



Teaching Literature of Incarceration in the African Context: Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Paradigms

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Abstract

This paper examines the poetics of literature on incarceration in the African context, arguing for its incorporation into the course module of higher institutions of learning, especially for students in the Humanities. Incarcerated people, particularly prisoners of conscience, often devise some ways of protesting or resisting the hostile atmosphere of a detention facility. One of these ways is their involvement in the act of writing to oppose and contest the instrument of state power which has been used to deprive them of their rights to freedom of expression, association, movement and, sometimes, their right to life. And once they begin to express themselves by writing and their writings reach the arena of public discourse, they generate their own strategies of reading. Thus, questions of what, why, and how a prisoner writes create a critical space in which critics interpret a text inscribed within a historical context and a discourse terrain. To this end, this paper clarifies the concepts related to prison writing, states the objectives of teaching it and offers some theoretical paradigms on how it might be taught.

Keywords: incarceration, poetics, writing, historical context, discourse, text and freedom.

Introduction

A work of art can generally be regarded as a form of self-expression. This expression can either be in the sense of the direct expressiveness of the state of mind or inner experiences of the artist, or in the sense of indirect or symbolic expressiveness of the idea, or vision of that artist on

social, spiritual, or even scientific exigencies. Essentially, Susanne K. Langer in “Art: The Symbol of Sentience” posits that “a work of art is a complex thing being at once a social possession, a personal record, a piece of self-expression, an influence, an object of sensuous delight” (1953:54). Osundare (2008) also considers a work of art as a tool for sharing ideas and impacting the society. He affirms:

What is art? If not communication, the bodying forth of airy nothing of imagination, investing it with a local habitation and a name. Art thrives on the urgent need to share, to make known and if possible, pass into common currency what once a private fancy ... all art seeks to affect. (5)

Literature, (especially for African literary texts verbally composed or in visual written form) in its sense of being an imaginative reconstruction of reality is by its very nature a social art committed or engaged in one way or the other to the promotion of human values. Artistic expressions in Africa generally carry a great deal of social relevance and purpose to the point that makes most writers and critics align with Mao Tse-Tung’s often-quoted statement that “there is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics. Onoge 1985:50).

However, there are some self-expressions categorized as “lived-in human experiences” whose inscription as life writings, government authorities would rather wish to be side-tracked in the corpus of national narratives. These particular sub-genres of life narratives constitute what Waliu (2009) regards “as an alternative and unauthorized national narrative that runs counter to the official or authorized national narratives” (iii).

Consequently, the experience of human captivity, of which incarceration is a predominant cultural practice and therefore a motif of textual engagement, is a global phenomenon. It has evolved over the years as one of the distinct literary modalities of life writings. Smith and Watson (2001) in their book, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* categorizes prison narratives among the “fifty-two genres of life writings”.



Their method was to combine the formal and semantic features of autobiographical forms within particular historical, social and cultural settings.

Therefore, this study is essentially an engagement with the artistic modes of African prison writing which I consider a distinct hallmark, but still an under-researched sub-genre of African literature as a discipline of study. It seems that the literature on incarceration in the African context of the experience has not been given adequate critical attention. An overview of recent critical works such as Irele's *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black diaspora* (2001), Tanure Ojaide's *Contemporary African Literature: New Approaches* (2011), and Chinyelu Ojukwu's *Critical Issues in African Literature: Twenty-First Century And Beyond* (2013) reveals that the distinctive features or poetics of African prison writings have not been clearly identified and analysed as a generically coherent body of resistance literature as other sub-genres such as 'war writings', women's writings, 'literature of the environment', 'travel writings' and even 'children's literature'. It is noteworthy that the "critical study of prison writing deals with an extent, global genre defined by a subject and relevant experience of its author" (Doran Larson 2012:2), and in the context of African experience, Olaniyan and Quayson, also rightly observe that within the larger corpus of African literature, there is the "flourishing of the form of writing we could call 'writers' prison diaries" (2013:139).

The study assumes that the originating or defining essence of African literature is that of commitment and that African writers particularly conceptualize aesthetic practices as a means of a social cause and intervention in the affairs of public governance. To this end, the study aims at exploring the manners in which African incarcerated writers undertake narrative styles and deploy artistic tropes (that is literariness as a secondary order of meanings) as a matter of commitment to special purposes.

