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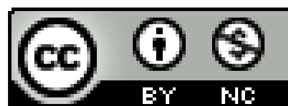

Views: ‘Prison Talk’– How Does Language Resist Authority in Egyptian Prisons?

Ahmed Abdel Halim

Keywords: Tattoos; Egyptian Prisons; Language; The Body; Sexuality

Introduction: Prison as an Ontological Laboratory

In modern Egyptian history, the prison institution has been more than a place where bodies are physically confined. It is an apparatus that moulds identities and generates meaning under intensely coercive conditions. As Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, the prison is the paradigmatic site of disciplinary power. Such power does not rely on physical punishment alone, but also on techniques of microscopic control and surveillance, producing ‘docile bodies’ that can be reshaped and classified within bureaucracies. Yet this structural subjugation does not result in the complete erasure of the self. On the contrary, it opens space for subtle, day-to-day resistance that emerges from within the very mechanisms of control. As the Iraqi researcher Mazen Marsoul argues in his study of the repressed body, the prison becomes a site of profound self-alienation and inner void, where the human being is reduced to little more than a number in a closed system. At the same time, this existential crushing can dialectically generate the conditions for symbolic strategies through which the self seeks to reclaim its agency. As such, the penal institution becomes not merely a place where punishment is administered, but also a field of struggle over ‘the essence of man.’

Within this field of struggle, language emerges as one of the most dynamic tools. Jail talk, or what Egyptians call *kalam al-habsagiyya* (speech of the inmates), cannot be understood as a fringe linguistic phenomenon, but as a symbolic structure that serves both defensive and ontological functions. It is a practice through which prisoners reclaim their ‘voice’ in a space designed to silence it. By renaming the world and breaking its monotony, they both forge metaphors and ironies that mitigate symbolic violence and build a parallel order of meaning that challenges the institution’s definitional authority - practices that can be read through Elsa Dorlin’s concept of ‘self-defence.’ Language here serves to restore a self who is threatened with fragmentation. Naming things is not a linguistic practice but a way of reclaiming the authority to define and recover part of the symbolic power taken away.

This analysis can be further enriched by drawing on Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity,' where identity is understood as the outcome of repeated discursive acts that produce and stabilise the self within a social setting. In the prison, adopting a particular vocabulary or performing certain discursive roles helps generate an alternative symbolic hierarchy within the punitive environment.[1] Beyond speech itself, the body also becomes a 'written text,' in David Le Breton's terms, as tattoos and markings turn it into a surface for inscribing memory and signalling affiliation.[2]

This article seeks to unpack 'jail talk' as a field where identity is negotiated within a space of coercion. It highlights how the prison shifts from being a place for producing docile bodies into a space where complex forms of symbolic struggle take shape, with language ultimately becoming the last bastion of the self in the face of attempts at erasure.

Linguistic Resistance and the Invention of Metaphor in Jail Talk

What is commonly referred to in Egyptian prisons as *kalam el-habsagiyya* constitutes a coherent linguistic system. It is not simply a sociolect or a colloquial register tied to a closed setting, but a symbolic counter-structure that emerges in opposition to the structure imposed by the penal institution. When a *mustajid* (newcomer) or *irad* (intake) enters prison, language is anything but neutral. Encountering such terms becomes a rite of passage into a world governed by unfamiliar rules. Labelling the new prisoner 'intake' signals, from the outset, an objectifying logic that enters the person into an administrative ledger, as if they were an item added to stock rather than a subject with a life story, personal traits, and social connections. Here, a first mechanism of de-individualisation takes hold, as the person is redefined within a bureaucratic discourse that reduces them to a serial number. Yet this very practice, which seeks to monopolise definitional authority, simultaneously opens a space for a counter-practice grounded in renaming. The 'right to name' is a primary form of symbolic power. Prisoners exercise it within a narrow but deeply telling way, reworking the vocabulary imposed on them into an alternative web of meanings. They do not simply reject the language of authority; they deconstruct it from within, turning the very instruments of domination into metaphorical expressions governed by their own logic. In doing so, they reclaim, however partially, the authority to define themselves and to resist the authoritarian world that surrounds them.

