

RESEARCH ARTICLE		The Symbolic Connotations of Libraries within Penal Institutions: A Reading of Concepts and an Exploration of Roles	
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Abstract			
The library's role extends beyond providing commonly known materials such as books and supplies. It also performs several social functions by transitioning from traditional, independent public and private library spaces to other domains, including public facilities such as universities, schools, hospitals, and even penal institutions. This article explores in depth the role played by prison libraries in the lives of inmates through the practices of reading and perusal. It investigates the effects of these activities.			
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Introduction

The prison is considered a distinct and confined space that restricts individual freedom and deprives inmates of various rights. However, recent years have witnessed a series of transformations within the justice sector at all administrative levels aimed at serving citizens and streamlining procedures. These reforms have contributed significantly to the enhancement of public services. This developmental trend has also extended to one of the sector's branches: the prison system. Relevant authorities have undertaken their reform through a series of modernisations affecting various institutional structures, including the legal framework, the improvement of inmates' living conditions, and efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate them into society.

Among these reforms is inmates' educational and vocational rehabilitation within penal institutions. Success in educational programmes offered inside prisons has become a prerequisite for qualifying for sentence reduction measures. As

education has become a condition for such benefits, it has become necessary to provide an environment conducive to learning, namely, the prison library.

The Library within this Space: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective

A library within the penal space raises several avenues for scholarly investigation, whether sociological, psychological, or statistical. However, in this article, our focus is confined to the significance of the library within the penal institution through the dual practices of reading and perusal.

1. Libraries between Public and Private Spaces

The history of libraries¹ can be traced back to ancient civilisations, particularly those of Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley. These early libraries were referred to by various names: the Sumerians called them "The Great House of Tablets," the Ancient Egyptians referred to them as the "House of Writings" or "Place of Spiritual Renewal," the Greeks used the term *Bibliotheca*, and the Romans *Libri*. In Arab-Islamic civilisation, words such as *dār* (house), *khizāna* (repository), and *bayt* (house) were commonly used to designate a library.

Historically, the library, as a physical space, has oscillated between public and private realms. Not all libraries were accessible to the general public or ordinary individuals (i.e., users). Even in contemporary times, this dichotomy remains pronounced and significant, often manifesting in location and purpose. Public libraries are typically "open to the public, in contrast to private libraries... and are financed by public funds..."² Moreover, they operate within the public sphere. Despite the multiplicity of definitions scholars offer, there is a consensus regarding four fundamental principles.³ Underlying public libraries:

- ❖ The public library provides services to the community across its various segments.
- ❖ The public library services are offered free of charge.
- ❖ The state will undertake the establishment of the public library.
- ❖ Individuals access the public library on their initiative.

Despite their expansion into the public sphere, these libraries have also been integrated into other institutions and bodies to bring services closer to individuals on the one hand, fulfil specific functions, and provide targeted services on the other hand. For example, hospitals represent one such specialised space. While medical libraries exist to serve healthcare professionals, their scope has expanded to accommodate the needs of patients, staff, and other visitors.

The same applies to the penal institution (prison), which forms the central focus of this study. It constitutes a particular type of space, defined by several characteristics. First, it is a site that deprives individuals of their liberty. Second, it is a controlled environment resulting from imposing a sanction for behaviour contravening the law. Third, it is a setting where strict surveillance is exercised over the inmate, including all forms of printed materials, a particularly acute issue in the case of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

2. From the Concept of Punishment to Reform and Training

The *Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* provides the linguistic definition of the word *ṣijn* (prison) derived from the verb *sajana*, meaning "he imprisoned him; he confined him; he withheld the anxiety and did not express it." The noun *ṣijn* (with a kasrah) refers to the prison itself, while the one who supervises it is known as *sajjān* (jailer), and the incarcerated person is *sajīn*, plural *sujanā* ' (male) and *sajnā* (female). Other forms include *sajīn*, *sajīnah*, and *masjūnah*, all deriving from *sajīnā* and *sajīn*.⁴

Thus, linguistically, *ṣijn* refers to where a person is imprisoned. This spatial understanding corresponds with the story of the Prophet Joseph, peace be upon him. In the noble Qur'ān, the Almighty says in His revealed words:

"He said, 'My Lord, prison is more to my liking than that to which they invite me. In addition, if You do not turn away their plot from me, I might incline toward them and become of the ignorant.'" (Qur'ān, 12:33)⁵

The term *sajjā*⁶ (with a fathāh) denotes the act of confinement and restriction of freedom, whereas *sijn* (with a kasrah) denotes the physical place where accused individuals and criminals are detained.

