

Writing Freedom: The Art of Contesting Incarceration Oscar M. Maina

“The universe is not contested in the name of simple consummation, but in the name of the hopes and sufferings of those who inhabit it” (Sartre, 1946)

Introduction

Human existence and interaction is essentially characterized by a contest between individuals who at times have diametrically opposed social, political, and economic ideals. Due to the forceful nature of our idiosyncrasies, we always perceive our ideals infallible and hence as fit of being enforced on others. This attempt makes human interaction teeter precariously on the axis of dominance and the desire to overwhelm on one hand, and resistance on the other. Moreover, resistance is not realized in similar degrees in all individuals; there are those who are easily intimidated, while others have amazing levels of resilience and they would go to any length to defend their convictions.

This fact is also explained by the observation that in all of us there is a paradoxical collocation of two natural and almost instinctual desires; desire to dominate others, and the desire for self-defense and self-preservation against domination by others. This preservation goes beyond protection of the body to include even the preservation of self dignity and personality. However, in the context of overwhelming subjugation, denial, and dominance, the oppressed lack effective avenues through which a conventional defense for the self would be enacted. This scenario is particularly witnessed in the context of imprisonment. In prison, the passage of time exposes the prisoner to vulnerability and a possible loss of self identity, which is made extremely painful by the severance of all meaningful human interactions.

But is the quest for self defense ceded in the face of denial, deprivation, and all these threats to a previously solid personal identity? To explore answers to this question, this article focuses on selected literature of the imprisoned, and pays attention to how freedom is preserved and contested even in incarceration. The article looks at the means and the processes through which imprisonment is negated as prisoners grapple with the rude denial of self worth and freedom, and the subsequent reassertion of the self. To be able to achieve this, this article particularly focuses on autobiographical prison literature by selected writers who include Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka, Dennis Brutus, Maina wa Kinyatti and others.

Prison and Poetic Self-alienation

Imprisonment as an institutionalized process punishes those who antagonize and threaten the established code of conduct. The main aim is to correct the perceived deviant and to make him/her more tolerable to the status quo. Correction is achieved through a three-pronged process of removal, denial, and the inculcation of fear. The prisoner is removed from the social, economic, and psychological cycle that hitherto defined his/her personality, and is placed under a restricted sphere characterized by limitation and denial

of fulfilling interactions. Imprisonment assumes that the denial of the power to define personal fulfillment deters the commission of acts that contravene conventional value systems.

But imprisonment has not always served the interest of the society outside the status quo. Throughout history, political imprisonment and unlawful custody have been used to muzzle dissenting voices. As a repressive tool, incarceration has been used to break the bodies, souls, and will of those that antagonize the status quo in political leadership. But since political agitation is not a socially criminal act, there lacks a corrective endeavor. The only “good” that can be achieved is the destruction of the political ideologue. But do these prisoners always have their bodies, souls, and will abused and broken? If not, what strategies do they employ in a bid to protect themselves from the affront presented by their incarceration?

This paper will focus on how the poetic act; the act of writing memoirs, diaries, and poems cushions the prisoner against self-degeneration. In many cases, political ideologues are members of the intellectual class and upon imprisonment, it is presumed that the intellectual is taken out of circulation. This prisoner’s social, psychological and intellectual worlds are inverted and replaced with a world created by the oppressor. As with conventional imprisonment, the ultimate goal is a forced re-socialization of the individual. The prisoner is forced to live within limited freedoms as provided by the incarcerator.

Any hope of defiance is therefore subject to the prisoner’s ability to redefine his/her own world in prison, and to reject the one being offered by the oppressor. This critical achievement is what ensures self-preservation in prison. New discoveries must be made as a means of alienating the self from pain and suffering. In many cases, the prisoner becomes more incisive, focused and heavily relies on instinct, exploration, adaptability and defiance. It is towards this end that the poetic mind and the poetic act become more critical, and ultimately act as functional tools that enhance the poet-prisoner’s alienation from complete incapacitation while under incarceration.

As a matter of fact, T.S. Eliot reinforces the observation that the poet must refrain from an emotional response to his incarceration if creativity is to thrive. Indeed, he asserts that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (184). This implies that the prisoner must alienate both his subjectivities and his quest for personal gratification. Alienation in this case does not imply denial, but it encompasses the creation of a psychological buffer between realities as presented by the gaoler and as perceived by the prisoner. These realities present a vivid exposition of the two forces that guide and dictate human nature and human interaction.

