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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Prison as Purgatory: A Study of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* and Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*

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Article History: Submitted-30/01/2018, Revised-12/02/2018, Accepted-15/02/2018, Published-28/02/2018.

Abstract:

This paper sheds light on Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* and Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. It also focuses on the experience of the writers who at later stage feel that the period of their prison life is a purgatory. The paper also emphasizes how the chosen writers feel a kind of satisfaction when they write whatever they have felt. They personally believe that writing is a kind of self-purification and it gives them a kind of relief. They perceive prison as purgatory where their body could be tortured for whatever the crimes they have committed.

Keywords: Crime, Prison, Justice, Government, Punishment

Prison literature mainly brings forth the experiences of the writers as prisoners who have been incarcerated in prison. As a result of which, they record and document the obstacles they have undergone while they were in prison. It is considered to be an authentic and promising one since it is written by prisoners/writers themselves. At the same time, prison literature does not confine itself with the literary productions which are produced within prison alone but also spreads its canvas to the literary productions which are done outside the prison too. As a matter of fact, its main intention is to reveal the inner turmoil of the prisoners and to mirror the real events by depicting how they were treated, manhandled and misguided by prison authorities. People have a common misconception that both jail and prison are one and the same. In fact, it is not true. Donna Rowe rightly explains in her dissertation that jail is a place where the accused will be retained for one year or less than one year whereas prison is the place where the accused will be retained for one year or more than one year. It has more programs compared to jail. In jail, the accused may not be convicted and he may be in the dock. But the accused may be convicted in prison(7).

There is a stark distinction between early sixteenth century prison system and modern prison system. For instance, Ruth Anheer postulates in her book that early sixteenth century prisoners (aristocrats) were allowed to move freely inside and outside the prison. They made use of their money and power and they felt at home in prison. On the contrary, the poor and the working class prisoners suffered very badly because they would not be able to give money and material benefits to the prison authorities (20). As a matter of fact, some prisoners were not

even convicted throughout their incarceration. Punishments and ill-treatments meted out to prisoners were beyond description. The punishments are beheading, flogging, wheeling and so forth. Modern prison system has changed drastically. It focuses on punitive methods than torturing the body. Foucault opines that although the modern prison system avoids the spectacle of public punishments such as beheading, flogging, wheeling and so forth, it still retains a kind of punishment which targets their (prisoners) minds and hearts than their body(16). It is accepted that people can easily recuperate from physical punishments but it is very hard to get rid of mental punishment. It creates a kind of mental trauma which cannot be cured unless they cure by themselves. Ruth Anherth remarks that early modern prison was an 'anti-panopticon' because it had no proper prison buildings. It had no systematic order and there was little provision for surveillance (11). Modern prison system has systemic order. The occupants feel that they are always under constant watch. As a result of which, the prisoners develop a kind of fear such as 'claustrophobia'. It can be accepted to some extent because the prisoners themselves hint those fears in their writings furtively.

For instance, Ruth Anherth says that in early modern prison system the prisoners were allowed to pass the information and letters through prison authorities. It was custom that before the letters got out of the prison, it was the duty of prison authorities to check whether the prisoners had written anything against them or against the ruling monarchs and kings. The letters can be censored if the prison authorities found them controversial. Some prison authorities might not even send those letters and sometimes they would not send letters on time. For instance, when Mandela was in prison, his son had passed away in the car accident. He received a letter after his son's burial although his family members had sent well in advance. She also points out that although the information and letters were being passed right in front of their eyes, the prison authorities behaved as if they did not notice at all because they got sufficient money and material benefits from prisoners (22). All their writings targeted the ruling monarchs and kings which resulted in earning their wrath. Almost all their writings were polemical and dissent. As a result, their incarcerations were lengthened and life imprisonments were converted into death penalty. For instance, Thomas More was beheaded because he wrote against his ruling monarch. Likewise, Oscar Wilde wrote many letters against prison irregularities. Even though he wrote against prison system in *Gaol*, he was under duress. He was also in a state of dilemma. It could be visibly seen on Oscar Wilde's face when he was on trials. Even judges tried all their tactics to elicit information from him as much as possible but everything went in vain. Wilde never uttered a word and he deliberately kept silence. It was quite obvious that he was mentally traumatized by the acts of Douglas and his family members. From the inception of prison on earth, the prisoners strive to convey the truth to the society while they are in prison so that the people (outside prison) can come to know of the truth for which they have been incarcerated.

