positionalities and the array of choices one can make in relation to them. Students have found the exposure to these real-life experiences valuable:

A key component was Dr. Yaghoobi provided her own personal experience and insight along the way, along with the guest speaker and poet who attended the class. Hearing the authentic perspectives of those with much closer ties to the subject of the literature brought the discussions to life.

I also try to communicate my values clearly and show how these values are connected to my positionality (identity). My syllabi also include statements about resources provided by the campus. Yet, I also add a personal note to evidently convey my values of respect for all.

Regarding the class readings and schedule, I consider my syllabi works-in-progress rather than as fixed and comprehensive sources. This approach leaves room for flexibility to invite student contribution. Collaborating with students can begin right here with the syllabus design. This can be achieved by leaving a few weeks of the semester open for students to come up with readings individually. Asking each student to bring in an additional reading to present to the class enhances our collective study and stimulates individual initiative and exploration. When we invite students to contribute to the syllabus, we redefine the power structures within the classroom and tell students that they have a choice. The typically rigid hierarchy of teacher-student is challenged when we display such openness to student exploration.

In this course the authors, each possessing a unique voice, skillfully employ visual and literary cues to explore and highlight the multifaceted experiences of those living in Iran. Human, strong, resilient, and resistant, these narratives unfold through a tapestry of visual and literary expressions. The course not only leads the students to explore Iran in detail but also fosters open and honest student-led class discussions that enriches their understanding of this complex and vibrant cultural landscape. Class discussions delve deeply into the profound significance of storytelling, autobiography, and memory, with a particular focus on the pervasive torture and human rights violations inflicted upon Iranian political prisoners and the broader Iranian community by the regime. The memoirs explored in class captivate the students, and they find the distinct yet personal storytelling styles of each author drawing them into the challenging worlds they inhabited. Witnessing the resilience displayed by these incarcerated individuals during their time in prison leaves students in awe, offering a nuanced perspective on

Iranian prisons that surpasses what a purely academic text or lecture series could convey. For instance, *Zabra's Paradise* provides a unique visual element to the literary exploration, offering a glimpse into resistance communities in Iran beyond the prison walls. This work, while graphic in its portrayal, compassionately depicts the violence perpetrated by the regime. One indelible image from the novel that often lingers in students' memories is the reproduction of two boys hanging from a crane after their execution. Moreover, the extensive list of names at the book's conclusion, memorializing those who perished or disappeared in 2009, has a profound impact on students, highlighting the enormity of the human cost. The small print extending across numerous pages is, indeed, a stark reminder of the scale of tragedy.

Through critical engagement with literary and cultural texts, I encourage students to recognize the power dynamics that shape identity construction, particularly in contexts like prison literature and performance studies. Analyzing these dynamics reveals how marginalized voices—such as those in prison—assert and reclaim their identities against oppressive forces. In memoirs and personal testimonies, for instance, students gain insight into how incarcerated individuals navigate the erasure and misrepresentation of their identities. This highlights the crucial role of diverse narratives in challenging dominant discourses and reshaping our understanding of identity.

My teaching approach bridges theoretical analysis with emotional connection, fostering empathy and deeper comprehension of the individuals behind these texts. Activities such as writing letters to activists or engaging with real-life stories through events serve as performative acts of empathy, allowing students to connect with the material on a personal level. These performative practices, like prison writing itself, become ways to resist and reframe identity in the face of power structures. By exploring how identity is constructed and represented in literature, students develop a profound appreciation for the complexities of human experiences and the impact of representation on identity formation.



A panel from Amir and Khalil's graphic novel *Zabra's Paradise* shows Zahra and a taxi driver discussing how love is seen as a threat to the regime, particularly in light of the recent execution of two gay men (p. 85).

Engaging Students Through Interactive Learning Activities and Assignments

Ensuring active student engagement remains paramount in my teaching philosophy. Recognizing the unique learning capabilities of each individual and the value they bring to the classroom environment, I design a range of activities for daily discussions to promote equitable student participation. These activities are carefully crafted to accommodate even the most reserved students, fostering an environment where all students feel empowered to contribute and ultimately feel a sense of achievement by the conclusion of each session.

