

Introduction

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Prison narratives have become the most common signifier to refer to a literary sub-genre which documents and reflects upon life in prison. Thus the discipline keeps, within itself, an urge to inquire about certain conditions of life, those which often seem differential in relation to their own selves, and are in thought and experience, often exclusive and exigent. With this inquiry, we have a question and a concern. Why has prison life surfaced to draw critical attention to itself when these narratives may have, arguably, been grouped under autobiographical impulses of non-fiction? After all, most prison experiences are intensely autobiographical in nature. If on the other hand, narration is presented through the various modes of fiction, they may have well been placed on a similar plane as that of some other accounts which may have presented a sense of trial, loss or melancholia. These would have probably contributed to just another section of literature, amongst various others, where characters across every literary canon, major and minor, have been depicted to have braved social and political oppression, invited ignominy and jeopardized the very motives of 'essential' life. For instance, the sumptuous understanding of picaresque novels, the texts which promote Jacobin ideals, revolutionary literature, absurdist art, feminist/queer discourse or the anti-colonial works of fiction have widely touched upon prison experiences as being central to their plot, action and the very purpose of narration.

The question, thus, demands one to look into something deeper, something more sociological and more material in its conception. 'Sub-genrefication' (for lack of a better term) would mean some sort of a congealing endeavour to classify certain experiences through the similarity of their thought and pattern. This would hold considering their own differences to themselves at the strings of reflection or recollection by each individual. This 'similarity' of 'thought' and 'pattern' is not just about behavioural manifestation but perhaps more about the similarity within the wider structures of power and the responses meted out to them by each individual (always in relation to a collective; who is always already deeply ingrained as a functional unit of the system).

Imprisonment is perhaps the most crude but potent expression of political power during modern times. Such expression contains a genealogy that has been traced by sociologists across centuries. Though the theoretical plinth of understanding prison/power has been overwhelmingly European in critical discourse, the ideas, while being malleable across specific spaces and contexts, may possess some sort of universality which may appear to be equally immanent to historically conditioned situations and yet may exist above them. Fundamental to this conception lay the universality underneath the structural impulse of knowledge (as a controlling principle) and the modes through which they operate (that seldom seems to vary radically across continents but live through archetypes and prototypes of the power discourse).

The concept of knowledge is not new to human imagination. For knowledge has always remained central to the pursuit of human expression and with knowledge, there arises the need to understand, organize, control and regulate political complexes. These complexes are intrinsic to every social formation. Thus, all politics finds themselves on 'knowing'; the act of 'knowing' wades into the womb of power. Of course, the resonance in the last two lines is unmistakably Foucauldian.

In the words of Michel Foucault,

Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point of dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just the way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 28)

This correlation between power and knowledge, besides being theoretical, may be intensely heuristic. In other words, the accumulation of knowledge (hence, acquiring a particular plane of power) must be moulded into some form of expression to exert the possession of it. Both power and knowledge, thus, have a classificatory obsession with order/ disorder and of maintaining binaries for the broader purpose of 'preserving' the power that builds this classification. Thus, in what may appear to propose another form of political hermeneutic circle, the dichotomies between civil/uncivil, normal/abnormal and discipline/delinquent are to be referred to these approaches.

The institution of imprisonment, too, refers back to these ideas. Incarceration has been a poignant but a remarkable mode of censoring all that is considered to threaten social order, the knowledge of things which cements it and the power operating behind these realities. The conception of censoring, of penalty and of penance is an archetypal belief which human social formations have exhibited across times and spaces. For instance, during the ancient times, quarantining enemies was a practice amongst both kings and feudal lords. Since the medieval ages, the idea of confinement was exclusively pertinent to a sort of 'wait-list' where aberrant candidates were kept behind systems of surveillance. While punishment remained as a corollary necessity to confinement, it was not considered to be the most significant mode of 'criminal control' (one may find references to imprisonment as an alternative form of punishment in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and in sections from the *Mahabharata*). Sociologists have recorded the thematic relation of the prison to the most significant mode of punishment only since the eighteenth century.