The notes compiled by Ahmed Said in *Prison Talk: Examples from the Terms of Egyptian Prison* read as a manifesto of day-to-day resistance in which metaphor plays a central role. In the prison setting, metaphor is not a rhetorical ornament but a survival technique, serving two intertwined functions: a cryptographic one that shields communication from the *hansash* (snake, i.e. the guard), and a psychological one that reframes the terror of material confinement. For instance, calling the viewing slit in the cell door *naddara* (eyeglasses) is not just a snarky turn of phrase; it subtly reworks the very relation of the gaze. Instead of being the elevated eye of authority that penetrates privacy and monitors bodies, the slit is recast as an instrument of seeing and knowing. The term *naddara* thus allows the prisoner to symbolically reclaim the position of agent-observer instead of being an object of surveillance. Likewise, terms such as *takhshiba* (wood-

ification) evoke the oppressive stillness of holding rooms, where waiting bodies harden into something like wood. Additionally, *taqfisa* (cage-ification) names the experience of visits conducted behind iron cages, where one is reduced to a zoo-like display. Both condense the physical experience into a metaphor of inhuman isolation. Language here does not deny material domination; it reframes it semantically, enabling its collective circulation, moderating its intensity, and rendering it open for representation and exchange.[3]

From another angle, these linguistic innovations can be read in light of Elsa Dorlin's argument that authoritarian systems seek to produce disarmed, 'undefendable' bodies by undermining their 'power of action' and even turning it against them.[4] In prison, humiliation is not incidental. It is a systematic practice aimed at reshaping the body's self-perception, breaking it down and rebuilding it again. In this context, metaphor becomes a subtle defence strategy that preserves what remains of bodily dignity by re-coding acts of authority in ways that dull their symbolic force. When a sudden search is called *tayyaha* (drop), its personal and degrading effect is stripped away and reframed as side effects of an abrupt event, almost like a natural force rather than an intentional act of humiliation. While this does not erase the humiliation, it allows it to be mentally absorbed within a more tolerable frame. A similar dynamic is at work with the term *qazqaza* (dabbling), used to describe urinating into a water bottle during solitary confinement or prison transfers. However degrading the conditions it refers to, the familiar expression helps normalise a harsh situation within the group and ward off stigma. In this sense, language performs a collective therapeutic function, creating distance between the self and the humiliating act and making the experience narratable and shareable.

The prison community produces its own specialised terminology that serves as a symbolic tool for evading surveillance and control. Terms such as *ambala* (ampul-making, meaning wrapping contraband for concealment inside the body, specifically in the anus), *Abu Treika* (a kind of high-quality cannabis), *Abu Shurta* or *Abu Saliba* (a light-blue narcotic pill), and *takhzin* (storage, meaning the concealment of contraband from the authorities) are more than passing slang. They're pragmatic codes generated to shield communication from institutional oversight.[5] In addition to facilitating the physical circulation of contraband, this innovative language redraws the boundaries of what can be seen and heard within the closed space of the prison, producing a private communicative sphere that remains, at least temporarily, opaque to authority. Language thus becomes a form of everyday resistance, one that does not rely on direct confrontation but on displacement, evasion, and the strategic renaming of things in ways that conceal them from the surveillance system.

Linguistic resistance, however, is not uncontainable. Drawing on its accumulated experience within the prison, authority recognises that coded language is a means through which prisoners evade control, and it moves to penetrate it through multiple mechanisms. One such mechanism is the recruitment of certain inmates, often in exchange for limited privileges, to act as informants within the cells, whether in temporary or long-term detention centres. These informants would then relay prison vocabulary to those in charge. In addition, the daily friction between prisoners and lower-ranking security personnel, such as informants and sergeants, gradually facilitates the

transfer of this terminology into the lower tiers of the surveillance system. The terminology thus loses its coded character, exposing the language of resistance as readable and intelligible to the very system it seeks to escape. Prison talk thus enters a continuous cycle of re-invention and exposure: prisoners generate new expressions to outmanoeuvre authority, while the latter works to decode and absorb these expressions, producing an ongoing symbolic struggle over who holds the power to name and to fix meaning within the prison space.[6]

Jail talk is not only a psychological shield; it also serves as a way of organising social and economic life inside the prison. In the absence of an external order, and with the penal institution monopolising authority, language establishes and sustains a parallel hierarchy. Roles such as the *nabatshi* (shift worker) and *futuwwa* (strongman) structure daily life and regulate the rhythm of the cell, often through tacit arrangements with authority. Within this context, a new economy emerges, with cigarettes functioning as a currency of exchange and recognition, as seen in roles like the *nabtashiyyat al-hammam* (toilet worker fees) paid to those cleaning the toilets. These networks are not deviations from order so much as products of what Mazen Marsoul describes as 'prisonization': the process through which the new inmate learns the language and rules of prison life in much the same way a child learns the culture of their society. It is a gradual integration that reshapes habits and behaviours in line with the constraints of forced living, producing a symbolic ordering of life within a closed social world.[7] Anyone who fails to grasp this linguistic code is ironically labelled *hirz* (protective charm) or *hirz mkamkam* (rotten protective charm), marking them as naive and unable to read signals or decipher codes, which often results in their marginalisation and exploitation. Jail talk, then, has a dual character: it is at once a tool of symbolic resistance against the discourse of authority and a mechanism for generating an internal order that redistributes roles and positions. Put another way, it is a space where domination and organisation, humiliation and solidarity, violence and creativity all intersect - and where, through language, the world is reconstructed within the very system that seeks to erase it.