According to Law No. 05-04 dated 27 Dhū al-Hijjah 1425 AH, corresponding to 6 February 2005, which concerns the regulation of prisons and the social reintegration of prisoners, Article 25 states:

“A penal institution is a place of incarceration in which liberty-depriving sentences, judicial orders, and, when applicable, physical coercion are enforced in accordance with the law. The penal institution may take the form of a closed or an open environment.”⁷

The first form requires the mandatory presence of the inmate within the penal facility, whereas the second does not. Prison⁸ is defined as the space in which sentences that deprive liberty (including detention, imprisonment, and hard labor in both forms) are executed for the duration prescribed by the court.

The term *prison* has several synonyms beyond the word *ḥabs* (detention) or other similar designations that, while performing the same primary function, namely, the restriction and deprivation of individual liberty, may carry additional connotations or reflect particular institutional purposes. Among these synonymous expressions⁹ are the following:

- ❖ Penal institution
- ❖ Rehabilitation and reintegration institution
- ❖ Re-education institution
- ❖ Reformation institution (as termed in some countries)

It is evident that the prison, as a space, has numerous symbolic connotations, predominantly negative. With the evolution of societies and the increasing activities of human rights organisations and advocacy movements, momentum has grown towards reforming the justice sector and the prison system. This shift has involved a departure from the traditional notion of prison as a filthy, degrading, and inhumane space, unfit for the presence of any individual, where inmates are often treated harshly and contemptuously, with little regard for their human dignity.

The emergence of a more flexible and humane conception of incarceration coincided with early efforts to reform the penal system, which began historically in Europe during the mid-eighteenth century. These reforms aimed at improving prison conditions and the services offered therein while enhancing prisoners' well-being through education and vocational training. The underlying objective was to transform the prisoner into a person capable of reform, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society.

In this context, the inmate's psychological (or physical) condition became the focal point of engagement. Space was created for reading moral and religious literature, with such works constituting the first types of books introduced into prisons. These texts were intended to guide inmates in refining their moral sensibilities and confronting the nature of their wrongdoing.¹⁰ Thus, the prison image evolved from a place of punishment and deprivation of liberty to a site for introspection and personal reform. The prison library has played a significant role in facilitating this transformation.

3. The prison library

Morphologically, the prison library¹¹ A prison library is defined as a room or hall containing shelves filled with books and periodicals. It may also take the form of a book cart pushed by a staff member through prison wings or consist of parcels of books sent periodically to the prison. According to the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Library and Information Science*, it is "a library operated by a prison to serve inmates, which may contain general materials or materials supporting its cultural programmes, along with legal subject matter."¹²

The importance of having a library within this space lies in what Rhea Rubin of the National Institute of Library Services to Prisoners noted: prison is an isolated, dull, and frightening place, and the inmate needs companionship, temporary escape, entertainment, and renewal. Library services may provide such relief. Prison offers the inmate a chance for introspection and reconsideration of personal decisions, and library services encourage this by providing materials that

foster self-confidence and health awareness among inmates. Moreover, libraries support general education programmes and access to legal research materials.¹³

Another definition of the prison library further underscores its objectives:

Libraries established within prisons or correctional institutions aim to offer inmates services and cultural and informational activities. Prison libraries pursue a range of goals, including the provision of information resources; the creation of opportunities for inmates to benefit from these opportunities during their free time; the responsibility of delivering vocational, social, and moral education; and the cultivation of reading habits.¹⁴

Historically, the emergence of prison libraries¹⁵ can be traced back to the United States of America, which was also the first country to establish a prison in the formal and institutional sense in 1820. The United States is further credited with pioneering the development of library and information services within prisons at the global level. American prisons have shown exceptional commitment to expanding the scope of these services and providing all possible opportunities and resources to support the rehabilitation of inmates. As a result, the library services offered in American prisons have rivals, if not surpassed, those of other libraries, particularly in terms of the diversity of services provided, owing to the unique nature of the community they serve.