Punishment and confinement, during the pre-prison times, had the character of a 'spectacle'. It established state violence which was more corporal, more tangible and hence, more real. Public executions were meant for social signalling in order to strike terror within the minds of social deviants and to establish precedents to avoid any such threat to the general social order. The central idea, both in theory and practice, was clear: to abide by the sovereign's dictums. During the early modern times, executions were in vogue. But by the seventeenth century, there was a conspicuous shift towards concealed forms of physical treatments for social aberration. Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* traces the genealogy of this system where he attributes the subjection of pain on individual bodies was effectively the law does not only enact itself but also exhibits what it can do. This ultimately concretised legal supremacy of the law of the sovereign. Foucault infers, "The history of this 'micro-physics' of the punitive power would then be a genealogy or an element in the genealogy of the modern soul." (*Discipline and Punish* 29)

The shift towards concealment thus was a leap from to body to the soul as the locus for exertion of power. The "gloomy festival of punishment" (*Discipline and Punish* 8) departed from its 'spectacular' nature towards an 'everydayness' which also signified the inevitability of its effect. It was a shift from the 'terrible fear' to that of the 'unseen'.

Foucault points out,

Now the scandal and the light are to be distributed differently; it is the conviction itself that marks the offender with the unequivocally negative sign: the publicity has shifted to trial, and to the sentence; the execution itself is like an additional shame that justice is ashamed to impose on the condemned man; so it keeps its distance from the act, tending always to entrust it to others, under the seal of secrecy. It is ugly to be punishable, but there is no glory in punishing. (*Discipline* 9-10)

Foucault also introduces bureaucrats, magistrates and educationalists as part of the legal fragment regarding punishment. These people cater to the "dangerous people" and in measures which would "discipline" them. He avers that by the eighteenth century, "disciplines became general forms of domination." (*Discipline and Punish* 138). It was evidently an "art of rank, a technique for the

transformation of arrangements. It individualizes body by a location that does not give them fixed position but distributes and circulates them in a network of relations.” (*Discipline and Punish* 146). Thus, discipline becomes central to the body economy which naturalizes power and the use of punishment as an accepted and expected form of socio-political life. This in the twentieth century becomes the distillate of the incarcerating phenomenon by the state.

Similarly, Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist revisited the ideas on criminality with respect to social norms and pontificated, “...an act is criminal when it offends the strong, well defined states of the collective consciousness.” (*Division* 39). Thus the definition of ‘crime’ could differ from one age to the other, the degree of punishment could be directly related to the degree of deviance. Punishment, in the views of Durkheim, was about “social solidarity”. He relates punishment to his sociological theories on ‘mechanical/organic solidarity’, the relative divisions of labour and with his concept of what he calls as ‘anomie’ in society.

He asserts,

Nowadays, since we are better aware of the purpose to be achieved, we also know better how to use the means at our disposal. We protect ourselves more systematically, and consequently more effectively. But from the very beginning this result was achieved, although less perfectly. Thus between the punishment of today and yesterday there is no great gulf, and consequently it had no need to change to accommodate itself to the role that it plays in our civilised societies. The whole difference lies in the fact that punishment now produces its effects with a greater awareness of what it is about. (*Division* 45).

However, Durkheim equates the ‘decrease’ in severity of penal approaches to individualised crimes in urbane societies as opposed to crimes which could affect collective understanding in primitive societies. He traces the ideas on banishment, surveillance and confinement up until that of understanding the prison system as an institutionalised structure concerning ‘rights’ and ‘liberties’; he associates them with complex societies which have been built on military lines. Thus imprisonment was directed not just to validate social solidarity but to deprive the ‘criminal’ of individual liberty which was the fulcrum of most modern, secular states, since the French revolution, around which the doctrine of liberal states was engineered. Thus, the state looked at the system of incarceration from a more absolutist character which was veiled by a layer of legal-rationalist and constitutional symbolism.

However, Foucault and Durkheim were not the only important analysts in this regard. A rather acclaimed approach was brought into the discourse by figures like Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer. Their seminal text *Punishment and Social Structure* (published 1968) followed the Marxist line of thought and sought to relate ‘changing imprisonment conditions and rates to changing labour markets’. To put it briefly, their hypothesis proposed that the condition and the degree of imprisonment is less strident when the market is devoid of labour (physical labour is introduced inside prisons and to generate the required productivity rate, the health and hygiene of prisoners are taken care of) but when the labour market is abundant, the prisoners are subjected to cruel treatment.