The class is discussion-based, with each session focused on a few specific themes such as justice, resilience, or the role of literature in human rights advocacy. By encouraging students to actively analyze and debate the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by prisoners, the discussion-oriented format requires them to go beyond surface-level interpretation and grapple with the complexities of each narrative. Each student is responsible for leading discussions on selected texts, pushing their peers to critically examine the nuances of the prisoners' experiences. This leadership role fosters accountability and ensures that students approach the material thoughtfully, developing their own interpretations via close-reading of the literary text while considering diverse perspectives. The interactive nature of these discussions reinforces the course's objectives: students not only comprehend the narratives of incarcerated individuals but also reflect on the broader implications of human rights violations. By actively engaging with these texts in a dialogue-driven format, students internalize the themes and develop a more profound understanding of the moral and societal issues at hand.

The intersection of student-centered learning and the teaching of Iranian prison memoirs is key to the course's success. Unlike other literature, these memoirs uniquely represent real-life political oppression, human rights violations, and personal suffering, requiring students to confront difficult, often harrowing, realities that are specific to Iran's political history. A student-centered approach, which allows space for personal engagement with the material, is therefore essential. It enables students to not only grasp the humanity of the Other but to critically reflect on political repression, cultural resistance, and resilience under autocratic regimes. Through careful examination of assigned texts and dynamic class discussions, students delve beyond the surface of the narratives. Open, student-led class discussions provide a platform for sharing ideas and engaging in diverse interpretations, which help shape the concepts developed in later assignments. This discussion-based format fosters deeper engagement with the material and encourages critical reflection. Reflecting on their experiences on class discussions, students responded as follows:

I also thought that the discussion leading project was very helpful because it gave me the opportunity to: 1. further develop my understanding for the section of the book I was presenting on and 2. taught me how to better understand/analyze other books that we were reading.

I loved the discussion format. I loved that we sat in a circle and just talked about the readings. I think it really helped in processing the harder readings. I found it exciting and interesting that we had different discussion leaders every time and that students led discussions.

The incorporation of theoretical readings, such as chapters from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* or Jacques Derrida's "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," which consistently thread through class discussions, alongside personal narratives, films, novels, and articles, significantly broadens students' comprehension of the multifaceted aspects of surveillance, torture, community, struggle, violence, and hope embedded in the Islamic Republic's regime. Foucault and Derrida offer critical frameworks for analyzing Iranian prison literature, providing insights into the dynamics of power, identity, and the ethics of testimony within oppressive regimes. Foucault's concepts, particularly those related to surveillance, discipline, and the panopticon, help students understand how the structures of control and authority operate within the prison system in Iran. His analysis of how individuals internalize societal norms and the impact of institutional power on personal identity is particularly relevant when examining the experiences of political prisoners, the mechanisms of repression, and the struggle for autonomy. On the other hand, Derrida's exploration of witnessing and the ethics of testimony enriches discussions around the narratives presented. His emphasis on the responsibility of the witness and the limitations of language highlights the profound challenges faced by authors and their subjects in conveying the realities of incarceration and torture. By engaging with Derrida's ideas, students critically assess how Iranian authors navigate the complexities of representation, memory, and justice, particularly in the context of political violence and trauma.

Introducing students to a fresh perspective on the classroom dynamic and their roles as active participants during the discussions infuses our learning materials with renewed energy. Among the most beloved activities I utilize is the "gallery walk," which fosters student engagement with the course content and with one another. I strategically place four (or more) posters, each featuring a different question, around the classroom. Working in groups and armed with a Sharpie pen, students move clockwise from one poster to the next, engaging in discussions and jotting down their responses. Encouraging students to respond to previous comments ignites further discourse and enhances collaborative learning. By conducting this activity in small groups, students often feel more comfortable sharing their ideas openly. As groups rotate through all the questions, they collectively review and augment the responses, promoting a sense of shared ownership over the discussion. This interactive approach not only encourages peer interaction but

also ensures that all students actively contribute their viewpoints. As I circulate among the groups, engaging in conversations and monitoring discussions, students are held accountable for articulating their opinions, thereby fostering a dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

As a collective, students also share personal perspectives and experiences that resonate with the text, contributing to a richer understanding. This dynamic interaction not only aligns with the author's objective of exploring human nature but also reveals the expansive spectrum of experiences within the memoirs that I teach. Their varied personal connections, whether rooted in empathy or familial ties, underscore the profound reach of these narratives. Among the texts I teach, *Kissing the Sword* stands out for crafting a particularly intricate narrative on humanity. It explores the tavrabs' (prisoners who have repented and become spies) detrimental actions on others while simultaneously delving into the author's own flaws and struggles to act as she desired within the prison environment. This complexity adds depth to the overarching exploration of the essence of humanity and care.

