

A Pip Into The Gulag: A Comparative Study of Incarceration In Alex La Guma's *The Stone Country* And Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*

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ABSTRACT- *This paper is a comparative study of incarceration in two African novels. The concept of the modern prison as a form of deterrence and rehabilitation can be traced to 18th century Europe. With the passage of time however, many authoritarian leaders have come to regard prison houses as veritable places to forcibly confine their political opponents in their bid to desperately remove them from the socio-political space. Apart from a few criminals in the two novels many of the prisoners are prisoners of conscience. Ironically, as observed in the two works, while the unforgiving circumstance in the prison and the brutality of the prison guards have conspired to deepen the depravity of the criminal elements in the prison, the political prisoners have become even tougher in their conviction to fight the evil regimes that confine them there. The paper contends that rehabilitation and deterrence can hardly take place for the genuine criminals in the two novels because these items seem to have vanished from the administrative guidelines of the prison officials. The way forward therefore, the paper concludes, lies in good governance which will not only prevent the need for political repression or imprisonment but also see prison as a genuine instrument of reform.*

KEYWORDS- Prison; incarceration; rehabilitation; criminals; conscience; political consciousness

"Art recreates in flesh experiences that have been lived by other men, and enables people to absorb them as if they were their own. (Solzhenitsyn, 1973:29)"

Unlike the Hobbesian state of nature where life was nasty, brutish and short, modern society is governed by laws. Laws are established rules that are backed by societal authority or custom for regulating the behaviour of members of a community or country. In order to prevent a break down of law and order, every country has its own law enforcement agents who are saddled with the task of enforcing strict compliance with the rules and regulations governing a society by the citizens. One of the defining characteristics of modern society is the rule of law. By convention, every member of society is a subscriber to the rule of law governing it. This is why those who contravene societal rules are made to face societal sanctions.

Depending on the gravity of the offence, most lawbreakers are often forcibly confined and denied a variety of freedoms under the authority of the state as a form of punishment. According to Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia

"the most common use of prisons is as part of a criminal justice in which individuals officially charged with or convicted of crimes are confined to a jail in prison until they are either brought to trial to determine their guilt or complete

the period of incarceration they were sentenced to after being found guilty at the trial."

The rise of the state as a form of social organization coincided with the beginnings of prisons. The development of written languages enabled the creation of formalized legal codes as official guidelines for society. Of these codes, the code of Hammurabi written in Babylon around 1750 BC stands out. In this code, the penalty for violation of the laws was based on the principle of the law of retaliation whereby people were punished as a form of vengeance often by the victims themselves. Many legal codes from early civilizations like the ancient Summerian codes, the Indian Manama Dharma Astra, the Hermes Trismegistur of Egypt and the Mosaic code also contained this notion of punishment as vengeance or retaliation. After some time, some ancient Greek philosophers mooted the idea of using punishment to reform offenders instead of merely using it as a means of retribution. Many Athenians who could not pay their fines were subjected to indefinite period of imprisonment. The Romans were among the first to use prison as a form of punishment rather than merely for detention. Soon, metal cages, basements of public buildings and quarries were constructed for this purpose with most of them, like the notable Mamertine Prison, being built near a sewer system with a network of squalid dungeons.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, castle, and fortresses and sundry basements of public buildings were used as prisons. Capital punishment was rampant. The need to stem the tide of criticism that greeted public execution led to mass incarceration as a solution. The 18th century witnessed so many prison reforms that later coalesced into two philosophies which regarded prison houses either as a form of deterrence or as a form of rehabilitation or moral reform. The latter school of thought believed that prisoners' behaviour could be corrected to make them useful to the wider society once again after release. The concept of the modern prison is a child of these two philosophies.