Language Performativity and Sexual Connotations Inside the Cell

Within prison, language transforms from a tool of describing reality into a performative practice that produces and reinforces identity under coercive conditions. Words do not merely reflect identity; they contribute to its construction. This can be approached through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where gender identity is not a fixed essence or an internal truth preceding action, but rather the result of a ritualistic repetition of actions and discourses that, over time, accumulate the appearance of 'normal' and 'self-evident.' In Egyptian prisons, performativity is far more intense. Gender is reconstituted within a closed space governed by strict punitive rules, which turns it into a fundamental resource for survival or control strategies. Masculinity and femininity here are not measured against external moral standards but are redefined within a prison-specific symbolic economy where gender becomes 'a fluid style,' expressed in language, tone, movement, and the capacity to endure pain, producing an unstable identity under conditions of coercion.

In the outside world, *sawabiq* (prior offences) carry legal and moral stigma, but in men's prisons, they constitute symbolic capital that secures an elevated position within the prison hierarchy. A phrase like *ragel sawabiq w fahman* (man of offences and expertise) is not a neutral description but a performative act of recognition, marking status and reasserting the figure of the 'seasoned' person who knows the rules of the game and how to play it. In Butler's terms, such language participates in the social construction of gender: the prisoner does not enter with a fully formed masculine identity but produces and affirms said identity through repeated linguistic and bodily practices.[8] This is evident, for instance, in the *tashrifa* (honorary reception), a ritualised assault inflicted on newcomers as an initiation. Projecting a tough body that can withstand the *tashrifa* without breaking is crucial for avoiding the labels of 'soft' or 'effeminate,' which open the door for further disempowerment or exploitation. Unlike the world outside the prison, labels like *hajj* (pilgrim), *agala* (ride), or *gadaa miri* (army boy) take on sexualised meanings linked to homosexuality or pedophilia, and are thus strongly stigmatised. At times, the dynamic escalates when 'strong,' hypermasculine prisoners assign a fellow inmate a woman's name, such as Afaf, after which the inmate becomes a target of systematic acts of domination, often under the watchful eyes of prison authority.[9]

From this perspective, manhood - or masculinity as a practice - is redefined as the capacity to endure physical hardship and humiliation without losing control. Practices like *ambala* - concealing contraband inside the body - come to signify cunning and experience, exceeding their original meaning as transgressions. The body is linguistically trained to be 'hard' and 'in control,' with language mediating and normalising this image, circulating it as a shared standard. As such, a patriarchal hierarchy is reproduced within a space that, though supposedly single-gender, continually regenerates internal power dynamics.

In women's prisons, gender performativity takes a parallel yet distinct form. Just as men deploy terms associated with homosexuality, women use expressions such as *mukhawiya* (paired up) or *markouba* (passive) to refer to women having sexual relations with other women. These terms similarly carry stigma, and additionally expose the women to punishment or exclusion, whether from fellow inmates or from authority.[10] At the same time, women's prisons often exhibit a feature less common in men's prisons: language tends to foster networks of solidarity that move beyond competition or control. What emerges is a form of sisterhood that responds to a structure of double patriarchy: the prison as a disciplinary apparatus, and the broader society that had already marginalised these women. Feminist writings by figures such as Nawal El Saadawi and Salwa Bakr document how the cell can become an alternative emotional space, one in which women reclaim the ability to speak honestly about pain, desire, and fear, away from the moral and discursive constraints imposed beyond prison walls.

Salwa Bakr, herself imprisoned for two weeks back in 1989, traces in her novel *The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven* how women prisoners produce a 'new language' that expresses their own consciousness, partially escaping the male-dominated linguistic legacy that had confined their voices to silence, shame, or taboo.[11] Storytelling creates 'healing narratives': fragmented and traumatic experiences gathered into story arcs that confer meaning, transforming

individual suffering into a shared mode of resistance. Language thus does more than construct identity; it also builds a collective memory, produces a counter-history from below, and records what official archives rarely acknowledge.[12]