In addition, a spotlight is cast on the enduring repercussions of psychological torture, affecting not only individuals but entire communities. For instance, the recounting of post-prison experiences in *Ghosts of Revolution* vividly portray the author's struggles with grief and PTSD. Her immediate urge to visit the graves of the lost highlights the profound impact on personal and familial levels. Focusing on such themes, one student conducted their entire close reading assignment on the following quote:

I watched this now grayed brother of mine, whom I used to take care of as if my own child, as he stared at my drastically changed appearance. It was as if we were looking for traces of significant moments of Iranian recent history, revolution, war, and political violence on the other's face and body, imagining their carvings on each other's soul" (Talebi, 32).

Through the firsthand perspective presented in the book and Talebi's adept use of descriptors, students gain insight into the deep emotional wounds and trauma inflicted by such experiences. They realize that the writing of these memories has been difficult for the authors as the act of recollection often forces a confrontation with painful emotions and unresolved traumas. Analyzing passages from memoirs such as Talebi's writing, where students discuss how the incarcerated use literature as a form of resistance directly connect student-centered learning to the themes of the course. The students are asked to reflect on how the act of writing in such conditions serves as both an emotional outlet and a political statement. This assignment uniquely links the pedagogical goal of developing empathy to the specific, complex realities and humanity of Iranian political prisoners.

The nature of the majority of my courses necessitates the creation of a safe and inclusive space where lived experiences can be shared and integrated with the texts, thereby bridging personal narratives with the dissemination of knowledge.

Believing in the “pedagogy of care” and “engaged pedagogy,” I emphasize a holistic and student-centered approach to teaching and learning. This approach prioritizes the well-being and development of students beyond just academic achievement. Pedagogy of care focuses on creating a supportive and nurturing learning environment that considers the emotional, social, and psychological well-being of students. It encourages me to recognize and cater to the unique needs of each student, taking into account their background, experiences, and learning styles. Engaged pedagogy, on the other hand, involves active and participatory learning experiences that go beyond traditional methods. It encourages students to be actively involved in their own learning, connecting course content to real-world issues and encouraging critical thinking. Students in my classrooms are not passive recipients of information; they rather actively engage in the learning process. Connecting classroom content to real-world problems encourages them to see the relevance of what they are learning. These approaches align with my belief that education is not only about the transfer of knowledge but also about fostering personal growth and critical thinking skills.

This approach aligns with bell hooks' concept of “engaged pedagogy,” which emphasizes the interconnectedness of teaching and learning and prioritizes the holistic wellbeing of both educators and students. hooks underscores the importance of collective wellbeing, referring to it as “self-actualization” (hooks, 1994, 15), which encompasses not only intellectual growth but also emotional and mental health considerations. By adopting a caring approach that acknowledges students' mental states and emotions, I cultivate an environment conducive to their overall development. This pedagogical approach also underscores the value of a participatory teaching style, where all stakeholders are actively involved in the learning process. Embracing this collaborative ethos has empowered my students, particularly amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic. Through mutual engagement and support, students have found a sense of agency and resilience in navigating their academic journey.

To take this a step further, students are required to close read passages from the book as part of their assignments. Conducting a close reading involves selecting a specific passage and engaging in meticulous analysis, akin to using a magnifying glass. The focus lies on points of style and personal reactions as a reader, acting as the foundational step for broader analysis, fostering the development of thoughts based on personal observations rather than external interpretations. The precision of observations directly correlates with the originality and accuracy of ideas. To initiate a close reading, they reflect on the mood the passage evokes and the reasons behind it; examine the choice of words and identify the ones that stand out; explore the relationship between important words; and evaluate the usage of words that may seem peculiar and consider any double meanings or additional connotations. In addition, they identify recurring images and draw connections to similar instances in the book and assess how the observed image contributes to

the overall pattern of the work. Finally, they analyze sentence rhythm, style, and punctuation for any distinctive features; identify repetitions within the passage and analyze their effects. Students also explore metaphors present in the passage and categorize them. They explore how objects in the passage may symbolize something else; if there are any traditional connotations, meanings, or religious and biblical significance associated with objects, colors, animals, or plants in the passage; and whether the passage, with its multiple symbols, holds allegorical meaning beyond the literal level. Here are some reflections on the close reading assignment from students:

The close reading assignments were crucial tools in developing writing skills with evidence from readings. The structure was an explicit analysis that required developed vocabulary and intricate inspection of the passages and outline the intended, unintended and possibly melded meanings for each and every word the authors chose.

