Chapter 4

Images: Writing imprisonment

Don't tell me about the valley of the shadow of death. I live there.

--Mumia Abu-Jamal

Many nights I lie here in my bunk and let my mind, my dreams, flow free, conjuring up a future I may never see. Certainly I pray my long journey doesn't end behind prison bars. I know it will not.

-- Leonard Peltier, Prison Writings

Captivity equates to loneliness and deprivation. One need not be in solitary confinement to be lonely. Even amid the overpopulated prison house an inmate could feel lonely, far from where he/she actually belongs. To deprive a person of the natural liberty that he/she enjoys by virtue of being born to this world and to administer corrective measures (through labour and didactic exercises) whereby it is attempted to erase the criminality in the person, has been the long pronounced intention of the carceral system ever since it was introduced. Modern prisons are depicted to be miles away, from these original intentions, in what is written by the prisoners. The theoretical problematic of the prison system that was dealt with in the previous chapters is best echoed in the writings from prisons. Writing, for prisoners, is manifested in different ways; for some it is the conscious effort to publicise the conditions in prisons, while for some others it is the only way to transform
their loneliness into productivity. One encounters both these types of writings while searching for prison literature. These two styles are perhaps the most prominent classifying points of prison writings. There is yet another more distanced writing, wherein the prisoner continues to do what he/she had been doing before imprisonment, thereby resisting the death of the intellect which the prison sometimes is intended or expected to effect. Broadly speaking, prison writings can be classified into these three categories. Within these classifications, one encounters different writing styles as well: poetry, fiction, memoirs, dairies, chronicles, letters, and theoretical discourse. All these writing styles can be identified in the wide area of prison literature. Prison writing, or to be specific writing in captivity, has a history that is centuries older than the modern prison. And this precisely is a major problem that any attempt to analyse carceral narratives faces. From as early as the 6th century AD to the present day prison constitute a major portion of literature around the world. The vast amount of literature that have been written during this long period of history, which continues up until the present day, can seldom be brought under the focus of a study with a limited scope, like the present one. Instead, what is attempted here is to bring to light the general concerns shared by prison writers through the analysis of select works.

A similar case can be observed with the portrayal of prison in films. A search on the internet with the key words "prison film" would retrieve tens of thousands of pages. On webpage in particular www.prisonmovies.net dedicates itself to publishing information on the portrayal of prison in movies. The site even contains a list of 300 best prison movies of all time, selected
from across the world. The depiction of prison in movies have also become
the subject for several studies. These especially relate to Hollywood movies.

Documentaries that describe the "actual" situation of prisons have also come
out in vast numbers. National Geographic and similar channels have even
produced series of programs based on prison conditions. Such quantity is a
challenge as well. Documentaries, television series and movies all represent
prison in different levels. Visual representation of prison is not a focus area of
the present study, as it contains enough material to be taken up as a multi-
volume analysis. Writings in itself amount to such large numbers, and to
meet this challenge or rather overcome it a selection of writings is made
across historical periods and geographic regions to equip a better
understanding of how prison is represented in writings, and also how prison
becomes the backdrop or workshop for more significant forms of writings.

From poetry to philosophy: Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*

*The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines philosophy thus,
"the study of the nature and meaning of the universe and of human life."

Although philosophical discourse has taken different routes in the most
recent times the fundamental idea of philosophy hasn't changed much.
Philosophising demands tranquillity and perhaps this is what Boethius, the
sixth-century philosopher, found in prison. Boethius "has long been
recognized as one of the most important intermediaries between ancient
philosophy and the Latin Middle Ages" ("Anicius") and his *The Consolation of
Philosophy* has been hailed "for making philosophical ideas dramatic and
accessible to a wider public" ("Anicius"). This work, it so happens, was written while Boethius was incarcerated. He was a high ranking official in Rome before getting into some sort of uneasiness with the power centres and was accused of treason and conspiring with the Byzantine emperor. Boethius was then imprisonment for a period of one or two years in Pavia before being executed. It was during this time that he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

Boethius begins his work with the invocation of muses which characterises the beginning of any epic poetry. The author complains about his sorrow to the muse and asks her to pour down to his pen so that he can get peace of mind. The lines are highly meditative for the opening of a work and expresses the mood of the writer who is composing the work in captivity. He addresses a complaint to the Muse thus:

Who wrought my studious numbers
Smoothly once in happier days,
Now perforce in tears and sadness
Learn a mournful strain to raise.
Lo, the Muses, grief-dishevelled,
Guide my pen and voice my woe;
Down their cheeks unfeigned the tear drops
To my sad complainings flow! (Boethius 1)

Boethius begins the treatise as a poem, or rather what he intended to write was a poem lamenting his sorrow. It turns out to be something entirely different. Here a function that poetic creation plays in dealing with the hardships of imprisonment, in expressing the horrors of life and in providing
mental and intellectual relief to the person in lonely distress is clearly reflected. The short invocation continues to give credit to the power of poetry:

These alone in danger's hour
Faithful found, have dared attend
On the footsteps of the exile
To his lonely journey's end.
These that were the pride and pleasure
Of my youth and high estate
Still remain the only solace
Of the old man's mournful fate. (Boethius 1)

Boethius confirms here that it was only poetry that gave him peace at the time of pain. Prison writing in general has been observed elsewhere to reflect "the psychological pathology, induced by confinement" (Vurren 43). This observation comes true in the case of Boethius's invocation. The author/poet not only laments on the condition that he is, but also underlines the changes that confinement has brought forth in him:

Old? Ah yes; swift, ere I knew it,
By these sorrows on me pressed
Age hath come; lo,
Grief hath bid me
Wear the garb that fits her best.
O'er my head untimely sprinkled
These white hairs my woes proclaim,
And the skin hangs loose and shrivelled
On this sorrow-shrunken frame. (Boethius 1)