Prisons today are used by the state to punish civil crimes. The United States, for example, has the world's largest prison population and the world's highest per capital incarceration. However, as philosophers are never tired of emphasizing, there is never a power without the lurk of a subtle snare; a skillful way, no doubt, to draw humanity's attention to an insidious danger: the misuse of power. Imperfect humans, especially dictators or tyrants all too easily fall prey to this snare. Over the years, authoritarian regimes have come to see prisons as veritable instruments of political repression to punish political crimes, in most cases without trial or legal due process. Although this use is strictly illegal under international law which advocates fair administration of justice, many autocratic regimes have found it useful to punish their political enemies, real or imagined. These regimes have little or no patience for dissident voices in society which they regard as nothing but an anathema. Their owners are therefore, instantly disambiguated to keep them away from circulation. "Political dictatorship in Africa", says Josephat Kubuyanda(1990:5) "concerns itself with repression which in effect, means the arrest, exile, execution or consistent harassment of dissident voices".

In many countries, social activists, human right crusaders, trade unionists and writers are easy targets of many dictators. Of these tribes of persona-non-grata, writers, perhaps because of the age-old truism that the palest ink is stronger than the sharpest of all swords and brains, are often considered a huge threat by many power-drunk leaders. Often and again, many of these writers find themselves in jail courtesy of these so-called political leaders whose sacrosanct creed is to suspect every piece of writing. Ironically, rather than break their will or silence these writers not a few of them have learnt to regard their prison experience as a huge catalyst in firing their creative imagination. Wole Soyinka wrote *The Man Died* (1969) in prison during the Nigerian Civil War. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained* is a product of his prison experience like Dennis Brutus' *Letter to Martha* (1973). Alex La Guma's *And A Threefold Cord* (1969) was written while in prison in the Republic of South Africa. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead* (1861) which portrays life of convicts in a Siberian prison Camp is a semi-autobiographical novel. Dostoyevsky himself spent four years in exile in such a camp following his conviction

for his involvement in the Petrashevsky Circle. Like Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Danisovich*, Dyakaonovinev's 242 paged *In the Zone, Uz: Book one, for Those who Love Freedom* (2014) is rooted in personal prison experience. According to him, since he did not think he would survive in the prison, he decided to write down everything from the first day he was arrested which resulted in the book. One of the purposes of imprisonment is to isolate the prisoner from the outside world. This is true for all prisoners whether she/he is a detainee or a common criminal. But according to Breytenbach who once found himself behind bars on account of his writing, the purpose of imprisonment is often taken to a ludicrous and diabolical height in the case of the writer who by nature of his/her craft finds himself/herself the veritable questioner and impeccable critic of the mores, attitude and myths of his society as well as the exponent of the aspiration of his people. He says:

"Everything is done to destabilize him, to keep him off because, for instance, not only is any expression of outside support kept from him, but the authorities try hard to create the impression that he is forgotten, rejected even, by his friends, colleagues or comrades (2009:165)."

Post colonial Africa with its many dictators has turned creative writing in the continent into what Nurudin Farah (1990:21) calls a "matter of life and death". Literature mirrors society and many of these dictators always get panicky at every printed word which they suspect must be a criticism of their misrule. In this panic, says Daniel Kunene (1981:426), "the oppressor, by a strange distortion of logic sees the ugliness in the art and not in himself, and instead of removing his own deformities, he breaks the mirror".

As observed earlier, many writers have long learnt to see their incarceration as another level of their creative enterprise. Apart from fictionalizing their prison experiences, some writers have come out with full length and realistic account of prison life. This recreation is often possible because their experience gained in prison often enables them to describe with great authenticity the condition of prison life and the character of the convicts that inhabit them. This paper is a comparative study of incarceration or prison experience in La Guma's *The Stone Country* (1967) and Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* (1994).

AMONG THE INMATES IN LA GUMA'S THE STONE COUNTRY

The Stone Country (1967) is dedicated to "the daily average of 70,351 prisoners in South African gaols in 1964" (8). While this may seem alarming, by 1973 the figure "had risen to 95,000 or five times the U.K average" (Roscoe, 1977:257). The non-white community is presented as being placed behind the bars erected by the apartheid system in South Africa. The prison setting is

populated by rapists, robbers, spivs, alcoholics, burglars and murderers. This itself becomes an extended metaphor in which the Cape Town jail and the Republic of South Africa are seen as one. This is because those outside the jail are not necessarily better than those inside it for their restricted physical space is not free from nightly raids by the apartheid police whose crudeness, injustice and establishmentarian overzealousness begin with no respect for private space and end with a stark denial of human dignity and personhood. The resultant psychological trauma that dogs the life of a non-white outside the prison is as bad as the brutality and obsessive primitiveness that are visited on their kits and kins in prison. This, no doubt, must be the justification of the epigraph based on the lines of Eugene Debbs that begin the novel:

*"While there is a lower class I am in it,
While there is a criminal element, I am
of it, While there is a soul in jail I am not
free (9)"*

On parade in the Cape Town jail with George Adams and Jefferson who are political prisoners are other hardened criminals like Butcherboy Williams, the depraved lord of the cells, Yusef the Turk the genius in self defence, Casbah Kid, the little danger on two legs and other motley collection of scarecrows like Gus, Morgan, Koppe and Solly. Although, George Adams the central character and Jefferson his friend are political prisoners they are kept in separate cells without trial. In fact, George Adams is specifically kept in the same cell with hardened criminals. And for talking back to the prison guard Fatso, and playing with a cat in the prison, he is made to forego his meals for three days. Through him we are able to have a pip into a typical cell in the prison:

*"with over forty prisoners locked up in
the middle of summer, the smell of sweat
was heavy and cloying as the smell of
death. The heat seemed packed in
between the bodies of the men, like
layers of cotton wool, like a thick sauce
which moistened a human salad of
accused petty thieves, gangsters, rapists,
burglars, thugs, brawlers, dope peddlers,
few of them strangers to the cells, many
already depraved, and several odd and
abandoned, sucking hopelessly at the
bitter disintegrating butt-end of life (8)."*

Eighteenth century prison reformers like John Howard and Elizabeth Fry would have been appalled at the state of the Cape Town jail where neither reform nor genuine repentance for the inmates is possible as the prison environment makes the prisoners more hardened. The survival of the fittest battle of District Six is brought into the prison. This is the genesis of the battle for supremacy in the cell between Butcherboy and Yusef the Turk. Indeed, it is a dog-eat-dog system that "defines the tragic reality of life in South Africa where many of the so-called prisoners are there in the first place courtesy of the injustice and poverty created by the oppressive system"

(Ogbeide, 2013:47). The friction between Butcherboy and his victims soon reaches a dangerous flashpoint when the former is floored by the Turk and covertly stabbed by the Kid. Violence rules the cell as the frustration of all the dangerous characters in the cell finds expression in different criminal activities like smoking, fighting, escaping, murdering and writing on the prison walls. Unlike these societal hoodlums, George Adams is presented as a mild-mannered political agitator who tries to no avail to transform his inmates by treating them with dignity and respect. Through him, says JanMohamed (1982:9)

*"La Guma shows how the demand for
equality, for respect and responsibility
for oneself and others and the desire for
vengeance can coalesce to overthrow
apartheid and to form a viable
alternative community."*

JanMohamed is quick to point out however that this seeming romanticization of revolution is strictly beyond his point of emphasis in a complex situation that one finds in South Africa. This is evident in his insinuation that George Adams' return to the main part of the prison where he is likely to restart his agitation in the novel "implies an open-ended struggle" (1982:10). Unlike the other inmates, George Adams is politically conscious and although his life is a marginal one like that of Michael Adonis in *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and Charles Pauls in *And A Threefold Cord* (1969), his is a voluntary one. He still has control over his destiny that is supervised by his subordination and sacrifice of personal freedom and self concern for a larger criminal interest which according to JanMohamed (1982:11) "marks the beginning of a new phase" in the development of Alex La Guma's writing away from his earlier naturalistic tendency. This is not to say however, that La Guma completely abandons the naturalistic mode of the first novels. According to Asein (1986:221):

*"There is in The Stone Country, for
instance, the tattered look of Folly, the
prison down, whose ragged shirt kept
'whipping around so that he looked for
all the world like a scare crow come to
life in the wind'. Even more revealing
from this standpoint is the description of
Butcherboy Williams' role as an agent of
the oppressor and the blending of his
image with the decadence of the system
being castigated. He assaults Gorge
Adams and his sinister traits are
conveyed in appropriate bestial
images."*