The close reading assignments were extremely helpful in developing skills to analyze prison literature. By challenging us to pick extremely abbreviated sections of the text, and draft several papers on them, required us to notice small patterns, connect with the intention and weight present in every word on the page, and connect with the deeper meaning that we otherwise would have breezed past.

The close reading assignments, integral to the learning experience, play a pivotal role in honing students' critical thinking and writing skills. These assignments demand explicit analysis, requiring the development of a nuanced vocabulary and a meticulous examination of passages. Students are often challenged to uncover intended and unintended meanings, as well as potential blends of meanings for each carefully chosen word by the authors. Although both *Kissing the Sword* and *Ghosts of Revolution* are creative writing pieces, it is not until students scrutinize them during their close-reading assignments that they fully grasp the weight of the words presented in each. One student relayed that "analyzing a paragraph from *Kissing the Sword*, honing in on the dehumanization and surveillance within the prison environment, was reminiscent of Michel Foucault's "Panopticon," and how it impacted the author, Parsipur's, mental health and post-prison functioning." The student close read the following passage:

"I had given up thinking about humanity, its future, the role of the writer, and the creation of a better society. All I thought about was money; enough money to create a comfortable life for my family and to build a fence around us to keep out trouble and misfortune. The key to doing all this was money. Money, money, money.

Monarchists, democrats, nationalists, liberals, socialists, communists, the Mujahedin, the Kurds, and religious minorities had all fled overseas. Two-thirds of the country's prominent writers were now scattered throughout the world.

Amid all this, what need was there for me to write? If I wanted to prove I was a writer, I had already done so. Did I have anything new to say? Of course I did. My mind was ready to blossom with new ideas. But instead of sitting and deliberating with like-minded peers, organizing lectures, and exchanging ideas with people, I had been locked up in a prison for drug addicts and prostitutes," (Parsipur, 183).

Parsipur's writing style and symbolism facilitate a profound realization – the way she depicts her struggles with self-censorship and the constant feeling of being watched effectively convey the emotional toll of Iranian prisons. The detailed narrative heightens the readers' awareness of the pervasive anxiety experienced within those prison walls. In these close-reading assignments, students navigate Bacon's "dangerous shores" of interpretation, where they confront the tension between what is explicitly stated and the deeper, often concealed, meanings. By engaging in this critical exercise, they learn to navigate the complexities of language and intention, uncovering layers of meaning that reveal the full impact of the narratives.

Since facilitating students' ability to bridge classroom learning with real-world contexts is a key focus of mine, I design interactive activities to compel students to actively engage with course materials, collaborate with their peers, and connect with me outside of scheduled class time. Tasks such as film screening, panel discussions, creating posters, podcasts, conducting interviews, or producing artwork prompt students to synthesize course content with their own experiences, the broader world, and current events. These assignments instill in students the understanding that literary analysis transcends mere interpretation of texts; it involves a deep exploration of our lived realities. In essence, I illustrate the relevance of course readings to contemporary issues, spanning both time and space. By encouraging students to explore the broader context of present-day concerns, I foster a sense of curiosity and critical inquiry, empowering them to navigate and understand the complexities of the world around them.

Film screenings offer a valuable opportunity for communal engagement with cinematic content, and to ensure a smooth and enriching experience. The film screening is a group project with one student serving as a moderator and the rest each play a role in delineating the significance of the film to the class themes and the larger world. This activity allows for a 10-minute Q&A session at the end where the class has the opportunity to ask further questions from the presenters. Post-screening, participants are required to prepare a comprehensive 4-page report encompassing their research and the Q&A session. The films I assign for this class include *Women's Prison* by Manijeh Hekmat, *Day Break* by Hamid Rahmani, and *The Circle* by Jafar Panahi. *Women's Prison* is an exploration of the lives of women incarcerated in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. Through a blend of documentary and fictional narrative, the film offers a glimpse into the harsh realities faced by political prisoners, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and the