The prisoners believe that if they tell the truth to the society in the form of writing, the society will try to help them to get justice since the prisoners do not have any other means to communicate with the outer world. In ancient times, prisoners started engraving on the

prison walls and some wrote on the walls with the help of charcoal. Prisoners started writing on papers when the printing machine came into existence. Although there are several reasons for prisoners to pen down their thoughts, they have some common hidden agendas behind their writings. There are many writers who contributed a lot to the emergence of prison literature. To name a few, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim Progress*, E E Cummings's *The Enormous Man*, Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Martin Luther king jr's *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, Nelson Mandela's *Conversation With Myself* and so forth. This paper attempts to study the hidden motives behind their writings in the light of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* and Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. Wilde is Irish wit, poet, dramatist, novelist and a writer of fairy tales. He was born in an affluent family. During the course of the time, he developed friendship with Robert Ross by whom he was introduced to homosexual practice. As a result, Wilde started having relationship with male prostitutes. At one point, he fell in love with Lord Alfred Lord Douglas known as Bosie. Douglas's father came to know of their affair somehow. He accused Wilde publically of being homosexual posing as sodomite. The case was filed against Wilde and he was taken to jail. There were three trials in all. The lawyers quoted passages from his novel *The Picture of a Dorian Grey* and from Douglas's poem and from the letters that had sent to Douglas. At last, he was convicted of being homosexual relationship with Douglas and male prostitutes. He was sentenced to years of rigorous imprisonment in Gaol. It was at this time he wrote two final masterpieces. They are: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*(long poem) and *De Profundis*. *De Profundis* is a long letter written by Wilde while he was in prison to his friend (Douglas) because of whom he had been incarcerated and suffered a lot. In fact, he wrote this letter to make him realize his mistakes as well as the faults of his family members.

Unlike Wilde, Thoreau is an American naturalist, transcendentalist, tax-resister and so forth. He is best known for his *Walden* which deals with simple living in natural surroundings and he has also produced a number of articles, journals, essays and so on. During the course of time, he developed a kind of aversion towards American government because of the Mexican-American Civil War and Slavery. In response to such inhuman acts, he refused to pay poll-tax. As a result, he had spent a night in jail which had left a great impact on him. Later, he delivered lectures on The Right and Duties of the Individual in relation to Government at the Concord Lyceum. Then, he revised the lecture into an essay entitled, "Resistance to Civil Government"(also known as Civil Disobedience). In fact, this essay is an argument for individual resistance to civil government in moral opposition to unjust government. Although these two writers have some specific purpose behind their writings, they have some hidden agendas. They are: justifying their deeds, gaining favor from the society, resisting the government, transformation of prison and confessing their sins, accepting their fate and so forth.

The main intention of prisoners is to tell the truth to the society by some means because there is a notion that those who go to prison are viewed as culprits and humbugs. The people may tend to believe that the prisoners might have committed the crime just because they

are put behind the bars and they also have an assumption that unless they are convicted, they could not be imprisoned. To distort the abovementioned stereotypes and misconception, they start writing down their ordeals. For instance, in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, he admits that he committed the heinous crime of homosexuality. At the same time, he wants to divulge to the society that he is not the only person responsible for his crime but rather it is Douglas (his friend) who forced him to do so. It is assumed that it is Wilde who has tortured Douglas for his needs but the truth comes to the light when his letter (*De Profundis*) gets published. After reading this letter, people understand who is innocent and who is the real culprit. As a matter of fact, Wilde wrote this letter with utmost care, keeping in mind that one day this letter would reach Douglas and the public. As he predicted, his innocence got revealed and Douglas's viciousness got exposed in due course.

Although the prisoners can recuperate from the physical punishment in prison, they are not able to free themselves from mental trauma they got while they were in prison. It torments them and it follows them like their shadow. Even after their release, the prisoners suffer from 'post-traumatic prison experience'. Prisoners alone know the sins that they have committed. Even, the judges and prison authorities may not be able to know unless the prisoners reveal to them. Some may reveal their sins in the dock. Some do not want to reveal them under any circumstances. The prisoners who confess will suffer less than the prisoners who never confess. Sigmund Freud has rightly pointed out that if human beings keep on suppressing their natural emotions or instincts, they will suffer from some health hazards such as: insomnia, gastric problems and so on. Likewise, the prisoners who keep themselves aloof or who keep themselves at distance from their inmates will suffer very badly. To avoid such conditions, some prisoners start writing from time to time. They are happy in a way because it kills their boredom. Some prisoners go on reading whenever they feel bored in their respective cells. It makes them forget themselves and carries them away to another planet where they can be at ease for some time. The prisoners who do not know the art of making themselves busy by engrossing in reading and writing will suffer drastically. Mika'il DeVeaux states in his article that the prolonged incarceration results in causing the psychological disorders such as a sense of hopelessness, greater dependence, and introversion and may impair one's decision-making ability and they also have high rates of recidivism(257-59).When the prisoners come out of the prison, the people(outside the prison) do not treat the prisoners as they treated earlier but rather they view them as criminals and consider them as threats to the society as it happened in the case of Wilde:

Still, in the very fact that people will recognize me wherever I go, and know all about my life, as far as its follies go, I can discern something good for me. It will force on me the necessity of again asserting myself as an artist, and as soon as I possibly can. If I can produce even one more beautiful work of art I shall be able to rob malice of its venom, and, and cowardice of its sneer, and to pluck out the tongue of scorn by the roots. And if life be, as it surely is, a problem to me, I am no less a problem to so pass judgment both on themselves and me (81-82).

Oscar Wilde's contribution for prison reform is highly commendable. He wrote several letters to the prison higher authorities to bring the reform in prison system. Joy Cameron mentions in his book that Wilde wrote a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* that children were badly treated in prison and they were not even given proper food. They were almost hungry all the time. At this juncture, he wrote another letter entitled *Prison Reform* in which he opted for a few prison reforms:

(1) Improvement of the food, which was revolting and 'just enough to sustain, not life exactly, but existence', and which 'in most cases consists of weak gruel, suet and water', leading to permanent diarrhea in many prisoners. (2) Improvement of the appalling sanitary arrangements and especially the abolition of the disgusting custom of 'slopping out' (still prevailing). (3) Better ventilation in the cells: for twenty-three hours a day the prisoners breathed foul air. (4) He wanted prisoners to be allowed more visits than the twenty minutes four times a year, more letters than the four year permitted (134-35).

Both Wilde and Thoreau never try to hide their crimes or deeds which prove that they do not want to be ashamed of what they have done because they desire that they should assert their individuality. As a matter of fact, they feel that they are stripped of from their honour and freedom when they go against their conscience. In order to substantiate his views, Thoreau discusses the lives of the army men in this work. For instance, though the army men do not like to participate inwardly in the war, they indulge in war since they are accustomed to abide by the government. Thoreau berates them openly that they are not true to their conscience. He persuades them by saying that they should not obey the government's rules and regulation when it does not respect their conscience. At the same time, it is noticeable among the prisoners that they embrace non-violence than violence. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King jr strongly supported non-violence. Louisa Dean postulates in her articles that both Gandhi and Martin Luther deliberately used non-violence thinking that the use of non-violence would escalate oppressors to resort violent methods. As a result, the people come to know the true nature of both the parties. She also defends both Mahatma and Martin Luther by stating that when people fight for social cause, they should resort to non-violence because they target government or regime (81). On the contrary, when people fight for personal cause, they may resort to violence. Hence, Mahatma and Martin Luther used non-violence because they had fought for social cause. Similarly, Thoreau also strives for better government and regime. So he purposely makes use of non-violence since he had struggled for social cause. Both Oscar Wilde and Thoreau accept their punishment without demur. It shows that they want to repent for what they have done. When Wilde came out of prison on bail, Robert Ross (his friend) beseeched him to flee abroad. He refused to go abroad. He never ever pledged the judges in the dock but rather he kept silence throughout his trials.

The fact of my having been the common prisoner of common Goal I must frankly accept, and, curious as may seem to you, one of the things I shall have to teach myself is not to be ashamed of it. I must accept it as punishment, if one is ashamed of having been punished, one might just as well never have been punished at all (Wilde 80).

Similarly, when Thoreau was put behind the bars for not paying poll-tax, he never showed reluctance to spend a night in prison. Even he goes to the extent of saying that it is better to stay in prison than staying outside the prison. He assumes that the government is the destroyer of peace.

Under government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less despondent spirits, is in her prisons to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor (Thoreau 15).

No one can say that he is free from society because human being is a part and parcel of society. It plays formative role in the life of an individual. They seek sympathy and favor from society in one way or the other. In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau boldly says that he does want to be the citizen of America. Simultaneously, he desires to earn the support of Americans so that he can resist the American Government. It clearly indicates that he alone may not be able to reform the Government but rather he needs society to support an individual. Similarly, Wilde mentions in his letter that he may not regret much if his relatives, friends and family members refuse to dine with him but he will regret more if they do not allow him to take part in their sorrow. Even he goes to the extent of saying that he will beg them and cry at their door if they do not allow him to step inside. Hence, it is quite obvious that society plays pivotal role in the life of a prisoner because prisoner seeks comfort and solace from society. Although the society cheats and abandons them, they have a strong belief in society because they want the society which should feel for them. For which, Thoreau visualizes an ideal society which would respect an individual.