Human nature is essentially a forced union of creative and destructive forces. Within each one of us, there are manifestations of these diametric forces, albeit at varied degrees. This variation is solely responsible for what we become. Some of us are desperately egocentric while others are altruistic to a fault! It is this altruism that forces individuals to defy the

instincts for self preservation and expose themselves to draconian political forces. Conviction makes it possible for ideologues to deny themselves the pleasure of pursuing personal gratification, and the continued defiance of the status quo precipitates the denial of basic freedoms, culminating in imprisonment. The creative persona in the prisoner continues to create and with diminished freedoms, this aspect is best explained through writing.

But does imprisonment mark the end of an ideologue's quest for social, political, and economic justice? Definitely not! But through what means does the prisoner manage to outlive the menace of prison? To explore this question, this paper seeks to examine how the prisoner recreates a world which provides as much freedom as can be had. This is the world that is only possible if the imprisoned individual engages an internal mechanism through which the unfamiliar and the familiar swap places. Prison becomes the familiar world, and the prisoner recreates a new identity, which is informed by prison circumstances. New perceptions, realities, images, and even symbols are created and enacted as functional deterrents to the hope of freedom and self-determination.

The most interesting image is that of the oppressor as created by the poetic mind. It is functional for the poetic mind to define psychological relations that enhance the scuttling of the vulgarities that characterize oppression and subjugation. This strategy makes it easier for the prisoner to diminish the stature of the oppressive forces and agents. This also serves to alienate the prisoner (and the reader) by exposing the lessened human worth that is exhibited by the gaoler. Wole Soyinka (1972) lends credence to this fact when he observes that in attempting to negotiate for authority through punishment and ruthlessness, the oppressor produces the reverse effect. Instead of cowering at the display of might and power, the prisoner makes himself impervious to pain and despair by reminding himself: "This creature cannot really touch me. He cannot save me therefore he cannot destroy me. This creature is irrelevant, he is not real. I represent reality" (p. 100). Apprehending the incarcerator from this perspective not only affirms the prisoner's dignity and worth, but also enhances the nurturing of a liberating psychological disposition.

In essence the struggle is not physical for the prisoner obeys not the whims of the body, but the desire to preserve mental ability, which makes it possible to negate the limitations of imprisonment. The poet must, from the foregoing, assume a higher psychological and intellectual position. This is the only means through which the imprisoned poet can deconstruct the psychology of the oppressor, and in so doing abnegate the oppressor's powers and privileges. The oppressor is thus no longer in control as far as psychological relations are concerned. To some extent, the poet recreates, reorders, and redirects internal energies hitherto unexploited. Peasant cunning becomes to the prisoner a means of achieving a world of freedom to decide and to determine.

In denying the prisoner access to other human beings; in terms of physical, intellectual, and ideological interactions, the incarcerator hopes that the prisoner will resort to self degeneration and pity. These are the factors that can easily trigger gradual destruction of the mind, the body, and the soul of the prisoner, and which the political prisoner must

systematically deconstruct. Through a natural instinct, human beings summon even inexplicable reservoirs of creative means to sustain the self even when faced with mortal danger. With limited physical and intellectual freedoms, the prisoner needs to create a convincing reality around the world within the prison. Art and creativity in this case act as a means of keeping at bay the intended internal regurgitation of the mind. But this pursuit will be in vain unless conviction is built from within. This conviction ennobles the prisoners and makes it easy for them to focus on the inverted realities.

Deconstruction in the prisoner's sense involves a complete yet rationalized abnegation of the reality being offered by the oppressor. The oppressor intends to make the prisoner feel overwhelmed and surrounded by an aura of helplessness and resignation. But how does a prisoner package and present this defiance? Would it help if the prisoner were to put on a brave face intent on thrusting back, with equal obscene energies, the absence of decorum and sound judgment characteristic of the gaoler? Definitely not! The prisoner must retain an upper hand not only with regard to psychological relations, but also with regard to intellectual disposition and judgment. To achieve this end, the prisoner must employ deliberate misrepresentations of his actual circumstances. This would amount to the utilization of honest deceptions; masking the real and making the incarcerator see what is expected. But how different is masking from denial? Masking is functional to the prisoner in that it enhances the nurturing of a more incisive exploration of individual circumstances. The prisoner becomes more apprehensive and more critical of the responses and the signals sent by and received from the incarcerator.