bonds formed among them. Hekmat's portrayal emphasizes the psychological and emotional toll of imprisonment, as well as the societal implications of their confinement. By focusing on the stories of these women, the film sheds light on issues of gender, justice, and the broader impact of political repression in Iran, ultimately advocating for the recognition of their experiences and humanity. *Day Break* centers on the story of Mansour Ziaee, a prisoner in Tehran's capital, awaiting execution for murder. Through flashbacks, the film reveals his past: Ziaee left his village, seeking a better life in Tehran. However, he struggled to keep his job and, in desperation, committed a crime – likely killing his employer – and was sentenced to death. Under Islamic law, the victim's family must be present at the execution and holds the power to pardon Ziaee's life. As the film unfolds, Ziaee's execution is delayed three times due to the victim's family's absence. The uncertainty takes a toll on Ziaee, causing him to withdraw from life, reject his family's visits, attempt suicide, and provoke solitary confinement. The film masterfully captures Ziaee's emotional turmoil as he navigates the complex and unforgiving Iranian justice system. *The Circle* is a harrowing film that explores the lives of several women in contemporary Iran, highlighting the oppressive societal norms and legal restrictions they face (societal prison and surveillance). The narrative follows multiple interconnected stories of women who are caught in a cycle of despair, dealing with issues such as forced marriage, unwanted pregnancies, and societal judgment. Each woman's journey reveals the harsh realities of their existence and the systemic injustices they confront. Through a stark and unflinching lens, Panahi critiques the patriarchal structures that limit women's freedoms and choices, while simultaneously showcasing their resilience and strength.

The film discussions add another layer to students' learning experiences, enabling them to reflect more comprehensively on the lessons. *The Circle*, with its powerful visual imagery portraying the challenges faced by women in Iran, and *Day Break*, whose haunting score and plot leave a lasting impression, both delve into the profound depth of emotions experienced by individuals and families under the Islamic Republic's violations of human rights. The film screenings, such as *Women's Prison*, offer a unique opportunity to scrutinize the evolving prison circumstances between 1984 and 2001. This allows students to delve into the functioning, development, critical players, and pivotal years in Iran's prison history. One group chose to work on *The Circle* which follows the lives of several Iranian women as they navigate societal pressure, governmental oppression, and violence. Of these women, three are revealed to be formerly incarcerated, and the film centers around these women's, as well as others', efforts to survive in Iran without spousal or familial support while remaining out of trouble with the authorities. Below is part of their writing where they drew connections between the film and the memoirs, as well as the secondary material:

Despite the fact that Panahi's film centers around people who escape from prison, rather than people experiencing incarceration, it possesses similar

themes to those of the prison memoirs of Shahla Talebi (*Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran*) and Shahrnush Parsipur (*Kissing the Sword: A Prison Memoir*). For example, both Talebi's memoir and Panahi's film discuss spouses' experiences of simultaneous imprisonment, illustrating that torturers often exploit spousal relationships when inflicting pain on prisoners. Additionally, with regard to Parsipur's memoir, both it and the film discuss the difficulties female prisoners face when trying to make a living for themselves outside of prison, highlighting that formerly incarcerated women may end up back in prison due to the societal/familial ostracism and barriers to employment they face upon their release.

Panahi's film also possesses similarities to other prominent pieces of Iranian literature, such as Khalil and Amir's famous comic *Zabra's Paradise* and Kaveh Shahrooz's harrowing report on the 1988 massacre of Iranian political prisoners. After all, Amir's piece, like Panahi's film, is greatly concerned with the nature of motherhood and the sacrifices mothers make for their children, while Shahrooz's article illustrates the arbitrary nature of capital punishment in Iran, which parallels the arbitrary nature of the arrests depicted in the film. It is also important to note that Panahi's film depicts themes from "Panopticism," a chapter in Michel Foucault's famous work on the nature of prisons called *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, as it conveys the main characters' perpetual feeling that they are being watched, as well as depicts their attempts to furtively circumvent the strict disciplinary system in their country.