As much as possible, George Adams with his refrain of "we are all in this together" tries to forge a form of solidarity with his inmates to no avail. Even his treatment of them with dignity and respect does not seem to have the desired effect. This is hardly surprising because they have succumbed to what Cormaroff and Cormaroff

(1981:18) call “colonization of consciousness”. This is why they are now no more than a condemned group of persons without initiative or resources. The apartheid system has conditioned them into a blind alley of curse and hate-filled frustration with a bias for the laws of the jungle where only the diabolically strong survive. This strategy is to create a division among the non-whites especially the blacks in order to detract them from the common goal of confronting the oppressive system. According to Diala-Ogamba (5) the strategy is a simple one:

“If the blacks can be conditioned to hate their own kind, then the white would have succeeded in turning hate away from themselves towards those they oppress, and so the oppressed would eliminate each other, leaving the white free to enjoy all the fruits of the land.”

The prevalence of political ignorance among the cantankerous inmates of the Cape Town jail is a function of their lack of consciousness of their colonization which many critics like Andre Breidlid have attributed to the lack of intellectual space in a complex environment of South Africa. In the submission of Ramphele (1993:5) this intellectual space

“is the capacity for individual awareness of one’s environment and the position one occupies in the power structure of one’s society; it help individuals to demystify ideology and to limit the impact of the constraint of a hegemonic order in social relations.”

As stated earlier, the prison itself is a microcosm of South Africa where exploitation, racial segregation and dehumanization prevail. For example, while plain corn mush is served to non-white prisoners, mush with milk and trays and slices of bread is reserved for the white prisoners. The incident involving the cat and the mouse is a reflection of the South African situation where the blacks are forever on the run from the system’s overzealous trigger-happy law enforcement agents George Adams reflects deeply

“You were on the side of the mouse of all the mice... The little man who get kicked on the backside all the times. You got punished and beaten like that mouse, and you had to duck and dodge to avoid the claws and gangs (127)”

George Adams is pained by the fact that his co-prisoners are not even concerned about the overthrow of the oppressive system for which he has dedicated his life. The escape bid by Gus, Morgan and Koppe to free themselves from the evil bonds of apartheid seems alright. But the tragic irony is that their escape will merely change their location from a smaller prison to a wider prison which South Africa has become for people like them. This is the wider implication of the impersonality and sterile landscape of the prison which La Guma says is a “world without beauty, a lunar barrenness of stone and steel and locked doors” supervised by “the grinding of boots,

counterpointed by shouted orders, the slam of doors and the tintinnabulation of heavy keys” (18). The dehumanization of the non-white prisoners by the sadistic warders is seen in the way they are made to strip stark naked before receiving their convict uniform. According to Asein (1986:225) the crushing brutality of the symbolic concrete structure is given prominence in the cosmic alienation of elements which is evident in the hostility of the sun, the heat in the cells and the arid barrenness of the landscape”. Indeed, the oppressive heat in the cells is an extension of this state-sponsored dehumanization and brutalization.

“The heat in the cell was solid. As Yusef the Turk has said, you could reach out in front of your face, grab a handful of heat, fling it at the wall and it would stick (80)”

The engaged existence of the inmates which is worsened by the inhuman treatment of the prison guards is itself a direct invitation to animalistic tendencies. This is why La Guma says that the prison is no more than

“a jungle of stone and iron, inhabited by jackals and hyenas, snarling wolves and trembling sheep, entrapped lions fighting off shambling musters with brains and bodies armoured with the hide of ignorance and brutality, trampling underfoot those who tried to claw their way from the clutch of the swamp (81)”

This symbolic setting and the emphasis placed on the depravity of the inmates help the reader to correctly understand South Africa where all too often a tyrannical few hold a hapless majority hostage by superior force of arms, subterfuge and diabolical logic.