Imprisonment is therefore, without doubt, a psychological contest. The incarcerator, at every turn must force the prisoner to drink from the cup of subjugation, an act that is vehemently opposed by the prisoner. This contest is well played out in the creation, rejection, and representation of realities; realities which as perceived by the prisoner and the incarcerator are diametrically opposed to each other. But the prisoner must remain superior to the gaoler. The most convenient way of achieving this is by reaching out to universal human ideals that the gaoler considerably lacks. One of these ideals is human tenderness – the ability to understand and to respond to human needs. As depicted in Dennis Brutus poem, "Somehow we survive", "somehow we survive/ and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither" (1973, p. 4). This citation brings to the forth the contest between the destructive and the creative human values. Prisoners derive a massive thrust from the understanding that they are better human beings as compared to their persecutors.

Inherent in a political prisoner's new reality is the realization that physical pain must be endured if the prisoner is to ultimately survive the season of imprisonment. But to endure this pain is not a mean task. The prisoner must suspend all quests for gratification, and close out any thoughts, hopes, and expectations of freedom. Under normal circumstances, we would expect the prisoner to obey the instinctual desire for freedom and self definition. But the prisoner realizes that an explicit yearning for freedom is yielding the self for execution, and creates means of masking and pushing away this desire. To the prisoner, this is the ultimate test. Deep within lies a desire for a world that

avails opportunities for self definition, but courage must be summoned to keep this desire a personal secret protected particularly from the incarcerator.

Human addiction to choice and satisfaction must be sacrificed at the altar of self-preservation. The human body, the epicenter of human yearning, is used as a bargaining chip. To the incarcerator, the prisoner's body is an opening to the prisoner's soul; a fact that the prisoner knows and acts upon. As presented in Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, the sacrifice of the body is part of the psychological strategy that leaves the incarcerator without a chip:

Rejoicing, I watch my body waste. I identify but do not prohibit the human satisfaction which comes from the pain and fear, the concern and incredulity in their eyes as the gaolers prowls round, on orders to report the slightest hint of weakening. Something in me, a glee I recognize as profoundly human laughs and condescends ... (1972, p. 254)

The prisoner is psychologically poised to outdo the incarcerator. The prisoner's success cannot be achieved unless there is stoic resignation to self-immolation. To the prisoner, death must be seen as just an incident in the long drawn struggle against oppression. In fact, Soyinka tells of his thoughts even after ten days of fasting; "gone was the fear that a life-urge might make me retreat at this moment. I held no direct thought of death, only a probable end of a course of action ... (1972, p. 255). Indeed, Soyinka starkly reminds us that "in any people that submit willingly to the 'daily humiliation of fear', the man dies" (1972, p. 15). Soyinka is of course not only referring to physical death, but also the death of the soul; the loss of self-worth and dignity, and the sense of helplessness resulting from timid submission to illicit power and authority.

It is pleasurable to the brave soul to endure suffering and to sacrifice for ultimate freedom. Towards this end, part of the energy is derived from the poetic deconstruction of who the gaoler is. Poetry re-energizes the mind and enhances an objective apprehension of the circumstances determinant of the prisoner's world, and as Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us, "to name a phenomenon is to demystify it and to take away its innocence" (as cited in Travers, 2001, p. 268). Writing is therefore not only a means of coming to terms with the actual reality of pain and suffering, but also an act that takes away emotions of self-pity and helplessness. Art is used as a strategy through which the prisoner actualizes his ideals. In a sense, the act of writing avails to the prisoner an opportunity to interrogate not only his circumstances, but also the historical significance of these circumstances relative to actual reality informing his incarceration. In his prison memoirs, Ngugi wa Thiong'o creates an artistic persona who makes it easier for the imprisoned self to defy the limitations of space and time. This persona provides the poet with a detached objective lens through which Ngugi's personal suffering can be alienated, and thus the intended degeneration of the prisoner's mind and soul kept at bay.

Ngugi traces the history of oppression, intimidation, and other expressions of denial right from the colonial to the post independence Kenya. Oppression is portrayed as a tool that is used to defeat the voice of dissent amongst the oppressed, particularly targeting those

personalities who stand up and voice their resistance. This historical reminiscence, also found in Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1972), is functional to the poet. It is a means of slotting his personal suffering into a continuum and a context, and therefore meaningfully draws from the resource of courage possessed of those who preceded him. In Ngugi's memoirs, he recounts of the great African heroes who dared to resist colonial oppression. He glorifies their efforts and in a way puts them on a pedestal from where he imbibes the courage that nourishes his soul and makes his resolve stronger. Also, these historical recounts help the prisoner see his predicament as a historical intertext involving the colonial and the post-independent governance.

