MOTIF BEHIND PRISON WRITING
CHAPTER –II
MOTIF BEHIND PRISON WRITING

Prison literature is a literary genre characterized by literature that is written while the author is confined in a location against his will, such as prison, jail or house arrest. The literature can be about prison, informed by it, or simply coincidentally written while in prison. It could be a memoir, non-fiction, or fiction. As in modern times, so in earlier periods there were many reasons for imprisonment: imprisonment on charges of treason, political or religious dissent, crime, and as a prisoner of war.

In pre-independence India, prison played a significant role in shaping the personalities of political leaders involved in the fight against the British colonial rule. Going to prison was a matter of honour then—a sacrifice in the service of the nation.

George Orwell lists "four great motives for writing" which he feels exist in every writer. He explains that all are present, but in different proportions, and also that these proportions vary from time to time. They are as follows:

1. *Sheer egoism*- Orwell argues that many people write simply to feel clever, to "be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups in childhood, etc." He says that this is a great motive, although most of humanity is not "acutely selfish", and that this motive exists mainly in younger writers. He also says that it exists more in serious writers than journalists, though serious writers are "less interested in money".

2. *Aesthetic enthusiasm*- Orwell explains another motif that be present in writing is the desire to make one's writing look and sound good, having "pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the
firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story." He says that this motive is "very feeble in a lot of writers" but still present in all works of writing.

3. Historical impulse- He sums up this motive by stating that this motive is the "desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity."

4. Political purpose- Orwell says that "no book is genuinely free from Political bias", and further explains that this motive is used very commonly in all forms of writing in the broadest sense, citing a "desire to push the world in a certain direction" in every person. He concludes by saying that "the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude."

The word is a weapon that both inflicts pain and secures power. Prisoners are relentlessly rewritten within the official 'power of writing', from interrogation and the making of a statement, through legislation and the political trial, to the regulations governing imprisonment.

Within this process the prisoner's sense of self and world is undermined, pain is made visible and objectified in writing and converted into state power. Language becomes subject to the dominant characteristics of the state: the lawlessness of absolute power renders the word a lie. However, the 'power of writing' is a contested arena. Prisoners write to restore a sense of self and world, to reclaim the 'truth' from the apartheid lie, to seek empowerment in an oppositional 'power of writing' by writing against the official text of imprisonment.

Writing gives people an opportunity to express themselves regardless of whether they are writing journalism, fiction or other type of genre. Writing, in its essence, is a soul soother. As the pen hits the page or fingers
tap on a keyboard, the writing is the beginning of personal expression. People write for a variety of reasons, but mainly writing serves to provoke change.

When people are stressed out or unnerved by certain situations in their lives, writing can tame those qualms. Putting thoughts on a page can help people solve those problems or just provide a sense of peace by expressing their feelings rather than keeping them bottled up inside. Journals, diaries and poetic writing are perfect examples of writing that soothes the suffering soul.

Writing about the experience of being in prison, whether during one's imprisonment or afterwards, presents unusual challenges to the writer. While the memoir writing may be an opportunity to record personal and individual suffering, many prison writers convert their experiences into narratives of broad social, historical, and philosophical importance.

Autobiographical prison writing is the most comprehensive articulation of this oppositional 'power of writing'. However, there is no monopoly over the political function of writing. While the written word retains both a dominant intention and a dominant operational 'truth', it is simultaneously ambiguous, an approximation, open to interpretation, manipulation and appropriation. In the context of imprisonment, these are the contours of the contested arena of the 'power of writing'; at stake is the question of on whose terms imprisonment will be both written and read.

A diary is a record (originally in handwritten format) with discrete entries arranged by date reporting on what has happened over the course of a day or some period. A personal diary may include a person's experiences, and thoughts or feelings, including comment on current events outside the writer's direct experience.
Generally the term diary is today employed for personal diaries, normally intended to remain private or to have a limited circulation amongst friends or relatives. The word "journal" may be sometimes used for "diary," but generally a diary has (or intends to have) daily entries, whereas journal-writing can be less frequent.

Prison has not been a hindrance to the indomitable, liberated spirit of great minds and great literature is produced even in prison in spite of being deprived of the glory of sunrise or sunset.

Prison has been a fertile setting for artists, musicians, and writers alike. Prisoners have produced hundreds of works that have encompassed a wide range of literature.

Prison narratives were written to inspire as well as inform. Prison elicited many life histories that would not otherwise have been written. It could provide the time as well as the incentive for autobiographical writing, though it should be noted that the conditions in jail were not always conducive for middle class prisoners, some of whom (like M.N.Roy) were deliberately denied ink, pen and paper as well as access to books and newspapers.\(^2\)

In order to avoid the unending boredom and monotony of jail life, he used to observe the beauties of nature.

It was only following their release that writing became emotionally as well as physically possible. After a long and gruelling period of confinement, writing about jail experiences might be a kind of necessary self-purging answering a therapeutic need to “imprison” the ordeal of incarceration on paper and so to come to terms with the humiliation and suffering involved.
Bejoy Kumar Sinha, imprisoned in the cellular jail, writes in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary Andaman: The Indian Bastille*, after his release from jail on medical grounds after nine years, explains, why he ventures to write his memoirs...

