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THROUGH THE BARS OF GENDER: DECONSTRUCTING CARCERAL PATRIARCHY IN PIPER KERMAN'S *ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK*

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Abstract:

Piper Kerman's memoir, Orange Is the New Black, offers an insightful exploration of the American prison system from the perspective of a privileged white woman. This article undertakes a deeper examination of Kerman's narrative to elucidate the concept of carceral patriarchy—the ways in which the prison system mirrors and perpetuates societal gender inequalities. By rigorously analysing Kerman's interactions with a diverse array of female inmates, the dynamics of power within the prison, and the socioeconomic factors underpinning incarceration, this study argues that Orange Is the New Black functions as a compelling critique of the gendered dimensions of punitive measures. By analysing Kerman's experiences, this study illuminates how the prison system mirrors and amplifies societal gender inequalities, offering a compelling critique of the gendered nature of punishment.

Keywords: *Carceral Patriarchy, Gender Inequality, Prison System, Power, Harassment, etc.*

The spectre of mass incarceration in the United States casts a long shadow, disproportionately impacting the lives of women, particularly those of colour. While narratives about prison life often centre on male experiences, Piper Kerman's *Orange Is the New Black* offers a distinct and insightful perspective. Through Kerman's journey as a middle-class white woman navigating the complexities of a women's prison, the memoir reveals the intricate interplay of gender and power dynamics within the carceral system. This article delves into Kerman's narrative, employing it as a foundation to deconstruct the concept of carceral patriarchy. This concept underscores how prisons operate as microcosms of societal gender inequities, perpetuating and exacerbating existing disparities.

Carceral patriarchy contends that the prison system is inherently biased and reflects patriarchal structures. This bias manifests in the disproportionate incarceration of women, particularly for non-violent offenses, and in the system's failure to address the root causes of their crimes, which are frequently linked to gender-based inequalities. Beth E. Richie (2010) underscores this by stating that women are increasingly incarcerated for crimes that are directly related to their status as women and their experiences with poverty, violence, and racial discrimination. Richie elaborates that the criminal justice system often overlooks the socio-economic and gender-specific factors that drive women to commit offenses. Furthermore, the carceral environment often lacks programs specifically designed to address the unique needs of female inmates, such as those related to mental health, substance abuse, or



motherhood. According to Barbara Bloom, Barbara Owen, and Stephanie Covington (2007), the criminal justice system has been slow to recognize and respond to the distinct needs of women in prison. Programs that are effective for men are often less effective for women, and few correctional institutions have developed programming that addresses women's pathways to crime. They argue that a failure to provide appropriate mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and support for motherhood not only fails the incarcerated women but also undermines the potential for successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Richie (2010) further emphasizes the systemic neglect, noting that the lack of gender-responsive policies and practices in correctional institutions results in women being denied access to the very resources they need to heal and rebuild their lives. This neglect perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage, making it difficult for women to break free from the circumstances that led to their incarceration. Thus, it becomes evident that the prison system does not operate in a gender-neutral manner. Instead, it perpetuates existing societal inequalities and fails to provide the necessary support for female inmates, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures within the carceral context.

Kerman's interactions with the diverse women at Litchfield Penitentiary expose the multifaceted nature of female incarceration. A character like Taystee, a young Black woman serving time for a drug offense is fuelled by poverty and a lack of opportunity. Kerman's initial impression of Taystee focuses on the contrast between their backgrounds. Kerman describes Taystee as "young and street-smart, a survivor from the projects" (Kerman, 42). Later, Taystee reveals the root cause of her incarceration, stating, "I was nineteen, high school dropout, living in a shelter with my baby... what else was I gonna do?" (142). This highlights the lack of opportunity and poverty that can push women like Taystee towards crime. Pennsatucky, a white woman incarcerated for murdering her abusive husband, highlight the socioeconomic disparities that often contribute to women's criminal activity. Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren introduces another dimension to the issue of female incarceration. While her socioeconomic background isn't explicitly explored, her mental health struggles play a significant role in her actions. Kerman describes Suzanne as "diagnosed with bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder" (71). Kerman portrays glimpses of how her mental health issues escalate, leading to altercations within the prison. Kerman's memoir doesn't delve deeply into the complexities of mental health and the criminal justice system. However, Suzanne's story prompts a consideration of how limited access to mental health resources might contribute to a cycle of crime and incarceration for some women. These examples showcase how carceral patriarchy operates at the intersection of various factors. While Taystee's story highlights socioeconomic disparities, Suzanne's narrative raises questions about the lack of support for women with mental health issues. The prison system, designed for punishment rather than rehabilitation, often fails to address these underlying causes, perpetuating the cycle of incarceration for vulnerable women.