Also, as a result of the social, emotional, cultural and intellectual dilemmas which often emerge out of the experience of preventive detention, the project focuses on the existential motifs of memory, pain and trauma,

survival and truth-telling to re-emphasise the universality of imprisonment as a society's regime or code of punishment and the emergence of prison writing as an expression of the self to counter, as it were, the official version of the narrative. Based on the various parameters and postulations of the study, we aim to discover the inevitable incursion of literature into critical issues related to human rights and governance in African nation-states, particularly Nigeria. From its findings, the research aims to demonstrate the importance of the study of African prison literary texts as they highlight the relevance of the literature of dissidence and resistance in deepening the understanding of the meaning of modern African literature.

A study such as this is important as it highlights the various forms of literary modes and poetic devices committed to writing the self-evidentiary story of truth-telling. The discourse particularly shows how an 'imprisoned intellect' (Davies 1990), an 'incarcerated self' (Waliaula 2009) or, as it were, a disoriented personality commits the resources of art as a means of survival to truthfully express the horrors of confinement to the outside world. By implication, the research reveals how a coherent body of writings that are cross-generic in manner of expression, underscores the importance of understanding the issue of 'truth- equation' (Gready 1993) in the discourse and counter-discourse of national histories. In this regard, I refer to particular contexts of postcolonial African countries from where the writings originate, to offer a re-assessment of the way political systems determine what is regarded as crime and how to administer justice to the citizenry, especially to human rights activists.

This research is important for other reasons. It reveals how a literary text can generate a 'transactional' reader's response to seeing a work of art as an instrument of political awareness and ideology. In lieu of the foregoing, it is obvious that scholarly investigation into the tradition of African Prison writing is important. The study identifies Davies' *Writers in Prison* (1990) as a work which addresses the theory and criticism of prison writing from the Western tradition of literary criticism and cultural studies. Although most enduring examples of literature in a wide array of fields, ranging from philosophy to religion, and from politics to creative works and dating back hundreds of years have been written in conditions of either confinement or



as a result of the experience of confinement or in exile, Davies points to the late 1980s as the period when elaborate scholarly interest in the interplay between confinement and writing began. Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987) offers a cultural perspective on the theory and practice of resistance literature. The work provides insight into the theoretical-historical contexts of the category of narratives subsumed as resistance literature to which prison writing of incarcerated intellectuals belongs. Another remarkable text is Bruce Franklin's *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978). The critic identifies two formative traditions of the United States of America's carceral culture and opines that "Modern American prison writing constitutes a coherent body of literature with unique historical significance and cultural influence" (1).

This study, therefore, leverages on the foregoing propositions to investigate the literary traditions informing the emergence of this distinct sub-genre of African literature. The subject of artistic commitment is considered not only from the various semantic imports of the functionality of African literary artefacts, as have been the preponderant focus of earlier projects, but also to the forms of artistic tools that the writers have deployed as media of self-expressions of the meaning of their prison experience.

Prison Writing as a Tradition

The literature of incarceration otherwise labelled interchangeably as dissident, rebel, detention, confinement, captivity or containment writing is a global phenomenon. It is a kind of writing motivated by the experience of being restricted to a place either in solitary isolation or within a group of other prisoners. In an attempt to situate the textuality of incarceration within the larger context of the experience of human captivity, Hill (2013) contends, "confinement literature refers to any work of fiction or non-fiction that deals with the fundamental issue of human captivity. It also encompasses other sites of containment such as slave plantations and concentration camps" (19). Since this study is concerned with the writings of African writers who have experienced confinement as a real-life experience, the subject of a prison environment, as a physical place of restriction of movement, association and expression comes to the fore. This explains why Carnochan (1995) in *Oxford History of the Prison-The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, posits that "confinement writing is a kind of literature characterized by restricting the free movement of body and mind" (39).