It may therefore be affirmed that the prison library plays a highly effective role.¹⁶ Its objectives include the following:

- ❖ Engaging inmates in activities that benefit them is aimed at maintaining order and security within the penal institution.
- ❖ Equipping inmates with skills and experiences that improve their behaviour increases their morale.
- ❖ Educating and enlightening inmates and cultivating a love for reading and exploration yields lasting benefits.
- ❖ Assisting inmates in continuing their academic and intellectual development through formal instruction and educational training.
- ❖ Contributing to the rehabilitation of inmates and supporting their reintegration into society upon the completion of their sentences.
- ❖ The crime rates can be reduced by increasing the cultural and intellectual levels of inmates.
- ❖ Connecting inmates with the outside world through reading and perusing periodicals (newspapers and magazines).
- ❖ The relationship between inmates and society should be strengthened through education, particularly by informing them of their rights and responsibilities through specialised literature.
- ❖ Library materials that support inmates working in correctional institution workshops, including access to vocational information that can help expand their knowledge base, are provided.
- ❖ Promoting social values and fostering awareness of the importance of responsibility, patience, diligence in serving others, preservation of public property, and cooperation in group work.
- ❖ Inmates are encouraged to interact with others normally and constructively by strengthening their personalities, enhancing their capabilities, and motivating them to respect themselves.
- ❖ Inmates are encouraged to respect the norms and regulations governing life within and beyond correctional institutions, thereby achieving social rehabilitation.

Although the prison library shares with public libraries the fundamental functions of education, cultural enrichment, rehabilitation, and recreation, it bears a particular responsibility in meeting the needs of inmates. It is often the sole facility to which inmates are granted access and from which they may derive benefits. As such, it constitutes the only space through which the inmate can meaningfully pursue the goals of reform, self-development, and the fulfilment of other related purposes.

Given that prison is a distinct and confined space that houses a highly diverse and dynamic population and that prison inmates are often among the least educated or entirely unable to read or explore written materials, library services cannot be regulated as they are in other types of libraries. Instead, they must be governed by a framework tailored to the defined objectives and the unique nature of the prison environment.

In this context, the following considerations may be outlined:¹⁷

- ❖ Preparing a dedicated schedule for inmates who regularly visit the prison library and allowing access without discrimination, except in cases where prison regulations necessitate restricting access for certain inmates.
- ❖ Harmony between the various activities of inmates and their use of the library is created while contributing to the provision of available training, educational, and counselling programmes.
- ❖ Offering educational, vocational, cultural, and ethical books.
- ❖ Library materials that address sensitive topics such as sexuality or politics should be avoided.
- ❖ Inmates' internal moral awareness is fostered through the organisation of lectures or seminars on crime and delinquency.
- ❖ Providing library services to sick inmates in prison hospitals within their cells.
- ❖ Raising awareness through the provision of audiovisual services, such as the screening of purposeful films.
- ❖ Supplying periodicals, bulletins, and various newspapers.

Conclusion

Examining this topic has demonstrated that the penal institution (prison) library plays a vital role, serving as a fundamental pillar whose importance cannot be overlooked. This is evident in the range of services it provides and the objectives it seeks to fulfil through its various functions and objectives that are in harmony with those of the penal institution itself, most notably the rehabilitation and reformation of inmates. These two aims enable inmates to reintegrate into the external environment and reconstruct their personality.

To strike a chord with the sensitive psychological state of the inmate, instilling hope that they may become a reformed individual who benefits both themselves and those around them, the established rehabilitation programmes, along with the concerted efforts directed at raising awareness and correcting inmates' thinking, are supported by the library's services. As a space of knowledge, culture, recreation, and education, the library offers inmates a means of liberation from the pain associated with punishment, which often results in feelings of remorse and sorrow. It opens a window of hope for the future of transformation, challenge, and reintegration.

In this way, through its services, the penal institution's library contributes to lifting the inmate from the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge by fostering a spirit of reading that enables them to adapt to any circumstance, regardless of the length of their sentence.

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