Georgio Agamben is probably the other most important sociologist who engages in a dialogue with Foucault. Emphasizing on what Foucault could have possibly elaborated further on, he seeks to ‘interpret’ the concept of an ‘apparatus’. He discusses Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ in his essay “What is an Apparatus?”, he deduces

Apparatus, then, is first of all a machine that produces subjectifications, and only as such is it also a machine of governance. Analogous considerations can be made concerning the apparatus of the prison: here is an apparatus that produces, as more or less unforeseen consequence, the constitution of a subject and of a milieu of delinquents, who then become the subject of new – and, this time, perfectly calculated – techniques of governance. (*Apparatus* 20)

This subjectification which Agamben draws on in his definition is however epigrammatic. He modifies this dichotomy in terms of a ‘state of exception’ by the nation where every subject is identified only through the coordinates of power (an identity card, a number, a financial license)

which equally un-identifies the subject to himself and his own mental image. Thus, it becomes “impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it in the right way.” (*Apparatus* 21).

In his text, *State of Exception*, he conceptualizes this as:

a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system. Since then, the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones. (*Exception* 2)

This “transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government” which “government” that “threatens radically to alter – in fact, has already palpably altered – the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms.” (*Exception* 2). This is fundamental to imprisonment where ‘correction’ is but a process of perpetual subjugation.

Norbert Elias, on the other hand, explicitly links the reduction in physical treatment of the subject to progress. “The process called civilization is especially marked by a reduction in the use of over physical violence and an increase in the intensity of psychological control.” (Vaughan 74). He further studies the imprisonment system as an expression of the cultural belief of the dominant groups in power; to him incarceration, too, is a cultural construct.

But whatever may be the distillate of these theories, there has always remained an exclusive sphere of experience which has varied across individuals as themselves and in relation to their groups. These experiences, as I call them ‘exclusive’ is not just because they vary inter-subjectively between races, cultures and individuals but also because they contain many intra-subjective layers within lives which confront and communicate with times in prison. The responses to the processes of incarceration and penalty are differently ordered or are rather structurally sprawled across times and spaces through individual recollection, engagement and anticipation. Such contours scarcely leave space for generalisation or objectivity which forms the basis for all theories.

Literature problematizes experiences and seeks to re-write the personal into the public and the political. Thus, while narration has an internal coherence (even logic) of its own, experiences and their relations to power do not. Hence the representation of such literary texts is not stringently analytical. They are deeply experiential and communicative. They propose a form of hermeneutics which enquires upon life in relation to the very act of ‘dwelling’ (in a Heideggarian sense) within multi-layered ‘meanings’ of politics, freedom, art and expression. In this context, the self is the subject and the site of all production, dissemination and application of power.

In literary studies, such experiences which spawn on reflection, invoke determination, impel transformation, nurture the ‘intentionality’ of guilt/ shame, or even risk dissolution of the psycho-social self may be explored under the umbrella term called ‘prison literature’. As Joe Lockard points out, “literature that emerges from records or imaginatively engages from records, or imaginatively engages the experience of incarceration” may contend to be put under this definition. In other words, prisons narratives understood *strict sensu*, must be explored through the locus or the place of writing the narrative, the relation between the narratorial ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’ and must dig up the secrecy of life within the institution of the prison.

While this grants enough room for a gamut of fluid discourses to contend for the ‘truthful grain’ of the sub-genre, the implication of the ‘prison’ may be metaphorical or even allegorical. In other words, a prison may be as psychologically real as much as it is in perceptible reality; any experience of confinement of the self may seek admission under this literary sub-discipline even without some direct experience of the literal and structural prison as we may understand it. To put it more simply, any form of power which disciplines and confines the mind, the memory, the body and finally suspends the apparatus of desire always stare at an experience which symbolically and semantically directs itself towards the imprisoned self. With the varied range of such experiences and the expansive lexicon of language, the media of narration may vary across the lineaments of a text, as much in

books as through the audio-visual media, through graphic texts, pictorial telling, through digital platforms and through other forms of popular imagination.

This special issue attempts to present some essays and articles which may sincerely contribute and commit to original research in this corpus.

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