Within the context of the experience of incarceration by some African writers, this study aligns with Mapanje's (1995) explication of what constitutes confinement literature. The writer affirms:

Prison literature springs from types of confinement under which one lives in isolation, where sometimes no visitors and no reading materials are allowed. There is confinement where one has access to books because the prison has a library, however inadequate, there is imprisonment with hard labour, imprisonment where no work is allowed; and there is confinement or exclusion; from a society where the writer has limited access to the wider world ... What is important is that each confinement generated writings with texture which reflects its own kind of environment and context. (5)

However, this kind of contextual backdrop problematizes ways of identifying the distinctive generic features of writings that should be classified as prison literature. It is noteworthy, that, while notable scholarly works such as Loan Davies' *Writers in Prison* (1990), Bruce Franklin's *The Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1989) and W.B. Camochan, N. Morris and David Rothman's *Oxford History of the Prison – The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (1995) have in various ways clearly identified and established the poetics of the Western literature of incarceration, that of the African tradition within the corpus of African literature appears to be under-researched and inadequate.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative to state the theoretical issues which surround the aspect of generic taxonomy of African prison writings. For instance, in his study of "Prison Literature in East Africa" Wawanjiru (2010) observes that it would be "fallacious and inadequate to study the body that is African literature without mentioning prison writings and the writers who have been so prolific in prison and captured insightful thematic concerns in Kenya and the continent at large" (1).

In her study of South African prison literature, Oswald (2007) attempts to provide a suitable definition for prison literature in relation to their cross-generic mode of classification. She maintains that "prison writing takes many forms: novels, memoirs/autobiography, poetry, biological/sociological studies, and so on. In other



words, it cuts across well-established, widely recognized genres” (32). In pointing out the problematic nature of generic classification in terms of their particular poetics, Oswald submits that “prison literature cannot be defined in terms of genres because of the vast differences both between and within the genres mentioned above” (34). This study aligns with Oswald’s method of identifying the common characteristics of prison writing which within our purview entails written literary expressions from personal experience. Thus, what some literary scholars would aptly categorize as the “writers’ prison diaries” are subsumed in this study as the broad cross-generic self-life modes of poetry and prose narratives. To the extent that these autobiographical modes are traceable to the triadic component of “autos-self, bios-life, and grape-act of writing, fictional works about prison experience are excluded from consideration in this study. However, it should still be mentioned that this mode of categorization comes with its theoretical controversy over the blurring of what constitutes non-fiction and fiction materials in prison memoirs. Sobanet (2002) in discussing the nuances of the prison novel as an interdisciplinary sub-genre observes that:

The texts which fall into the sub-genre of the prison novel represent artful intersections of autobiography and fiction, and their narrators often attempt to be sociological in their precision when observing and depicting the nature of conditions and relations behind bars. (1)

The foregoing overview of the multi-generic mode of prison literature points to an examination of the expressive motifs of African prison writings.

Motifs of African Prison Writing

Prison writing is an act of self-expression; a re-writing of self to counter and resist, as it were, the official code of imprisonment. Therefore, prisoners, especially prisoners of conscience, engage in narrating their experiences for several reasons. First, they engage in the act of writing for self-restoration. They write to restore the sense of self-identity and intellectual freedom taken away by the punitive regime of incarceration. Foucault (1977) considers imprisonment as an instrument of the state’s power to maintain total control over its subjects. In describing this official code of imprisonment as a “network of writing”, Foucault claims that “the prison writer is a heavily mapped writer. He is situated in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix him” (194). What this implies is that once an individual becomes a prisoner, the state authority gives him an identification number which signals the end of the

personal identity of that person as a free member of the human community. In reaction to this, prisoners according to Gready (1993), “write to restore a sense of self and world, to seek empowerment in an oppositional power of writing by writing against the official text of imprisonment” (493).

Moreover, the act of writing for an incarcerated individual is a kind of mental therapy and emotional catharsis. For Lwanda (2004), “writing for oneself within prison can be a tool of mental survival” (60). Frantz Fanon (1963) in *The Wretched of the Earth* also conceives political prison writing as part of the “discourse of national or communal aspiration. It can never be analyzed outside the context of the socio-political and economic circumstances placing the writer in prison” (181). This concept of prison writing as a tool of empowerment for incarcerated writers brings to the fore some expressive motifs that bind prison texts together as narratives of self-witnessing of the experience of human captivity. Larson (2010) succinctly asserts that “all prison writings bear not only a common subject but re-current, internal formal traits. It is a genre bound not only by its subject and authors but in its expressive tropes” (2). Thus, we have an expressive motif of torture and trauma. The motif of torture is a recurring decimal in the discourse of the narratives of human captivity. Incarcerated writers usually express the traumatic effect of confinement on their minds and physical body. The power to arrest, detain and interrogate people manifests as a form of torture and inflicting pain on people. Scarry (1985) addresses the subject of torture in her book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. She contends that “the essence of interrogation and torturing is to uncreate and unmake a prisoner’s world and sense of self” (13).