Here poetry serves the purpose of both upholding his spirit and reflecting on the condition in which he is in. On reminding himself that the white hairs that he has got are, but untimely, signs of him getting old (Boethius was hardly
fifty when he was executed) the poet/author is pointing his fingers to the damage that incarceration has the ability to inflict on any person. Although Boethius was imprisoned not in a modern day prison environment, the trauma that he experienced and the physical changes that he underwent is reflected to be somewhat similar to what occurs to an inmate in the contemporary prison. This is what makes Boethius's philosophical writing important in the context of prison literature. The invocation that Boethius makes is a "sorrowful complaining" for him. Whereas, the poet/author does not write an epic on his condition in confinement, the short invocation serves the purpose of projecting the hardship through which he passes with utmost clarity. After this short tryst with poetic musing, Boethius enters into his real intention:

While I was thus mutely pondering within myself, and recording my sorrowful complainings with my pen, it seemed to me that there appeared above my head a woman of a countenance exceeding venerable...Her right hand held a note-book; in her left she bore a staff. And when she saw the Muses of Poesie standing by my bedside, dictating the words of my lamentations, she was moved awhile to wrath, and her eyes flashed sternly. 'Who,' said she, 'has allowed yon play-acting wantons to approach this sick man—these who, so far from giving medicine to heal his malady, even feed it with sweet poison? These it is who kill the rich crop of reason with the barren thorns of passion, who accustom men's minds to disease, instead of setting them free. Now, were it some common man whom
your allurements were seducing, as is usually your way, I should be less indignant. On such a one I should not have spent my pains for naught. But this is one nurtured in the Eleatic and Academic philosophies. Nay, get ye gone, ye sirens, whose sweetness lasteth not; leave him for my muses to tend and heal!' At these words of upbraiding, the whole band, in deepened sadness, with downcast eyes, and blushes that confessed their shame, dolefully left the chamber. (Boethius 2)

The shift from poetry to philosophy is dramatic. When the poet laments his sorrows to himself there comes a lady who is highly venerable and seeing the Muses of Poetry by his side orders them out on the claim that you have no right to corrupt the rational mind of a person who has been deeply studying academic philosophy. This entry (of philosophy) and a subsequent exit (of poetry) reminds of one of the greatest controversial philosophical/political argument that to have ever occurred, Plato's Republic. Plato denounces poetry/poet from his ideal republic on the argument that it corrupts the rational mind and blocks it from seeing reality. Boethius had first hand experience with the works of Plato (and Aristotle), having translated some of them into Latin. So it couldn't have been a coincidence that Platonic ideal is reflected in Boethius. Since the exist of the Poetic Muses, Boethius continues to engage in a philosophic dialogue with the lady personifying Philosophy itself. The Consolation of Philosophy is written in a complex style, which Stanford Encyclopedia states to be causing "interpretative difficulties of a different order from the logical works or the theological treatises." The
style of writing "highly rhetorical prose is interspersed with verse passages" ("Ancius") is said to have been making it a challenging text to interpret. The content of the philosophical treatise is a consolation of the philosopher's self who laments over the sudden change of fortune that he is facing. As the last work of a philosopher before execution *The Consolation* marks Boethius's philosophical and literary testament. This is what is manifested in the complex style that the author seems not to have used elsewhere. The complexity of style can also be seen as the complexity of life, or that of governance, or imprisonment, or even the death that he is soon expecting. Although Boethius leaves his poetic intentions behinds and goes ahead with his philosophic elaborations, this endeavour is by and large conditioned by the linguistic specificities of poetry reflected in his style of writing.

Boethius's treatise is on the whole about happiness, it is a quest to find true happiness. Although there is no explicit reference being made anywhere in the text to any Christian doctrines, the underlying message of the text as whole has been the greatest influence on Christianity during the Middle Ages. In that sense, the work can be seen as a final statement that a prisoner philosopher makes consolidating the entire gamut of academic activity that he has been doing all through his life. Prison becomes a platform for this and death which is arriving soon becomes its stimulant. Thus Boethius can be regarded as the precursor to some of the contemporary prison writers in expressing what they ultimately want from life and want they want to leave for the posterity. Captivity here is not just a difficulty that makes the writer depressed, but it is an agent that provokes him to create and
thereby sense himself out of the peril in which he has been put. Such deep concerns can be identified in other prison writers as well, yet Boethius holds a unique position in being the harbinger of all such endeavours.

**Politics from prison: Gramsci's prison writings**

One of the most widely circulated prison writings, at least among the loyalists of the left, is that of Antonio Gramsci. His writings are comparable to Boethius in one level, in that he attempted to continue writing what he used to write before being imprisoned. Gramsci did write something more than that, in the form of letters in which he makes reflections in his self, life and the hardship he faced in prison. Although the *Prison Notebooks* gained immense popularity among the intelligentsia, it was through his letters that Gramsci gained popularity among the general public, which makes them unavoidable in analysing the author's prison writings.

In Gramsci's interpretation, Marxism is seen as, "an autonomous, comprehensive and totalising conception of the world capable of interpreting the social totality with the aim of progressively transforming it" (Rodriguez 8).

Gramsci's prison life is conditioned by two realms of isolation; one from his family and the other from his political activism. Both these isolations could be seen reflected in the writings in two different ways. In the "Introduction" to *Letters from Prison*, Frank Rosengarten mentions the value of Gramsci's letters in expressing the conditions of imprisonment that he went through. He says:
As the expression of a man violently removed from the arena of political struggle in which he had been actively engaged since his teenage years in Sardinia in the first decades of this century, Gramsci's *Letters from Prison* are an excellent source of insight into both the physical and psychological problems of prison life. (2)

The fight with illness, fear of death, prison rules that erase the individuality of the prisoners are all reflected in Gramsci's letters. The letters express the need for communication with the outside world that Gramsci feels and paint a personal portrait of a man known only as a great Marxist intellectual. The intimacy of these letters to the personality of Gramsci is what makes them all the more important in understanding the individual called Antonio Gramsci.

