

## **Stone Walls Do Not A Prison Make, Nor Iron Bars A Cage**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the works of three poets who, despite physical incarceration, expressed profound themes of resilience, freedom, and human dignity. The first is Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor of India, who composed deeply reflective poems during his exile in British-controlled Rangoon. Zafar's poetry encapsulates his sorrow, nostalgia for his homeland, and resistance to oppression, all while exploring mortality. Next, the article delves into Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a renowned Urdu poet whose prison poems capture the anguish of confinement alongside the enduring hope for justice. His emotive language resonates with the struggles of the oppressed and serves as a powerful critique of political tyranny. Lastly, the article introduces Vasyl Stus, a Ukrainian poet and dissident who wrote during his imprisonment in Soviet labor camps. His poetry conveys a profound understanding of human suffering, freedom, and the resilience of the spirit against systemic oppression. By exploring these three poets' experiences and their translations, the article highlights the transcendence of art over physical captivity, emphasizing the enduring strength of human expression across cultural and historical boundaries.

### **KEYWORDS**

Freedom; prison writings; resilience.

The title of this article is the poem by "To Althea, from Prison" written by Richard Lovelace while he was imprisoned in Gatehouse prison. Because we are told that prison walls keep us safe from those inside — and to keep those of us outside from looking at those inside, from listening to their voices and learning from their experience. But both Mahatma Gandhi's, Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography, and Nelson Mandela's writing on Robben Island were within these very walls.

The author would like to reintroduce/introduce three poets whose

works can be studied in detail as translations. Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal emperor of India, is not only renowned for his political role but also for his incredible poetic prowess writing under the pen name of Zafar. During his imprisonment by the British in Rangoon now Myanmar after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, Bahadur Shah Zafar composed several poignant and powerful poems in his collection *Deewan E Zafar* that reflected his anguish, longing, and resilience in the face of adversity. These prison poems by Zafar provide a profound insight into the emotional and psychological turmoil he experienced

during his captivity. Despite being confined within the walls of his prison cell, his poetic genius soared as he expressed his deepest thoughts and emotions through his verses. One of the notable themes in Bahadur Shah Zafar's prison poems is his contemplation of mortality. In these introspective poems, he reflects on the transience of life and the inevitability of death, as he personally faced the prospect of his mortality trying to find solace and freedom within the confines of his imprisonment. Zafar eloquently expresses his yearning for freedom, nostalgia for his homeland, and resistance against oppression. Here I would like to quote a couplet-

Kitna hai badnaseeb zafar, dafn ke  
liye,  
do gaz zameen bhi na mili kooch-e-  
yaar me (Zafar)  
How wretched is your fate, Zafar!  
That for your final berth  
You couldn't get in your beloved's  
land  
Two meagre yards of earth  
(Rekhta)

Bahadur Shah Zafar's prison poems not only depict his struggles but also serve as a reflection of the larger political and social climate of his time. They provide a window into the oppressive rule of the British Raj and serve as a call for resistance and liberation. In these poems, Bahadur Shah Zafar laments the loss of freedom and sovereignty, expressing his desire for India to rid itself of foreign dominance and regain its independence. Through his prison poems, Bahadur Shah Zafar conveys a range of themes and emotions that resonate with readers even today. Bahadur Shah Zafar's prison poems are a testament to the ability of language to transcend physical restriction and convey the core of the human experience, especially during difficult and trying times. The poetry written by Bahadur Shah Zafar while imprisoned is a potent illustration of the human spirit's

resiliency and the strength of the downtrodden. Bahadur Shah Zafar addresses themes of grief, longing, resiliency, and resistance in these poems, creating verses that strike a chord with readers due to their rich emotional content and exquisite lyrical beauty. The poems written by Bahadur Shah Zafar while being imprisoned offer a moving and in-depth examination of his feelings and circumstances. Bahadur Shah Zafar eloquently expresses his yearning for freedom, nostalgia for his homeland, and resistance against oppression.