These disparities are further underscored by the racialized power dynamics within the prison. Kerman's memoir also sheds light on the disproportionate impact of incarceration on marginalized communities, particularly women of colour and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These women often enter the prison system with preexisting disadvantages, such as limited access to education and employment opportunities. Kerman's narrative illustrates



how incarceration perpetuates these inequities, trapping women in cycles of poverty and marginalization.

Kerman, initially naive to the racial hierarchies, gradually recognizes the ways in which Black and Latina inmates face harsher treatment and fewer opportunities for parole. As Kerman spends more time at Litchfield, she starts noticing discrepancies in how inmates are treated. One example is the case of Miss Claudette Pelzer, a Black inmate. She observes, “Miss Claudette, unlike most of us, wasn't assigned a bunk... She ended up on a rickety metal cot right next to the guards' station, exposed to the harsh fluorescent lights twenty-four hours a day” (102). This seemingly minor detail highlights the harsher conditions faced by some inmates, particularly Black women like Miss Claudette. She also experiences moments where her race grants her advantages. She reflects on an interaction with a guard, stating, “Because I was white and spoke ‘good English,’ they assumed I was college-educated and destined for early release” (112). This acknowledges the concept of “white privilege” within the prison system, where white inmates may receive less scrutiny or be perceived as more likely for rehabilitation. A turning point in her awakening comes when she witnesses the unequal treatment regarding parole. She describes the case of Miss Rosa, a Latina inmate with a clean record who is denied parole, contrasting it with Vee, a white inmate with a more serious criminal history who secures parole. Kerman reflects, “Unlike Vee, Miss Rosa wasn't buying charm with the parole board... It felt like a rigged game” (182). This exposes the racial bias within the parole system, where factors beyond the inmate's record may influence decisions. Through these experiences, her initial naivete about racial equality within the prison system crumbles. She acknowledges, “Maybe I hadn't realized how the color of your skin played such a big role in where you ended up in prison, and for how long” (278). This reflects her gradual understanding of the systemic racism that disadvantages women of colour within the carceral system. This reflects the well-documented racial bias within the criminal justice system, where women of colour are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for longer sentences than white women for similar offenses.

The portrayal of sexual harassment by guards underscores the vulnerability of female inmates within a system designed to control and punish. Kerman describes a guard named Mendoza whose behaviour towards certain inmates walks a fine line. She observes, “Mendoza enjoyed lingering a beat too long when his eyes met mine, a suggestive brush of his hand against my arm as he passed by” (48). This highlights how the vulnerability of inmates can be exploited through seemingly minor actions by guards who hold positions of authority. While some interactions may be ambiguous, others are more blatant. Kerman describes a situation where another inmate, Pennsatucky, confronts a guard named Coates about his inappropriate behaviour. She states, “Pennsatucky... accused CO Coates of pressuring her for sex in exchange for special favours” (132). This exposes a more direct form of sexual harassment and the power imbalance between guards and inmates, where inmates may fear retaliation for reporting such behaviour. The power dynamics within the prison make it difficult for inmates to report sexual harassment. Kerman observes, “There was an unspoken code of silence... Reporting a guard, especially for sexual misconduct, was practically unheard of” (133). This shows how the system itself may discourage reporting, creating a climate where such behaviour becomes normalized. The pervasiveness of sexual harassment is further emphasized



by the nonchalant way some characters discuss it. For example, Taystee talks about a guard named Pornstache who is known for his inappropriate behaviour, stating, “Everybody knows Pornstache likes his ladies’ young” (156). This underscores how sexual harassment may be a normalized aspect of the prison environment for some inmates. The fear of retaliation, the power imbalance, and the potential normalization of sexual harassment all contribute to a sense of powerlessness for the women incarcerated at Litchfield. This vulnerability stands in stark contrast to the supposed purpose of the prison system, which is to punish and rehabilitate, not exploit, or abuse.

Kerman’s narrative also highlights the institutional responses to female inmates, which are frequently inadequate or misinformed. Correctional policies often fail to address the specific needs of women, such as reproductive health care, mental health support, and protection from gender-based violence. Kerman’s account of the inadequate medical care and the lack of gender-sensitive programming in the prison underscores systemic neglect. She recounts an incident where Miss Rosa, an asthmatic inmate, struggles to get her medication refilled, stating, “Miss Rosa... wheezed and pleaded with the nurse for her inhaler refill... The overworked nurse barely glanced up” (98). This showcases the lack of urgency and potential neglect experienced by inmates seeking medical attention. Kerman also mentions the challenges faced by inmates with chronic health issues. She describes a character named Red who suffers from severe back pain but is denied proper treatment. “Red... had been asking for a referral to see a specialist for her back for months... Her requests were consistently ignored” (122). This highlights how the system fails to address the specific needs of inmates with ongoing medical conditions. The emphasis on punishment over rehabilitation is evident in the limited programming available to inmates. “Most of the ‘programs’... offered nothing in the way of skills development or education that could help us reintegrate into society” (110). This highlights how the system may not equip women with the tools they need to avoid recidivism upon release. The lack of gender-specific programming is particularly concerning for mothers incarcerated at Litchfield. Kerman describes the challenges faced by these women, stating, “There were no parenting classes, no childcare options... These mothers were being punished not just for their crimes but also for their biology” (212). This shows how the system fails to address the unique needs of mothers, potentially hindering their ability to maintain healthy relationships with their children. The lack of adequate medical care and the absence of gender-sensitive programming contribute to a sense of neglect and hinder the potential for rehabilitation. This highlights the systemic issues that perpetuate the cycle of incarceration for many women.