INMATES AS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE IN ZELEZA’S SMOULDERING CHARCOAL

Critics and writers like Chirambo and Zeleza have traced the genesis of the continent’s post independence problems to the way power was handed over to the wrong leaders who took charge after the exit of the colonialists. Bitten by the bug of megalomania, many of the so- called leaders soon became dictators whose word was law. Dictatorship brooks no opposition and any dissenting voice, no matter how reasonable is treated as one who must either be eliminated or kept in jail where he is expected to pine away in abject misery. In Zeleza’s *Smouldering Charcoal*, the president, simply known and addressed as “the leader” is the sole administrator of the party in power and through it he maintains an iron- like grip on the country. This is possible through many fanatical youth leaguers, party agents and numerous informers who Zeleza calls “untamed pests”, who are actually a group of political loyalists who “have chosen to serve the party either in position in its hierarchy or as undercover agents in clandestine activities” (Chirambo,

1999:9). With the help of these ubiquitous pests, many political agitators, political opponents, school teachers and even friends of political opponents have been bundled into prison without trial. Zeleza tells us:

"side by side with the sworn enemies of the regime were many who had been detained simply because they happen to belong to the "wrong" ethnic group or had fallen out of favour with the power that-be. Others were associated with those who had fled into exile. These were school teachers, lawyers, civil servants, workers, peasants and even a number of chief and former ministers. It was a microcosm of the potentials of a country laid to waste because of pervasive fear, ruthless greed, political repression and moral bankruptcy (149)."

The condition of the prison is so bad that prisoners who are not criminals like Chola are made to sleep on bare floor with only one blanket and a filthy bucket in the same room. The prisoners are made to do hard labour in spite of the poor food and poor living conditions. The oppressive heat in each cell is comparable to the kind in *The Stone Country* where it is possible to literally grab a piece of it, according to Casbah Kid, and throw it at the wall. Prisoners are neither tried nor allowed to get access to lawyers. Visitors are never allowed. It is in the face of all these inhuman treatments that the prisoners decide to go on hunger strike. But rather than soften the minds of the prison guards, this only hardens them the more as "they waited for hunger to force the prisoners to see the futility of their action" (147). Seeing that their threats and divide and rule strategy in the prison have no effect on the resolute prisoners, the guards that come in different funny aliases decide to pick Chola, Mchere and Bota as scapegoats. Taking each to a different room, they are visited with a series of punishment to break them and make them renounce their strike:

"They were stripped naked. Each room was filled with ice water up to the knees. They could not sit or walk around or sleep. The room was kept dark. Occasionally, a powerful light bulb was turned on every now and then the door would be opened abruptly and they would be flushed with a bucket of cold water or a water hose. They peed and shitted in the water. This went on for three days. The men grew weaker, some became delirious (155)."

Suspected of being the ring leader of the movement for National Transformation, an underground organisation dedicated to the overthrow of the dictatorial government with a branch in prison, Chola is later taken to the Condemned Section for more torture to get a forced confession from him. Vowing to break him, the chief superintendent decides to be in charge of the torture

himself and what Chola later experiences is reminiscent of the unimaginable torture in Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*:

"Chola was told to strip naked. A stove of hot charcoal was brought. He was told to sit on it... They grabbed him and put him there. He screamed as his buttocks felt the heat. After he was removed, he saw one of the guards taking out a hot nail from the stove. It was pierced through his penis. Chola shouted with terror (157)"

Frustrated that not even his heinous crime against humanity visited on Chola has succeeded in eliciting his desired confession, the superintendent later takes his quarry to a tiny damp room whose walls are covered with graffiti written with human faeces. Here, he is eventually killed by the monstrous Bonzo, the prisoner on death row.

Unlike the stony prison in *The Stone Country* which is populated mostly by criminals of all kinds, those in *Smouldering Charcoal* are mainly prisoners of conscience who "the leader" desperately wants to keep away from the public space in order not to "infect" the people with their dangerous anti-government political doctrine.