The next, a renowned Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, captivated the hearts and minds of readers with his powerful and thought-provoking prison poetry. He named a few of his collections *Dastan E Saba*, *Kalam E Faiz*. His poem was very aptly picturised in the rendition of late actor Narender Jha in Vishal Bharadwaj's *Haider*. Faiz's words were not only a reflection of his personal experiences but also served as a voice for the struggles and aspirations of the oppressed. Faiz's prison poetry was a testament to his resilience and unwavering belief in the power of words to challenge and confront injustice. His poetry captured the emotions and realities of being confined within the walls of a prison, where freedom was stripped away but the spirit remained unbroken. Vivid imagery and metaphors convey the harsh realities of incarceration. His words painted a picture of cramped cells, barren landscapes, and the isolation felt by prisoners, depicting the physical aspects of imprisonment, his poetry also delved into the emotional and psychological toll it took on the human spirit. He expressed the feelings of anguish, despair, and hopelessness that incarcerated individuals experienced, while also highlighting their resilience and determination to keep fighting for justice.

Qaffas udaas hai yaro, saba se kuch  
toh kaho/

Kahin to bahr-e- khudaa aaj zikr-e-  
yar chale

This birdcage is forlorn, call upon  
the gentle wind,  
friends to petition the Lord,  
if it will to speak of my beloved.  
(Translation by Mustanir Dalvi)

The poem "Gulon Mein Rang Bhare" by Faiz Ahmed Faiz is a powerful illustration of his skill at capturing intense feelings in his poetry. Written while he was imprisoned for political reasons, the poem captures the hardships and suffering of captivity with a profound sense of melancholy and longing. The speaker's confinement is poignantly contrasted with the sight of blossoming flowers and their brilliant colours, which represent the harsh realities of captivity and the beauty of release. "Gulon Mein Rang Bhare" is an important poem in Faiz Ahmed Faiz's body of work because, although written in prison, it becomes a potent statement of resistance and resiliency in the face of injustice. The difficulty in translating "Gulon Mein Rang Bhare" into English is expressing the emotion of lies in maintaining the poem's emotive force while accurately portraying the depth of feelings and nuanced aspects of Urdu language. The tremendous complexity of translating poetry is demonstrated by the challenge of accurately expressing the profound effects of imprisonment and resistance in a foreign language. Maintaining the spirit of the original poetry while making necessary changes to make it more relatable to English-speaking audiences demands careful consideration. By dissecting the English translation of "Gulon Mein Rang Bhare," we can decipher the complex process of adapting Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poignant account of incarceration and perseverance for its intended audience in English.

The third poet is Vasyl Stus a prominent Ukrainian dissident of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century poet known for his intense and poignant verse. His works often portrayed themes of love, freedom, and the struggle for human rights. One of his most famous poems, "Here's the sun for you," delves into the idea of hope and resilience in the face of adversity. The complexities of existence in a repressive society by the use of imagery and symbolism creates a powerful and thought-provoking piece to convey the resilience of the human soul in the face of adversity. His poetry, characterized by its profound exploration of human emotions and social commentary, has left an indelible mark on the literary landscape. Stus' works often reflect the tumultuous political climate of his time, addressing themes of oppression, injustice, and the enduring human spirit. Through his evocative use of language and symbolism, Stus captivates his readers, compelling them to confront the harsh realities of their world while inspiring hope for a brighter future. Stus' poetry continues to resonate with audiences around the globe, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries. His enduring legacy serves as a testament to the transformative power of literature and its ability to ignite the flames of activism and change.

Stus' time in Soviet labor camps not only shaped his perspective but also greatly influenced the themes and motifs in his poetry. The trauma and dehumanization he endured as a prisoner of war permeate his poetic expressions, providing a raw and unfiltered lens through which to view the human condition.

The day I tire, I will die and thus  
Hide in the hues of night unseen by  
most,  
Where they don't know happiness  
or wrath,  
Where they don't live but chew  
their own death.  
So many words; they are like  
crippled ghosts!

(translated by Artem Pulemotov)

Furthermore, Stus' use of lyrical language and metaphor in '*Prison Verse*' eloquently conveys the resilience and indomitable spirit of those who endured unimaginable suffering. Through his poetry, Stus not only sheds light on the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime but also pays homage to the unwavering human spirit in the face of adversity.

As we delve deeper into Stus' poetic works, we witness a profound exploration of themes such as freedom, justice, and the enduring quest for human dignity. His

poetic voice serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring impact of war and oppression on the human psyche, urging readers to confront the harsh realities of conflict and captivity.

These translations serve to show the indomitable spirit of the poets that transpires all boundaries. And that poetry stands as a poignant reminder of the enduring strength of the human spirit as well as the unwavering power of artistic expression.

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