This dimension becomes especially salient in rituals of symbolic and gender-based violence inside prison, such as *qarfasa* (squatting) or invasive 'self-search' procedures targeting women's genitalia, which women prisoners describe as tantamount to sexual violation.[13] In these moments, the body is not merely subjected to security control; its most intimate parts are singled out as sites of unwarranted autonomy and privacy. As Elsa Dorlin argues, focusing on these parts does more than regulate a legal subject: it undermines the 'capable subject' and erodes the very capacity to act, decide, and exercise sovereignty over one's body. Yet women prisoners respond by turning their 'tongues' into tools of documentation and record-keeping, capturing the emotional texture of these experiences and producing a discourse that refuses their reduction to voiceless victims. Narrating the humiliation, naming it as such, and circulating it within the group, women produce a parallel political and social archive and resist the institution's gendered domestication that marks them as subordinate and abased. Gender performativity in prison - across both men's and women's spaces - reveals language as a central field of struggle where body, identity, and power are not fixed givens; they are practices forged under coercion and, at the same time, mobilised for survival and self-redefinition.

Tattooing the Body: The Permanent Mark of Identity

When spoken language reaches its limits due to surveillance, and with words themselves becoming suspect or liable to confiscation, expression shifts from voice to skin; the body becomes an alternative mode of expression. In this sense, tattooing in Egyptian prisons can be understood as a radical extension of linguistic resistance; a transition from tongue to flesh, where the skin bears that which cannot be openly said. Tattooing here is not an ornament; it is a 'signature of identity' in a space that standardises bodies and absorbs them into a rigid objectifying system. If the penal institution works to assign each prisoner a serial number with uniform dress, shaved hair, and regimes of inspection and classification, then tattooing - as a drawn rather than spoken language - operates as a countermeasure that reclaims the body and returns it to a singular self. Here, one might recall David Le Breton's reflections on the sociology of the body, where tattooing appears as a kind of 'body biography': the writing of the self onto its own biological surface, an act of chosen pain set against imposed pain.[14] When a prisoner pierces their skin with improvised tools and marks it with pigment, the body becomes a social stage on which to perform identity. Pain is redefined, no longer solely an instrument of domination but a 'logic of action' and a way of asserting the capacity to choose.

In an environment where uniformity is enforced and difference deliberately erased, tattooing becomes a project of individuation. The significance of this act is heightened by the crude conditions of its execution - improvised needles, thread, pigments made from boiled greens or soot - turning the act into a painful rite of passage. Endurance is tested, and pain becomes a silent

dialogue with the body: not mere suffering, but a moment of acute existential awareness and a reclamation of a body that authority sought to appropriate. Through tattooing, the body ceases to be a purely biological surface and becomes a symbolic medium that speaks to others on behalf of its owner. It now carries a coded language, rich in social, moral, and sometimes even 'combative' meaning. The tattooed body signals affiliations, displays experience, and gestures toward a personal history that cannot be reduced to an administrative file. It becomes an open text within the prison community, legible only partially to authority which does not fully control its script.

Tattoos in Egyptian prisons function as condensed 'identity cards' that reveal the prisoner's story, choices and experience. A teardrop beneath the eye, for instance, carries many possibilities: a filled tear may signify having committed a killing, an explicit claim to violence, while an unfilled one may mark the loss of a loved one or years spent behind bars, indexing an identity shaped by absence and suspended time. The 'five dots,' arranged with four surrounding a central one, offer a stark visual metaphor for prison ontology: the individual confined within the four walls of the cell. The tattoo is a visual representation of physical enclosure and the architecture of domination. A clock without hands conveys the 'brutality of time,' where meaning stalls and life's rhythm is frozen. The dagger, by contrast, signals aggression and rebellion, drawing on motifs of *baltaga* (thuggery) and *sha'awa* (mischief), and announcing either a readiness for confrontation or, at the very least, a refusal of passive integration into the system.

Alongside these combative and temporal meanings, tattooing also appears as a pressing emotional response to an exceptionally harsh environment. Phrases such as *ya rabb* (O Lord) and the names of mothers and lovers restore a measure of humanity to the body, linking it to an external world - spiritual, affective, or erotic - that exceeds the prison walls. It is as if the prisoner embeds, in their own skin, a thread connecting them to a prior or imagined life. In this sense, tattooing becomes an act of symbolic mooring at a time when meaning begins to drift away. The mark on the skin here functions as an emotional anchor in a sea of instability and uncertainty. Some tattoos also take on the role of an amulet or talisman, drawing on traditional beliefs that reappear in prison as symbols of protection against the 'evil eye' or invisible harm. Here, the body intersects with cultural inheritance, and tattooing becomes a charm that situates the prisoner within a symbolic field of defences against material and moral threats.