As Rosengarten says the letters "are an invaluable connecting thread joining Gramsci the thinker with Gramsci the human being. Through them, the reader can see how a man in prison reviews and reconstructs his life, tries to define his primary relationships, and struggles to maintain his sense of identity" (2). This doesn't mean that the letters hold a position isolated from the political writings that Gramsci undertook in prison. In fact, these letters serve to delineate the origin and development of Gramsci's intellectual writings. Gramsci's theory of hegemony, his reading of Dante, the way on which he related culture and theory, his reflections on the inseparable nature of theory and praxis are all expressed in some of the letters. All these from part of the political/theoretical writings in the *Prison Notebooks* as well. Gramsci's development as an intellectual conditioned by the experiences of childhood can clearly be understood from these letters.
The isolation that Gramsci feels from family and the pain that it inflicts in Gramsci is seen in the deep concern that he shows in some of his letters. The way he ends the first letter that he writes to his wife after being imprisoned clarifies how concerned he is about his family and children:

My dearest, I do not want to trouble you in anyway: I'm a bot tired because I sleep very little and so I cannot write everything that I would like to. I want to make you feel deeply all my love and trust. Embrace all of your family; I hug you and the children with the greatest tenderness. (Gramsci, Letters 37)

Here Gramsci is an ordinary human being, concerned about his family and expressing his helplessness at not being able to write all that he wants to because of being tired. It could be the prison conditions that made him sleep less, or it could even be the fact that he is engaged in his political writings until late in the night. Elsewhere in the same letter Gramsci says "I want to see Delio again and to see Giuliano" (36). Gramsci had spent some time with his elder son before returning to Italy, but had not seen his younger son even once; which he didn't at all. In yet another letter addressed to his mother (dated November 20, 1926) a different aspect of Gramsci’s persona is revealed. He writes:

I've thought about you a great deal during these days. I've thought about the new sorrow that I was going to cause you at your age and after all the suffering you've endured. You must be strong, despite everything, as I am strong an you must forgive me with all the tenderness of your immense love and goodness….I'm tranquil and
serene. Morally I was prepared for everything. Physically too I will try
to overcome the difficulties that may await me and to keep my
balance. You know my character and you know that at the bottom of it
there is always a quantum of cheerful humour: this will help me live.

(Letters 37)

Here Gramsci is trying to at once ask forgiveness from his mother for the
hardship that he caused her and also giving her the confidence and strength
to live on by telling her that he will live on with the help of his humour. There
is no dialectics here, no hegemony but simple serene affection that a man
has towards his mother. Later in the same letter Gramsci tells his mother that
he doesn't have the strength to continue as he is tired of not sleeping. Here it
is somewhat clear that he doesn't sleep because he is preoccupied with so
many things. His words, "I've written other letters, I've thought about many
things," (38) echoes how engaged he was in the prison cell. Further on he
laments over the fact that he was not "as affectionate and good toward all of
you as I should have been and as all of you deserved" (38). The self-
reflective mood to which prison transforms a person is visualised in these
words of Gramsci. But then Gramsci was not just self-reflective in emotional
matters as evident from these letters, on the other hand he was more
occupied with writing the ideological elaborations which constitute the
interpretation of Marxism that Gramsci is credited with. These letters could
be seen as welcome breaks amid tiresome schedule of theoretical exercise
that he has been doing day and night.
Gramsci was not just communicating with his family members, but he was attempting to fulfill his other responsibilities as well. In the letter dated November 30, 1926, he writes:

I've been in Palermo (in jail) for three days now. I left Rome on the morning of the twenty-fifth for Naples where I stayed for a few days and was devoured by insects. In a few days I will leave for the island of Ustica, to which I have been assigned for my *confino*. During my journey I was unable to send back the keys to the house: as soon as I arrive at Ustica I will forward them immediately and I'll send you the precise address and instructions for sending me or having sent to me the things that I'll be able to keep here and that may be useful to me.

My health is fairly good: I'm a bit tired, that's all. (*Letters 38*)

This is a letter addressed to Clara Passarge, Gramsci landlady in Rome. The concern that he could not return the keys and the pre-request to send him a few useful things (which he says he will mention in the next letter) exhibit the responsible nature of Gramsci as a tenant and the healthy relationship he shares with his landlady. Gramsci is careful enough to have thought of things that he would find useful in prison, which underlines that imprisonment has not taken its toll on him (it's only a few days into it after all). Another interesting aspect of Gramsci's character could be seen in a letter that he wrote to Tatiana, his sister-in-law and long-standing aid who continued to help him through his days in prison and until his death, in which he describes the long journey he took to Ustica. He writes:
The journey, aside from the special conditions under which it took place – as you can understand, it is not very comfortable, even for a robust man, to travel for hour after hour on local trains and boat in handcuffs that are ties in turn to a chain that attaches you to the wrists of your travel companions – was very interesting and rich in the most varied motifs, running from the Shakespearian to farcical. (Letters 39) He goes on to compare a particular juncture of this journey to the gravedigger’s scene in *Hamlet* and that despite all the hardships he endured during the journey, he has gained weight. Gramsci’s humour, of which speaks in the letter to his mother, is epitomised in these words and so is his deep understanding of literature. He makes literary allusions elsewhere, especially in his letters to Tatiana, about Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as well. The unusual length of Gramsci's letters to Tatiana illustrates how close she was to him, taking good care of him in the absence of her sister. In fact, it was Tatiana who collected the letters and arranged for its publication after Gramsci's death. The letters that Gramsci wrote in prison served the purpose of giving himself a feeling of being amid his friends and relatives. This was a crucial relaxation in the lonely atmosphere of his imprisonment. But the more valuable contribution that these letters made was to keep Gramsci's intellectual spirit alive which resulted in the production of what would determine the position of Gramsci among the greatest of Marxist scholars of twentieth century: *The Prison Notebooks*.

Gramsci's ideology, it can be argued, developed in incarceration. The series of physical and mental hardships that he went through could not only
kill his intellectual vigour but it served, on the contrary, only to strengthen it further. That is what the 33 notebooks that were smuggled from the supervised hospital, in which Gramsci spent his final days, by Tatiana testify. Steve Jones has the following take on the significance of the notebooks:

These *Prison Notebooks* are a fragmentary, incomplete record of Gramsci's mental efforts over a decade, written under the watchful eye of the prison censor, and reassembled years later by editors and translators. Yet despite the conditions of their production and publication, what makes the *Notebooks* among the most important and moving documents of the twentieth century is precisely their immediacy, their sense of not being disinterested but of transcending the confines of prison, of reaching beyond the failure of socialism and the triumph of fascism, to understand a contemporary situation and to remake it. (25)

Gramsci spares no socio-political incident of his times from the purview of his writings; "intellectuals, language and linguistics, about literature and folklore, the Southern Question and the Risorgimento, about 'Americanism', 'Fordism' and most insistently hegemony" (Jones 25) are all subjected to rigorous analysis to equip a better understanding of the operation of the centres of power in advanced capitalist countries. Gramsci's launch-pad is Marxism, which he never leaves out throughout his study. He develops Marxism by means of his own ideas of cultural hegemony and praxis without losing the theoretical grounding of the ideology. What is surprising about Gramsci's works is that it all happened in confinement, under severe health problems,
acute mental distress and constant surveillance. He very well knew that the ideology which he opposed vehemently is flourishing during the times. Yet, he did not lose his academic balance. His brain did not stop working. That was the main intention of Gramsci's imprisonment.