For instance, Ngugi (1981) perceives post-independence political oppression as a trait inherited from the colonial settlers. The continued persecution and detention of fellow humans results from insecurity and ineptitude, as evident in this excerpt:

True to their colonial cultural inheritance, they were mortally scared of peasants and workers who showed no fear in their eyes; workers and peasants who showed no submissiveness in their bearing; workers and peasants who proclaimed their history with unashamed pride and who denounced its betrayal with courage. (p.71)

To Ngugi, his is not an individual struggle; it is a struggle with an anti-colonial genesis and it represents the struggle of the oppressed masses as they seek historical justice. It is for this reason that the prisoner must resist individual aspirations for freedom, and instead rededicate the self to the expression of the aspirations of the masses. Writing from prison is in this perspective an act of defiance; a means of defying the incarcerator's attempt at breaking the prisoner's body, soul, and mind, and as Ngugi explicitly observes, "the defiance of this bestial purpose always charged me with new energy and determination" (1981, p. 10). Art in this way is a liberating tool and it enhances the prisoner's contestation of his imprisonment.

With the prisoner's continued resistance, the gaoler seeks more punitive means of isolating the prisoner. These include systematic deny of human interaction, and most prominently the denial of interaction with close family members and friends. From the incarcerator's perspective, this is meant to heighten the prisoner's anxiety and thus subdue the spirit of defiance. But the prisoner learns to derive fulfillment from the rare yet meaningful letters sent from and to the prisoner. The letters in many cases provide the prisoner with an opportunity to reinvent his social interaction, and also to reaffirm his commitment to his struggle. When cheated out of the last laugh, the incarcerator attempts to sever this link. In fact, Maina wa Kinyatti laments thus in a letter sent from detention, "if this contact is cut, if I don't write, I will break, I will run mad. Writing helps to keep me sane between these walls" (2006, p.61). But how does the prisoner manage to smuggle this sustaining communication of information to and from prison amidst the gaoler's hawk-eyed censorship?

True to Ngugi's observation, the deprived masses are not concretely contained by fear and submission. Inside the prisons exist men and women of conviction who "remind one

continuously that the mindless ones are neither the total sum nor the true face of humanity” (Soyinka, 1972, p. 104). The prisoner owes some of the most fulfilling and sustaining moments to some warders who despite being part of an oppressive system have not betrayed their moral conviction. These warders do function to facilitate the rededication of the prisoner’s energies for they are always a reminder of the worth of the prisoner. They are a source of encouragement, motivation, and most importantly they expose the contradictory nature of the oppressive political system. Such exposure emboldens the prisoner for it is perceived as a vilification of the evil of injustice, and a stimulus to capture and preserve the acts of justice resulting from these meaningful interactions.

Inventiveness and the Creative Stimulus

Imprisonment has in general been perceived as a time when the prisoner’s ability to desire self motivation and determination is drastically curtailed. And as one study opines, “although the general level of intelligence is not affected, people find it difficult to work out the solutions to tasks that they have to do” (Cooke, Baldwin, & Howison, 1990, p. 58). However, contrary to this opinion, imprisonment does not always hinder creativity and inventiveness. Stimulation is sometimes the express result of incarceration, as the prisoners invents means and ways of countering the limitations of the prison environment. There is a marked increase in the concentration of psychological energies that have been hitherto unexplored. A case in point is in Wole Soyinka’s narrative as he picks a doctor’s pocket for a pen, “. . . I leant forward into him, plucked out the pen as his left breast turned past me. I palmed it, then placed my palm flat on the table, the pen ensconced inside it (1972, p. 194). As evident, the prisoner creates and seizes opportunities that present themselves as a means of facilitating the accomplishment of the self imposed task of writing.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s account is even more forthright on how writing makes it easier to grapple with the adversity of imprisonment as exemplified in this part of his narrative: “writing this novel has been a daily, almost hourly, assertion of my will to remain human and free . . .” (1981, p. 6). It is not in doubt, therefore, that the ideological prisoner reverses denial and from it creates a means of engaging the dialectics of incarceration, yielding to him enormous stimulus and motivation to write and express the creative instinct.