Film screenings prove instrumental in directing students' focus toward the interconnectedness and shared themes present across the readings, fostering a deeper understanding and connection to them. For instance, one student focused on the lives of imprisoned children in *Women's Prison*, identifying the overlapping similarities and ideas in both *Kissing the Sword* and *Ghosts of Revolution*, as well as within the panels of *Zabra's Paradise*. This exercise, demanding a close examination of each story's themes and incorporating research on the respective time periods, directors, and actors from each movie, allows the students to establish enduring connections. Through this process, they uncover shared experiences among diverse individuals under the Islamic Republic, emphasizing the common and essential humanity of those enduring imprisonment. Additionally, they have the opportunity to highlight the remarkable bravery exhibited by those who resisted, and continue to resist, the violations and violence perpetuated by the regime. Through this process, they uncover shared experiences among diverse individuals, emphasizing the common humanity of those enduring imprisonment. As they navigate these interpretations, students are challenged to confront the complexities of representation and meaning in the films, fostering a deeper understanding of the nuanced realities depicted. This engagement not only sharpens their analytical skills but also cultivates an awareness of the profound emotional and social implications of the narratives, enhancing their empathy for those who resist the regime's violations and violence.

The Performative Nature of International Collaborative Education Bridging Cultures

In addition to my regular activities, in 2020 I had the opportunity to collaborate with a colleague in Iranian university holding the class virtually. In an increasingly interconnected world, education must transcend traditional boundaries to foster meaningful dialogue and understanding between diverse cultures. The collaboration between Iranian and American students served as a powerful example of this transformative potential. By engaging students in a comparative exploration of the American and Iranian judicial systems, the course exemplified the principles of performance studies, where knowledge is co-constructed and shaped through interaction and shared experiences. At the heart of the course lies the emphasis on interaction and collaboration. The collaborative projects undertaken by Iranian and American students were not merely academic exercises; they represented a performance of social engagement. Through discussions and joint initiatives, students negotiated and constructed their identities in real-time, moving beyond passive learning to active participation. This dynamic highlighted the relational aspects of education, where the interplay between students fosters a deeper understanding of each other's cultures and perspectives.

During the course, we devised the syllabus in a comparative manner where Iranian students learned about the U.S.'s judicial system and American students learned about Iranian judicial system. It was an immensely impactful opportunity for my students to meet and work with Iranian students on a project. During this particular semester, the human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoodeh was (still is) in prison, and my students got the chance to write a note to her and send it to her via her partner. This gesture transcended mere communication, embodying a ritual of solidarity and connection, carrying significant social and political meanings. In addition, on the U.S. side, George Floyd had just been murdered by law enforcement and we had witnessed mass protest across the U.S. Connecting these globally significant moments to the text and readings of the course allowed the students to relate to each other's experiences across the world. By addressing contemporary issues like George Floyd's murder and the subsequent protests, students contextualized their learning within a broader framework of judicial systems and human rights. This intersection of education and social justice allowed them to embody the roles of active citizens, acknowledging their responsibilities in a world marked by systemic injustices. To bring the two together, I drew from Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire's profound concept of "the word and world." I perceive education as a multifaceted endeavor, blending artistry, politics, and knowledge dissemination. It intricately weaves together the practical and the theoretical realms, prompting us to embody, as Freire eloquently phrases it, the roles of "a politician, an epistemologist, and an artist" (Freire, 1985, 17).

However, I acknowledge the complexity of embodying all three simultaneously, particularly when delving into the realms of human rights within Iranian literature. Ruminating on this connection between “the word and the world,” one student wrote in the course evaluations:

I found it impactful when we were able to meet and work with Iranian students on a project. We also had an activity where we googled the deaths in Iran and how many people were in the prisons at the time. We also had the opportunity to go to events and meet the people that we learned about and wrote our material for the class. I thought it was awesome that we got to write a note to an activist prisoner in Iran.

To me, this collaboration exemplifies the transformative potential of education as a performative act. By emphasizing interaction, embodied knowledge, and the power of narrative, the course fostered a rich and dynamic learning environment. In doing so, it challenged students to engage critically with their own experiences and the complexities of the world around them. Ultimately, this educational approach highlighted the significance of bridging cultures through literature, illustrating how education can be a multifaceted endeavor that transcends traditional boundaries.

Our journey through Iranian Prison Literature navigates the “Dangerous Shores” of the textual and the performative: the interpretation, communication, lexical definitions, humanizing the lives and resistances of those in Iran. This compassionate exploration transcends knowledge acquisition, fostering empathy and critical engagement. Education becomes a dynamic interplay between “the word and the world,” the intellect and emotions where every reading informs and shapes our subsequent engagements. By facilitating this interplay, I cultivate a deeper understanding of human experience complexities and the power of storytelling. Iranian Prison Literature serves as a testament to the transformative potential of literature in bridging the textual and performative shores.

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