Since my release I have been flooded with endless and varied questions regarding my comrades—the Andaman Prisoners. Why did they go on hunger strike? Were they despaired? What is their full significance of their historic declaration to Gandhiji? What were the factors that brought this profound change in their ideas? Did long years of prison rigour too contribute their share to the change? In the event of their wholesale release where would they stand tomorrow in the country’s struggle? Was Andaman a prisoner’s heaven or hell? Are the prisoners very restive today in not being released? There has been a stream of such questions from different quarters, from different individuals. Several papers have asked me to write about these aspects in their columns... . In the face of the persistent queries, the idea occurred to me that I could write a book to answer the large number of questions and thus do my little bit to dispel some of the prevailing misunderstandings, and give some positive and valuable information that is not known to public. I have lost no time in working out my idea and found great solace in doing it—thus forging a living link with my incarcerated friends.3

He wrote to reveal himself through the written word. Jawaharlal Nehru says:
"It may be that if many attempt to write his life they may succeed in throwing light on some aspects of this unique career."\(^4\)

He clearly and straightforwardly revealed his objective:

"I write as the spirit moves me at the time of writing." "I write to propagate my ideas." And again he says: "The reader can have no idea propagate my idea of the restraint I have to exercise in the choice of topics and my vocabulary. It is training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and to make discoveries of my weakness. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds."\(^5\)

Writing for Gandhiji was:

An instrument to explain, to clarify, to reveal his thoughts and ideas. Writing also enabled him to look into himself. These writings established him as a writer of distinction among Indian masters of English.\(^6\)

Gandhiji as a writer had a definite intention; he wanted to propagate the ideals he believed in. He states:

"There can be no room for untruth in my writings, because it is my unshakable belief that there is no religion other than truth and because I am capable of rejecting aught that is obtained at the cost of truth. My writing cannot but be free from hatred towards and individual because, it is my firm belief that it is love that sustains the earth........ As for giving ides, I have some originality. But, writing is a by-product."\(^7\)
Gandhiji expressed himself and his ideas in a plain, distinctive and impressive manner and conveyed his views and feelings to the reader. He wrote truthfully and without fear of anybody, because he even loved his enemy. He was sincere in his thoughts, words and deeds. His style reflects the transparent sincerity and frankness of his heart. In fact, perfectly sincerity, truthfulness and frankness were his chief aims in writing.

Gandhi speaks about what made him to write his autobiography:

It is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply wan to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments; it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. But I shall not mind, if every page of it speaks only of my experiments. I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief, that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader. My experiments in the political field are now known, not only to India, but to a certain extent to the civilized world.8

Dorothy Norman in her book, Nehru: The First Sixty Years records vividly, of the leisure Nehru had in prison to pen his great works...

...asked in January 1950 whether he was writing another book, he replied, 'How could I be? I've not been in jail of late.'9

When a person achieves extraordinary success in life, his ambitions are satisfied to a great extent. He would like to share his innermost feelings with the public at this juncture. Hence, he expresses these feelings through his autobiography or any other method of expression by putting them on paper. So the writer wishes to leave behind for posterity the legacy of an
The purpose of any book is to reveal the events of a crucial period of India’s freedom struggle in their true perspective. The inner urge makes a person to desire to seem clever, to be talked about, and to be remembered after death. Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed.

People write autobiographies, memoirs, reminiscences, diaries because they want the information about their life on earth to be preserved after their death. Why else would they go to the trouble of writing so many boring details about their life? Because they believe their experiences in life can inspire others and can change people’s lives. Some narcissists write autobiographies because they feel their lives are important and notable enough that others would follow their examples.

The writers face many difficulties to procure paper and pen. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’ could write on toilet paper. One of the prisoner of cellular jail, Andaman, Bhai Paramanand puts it thus:

It is a great offence in jail to keep a pencil or a piece of paper, just as it is to gamble. But as the prisoners thought it their duty to break all rules it was a common practice among the political prisoners to write and send letters just as the ordinary convicts’ gambled with the money treasured up in their throats.¹⁰

For Jawaharlal Nehru things were different, he was a VIP prisoner and enjoyed more facilities than ordinary political prisoner. Writing to him was a luxury. He expresses why he wrote thus:

Sometimes I would weary of too much reading, and then I would take to writing. My historical series of letters to my
daughter kept me occupied right through my two-year term, and they helped me very greatly to keep mentally fit. To some extent I lived through the past I was writing about and almost forgot about my goal surroundings.¹¹

Nehru gives the mental makeup of a prison writer. He has to undergo many tortures, outer and inner.

Long and lonely terms of exile and prison are hard to bear, and the mind of many a brave person has given way and the body broken down under the strain. To live cut off from the world and far away from one’s friends and companions and those who share one’s hope and lighten one’s burden, one must have strength of mind, and inner depths which are calm and steady, and the courage to endure.¹²

The best writings are those which expose the inner journey of the self and depict the inner struggles of the person. It establishes a coherent and individual identity of the person.
REFERENCES

5. Ibid, p.23
6. Romain Rolland, Mahatma Gandhi, p.22.