



Predicament Circumstances of Prison Literature

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Abstract:

Prison writing became a characteristic cultural form of early modern England. Its popularity rested on an increase in the number of prisoners, many of them literate elites imprisoned for politics, religion, or debt; an expanded audience of political and religious sympathizers; and the growth of the book trade. Despite the liberties accorded to writing, prison was humiliating, injurious to reputation, and dangerous to health. Many questions about the causes and effects of this form of writing remain; it is nevertheless essential to an understanding of early modern culture, including the nature of crime and punishment and the history of the Reformation.

Keywords: Prison Literature, Predicament

Introduction:

Prison Literature could be defined as a body of literature written by writers in prison, jail, lock-up, prisoner's camp, concentration camp and house arrest for different reasons. The jail does not only mean iron bars and high walls, it also means restrictions on one's physical and mental freedom, dislocation from social, cultural, and political life. There is a huge body of works produced by writers while serving imprisonment across different cultures written in different languages of the world ranging from Arabic, English, Urdu, Persian, French, German, and other major or minor languages of the world. Anouck de Wringer thus aptly defines Prison Literature thus in his paper entitled "I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody: Defying Violence with Words": Prison literature is a genre in which authors usually express their individual or collective struggle against an oppressive regime. In this way, prison literature could

be regarded as a literary testimony of oppression and resistance that can clarify the specific facets of violence within a particular socio-political context.

The history of prison writing seems to have begun with Boethius, a classical Neoplatonist philosopher who wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* in 523 AD, during his imprisonment for treason. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a written account of a conversation Boethius had with Lady Philosophy while he was in prison. It serves as a personification of his philosophical ideas, such as the denial of the flesh, intellectualism being the highest good earth can offer, evil's lack of substance, and providence as the reason God created the universe. This thought-provoking mate

Many prison writers have found their time in captivity a time to comprehend on some of the most serious questions of life, and have found it a time to free themselves from the daily mundane of lives. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the most celebrated Urdu poets has found his four years of incarceration as he himself accepted this in one of his interviews that 'going to jail was like falling in love again'. He in one of his famous prison poems writes:

What if my pen and paper have been snatched away?
I have dipped my fingers in the heart's blood,
What if my lips are sealed?
I've lent my tongue to each link in the chain. (Faiz)

Great Literary Works Written in Prison:

One of the landmark works in Prison literature, **The Pilgrim's Progress** narrates the journey of a Christian to a paradise called Celestial City, enduring various trials and tribulations. John Bunyan, a separatist preacher, wrote the epic tale while he was being imprisoned by the monarchy for public preaching. Bunyan conceived and composed the work during his 12 years behind the bars in Bedford Jail. He published the book in 1678 and it went on to be a huge success.

The pioneering fantasy author Michael Moorcock said that reading **The Pilgrim's Progress** when he was a child showed him an important truth, which is that a story should always have more than one meaning. Whilst the Christian allegory is inescapable and unmissable for adults, for younger readers Bunyan's book can read like an exciting fantastical adventure featuring more than its fair share of peril, drama, and creative invention.

But as the name of the central character, Christian, makes clear, as well as the names of the various figures whom Christian encounters over the course of the narrative, **The Pilgrim's Progress** is a deeply allegorical work about salvation and what the individual believer must undergo in order to attain it.

Those wanting to reach the Celestial City of Heaven when they die had better make sure they are not tempted by Mr Worldly Wiseman or the wares on offer at Vanity Fair, or that they don't succumb to the overwhelming power of the Slough of Despond (i.e., melancholy, or depression) or the darkest pit of despair (the dungeon in the Giant Despair's Doubting Castle).

And many of these features of *The Pilgrim's Progress* were inspired by the area that John Bunyan knew well, around the county of Bedfordshire in England, around 50 miles north of London. For instance, the Slough of Despond was modelled on the grey clay deposits around the model village of Stewartby. Similarly, Doubting Castle in the book is based on the real (though sadly now destroyed) Amptill Castle.