There is also the motif of self-witnessing and truth-telling of things that happen and experiences lived in a prison facility. Prisoners write to testify of the horrors of incarceration. The things that often characterize the physical space of a prison environment include hostility, sexual harassment violence and death. Thus, prisoners write as witnesses of those things that either happen to them or others around them. Millet (1994) in her book, *The Politics of Cruelty: An Essay on the Literature of Political Imprisonment*, discusses how political prisoners in South Africa represent their experience of violence and other forms of human rights abuse in their narratives. The critic uses the term “*temoignage*”: the literature of the witness, the one who has been there, sees it, knows” (15) to situate literature of incarceration in the category of autobiographies of the victims of the acts of state terrorism. To this



end, prisoners' writings emerge as narratives of truth-telling of their feelings about their particular countries' system of justice and mechanism of penology.

It should be underscored that prison writing is not only characterized by the writers' concern with the nature and meaning of human existence, there is also the motif of survival. Prisoners express their determination to survive the horrors of incarceration in their writings. In her study of the prison memoirs of Soyinka and Breytenbach, Diminitriu (2000) confirms that "survival is a major theme of prison writing" and that prison writing is a back translation of daily suffering into one's own higher vision of the self (94). This position, as the study discovers, reinforces the widely held notion that imprisonment hardly succeeds in its intent of silencing or more or less rehabilitating prisoners of conscience, instead, it often serves to radicalize and harden their ideological and oppositional stances. This explains why prison-authors often foreground the imagery of birds, the sun, the moon and the stars in their expressions. They also attempt to endure the harsh realities of prison life which they consider as a process of physical and spiritual form of self-renewal.

Another critical area of self-expression in African prison narratives is history. African political inmates write with a new keen sense of the history of the social and political exigencies of their particular milieu. In a political prison text, there are usually two versions of what happened. We have the dominant official version of historical events, which is circulated as the master narrative of national histories. Then, we have the narrative of self of a political inmate, which is regarded as a marginal unofficial or alternative version of the master narrative that comes in the form of state laws and penal codes, which a prisoner of conscience might have disregarded or flouted as a result of his political conviction and social vision. To this end, political prison writings are regarded as 'counter-discourses of official versions of national narratives. Davies (1990) makes the notion of 'counter-discourses' and 'unofficial marginal narrative' clearer, in the way he describes the historical context which conditions the artistic texture of a prison narrative. In describing the dehumanizing condition of a prison facility as marginal, he contends that "it is necessary to understand those ideas which had been nurtured by prison and to understand prison as a school for writers. We need to understand the imprisoned intellectual as writing not only in a margin of the society that imprisons but also in the margin of the prison itself" (4). Lovesey (1995) also considers the usefulness of the African prison diary in reshaping the official version of national histories. In his

examination of Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Ngugi's *Detained*, and Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of Albino Terrorist*, Lovesey regards the African prison diary as an allegory of "the structuring of national histories" and affirms that "the African prison diary brushes against the grain of official histories of the prisoner's activities, it re-writes official master narratives of national history" (38). It is in this light that we note the relevance of Mapanje's introductory notes to *Gathering Seaweed – African Prison Writing* (2002). The writer underscores the historical value of African prison narratives. He contends that:

The fragments of prison experiences gathered here have historical relevance, they constitute a defiant recasting of Africa's history through the eyes of some of its finest hostages, it is also an indelible record of the original growth and maturity of the struggle for the restitution of human dignity and integrity, justice and peace on the African continent. (XIV)

Therefore, history in African prison writing is not just seen as a mere record of historical events in a linear sequence, but it manifests as a text of other discourses and social practices.