Charged with provoking class hatred and civil war, "At his trial in 1928, the official prosecutor ended his peroration with the famous demand to the judge: 'We must stop this brain working for twenty years!'" (Hoare xviii). And for twenty years it was that the judge sentenced Gramsci, although he served only seven years in prison and another two in supervised hospitals. What this sentence couldn't achieve was to lock up Gramsci's brain, which as mentioned earlier, went on to work with increased energy and precision. Gramsci's prison writings testify another failure of the prison system; its inability to transform the thought of the individual. It is precisely one of the main aspects that makes it an important concern for the present study. Not only could incarceration change Gramsci's attitudes, but it aggravated his political will making him formulate epoch making theoretical elaboration within the walls of confinement. Hence, Gramsci's writings, although more valuable than just prison writings, remain an integral part of captive writings to have appeared world over.

**From the Indian prison: Nehru and Aurobindo**

Indian prison has produced a vast amount of writings, especially during the freedom movement, to cover all of which would require a much larger canvas than that of the present study. Jawaharlal Nehru's writings
bear testimony to this. The three most important books by Nehru titled *The Discovery of India, Glimpses of World History* and *Toward Freedom* (a.k.a. *An Autobiography*) were all written in captivity. For Nehru the life in prison was, as Saul K. Padover writes in the "Introduction" to *Glimpses of World History*, "a postgraduate course in history, literature and philosophy." It was in prison, according to Padover, that Nehru "enriched and deepened his mind" (v). Nehru himself writes in the "Preface" to his *Autobiography* on why he chose to write it in prison. He says, "The primary object in writing these pages was to occupy myself with a definite task, so necessary in the long solitudes of jail life, as well as to review past events in India with which I had been connected to enable myself to think clearly about them" (Nehru *Toward Freedom* xiii). This is a general reason that is seen in almost all the writings from prison, to keep oneself occupied in the loneliness of prison life. Hence, Nehru's writings become part of the larger frame of captive writings without being restricted to just prison memoirs. Nehru's works occupy much larger territories of history, politics, geography and autobiography. Although this is so, as the author himself mentions, the works bear the traces of the distress through which he had been passing at the time of writing them. Yet *Toward Freedom* is also a journey through Indian history of the times, even though the author states that it was not his intention, by virtue of having passed through different phases of the freedom movement the autobiography naturally throws light on these.

Although Nehru felt the pains of being lonely, it could be understood that he never went through the hardship of incarceration faced by inmates in
the contemporary incarceration scenario. He was a political prisoner of high
esteam and some notes in the *Autobiography* gives the feeling that he had
been given the same level of dignity even within the prison. For instance,
Nehru recollects an incident that happened just before he was transferred
from Bareilly jail. As the author and another inmate were about to be
transferred to another jail the superintendent of police of Bareilly, who was
an Englishman, handed him a packet which contained old German
magazines. He told Nehru that he had specially ordered it from him on
learning that the author had been trying to learn German those days. This
incident leads the author to ponder about the relationship between Indians
and Englishmen, and what follows is a psychological meditation upon why
there is hatred between these two group of people. Nehru writes:

> During that long midnight drive I mused over the relations of
> Englishmen and Indians, of ruler and ruled, of official and nonofficial,
of those in authority and those who have to obey. What a great gulf
> divided the two races, and how they distrusted and disliked each
> other! But more than the distrust and the dislike was the ignorance of
each other, and, because of this, each side was a little afraid of the
> other and was constantly on its guard in the other's presence. To
each, the other appeared as a sour-looking, unamiable creature, and
> neither realized that there was decency and kindliness behind the
> mask. As the rulers of the land, with enormous patronage at their
> command, the English had attracted to themselves crowds of cringing
> place hunters and opportunists, and they judged of India from these
unsavoury specimens. The Indian saw the Englishman function only as an official with all the inhumanity of the machine and with all the passion of a vested interest trying to preserve itself- How different was the behaviour of a person acting as an individual and obeying his own impulses from his behaviour as an official or a unit in an army! (3)

Such a disposition is rare in the wake of the turbulent nature of the period in which Nehru wrote this. The freedom struggle was in full swing and in that context such philosophical and psychological elaboration on the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is seldom expected. This is the twist in Nehru's prison writing which gives it a unique position among the works penned in captivity. Although his mind was open for such academic exercise, Nehru did experience some typical misdemeanour of the colonial legal system. As R. R. Diwakar points out, "As an example of fantastic but brutal ways of law and order authorities in Indian States of those days, Jawaharlal's arrest at Jaito with another person may be cited. They were cuffed with each other and led by a common chain held by a constable." Given the fact that he was a freedom fighter hailing from the upper class this was not something which Nehru could have passed through easily. Yet such acts, instead of curbing the non-violent scholastic mind-set that he had, did only contribute to making it even stronger to such a level to have made him write the celebrated works in captivity. Here the horrors of legal authority can be seen acting on the submissive subject yet being unable to conquer the spirit of the subject. This is precisely why Nehru went to jail several times, spending
almost ten years in prison, after the above mentioned incident, which happened in 1920.