The Next landmark work in Prison literature, Our *Lady of the Flowers* (Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs) is the debut novel of French writer Jean Genet, first published in 1943. The free-flowing, poetic novel is a largely autobiographical account of a man's journey through the Parisian underworld. The characters are drawn after their real-life counterparts, who are mostly homosexuals living on the fringes of society.

The novel tells the story of Divine, a drag queen who, when the novel opens, has died of tuberculosis and been canonised as a result. The narrator tells us that the stories he is telling are mainly to amuse himself whilst he passes his sentence in prison – and the highly erotic, often explicitly sexual, stories are spun to assist his masturbation. Jean-Paul Sartre called it "the epic of masturbation".

Divine lives in an attic room overlooking Montmartre cemetery, which she shares with various lovers, the most important of whom is a pimp called Darling Daintyfoot. One day Darling brings home a young hoodlum and murderer, dubbed Our Lady of the Flowers. Our Lady is eventually arrested and tried, and executed. Death and ecstasy accompany the acts of every character, as Genet performs a transvaluation of all values, making betrayal the highest moral value, murder an act of virtue and sexual appeal.

Despite differences of personality, the three characters share, like their creator, a precarious existence, fully tied to the ever-lasting present of the here and now. They are heedless of the past and future and are totally indifferent to the bourgeois ethics of progress and development. Most important, they are free of all moral or ethical code, which turns them into mere surfaces devoid of all substance as the glassy imagery associated with them illustrates (the narrator frequently refers to glass, windows, mirrors, glaciers, ice when depicting the various characters). Stripped of morality, Divine, Daintyfoot, and Our Lady thus live entirely in the realm of the instinctual to which they show indefectible allegiance.

Through reverence of these characters—especially Daintyfoot and Our Lady—the narrator, implicitly Genet, gives vent to his “cult of the criminal,” murderer, and thief combined. From the novel's outset, he shows deep sympathy for his fallen heroes, Weidmann and Maurice Pilorge, two murderers guillotined young. To pay homage to their memory he has hung on the walls of his cell the newspaper photos of these and other criminals. The narrator even takes his reverence further by wanting to step into the shoes of his dead hero, Pilorge, who had killed his lover, Escudero, for a small sum of money. Like his ideal type, he wanted to kill in order to test his limits and defy fear and death: “I want to sing it plainly. Without pretending, for example, that I want to be redeemed through it, though I do yearn for redemption I would like to kill.”

Although at first appearances they may be considered generic types, these three characters are anything but one-dimensional or monolithic. They are extremely complex and ambiguous, and their instability and rootlessness make them ungraspable. Dainty foot, for instance, is described as both “violent” and “tender”; similarly, Divine is “fragile” and “delicate” and yet capable of callous, pitiless conduct. This ambiguity, which unsettles categorization and single definition, both reveals Genet’s love of paradox and indicates the novel’s overall impressionistic outlook.

The different space-time sequences (the country, prison, Paris) that the narrative encompasses constantly fuse and confuse. They superimpose and fade into one another, obscuring their distinctive outlines. Divine’s funeral scene, for example, described at the novel’s beginning, testifies to Genet’s impressionism. In this scene, the world of the living and that of the dead juxtapose and communicate with each other, the connection being suggested by Divine’s room overlooking the Montmartre cemetery. The room’s window is, in short, a threshold bringing together two antagonistic worlds. Similarly, the funeral procession exhibits disparate colours and contrastive shades, the combination of which brings side by side the sadness of death and joy of life: “In rain, this black cortege bespangled with multi-coloured faces and blended with the scent of flowers and rouge followed the hearse.”

Juxtaposition of opposites is a distinctive feature of *Our Lady of the Flowers*. The world in which Genet’s characters evolve is the realm of both delicate material (satin, silk) and of sharp, lethal objects like knives and guns. Tenderness and violence go hand in hand, as do beauty and vulgarity, the necessary and the superfluous. Divine’s room, for instance, concentrates nice objects and ugly ones: “The room descended till it blended with a luxurious apartment, adorned with gold, the walls hung with garnet—red velvet, the furniture heavy but toned down with red faille curtains. . . . The floor was covered with thick blue and violet carpets.” The disparate objects saturating Divine’s room reveal the latter’s (and humankind’s) dependence on possessions.

