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TO PRESERVE HUMANITY: *POEMS FROM GUANTANAMO*

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ABSTRACT

Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees speak published by Marc Falkoff, is a collection of poems written by the infamous prisoners of GTMO or Guantanamo Detention Centre. The very existence of Guantanamo Bay camp nullifies the purpose of democracy as most detainees are detained without any trial. This article explores the poems and the poets themselves; investigating content of the poems and role of these prisoners as poets. They might not fit in to Wordsworth's definition of a poet. But they embody its spirit and let their feelings flow spontaneously. They declare their innocence, rip open the hypocrisy of their captives and describe the injustice done to them. Poems claim that their captors are not interested to listen to them. It is as if they want them to be perpetrators. The poets underscore the absence of a judicial inquiry preceding detainment.

Keywords: Prison poetry, Human Rights, Legal Rights, Romantic Ideals

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Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees speak is collection of poems written by the infamous prisoners of GTMO or Guantanamo Detention Centre. It was published by Marc Falkoff. "Marc Falkoff is an assistant professor at the Northern Illinois University College of Law and attorney for seventeen Guantánamo prisoners." ("Marc Falkoff | University Of Iowa Press") The corner stone of any criminal justice system is the benefit of doubt or the stance of 'innocent until proven guilty' as found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly art. 11) The only exception to this rule is in the case of terrorism. The definition of terrorism is vague. Nations and organizations define them according to circumstances. The very existence of Guantanamo Bay camp nullifies the purpose of democracy as most detainees are detained without any trial. Even if there was a trial for the accused, the onus of proof their innocence lies on the accused themselves. It is not the prosecution's job to prove that they are guilty. The pressure is upon the defence. It is also interesting that most people detained in the prison are not American citizens. But they are the citizens of other nations. In one stroke, the American government take over human rights and sovereignty of other nations. (Smith)

Can we regard these detainees as poets? Wordsworth in Preface to Lyrical Ballads has said; "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". He has also said "The subject is indeed important!" (Wordsworth). *Poems from Guantanamo* has both these things and more. Indeed, Wordsworth preferred poems of "common life" and "common man". Poets of this collection *Poems from Guantanamo* are

neither common men nor their experiences common. Yet Wordsworth has also said "Poetry is the image of man and nature." Image of man would not be complete without taking to account people who are both exceptions and exceptional. "Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time." The job of a poet is to bind together people. The people who need 'binding' are the people who have been shunned. When Wordsworth said that poet "is a man speaking to men:" he intended a person who was enthusiastic and tender. The poets in this collection will not have that positive energy that Wordsworth sought. But in a way they have "a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul." (Wordsworth).

As they are not even give trial, they have to claim innocence through poetry which in a way had to be smuggled outside the prison or had to survive huge censorship. It is another blatant violation of freedom of speech or expression which comes from a nation which boasts itself in their anthem as 'the land of the free'. Apparently freedom is only for a certain people and not for others. (Smith)

The following poems claim innocence of the poets and tell also the fact that their captors are not interested to listen to them. It is as if they want them to be perpetrators.

Abdullah Thani Faris Al Nasi in his poem "To my father" cries

"I have committed no crime and guilty of no offense" (Falkoff 24)

He claims in this poem that his captors "told him to confess", but he is "guiltless". (Falkoff 24)

In *Death Poem* by Jumah al Dossari, he writes

"...let them bear the guilty burden, before the world

Of this innocent soul" (Falkoff 31).

Religion cannot be ignored for these captives. This could be an allusion to judgement day. He believes he will someday get justice.

Osama Abu Kabir writes in the poem *Is it true?*

"But do you hear me, oh judge, do you hear me at all?

We are innocent, here, we've committed no crime.

Set us free, if anywhere still

Justice and compassion remain in this world" (Falkoff 49)

In this poem he underscores the absence of a judicial inquiry preceding his detainment.

Abdullah Thani Faris Al Nazi made this statement in a military administrative hearing when he was asked why should they not consider him as a threat? "In the world of international courts, the person is innocent until proven guilty. Why here is the person guilty until proven innocent?" He tells the sea in his poem *Ode to the Sea*.

"Do you know of our sins?

Do you understand we were cast in to this gloom?

O sea you taunt in our captivity,

You have colluded with our enemies and you cruelly guard us" (Falkoff 64)

In each of the above quoted every poet claims his innocence or refers to his innocence. This is something they cannot do in public court room.

Some of the poems are an indictment of the captors' crimes against the captives. Shaker Aamer who was released recently wrote the poem "*They fight for peace*" in which he asks

"What kind of peace are they looking for?

Why do they kill?" (Falkoff 20)

In the end of the poem he concludes that "they" talk, argue and kill. He sarcastically ends "they fight for peace." He is accusing is captors of being aggressive and hypocritical. (Falkoff 20)

This shows that his captors were trying to make him confess of crimes he did not commit. He was sold by bounty hunters to the U.S forces (Falkoff 24) for which he writes

"..I have been sold like a fattened sheep." This shows the prisoner was dealt like an animal. (Falkoff 25) He uses the metaphor of "fattened sheep" to show his anger.

Mohammed El Gharani was arrested by the Pakistani police and handed over to US forces. He was a Saudi citizen staying in Pakistan to learn English.

“Their aim is to worship petty cash,
And for it they break all vows.
I came to their land to pursue an education
And saw such malice in them.” (Falkoff 38)

This probably was against the Pakistani soldiers. (Falkoff 37) El Gharan, being a monotheist believer is insulting the Pakistani soldiers by accusing of idol worship. They are worshipping “Petty cash”. He might be making use of their Muslim identity. The poem also talks about mental and spiritual torture.

“We saw such insults from them;
Not even the book of God was protected.”

This shows the lack of tolerance the soldiers had towards them (Falkoff 39). The poet feels that an assault against his religion. This is his opinion of the war on terror.

“Out of spite they showed such impudence
Their war is against Islam and justice.” (Falkoff 39)

This is feeling can be felt throughout the poems. They feel their detention has do with some sort of blind prejudice or hatred.

Sami Al Haj writes in the poem *Humiliated in Shackles*
“The oppressors are playing with me,
As they move freely about the world
They ask me to spy on my countrymen.” (Falkoff 42)

This shows that he was humiliated and pressurized to become an informer.

He also blames America and Bush for his fate. He thinks that the Iraq war was done on false premises which everyone is aware of.

“America you ride on the backs of orphans
And terrorize them daily
Bush, beware
The world recognises an arrogant liar” (Falkoff 42)

Conclusion

Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees speak tells the unheard story of prisoners of the war on terror. It is one of the most dangerous acts carried out by US government in order to keep their citizens safe. But it did not make them safer. It only made them look like hypocrites. Everyone has the right to know for what crime they are arrested for and they do have the right for a due court process. The efforts of Falkoff and others are commendable. They stood against their own government against people who allegedly wanted to harm them. They do not want terrorist suspects to escape. But they want civil liberties and processes to be secure. The book becomes an appeal and reader becomes the jury. It exposes the hypocrisy of Americans on tolerance and democratic values.

They express strong emotions and have seen dark side of humanity. They may not have the optimism of Shelley or Keats; but they have feelings genuine enough for a romantic.

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