George Adams in *The Stone Country* and Chola in *Smouldering Charcoal* are political prisoners. Both are politically-conscious enough to know that beyond the bickering in the cell among the inmates lies the need to forge a united front against their oppressive governments. However, unlike George Adams who in the face of his inability to form a solidarity with the criminal inmates has resorted to simply treating them with dignity, respect and generosity with a faint hope of reciprocation, Chola has succeeded in recruiting some of the inmates into his pet Movement. Together with Mchere, they have succeeded in making each cell to have its own semi-autonomous committee in order to prevent the prison authorities from paralyzing its activities should they isolate a few key leaders. It is the manuscript that Chola writes in prison that Ndatro, Mchere and Catherine take along with them into exile to form an essential part of the Movement. Unlike in *Smouldering Charcoal*, racial segregation even among the prisoners abounds in *The Stone Country*. White prisoners are treated with a degree of respect and dignity by the prison guards than their non-white inmates. The prison guards are particularly brutal with the nonwhite prisoners who they regard as baboons who deserve to be treated without any iota of humanity. This is not to say, however, that one can ever compare that brutal treatment of the non-white to the cruel sadism of the prison guards in *Smouldering Charcoal* that is a reminder of the ones during Hitler and Stalin's era. Like Diakonov's novel, *Smouldering Charcoal* is an indictment of the dictatorial regime of President Kamuzu Banda of Malawi who preferred to feed his prisoners of conscience to the crocodiles in Malawi to sending them for fair trial.

Perhaps because the prisoners in *Smouldering Charcoal* are no criminals, there is nothing like attempted jail break like one finds in *The Stone Country* where Koppe, Morgan and Gus try desperately to escape from their cell. According to Zeleza, the inmates “did not agitate for their unconditional release although the questions of speedy trials, access to lawyers and admission of visitors were also raised” (147). In fact, rather than fight for supremacy in the cell like the inmates in *The Stone Country*, many of the jail birds in *Smouldering Charcoal* have found salvation of a sort in Our Holy Brother’s Freedom-in-Christ Church. On the whole however, all the prisoners in both novels are in prison because of the high-handedness, political repression and authoritarianism of their home governments. This is of course germane, for while it is easy to see the criminals in *The Stone Country* as individuals that should be rightly kept behind bars one must not forget that it is the system that has made them criminals having dehumanized them. No one is born a criminal. An oppressive society like the kind in the two novels can drive a man crazy with a bias for criminal tendencies. After all, in the immortal submission of Brissot de Warville (1781), “man is not born an enemy to society. He does not disturb the general tranquility until he has lost his own”.

CONCLUSION

The development of the modern prison can be traced to the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. Bentham’s concept of the prison as a form of punishment and correction away from the earlier notion which regarded incarceration simply as a holding state until trial or hanging was quite revolutionary. In fact, Bentham’s theory of the modern prison highly influenced the establishment of the first prisons which were used as rehabilitation centres. Many authoritarian regimes like the ones in the two novels under study have long embraced only the punishment aspect of the prison and jettisoned the corrective aspect. Rather than rehabilitate the criminal inmates in *The Stone Country*, the brutality of the prison guards has instead pushed them down the valley of depravity where once again they are back in the Hobbesian State of nature. The consequence of this is their animalistic behaviour. As the only sane man in the midst of the insane, George Adams is helpless about the state-sponsored divisiveness among the inmates, about the preferential condition in the prison and even more so about his own prospect of a long sentence.

But while George Adams is lucky not to have been devoured by the ravenous wolves of inmates in *The Stone Country*, Chola in *Smouldering Charcoal* is not so lucky. Afraid of the likely implication of killing a prisoner of conscience like Chola, the guards decide to give the job to the monstrous Bonzo. Like the inmates of *The Stone Country* who have become hardened by the brutality of the prison guards, the political prisoners in *Smouldering Charcoal* have become even stronger in their conviction to

resist the evil leader who has made independence a monstrous concentration camp on account of his dictatorial antics. This is why they later found themselves in exile waging a guerrilla warfare. Their motto of “the struggle has just begun” is an indication that they are prepared to wage a long drawn battle against the leader and his evil regime. Modern states should learn to embrace good governance as a panacea to criminality in the society. True, society is inhabited by imperfect humans. This means that criminality may be difficult to be totally wiped out. This is where good governance which will regard incarceration as an instrument of rehabilitation for genuine criminals rather than for political repression to silence perceived enemies comes in. Good governance is the way forward for, as the ageless truism states, those who make peaceful change impossible only make violent change possible.

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