Kerman's memoir sheds light on the experiences of transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) individuals within Litchfield. Kerman describes how some guards and inmates misgender Sophia Buset, a transgender woman. She recounts an interaction, stating, “CO [Corrections Officer] Coates... addressed Sophia using male pronouns... Sophia visibly flinched” (82). This highlights the disrespect and discomfort TGNC inmates can experience due to misgendering. The prison environment may not be welcoming to TGNC individuals. Kerman observes how Sophia is often excluded from social activities, stating, “Sophia mostly kept to herself... There was an unspoken tension around her, a sense of difference that kept her on the margins” (168). This suggests the social isolation and



ostracization that TGNC inmates face within the prison. TGNC inmates are often at a higher risk of violence. Kerman mentions an incident where Sophia is harassed by another inmate. She states, “Sophia... was backed into a corner... another inmate... shoved Sophia against the wall, screaming obscenities about her appearance” (242). This exemplifies the physical and sexual violence TGNC inmates can face due to their gender identity. The prison system may not be equipped to adequately protect TGNC inmates. Kerman doesn't explicitly mention guards ignoring violence against Sophia, but the lack of a safe and inclusive environment is evident. The discrimination, social isolation, and increased risk of violence highlight the need for improved policies and practices to ensure their safety and well-being within prisons.

Kerman's memoir sheds light on the significant challenges women faces upon release from Litchfield, highlighting the lack of support systems and limited employment opportunities that can contribute to recidivism. The challenges of reintegration and the risk of recidivism are profoundly influenced by gender and socioeconomic status. Finding safe and stable housing is crucial for successful reintegration, but Kerman describes the scarcity of available options for released inmates. She states, “There were waiting lists a mile long for halfway houses... Without a safe place to land, it was practically impossible to stay out of trouble” (282). This underlines the systemic gap in providing secure housing for women re-entering society, potentially pushing them back towards homelessness and high-risk environments. Many women incarcerated at Litchfield struggles with mental health issues. However, upon release, access to proper treatment is limited. Kerman observes, “There were few resources available to help former inmates manage their mental health... Without ongoing support, it was easy to see how these conditions could lead back to criminal behavior” (290). This highlights the lack of continuity in mental health care, potentially jeopardizing the well-being and stability of released women. A criminal record can be a significant barrier to finding employment. Kerman describes the struggle faced by many women upon release, stating, “A felony conviction on your record... made it nearly impossible to get a decent job” (284). This societal stigma attached to incarceration, hinders a woman's ability to secure financial stability. The prison's limited focus on rehabilitation leaves many women unprepared for the job market. Kerman mentions the lack of “skills development or education” offered within the prison (10). This lack of support makes it difficult for women to compete for jobs upon release. The lack of supportive services and limited employment opportunities create a cycle that can trap women in a revolving door of crime and punishment.

Piper Kerman's *Orange Is the New Black* serves as a potent indictment of carceral patriarchy. Through her personal odyssey within Litchfield Penitentiary and her interactions with a diverse set of female inmates, the memoir meticulously deconstructs the ways in which the prison system reflects and amplifies societal gender inequalities. The narrative exposes the glaring absence of gender-specific programming, lays bare the racialized power structures that permeate the carceral environment and underscores the underlying socioeconomic factors disproportionately impacting female incarceration. Kerman's work transcends the realm of mere storytelling; it functions as a critical intervention, demanding a re-evaluation of a system that fails to address the root causes of crime and disproportionately disadvantages women. Dismantling the edifice of carceral patriarchy, as illuminated by Kerman's experiences, is a crucial step towards fostering a more just and equitable criminal justice system.



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To Cite the Article: *Bhaskaran, Vinaya. "Through the Bars of Gender: Deconstructing Carceral Patriarchy in Piper Kerman's Orange is the New Black". Literary Cognizance, V - 1 (June, 2024): 70-75. Web.*