But the prisoner not only creates artistic impressions, but also engages art as a means of inquiring into the essence of the changing tides in life. This therefore distinguishes two distinctive forms of writing; prison poems and prison memoirs. On one hand, prison poems are express thoughts as incited by the prisoner’s experiences. In most cases, prisoners concretely capture their emotions and responses through these poems. For instance, Saga McOdongo (2008) constantly records her most painful moments through a series of poems conceived after witnessing or experiencing most dehumanizing acts of violence in prison, as in this excerpt:

They grasped her neck and hit her hard.
Blows and kicks they rained on her.

The unusual but common loud crying rent the air.
 Rudely interrupting the peace of the morning.
 Her lonely voice cried pitifully aloud.

.....
 Until at last she refused to feel the pain of the whip. (p.58)

In capturing such a violent scene, the prisoner's inspiration attempts to achieve two objectives; first, the prisoner attempts a therapeutic purgation of anger and helplessness, and secondly, these poems serve as a form of protest against such human degradation. These poems are therapeutic in that they function to unburden the prisoners' mind for they are artistic psychological gateways for letting out painful events. Also, since the prisoners lack effective avenues to protest dehumanization, the poem provides an alternative means of protest. It is also noteworthy that prisoners also subjectively select incidences to be recounted. This means that particular events hold significance as far as the contest between prisoners and the gaoler. For instance, all incidences that illustrate defiance or even the defeat of the gaoler are celebrated, as illustrated in McOdongo's poem where the prisoner "refuses to feel the pain of the whip."

In the memoirs of Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, prison poems are not merely used to achieve these two basic functions. The poet-prisoner uses the poems as a dialectical form of heightening personal reassurance in the face of uncertainty. Reassurance also emanates from the intertextual assessment of self with reference to other poets and other ideological prisoners. This trajectory is similarly evident in the prison poetry by Dennis Brutus. In *Letters to Martha*, as in the poem "After the sentence", the prisoner finds himself in a whirlpool of emotions:

exultation
 the sense of challenge,
 of confrontation,
 vague heroism
 mixed with self-pity
 and tempered by the knowledge of those
 who endure much more
 and endure . . . (1973, p. 54)

To the prisoner, the knowledge that such suffering is and has been shared with others makes subtle the pain of denial, and consequently acts as a redeeming and assuring reference. The poetic thought is therefore not only meant for others, but also for the self. In this way, the poetic persona diminishes the ill effects of his experiences, and challenges himself to live up to the confrontation that must start with the purgation of personal emotions best expressed through poetry.

As a means of recreating and reordering the circumstances surrounding the prisoner, poetry helps the prisoner shift through his emotions and focus on those that accord him a means of self transference. The prisoner recognizes that survival and sustenance are the

most immediate needs that must be met. It is to fulfill these needs that the prisoner summons the poetic muse. But even as we celebrate these texts that are written in prison, we must appreciate that this literature is produced in extremely challenging circumstances. There are limited facilities, limited peace of mind, and even limited inspiring moments. But one thing must have made it possible for these writers to have the determination to pen their experiences and thoughts; courage in the recognition of the functional nature of art. This courage results from the desire to share and preserve the significance of even the most horrid experiences.

Conclusion

It is evident that art provides a means of coping with the traumatizing effects of detention and incarceration. Creativity enhances the buttressing of the inner self, making it easier for the jailed poet to outlive the period and the brutalities of imprisonment. Creativity replaces debilitating thoughts of pity, betrayal, anger, and revenge. To the ideological prisoner, the ability to substitute such thoughts and feelings is a *sine qua non* condition for ultimate preservation, and also as a means of cheating the gaoler of that all important last laugh. Instead of taking away the stimulus to create, imprisonment enhances and steels the resolve to defy the sense of restriction.

The prisoner, with a sharper sense of self and with a focused and urgent need to assert himself, seizes writing as a concrete means to preserve his threatened ideological orientation. Writing becomes a means of preserving a deeper sense of psychological and intellectual freedom, even as the prisoner's spatial freedom is restricted. The act of writing therefore becomes a strategic expression of the prisoner's sense of freedom, and an assertion of hope even at a time of suffering. But as it emerges from our discussion, imprisonment is a debilitating experience which would be even harder to contest were it not for the therapeutic artistic resources prisoners avail to themselves. This is a process that involves the scuttling of urgent human needs, expectations, and desires. It is a process that can be only be achieved when simple consummation is suspended and replaced with a more incisive apprehension of universal human ideals.

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