Through dramatization of overabundant, superfluous items, Genet denounces bourgeois society’s materialism, castigating people’s enslavement to money and property. In this he may be said to have honestly followed his critique of materialism to its ultimate conclusion, for he lived all his life without owning any property. He spent most of the money he earned supporting friends and lovers.

Women's Prison Writing:

The female inmate intends not just to escape prison's imposed isolation but to communicate some point about the unrelenting reality of her experience. Letters are the main form of communication used by women prisoners. They emphasize direct discussion of events, people, physical surroundings, and activities. Some women write autobiographies or prison memoirs to reach a wider audience. Some demonstrate the continuity of women's prison writing and their own awareness of a tradition in women's

prison literature. Women prisoners' attitudes toward other female inmates are not monolithic; there are two categories of prison writing classified according to attitudes toward other inmates: works written in a spirit of camaraderie and those written in a spirit of discomfort. Women prisoners are often able to construct a persona, or image of themselves, that they want to project to their audience. In this way, they can maintain some control over their world and regain some pride and sense of responsibility often lost in prison. Because women's prison writing is realistic, much can be learned from it about women and society in general. Excerpts from several works of women prisoners are included. A total of 25 references are supplied.

Indian Prison Literature :

Indian prison literature is the prison literature mainly written by Indians who were incarcerated in the Indian subcontinent. It provides a unique entry-point into the nature of punishments, and crime, and holds a mirror to the conditions of prisoners, reflecting on the intricacies of the functioning of jails and prison houses, features of law and legal systems in a particular time and place. Indian prison writing often traces the creative growth of the individuals, their personal moments of immense vulnerability, and sometimes even records their political views and ideas. In the subcontinent's literary history, this genre shows a diversity of form and content; it interrogates, in particular, the power structures of the given time period, and shows the human side of the prison experience. The narratives reveal the intersection between the personal and the political, and it is perhaps because of its inherent subversive potential, that the genre has regularly suffered from a distinct neglect of scholarship, and brutal censorship.

Prison narratives provided the prisoners a way of relating their trauma of confinement, enabling them to come to terms with the punishment, and consequent social ostracisation that they had to endure. The diverse prison writings from various epochs and regions of the subcontinent acts as an archive that provides an active commentary on legal systems, power relations, and the nature of authority that regulate such structures. They showcase how power relations have changed in the nation – from monarchy to a democratic republic through a phase of colonialism, and how with this change the legal systems, the understanding of crime and punishments have also undergone significant changes from the ancient to the modern era. Moreover, whilst looking at this genre from a gendered perspective, there is a distinct lacuna in the voices and records left by women prisoners, which discuss the nature of the female subject's relationships with power, crime and punishment in a society.[2]

Current trends in Prison Literature:

The highlights of prison writing in the Indian context, the discussion initially focuses on the historical development of Indian prison writings. The definition of prison writing and highlights how the genre of prison literature in India has evolved. An attempt will be made to arrive at an answer for why such a generic classification is required in the Indian context and its significance in the literary and

cultural history of India. The paper will further analyse the narrative elements used by different authors and how these elements have changed with the passage of time. Emphasis will be laid on how Indian prison narratives have mediated the rigid borders of life writing. The paper will then proceed to shed light on how Indian prison writing adheres to and deviates from the rules and characteristics of (auto) biography. The multimodal qualities of Ferreira's narrative will be clinically analysed and their significance will be highlighted. The paper will then proceed to study Shashi Warriar's *Hangman's Journal* and will go on to explicate how fiction is used in prison narratives. This attempt will eventually open up the discussion to wider politics relating to the literary tussle between autobiography and auto-fiction.

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