The author recollects that he had several companions in Naini prison and in Bareilly, and so the near solitary confinement (although not technically so) in Dehra Dun, which he had to undergo as his companions were released eight months prior to him, was a very difficult one for him. This, Nehru recalls, was a "dreary period" for him. Yet during this time too he had some unusual privileges which prisoners seldom had. Nehru writes:

As a special favour, I suppose, I was allowed to receive fresh flowers from outside and to keep a few photographs, and they cheered me greatly. Ordinarily, flowers and photographs are not permitted and on several occasions I have not been allowed to receive the flowers that had been sent for me. Attempts to brighten up the cells were not encouraged, and I remember a superintendent of a jail once objecting to the manner in which a companion of mine, whose cell was next to mine, had arranged his toilet articles. He was told that he must not make his cell look attractive and "luxurious." The articles of luxury were: a toothbrush, tooth paste, fountain-pen ink, a bottle of hair oil, a brush and comb, and perhaps one or two other little things. (6)

This shows how Nehru was a special prisoner who was allowed favours that were not allowed to others, which makes his imprisonment more like what the popular public attitude of Scandinavia reflects, to be confined in itself is punishment enough. It is from this premise that Nehru derives the vigour to
write his letters and memoirs, which went on to surpass these identities and become classics in history and literature. Nehru's writings do reflect the pains and horrors of being incarcerated and serve as important reference points to understand the prison environment during the British period in particular and the human mind's reaction to being imprisoned. This reaction has taken a strange turn at some moments, especially when Nehru has felt it as relieving him from the pressures of the outside world and giving him peace and tranquillity, which he himself has contradicted in several places in his writings. Given all that Nehru's writings form a quintessential part of literature to have been written in prison and integral documents in understanding the history of Indian freedom movement.

Another account of prison life in India spent at around the same time as Jawaharlal Nehru stands for an interesting comparison. The work in question is Sri Aurobindo's *Tales of Prison Life*. Imprisoned in May 1908 in relation to an explosion and charged with terrorist activities, Sri Aurobindo (then Aurobindo Ghose) was jailed in a solitary confinement at Alipore Jail before being acquitted and released in May 1909. The *Tales of Prison Life* recollects Aurobindo's experiences during this one year of incarceration in British India. This prison life was different, or it was differentiated by what the prisoner did. As Kate Millet says, "Inside this claustrophobic space, under conditions of appalling heat and thirst, Aurobindo was finding God" (Millet 196). Albeit being imprisoned for an alleged crime against the state, Aurobindo found meaning in his imprisonment on a unique level. Prison was, in fact, Aurobindo's "Bodhi tree" as exemplified by the "Uttarpara Speech"
which Aurobindo gave soon after his release and which shows traits of a yogi in the making.

Aurobindo's work opens with a very short description of the incident that lead to his imprisonment. He writes of being unaware of the fact that he had been the prime suspect in the case. Aurobindo writes:

I was not aware at the time that the prime suspect was none other than me and the Police investigation featured me as chief murderer as well as the initiator and secret leader of the young Nationalist revolutionaries. Nor did I know then that this day would mark the end of a chapter in my life, that there stretched before me a year's imprisonment during which period all bonds of a normal human life would be rent asunder and that for a whole year I would have to live outside human society, like a caged animal. And that my return to the field of action would not be as the old familiar Aurobindo Ghose but as a transformed being with a transformed character, a transformed intellect, a transformed life, a transformed mind, who would emerge from the Ashram at Alipore to continue the work on new lines. Though I have described it as imprisonment for a year, in effect it was a year's seclusion as in an ashram or hermitage. (Tales 1)

Shades of the change that Aurobindo underwent during his days in prison could well be read between these lines. Although it was more of a spiritual transformation that he underwent, Aurobindo doesn't fail to give a detailed account of the days spent in the prison cell. In the opening pages of the Tales Aurobindo compares the prison cell to a "yogashram" (hermitage)
which was given to him by his enemies and considers it more valuable than anything that his well-wishers had given him. This is the yogi Sri Aurobindo writing, of the making of that spiritual being within the confines of the four walls of a tiny prison cell. On being released from prison Aurobindo "quit politics, founded a religious movement, and began life again as a mystic" (Millet 197). Aurobindo Ghose's metamorphosis into Sri Aurobindo was through unbearable psychological struggle. It was against this odd that Aurobindo tried to meditate and reach to a higher state of mind. Aurobindo notes the following lines about his suffering in prison:

This essay was not meant to be a historical record of my inner life during imprisonment; I merely wished to describe some of the outer events. However I thought it fit to begin the essay with a mention of the real essence of the prison-experiences - lest readers mistake suffering as the summary of my prison-life. Although it cannot be said of suffering, that there was none, the period, on the whole, passed in self-existent bliss. (Tales 2)

Even though Aurobindo didn't want to write about his experience of being imprisoned, he ends up giving a clear picture of the days he spent in captivity. Aurobindo's life in captivity was almost entirely guided by his meditation, as revealed by the Tales. The solitary life and the feel of absolute loneliness, even amidst the footsteps of several people who used to pass through the stairs in front of his room at the lock-up where he was held before being transferred to Alipore Jail, that the author had was overcome by nothing other than meditation and prayers. Aurobindo writes, "During solitary
imprisonment the mind did become restless at first. But after three days of
day and meditation, an immobile peace and unshakable faith was again
established in the being" (Tales 13). It was this faith and peace that made
Aurobindo endure the hardships of prison life. Aurobindo was taken to
Alipore in May 1908 and was held in what he describes as the, "windowless
cage fronted by a large iron barred-door" (Aurobindo Tales 16). Aurobindo
writes that there was a courtyard in front of his cell, the door to which was
always kept open. He says that the door to the courtyard was kept closed for
those who were sentenced to be punished with a higher degree of solitary
confinement, for the closure of the door would mean the prisoner being
deprived of any human contact whatsoever. Hemchandra Das, who was with
Aurobindo, was given this severe form of punishment. Aurobindo promptly
notes that it was illegal for under-trial prisoners to be kept in solitary
confinement, but the fact that the crime of which he and his friends were
accused was of a special nature that it fell outside the purview of the law.
For them the law was more or less decided by the jail authorities. Aurobindo
strikes poetic perfection while describing some of the physical qualities of the
prison. For instance, when he mentions the two utensils that were provided
to him by the jail authorities, he says:

The impeccable standard of hospitality manifest in arrangements for
our accommodation, was maintained, by the generosity of the
authorities, in the matter of furnishings too. The bare courtyard was
adorned with a single plate and a single bowl. Once scoured with
suitable care, this representative sum of
my material possessions - the plate and the bowl - would shine ever-
so brightly that the silver-like lustre would simply melt one's heart; and
taking the faultless, glowing radiance as symbolic of the 'heaven-like'
perfection of the British Monarchy, I would savour the pure bliss of
loyalty to the Crown. (Aurobindo, Tales 18)

Here Aurobindo, the poet, plays a note of sarcasm yet in a very high degree
of linguistic ornamentation. He writes on these two physical possessions as
though it were some precious jewellery, but in describing so he is making a
clear ridicule of British incarceration system in general and its nuances in
particular. Aurobindo doesn't stop with the physical description of his plate
and bowl, he goes on to describe specific functions and attributes of each of
them in some detail. He recollects the fact that the plate has a slight problem
that it used to spin around on the ground with the slightest touch of the finger
and hence he was forced to hold it in one hand and use the other hand for
eating (a practice not uncommon today but, seems to be so during
Aurobindo's time). It is the bowl that he describes in a more hilarious fashion.
He compares it with a British civilian who possesses the "inborn skills and
capabilities for all professions" and hence could become "a judge or a
magistrate or a police officer or a revenue officer or a chairman of
municipality or a professor or a preacher at a moment's notice," (Aurbindo,
Tales 18). This could appear one of the strangest of analogies ever, yet
serves the purpose of depicting how crucial this small bowl had been for
Aurobindo the prisoner. In fact that was the only piece of vessel he had for
collecting liquid for whatever purpose and hence was for ablution, washing,
bathing, and also as a serving bowl at meal-time. Aurobindo makes a statement about the bowl that is very well-suited for the Indian condition, as well. He says, "The bowl bore no distinction of caste or creed," (Tales 20).

The description of the plate and bowl is a psychological exercise or, in case of Aurobindo, a meditative attempt to draw the picture of how lonely the solitary imprisonment had been. This problem that Aurobindo addresses indirectly and later on quite directly, is seen as the basic underlying factor that contributes to prisoners turning to writing. Aurobindo even goes on device a special and experience driven definition of solitary confinement. He says, "Solitary imprisonment is supposedly a special form of punishment, predicated on to the provision of human company and curtailment of freedom to breathe freely under the open skies, to the extent possible" (Tales 20).

Aurobindo goes on to describe the prison conditions in Alipore and explain how unhygienic and inhuman they were, with no proper cleaning and even basic facilities. He speaks of the summer time when the tiny prison cell would heat up and cause extreme discomfort for any human being. Although Aurobindo gives this a spiritual twist by noting that this made him realise the "joy of Mother Earth's embrace and her cooling touch" (Aurobindo, Tales 24) by attempting to cool himself off rolling on the ground. He even speaks of a small scale flooding that happens in his cell when there is heavy rain. At such times he had to keep himself awake the whole night due to the rain wetting his blanket and the floor. He recollects of having had to wait long, after the rain ceases, for the ground to dry up so that he could sleep again. Aurobindo clarifies the purpose of his writing further in the following way:
The description of the Alipore Government Hotel I have provided so far, and intend to provide in the future, is not meant to publicise my personal suffering; the objective was to bring to light the wondrous arrangements made for under-trial prisoners in the civilised British Raj, the prolonged agony that innocent people undergo as a consequence. (*Tales* 25)

Naming it a government hotel Aurobindo, it seems, is hammering nail after nail into the body of the criminal justice system of British India. He is being sarcastic not by accident but by choice, and that is exemplified in his own words. He says that he too had suffered the perils of the prison system but he overcame this with the help of "Divine Grace" (25). This grace, he says, had helped him transcend the sufferings and grow "incapable of feeling any hardship. This is why memories of prison life, when they resurface, evoke a smile instead of rancour or sorrow" (25). Aurobindo continues the mixing up of physical and metaphysical throughout the book. In fact it seems that the book in itself is an attempt to prove that physical hardships can best be overcome by spiritual consultation. This is precisely what Aurobindo did and continued to due ever since he left prison.

A notable shift of focus in Aurobindo's writing is when he talks of the prison staff. He writes:

There is a special need to mention the humane conduct of staff-members of the Prison administration and their kindness. I have been obliged to criticise earlier the arrangements made for us in prison, and shall continue to expose the inhuman cruelty of the British prison
system. But I have also described the qualities of the chief staff-members so that readers do not imagine this cruelty to be a reflection of any staff member's personal character. (Tales 43)

The observation of Aurobindo is not conditioned by any fanatic nationalistic sentiment and hence he doesn't fail to mention the good qualities of the officials who helped by supplying materials to read and who gave him company occasionally. He conditions all that recollects of the prison life with a stint of divinity and spiritual undertones, yet Aurobindo's prison memoirs offer a clear picture of how prison operated during the British Raj.

On comparing the writings of Nehru and Aurobindo what surfaces is the difference in the attitudes that these writers show towards imprisonment. While Nehru chose his prison days to endeavour on an intellectual meditation conditioned by the recollection of the cultural heritage of India, Aurobindo chose to attain the ultimate spiritual bliss aided by the solitary life in prison. Yet they both echo their takes on the British rule and the prison conditions during the Raj as clearly as they could in their writings. While Nehru's writings seems more of a narrative, that of Aurobindo tends to be on a descriptive level. Although they employ different literary styles, both the writers portray what it felt to be in a British prison in colonial India.

**Writing Apartheid: Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom***

South Africa is one nation that has attracted international attention for a long time due to the Apartheid regime and the resistance movement
against it. This political movement has seen a lot of people being incarcerated for unusually long terms. The most notable figure of this struggle Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned in Robben Island for 18 years has written elaborately about his days in prison. Mandela's prison writings have appeared in two different volumes, one his autobiography titled, *Long Walk to Freedom*, that details the development of the man and the other a selection of his letters, speeches et cetera, titled *Conversations With Myself*, which reflects a more personal lesser known side of Mandela. Only the autobiography is analysed in the present study.

Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* goes beyond being just a record of his experiences in prison and sketches a detailed account of his life, passing from his childhood through his emergence as a freedom fighter, his life in Robben Island and the freedom that came after a long 27 years. The Mandela seen in this autobiography is the human Nelson Mandela, rather than the mythical figure that he was transformed into, that is seen here. This is precisely a factor that makes the work crucial. The work was conceived and more than three fourth of it was written while Mandela was in Robben Island brings its to within the limits of the present study. Mandela opens his work with the memories of childhood, most notably his name and its meaning and the significance it has to the life that he lead. Mandela writes:

> Apart from life, a strong constitution, and an abiding connection to the Tembu royal house, the only thing my father bestowed upon me at birth was a name, Rolihlahla. In Xhosa, Rolihlahla literally means "pulling the branch of a tree," but its colloquial meaning more
accurately would be "troublemaker." I do not believe that names are destiny and that my father somehow divined my future, but in later years, friends and relatives would ascribe to my birth name the many storms I have both caused and weathered. (Ch.1)

Thus the "troubles" that Mandela made and those that he had are all, in a sense, embodied in his own name. In the following pages of his *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela gives a detailed account of not only his own struggle in being a citizen in his place of birth but also sketches the nuances of the historical phase through which South Africa was passing through during the time. He writes:

> The year of my birth marked the end of the Great War; the outbreak of an influenza epidemic that killed millions throughout the world; and the visit of a delegation of the African National Congress to the Versailles peace conference to voice the grievances of the African people in South Africa. (Ch.1)

Mandela gives a detailed description of his place of birth and his family. Mandela's father was the chief of Mvezo (Mandela's birth place) yet that chiefdom had a dimmed stature due to the white minority government that was in place. Mandela says, "Although the role of chief was a venerable and esteemed one, it had, even seventy-five years ago, become debased by the control of an unsympathetic white government" (Ch.1). Then he goes on to sketch the history of the Tembu tribe, of which he was a member. The initial pages of *Lon Walk* provides, in great detail, information on the background of
a freedom fighter, the reasons, the strengths, and the very foundations on
which the character of Nelson Mandela was built. Mandela writes, "I maintain
that nurture, rather than nature, is the primary moulder of personality, but my
father possessed a proud rebelliousness, a stubborn sense of fairness, that I
recognise in myself" (Ch.1). Mandela is tracing the roots of his own character
by offering glimpses from his father's life and character. In fact, the common
thread that runs through the work, the idea of attaining freedom, is seen at
work in all parts of it. The work is in fact a document not of struggle and
hardships but of freedom itself, with each page and each incident that is
mentioned underlining its importance in Mandela's life. He recollects each
and every event in his life that has a defining influence on it; his relationship
with his father, his father's death (which he says changed his whole life, his
life at the Great Place with the family of the chief of the Tembu people, his
coming of age at Johannesburg, the involvement in freedom struggle and his
long years of imprisonment are all written down to the detail by Mandela in
his Long Walk.

Mandela's writings offer philosophical insights into his life at several
points. For instance, while recalling his father's death he writes, "I do not
remember experiencing great grief so much as feeling cut adrift. Although my
mother was the centre of my existence, I defined myself through my father"
(Ch.3). The patriarchal order into which Mandela was born and the unique
relationship that he shared with his father are both echoed in these words.
He moves on to describe how his life changed after his father's death. After
he came to stay with the family of the Thembu chief at the Great Place,
Mandela found himself getting acquainted to a wider form of life. He was educated in western style institutions, yet developed a deep interest in ethnic culture and traditions. He fled to Johannesburg along with Justice, the Thembu chief's son, to avoid getting married. Having worked in several places and getting into contact with ANC activists, Mandela grew into a freedom fighter in his new city. About becoming a political activist Mandela has a different take:

I cannot pinpoint a moment when I became politicised, when I knew that I would spend my life in the liberation struggle. To be an African in South Africa means that one is politicised from the moment of one's birth, whether one acknowledges it or not. An African child is born in an Africans Only hospital, taken home in an Africans Only bus, lives in an Africans Only area, and attends Africans Only schools, if he attends school at all... I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments, produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, From henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise.

(Ch.11)

Mandela recounts the events that lead to his transformation into a full time freedom fighter. The friendship with Walter Sisulu, ANC meetings, the mineworkers' strike of 1946, the multi-ethnic friendships at university, and the
passing of Asiatic Land Tenure Act and the Indian community's struggle against it were all incidents that contributed to the making of the freedom fighter in Nelson Mandela. The freedom fighter in Mandela grew fast and became an important figure in the African National Congress. His was an important name in the one hundred forty-four people arrested through a well-planned move by the government, accusing all of high treason against the state in December 1956. The trial that followed, known as Treason Trial, went on till 1961. Mandela was among the thirty men who faced the trial till the end. Mandela and the other who were arrested were housed in the Johannesburg Prison for two weeks. The prison, Mandela says, "popularly known as the Fort," was "a bleak, castle like structure located on a hill in the heart of the city" (Ch.23). Mandela writes of the cruel treatment that they were subjected to in the Fort. He says:

> Upon admission we were taken to an outdoor quadrangle and ordered to strip completely and line up against the wall. We were forced to stand there for an hour, shivering in the breeze and feeling awkward – priests, professors, doctors, lawyers, business men, men of middle and old age, who were normally treated with deference and respect. (Ch. 23)

Mandela gives a picture of the prison cell in which he was put in the minimal words. What is striking is his philosophic statement that, "no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones," (Ch. 23). These occasional reflections elevates the Long Walk into sublimity. Mandela speaks
of the political and social space that the arrested leaders of the ANC constructed within the prison. Many of them were living under severe restrictions and were finding it difficult to meet each other before being imprisoned in the same cell. They organised programs daily; had political discussions, and lectures. They were rejuvenating themselves in the prison cells. Of one such interesting event Mandela writes in the Long Walk. Once there was a music lecture to which a Zulu prisoner contributed by singing a song in honour of the legendary Zulu warrior and king named Shaka. All people in the cell were entranced by this performance and soon all of them joined in the traditional Zulu dance which the recital lead to. Mandela writes:

Accomplished ballroom dancers, sluggards who knew neither traditional not Western dancing, all joined in the indlamu, the traditional Zulu war dance. Some moved gracefully, others resembled frozen mountaineers trying to shake off the cold, but all danced with enthusiasm and emotion. Suddenly there was no Xhosas or Zulus, no Indians or Africans, no rightists or leftists, no religious or political leaders; we were all nationalists and patriots bound together by a love of our common history, our culture, our country, and our people.