I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of the neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which I have also imagined, but not yet anywhere seen (Thoreau 28).

No one likes to stay or remain in prison under any circumstance. It is the common perception that prison is the place of suffering. On the contrary, both Wilde and Thoreau try to transform the prison into a place where they can feel themselves at home. They never point out in their writings that they have neither regretted nor condemned others for being incarcerated. In a way, they feel that they are much free inside prison than outside prison. At one point, they think that society is the root cause for their sufferings. They openly declare that they are happy with prison life although it has some drawbacks. The prisoners deliberately mention in their writings that they enjoy being in prison because it is a kind of insult to the concerned persons who want them to suffer in prison. They assume that if they let their opponents to know that they suffer in prison, they feel they have been defeated by their opponents.

I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred (Thoreau 19).

Hence, the prisoners purposely indicate in their writings that they enjoy being in prison although they suffer drastically because the prisoners want the concerned persons also should suffer in one way or other.

Both Wilde and Thoreau develop strong aversion towards Government. They assume that Government will favor the people who will favor the Government in turn. These people can mend the law or buy the law with the help of their political and financial support. For Wilde and Thoreau, getting justice from Government and judiciary is like building castles in the air. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* rightly postulates that there is a possibility that the Magistrate can use his insinuations while passing sentence since the accused may not be able to have access to the document. Magistrates pay little attention to the accused (35). It is clearly expressed in Wilde's *De Profundis*. For instance, judges know fully that Douglas has also taken part in homosexual act with Wilde but they exclude Douglas from being punished. It is quite obvious that they do not punish Douglas since he belongs to well-to-do family and his father is an influential person. On the contrary, Wilde is punished since he has no political or financial support. In the case of Thoreau, he is imprisoned for not paying the poll-tax. Although he has money to pay, he does not want to pay keeping in mind that the rich can pay because they have money but the poor cannot. Both Wilde and Thoreau emphasize that the Government should not favor a particular section of people alone but rather it should render justice irrespective of class, political and economical background. For which, both daydream of having egalitarian and utilitarian government.

It is usual that prisoners write for justifying their deeds, seeking help from society and convincing their family members. Apart from the abovementioned things, they have some special purpose in their mind because they may not be able to recount orally everything as free as they can reveal in the form of writing. They feel a kind of satisfaction once they write whatever they have felt. They personally believe that writing is a kind of self-purification and it gives them a kind of relief. At one point, they think that though they are facing punishment physically in prison, they have escaped from being punished mentally. To compensate their mental punishment, they start penning down their thoughts. As a result of which, they feel they have confessed everything and nothing remains in their hearts.

To conclude, there is no doubt that Wilde and Thoreau have suffered physically in prison but they don't want to undergo any unpleasant experience mentally because they believe that their body can deserve punishment. They don't like their souls to be tortured since they consider their souls as pure as child's heart. They perceive prison as purgatory where their body could be tortured for whatever the crimes they have committed. They wholeheartedly accept their punishment thinking that it is temporary one because their intention is to reach the permanent place like heaven where they can be at ease and where they will feel be free. For them, heaven is a place where the individuals can be respected and where the individuals can be allowed to do as they desire.

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The first time Oscar Wilde saw the inside of a prison, it was 1882—thirteen years before he’d serve the famous criminal sentence that produced *De Profundis*, his 55,000-word letter to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas. Financially pressed and known primarily as a public speaker—by then he had only published a thin volume of poems—he’d committed to a nine-month lecture tour of America. During his stop in Lincoln, Nebraska, he and the young literature professor George Woodberry were taken to visit the local penitentiary. *De Profundis* (Latin for “from the depths”) is Oscar Wilde’s reconciliation from a life full of pleasure. In 1891 the author began an intimate relationship with the young aristocrat Lord Alfred Douglas, known to his friends as Bosie. This affair led to speculations about Wilde’s sexuality just as his career was reaching its apex. Ultimately, Bosie’s father, the powerful Marquess of Queensberry, accused Wilde of homosexuality. In addition to detailing the wrongs visited on Wilde by Bosie and his family, *De Profundis* traces the spiritual growth that Wilde experiences in prison. Having lost everything he holds dear, Wilde transforms his hardship into art. This ebook has been professionally proofread to ensure accuracy and readability on all devices.