Yet these 'inscriptions of the skin' do not remain confined within prison walls. They travel with their bearer after release, becoming a permanent feature of visible identity. While tattooing may serve as a tool of individuation and resistance inside prison, outside it may become a stigma, limiting reintegration and affecting employment and social acceptance. The prison tattoo thus carries an irony: it reclaims sovereignty over the body under conditions of domination, yet it may become a 'permanent penalty' that binds the body to its prison past in ways that cannot be erased. Still, the choice to inscribe the body despite this risk reveals a deep desire to fix the prison experience within the self as a formative element of identity rather than a passing episode. The tattooed body thus becomes a living archive, bearing on its surface a personal and collective history, preserving the trace of prison on the skin long after the formal sentence has ended.

In conclusion, linguistic and bodily resistance in Egyptian prisons can be understood as a structural response to what Michel Foucault termed the 'microphysics of power': the fine-grained network of techniques that permeate the prisoner's everyday life in order to regulate conduct and reshape identity. When the penal institution seeks to produce a 'docile body' through constant surveillance, inspection, classification, and repeated disciplinary interventions, it does more than constrain outward behaviour; it attempts to re-engineer the individual's relation to their self, so that even the smallest gesture falls within the horizon of authority.[15] In this context, jail talk, gendered performativity, and tattooing should be understood not as marginal cultural phenomena but as counter-practices: they redraw the boundaries of the self and grant the prisoner a partial capacity to control how their body and identity are represented. What emerges is a form of microscopic resistance that operates within subtle symbolic frames while avoiding direct physical confrontation. These practices do more than preserve the psychological dimension of the self: they testify to the human capacity to devise defensive strategies in the face of authority's symbolic project that seeks to dismantle all forms of individual agency.

Despite recurring official claims of improving prison conditions in Egypt, ongoing human rights reports continue to document both material and symbolic violations, with reforms often remaining superficial at best. While authority retains control over cells, walls, and mechanisms of punishment, the prisoner - even within narrow limits - preserves the right to name, to signal presence, and to turn the body into a political and social text that reflects resistance. The prison experience thus reveals a central paradox: the more intensive the mechanisms of control and violence, the greater the need for subtle practices that regenerate the human 'power of action,' enabling prisoners to cultivate an internal ethic of self-defence and to retain definitional authority even in conditions of extreme coercion.

From this perspective, the prison is no longer a site of collapse and compliance. It has become a laboratory for experimenting with new forms of identity formation, where linguistic, bodily, and symbolic resistances intersect to construct a shield guarding the self. These practices do not end the oppressive reality, but they affirm the human ability to invent means of survival, to preserve symbolic existence, and to carve out a partial space of sovereignty that allow for self-definition outside the penal institution. In Egyptian prisons, language and the body emerge as the final bastions of identity. Harshness as incarceration is, it still allows for a persistent reassertion of the self and its agency, even at the height of domination.

AI Assistance Statement

The author used AI tools solely for formatting references in the footnotes.

About the Author

Ahmed Abdel Halim is an Egyptian novelist and researcher who writes on topics of political sociology and the body, and its relationship to spaces of power, colonialism, and neoliberalism. He has published several books and contributes to Arab, English, and French platforms and journals.

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[2] David Le Breton, *Signs of Identity*, Arabic translation by Abdul Salam bin Abdul Ali (Page Seven Publishing House, 2022), 19.

[3] Ahmed Said, *Kalam Habsigeya: Namaazig min Maskukaat el-Sign el-Masri* [Prison Talk: Examples from the Terms of Egyptian Prison] (Umam for Documentation and Research, 2021).

[4] Elsa Dorlin, *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence*, Arabic translation by Jalal Badla (Dar Al-Saqi for Printing and Publishing, 2021), 36.

[5] Said, *Kalam Habsigeya* (Prison Talk), 13.

[6] Based on the author's experience of spending two years in Egyptian prisons, there exists a category of prisoners known as *murshidin* ('guides'). Operating within the prison's internal structure, they receive certain privileges in return for monitoring and reporting on fellow inmates. This helps sustain the authority's dominance and contain behaviours that might disrupt or threaten the system.

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[9] Ahmed Said, *Kalam Habsigeya,* 9, 27.

[10] For more on sexuality in women's prisons, see: Ahmed Abdel Halim, *Min Yamlik Haqq Al-Jasad? Qiraa Fi al-Hayat el-Sijniya. Kawalis Jinsiyya: Al-Mithliya, Al-Taharrush, al-Istimna* [Who Owns the Body Rights? A Look at Prison Life. Sexual Underground: Homosexuality, Harassment, Masturbation] (Umam for Documentation and Research, 2022), 87.

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