(Ch.23)

Thus the cultural/political unity of the South African freedom fighters is portrayed by Mandela. The unified admiration that the members of the ANC had towards the African cultural heritage is what made them dance and feel a sense of oneness in their struggle. Theirs was a fight to restore their lost pride, their tradition and their culture and if it were not the legends then what
else could have united them in this? The transformation of prison cell is noticeable in this case too, as in those mentioned earlier. Surpassing the original intention of bringing forth a sense of guilt among the imprisoned, the punishment cell is converted into a conference hall where political causes, cultural conviction and social unity is cemented strong. Mandela speaks at length of the Treason Trial, mixing it with the incidents that happened in his life during its course, including the marriage with Winnie. The preliminary trial ended in 1957 and the formal trial began in August 1958. By the end of the formal trial in March 1961, all those accused were found not guilty. Later on the struggle for freedom intensified and Mandela culminating in his arrest on 5 August 1962. He was serving a five-year term when other members of the ANC were arrested in July 1963 after which the infamous Rovonia Trail began. The trial went on for about an year after which in June 1964 Mandela, along with other leaders, were sentenced to life imprisonment. Mandela eventually spent 27 years in prison, 18 of which he was incarcerated in Robben Island. It was during the course of the Rivonia Trial that Mandela made is famous "I am prepared to die" speech, that inspired a number of people in the African nationalist movement. The days spent in Robben Island covers almost half of the Long Walk to Freedom, making it the longest step in the walk. The colonel who told Mandela that he would be shifted to another place from Pretoria jail, where he was imprisoned after the Rivonia Trial, uses words of freedom to talk of this transfer. Mandela quotes the colonel who says, "We are taking you to a place where you will have your freedom. You will be able to move around; you'll see the ocean and the sky, not just
grey walls" (Ch.59). Mandela says that the colonel did not intend any sarcasm when he uttered these words, yet he was sure that the place which he referred to would not offer him the freedom that he yearned for. While travelling to the new location in a police van, another officer tells Mandela and his fellow ANC leaders that they won’t be in prison for long as the demand for their release is too strong. These words are carefully recorded by Mandela in his book, perhaps with the intention of generating the feeling of the yearning for freedom that they had or anyone has while being imprisoned. Even while aboard the military plane Dakota, en route to Robben Island, Mandela’s mind was engaged in deep strategic thoughts as revealed by his hunt for a possible guerrilla hide-out among the landscape of the cape. He looked out through the pot-hole of the plane and found a forested area which he told his colleagues would best suit a hiding place from where they could fight.

The prison life at Robben Island is elaborated in several pages that constitute almost half of the entire book. All this began with the opening ritual that Mandela says is common when prisoners are transferred from one prison to the other. He writes:

One of the ritual indignities of prison life is that when you are transferred from one prison to another, the first thing that happens is that you change from the garb of the old prison to that of the new. When we were undressed, we were thrown the plain khaki uniforms of Robben Island. (Ch. 59)
The old jail, where they were initially imprisoned, was only a temporary arrangement for them. A whole new maximum-security facility was built for political prisoners later. Here they were "not permitted to go outside or have any contact with other prisoners" (Ch.59). Mandela and his fellow ANC prisoners were housed in section B of the new prison within the prison. At Robben Island Mandela was subjected to severe ill-treatment at the order of the Apartheid government. Mandela recalls the work in the prison as being, "tedious and difficult" yet dismissing it as "not strenuous enough to keep us warm" in the winter, but at the same time, "demanding enough to make all…muscles ache" (Ch.59). Robben Island was extremely racial in its make-up as Mandela mentions it. There were no black-guards and no white prisoners. Thus the governed-governing relationship which he had been facing outside was replicated in the prison as well. Life in Robben Island was felt by Mandela as being in a world apart. He recalls the isolation of the island, "made it not simply another prison, but a world of its own, far removed from the we had come from…we were face to face with the realisation that our life would be unredeemably grim" (Ch. 59).

Island days slowly saw Mandela and his colleagues settling down to the routine of prison life. He has a interesting take on prison routine:

Within a few months, our life settled into a pattern. Prison life is about routine: each day like the one before; each week like the one before it, so that the months and years blend into each other. Anything that departs from this pattern upsets the authorities, for routine is the sign of a well-run prison. Routine is also comforting for the prisoner, which
is why is can be a trap. Routine can be a pleasant mistress whom it is hard to resist, for routine makes the time go faster. (Ch.60)

Mandela's poetic lines on prison routine sketches the boredom and the significance of it into another level. Since routine blockades one from having a sense of time it is seen as a trap. Mandela warns, "Losing a sense of time is an easy way to lose one's grip and even one's sanity" (Ch. 60). The perils of prison life in general is embossed into Mandela's memoirs. When he writes of time slowing down in prison, it refers not only to Robben Island but to all prisons of the world. At imprisonment, people are reduced to having minimal existence which slows things down. Yet Mandela's spirit which drove him to freedom never ceased even for a moment even while incarcerated. He was guided by the same spirit which he has before he reached the Island. And he rightly identified his challenge, as echoed from his own words, "how to survive prison intact, how to emerge from prison undiminished, how to conserve and even replenish one's beliefs" (Ch.60). This was indeed what he achieved when he came out of prison after 27 long years. Although he spent such a long sentence, Mandela emerged as the same committed political activist that he was at the time of being arrested. And it was this sustenance that lead him to his presidency and subsequent elevation into an international icon.

Mandela's prison writings yet again testify the incapacity of imprisonment to mute the political convictions that an individual has. Prison doesn't act as a culler of what the punishers call misdemeanour and prisoners leave the prison without having achieved the change that was
intended to have happened in them at the time of being sentenced.

Mandela's life in prison was one of long endurance and he overcame those long years with uncompromising spirit. And when he came out it was truly into the freedom to which he walked from the day of his birth.