Objectives of Teaching Literature of Incarceration

This research is essentially an engagement with the poetics of African prison writing as a distinct literary component of African literature. According to Preminger and Brogan (1993), poetics denotes the theory of literature or literary discourse (925). In a specific sense, poetics is a systematic theory of literature which attempts to define the nature of literature, in this case, literature of incarceration, "its kind and forms, its resources of device and structure, its governing principles, the functions that distinguish it from other arms, the condition under which it exists and its effect(s) on readers" (Jegede 2005:133). The study views African literature of incarceration as a hallmark, but still a critically neglected sub-genre. It aligns with Wawanjiru's (2010) proposition that it would be "fallacious and inadequate to study the body that is African literature without mentioning prison writings and the writers who have been so prolific in prison and captured insightful thematic concerns in Kenya and the continent at large" (2).



It is in this light that this research attempts to further explore and boldly inscribe literature of incarceration into the reading paradigm of African literature in the way the discipline has incorporated other sub-genres on ‘war writings’, ‘children’s literature’, ‘women’s literature’ and even ‘travel writings’. Larson (2010), in his critique of the prison writings of Wole Soyinka, Martin Luther King (Jr.), Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson states that:

A critical study of prison writing deals with an extant, global genre defined by the subject and the relevant experience of its authors. In this nominal sense, we can speak of ‘prison writings’ as truthfully as we do of ‘war writings’ or ‘travel writing’ or even of ‘food writing’ (2)

Thus, in order to broaden the critical enterprise of defining the meaning of African Literature, this study critically examines African prison writing in terms of matter and manner of commitment. The study further confirms the interplay between the place of confinement as context for composing and writing, and the prison text as a platform for evoking images, symbols and myths.

A study such as this could also be useful to policymakers in the Ministry of Education, particularly in Nigeria. For example, literature of incarceration could be incorporated into the course modules of students in the school of humanities in the country’s higher institutions of learning. Mapanje’s model of the study of the discourse of literature incarceration at the University of Leeds could be followed. With particular reference to the intellectual impact of the course on the students, Mapanje says:

The module was so popular a record number of students registered for it...at the end of the semester, some students claimed they had found the study of the literature of witness more relevant to the current discourse on justice, torture, survival, truth and reconciliation than they had anticipated. Others claimed that the module helped them gain an understanding of the concerns of asylum seekers, immigration authorities and human rights organizations... (2002:234)

To this end, literature on incarceration could for a start be inaugurated as a course module for undergraduates in the nation’s correctional facilities. For this purpose, the National Open University (NOUN) comes to the fore as the nation’s vanguard of the Open Distance Learning System (ODLS). From the premise of the issues raised in this project, undertaking a course in confinement literature would impact positively the system of what scholars on the sociology of prison life label as ‘Prisonisation’ (Deborah Drake et al 2015). It would for instance further open windows of artistic writing for incarcerated students to restore their self-image and humanity.

Theoretical Paradigms

On African prison writing, notable scholars have advocated for a more sustained scholarly investigation of this category of literary texts. Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1985) in dismissing the scepticism of Bahadur Tejani’s view about the literariness or otherwise of Brutus’ prison poetry, contends in “The Song of the Caged Bird: Contemporary African Prison Poetry” that “Dennis Brutus, Okot p’ Bitek and Wole Soyinka represent the essence of African prison poetry ... the burden of their song is identical, prison life is horrible, condemnable and unacceptable” (77). Lovesey (1995) also argues “out of the discourses of African colonialism and neo-colonialism arises the prison diary which allegorises the structuring of national histories. It is one of the encoding genres of certain African literature” (5). Olaniyan and Quayson (2013) in their introductory notes to the section on “Creativity in / and Adversarial contexts” in *African Literature - An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* encapsulate the arguments of these scholars and others such as Biodun Jeyifo (2004), Sophie Ogwude (2008) and Randa Abou- Bakr (2009). They maintain that:

African Literature and Literary studies propose another theory much more valid for many parts of the world today of the complex intersection of adversarial contexts and the flowering of the creative muse...one dirty little secret of the African literary tradition is the flourishing of the form of writing we could call writers’ prison diaries; that is poems, fictional and non-fictional (prose and dramatic



works by writers about their experience in the jail of the postcolonial states as political prisoners). (139)

Loan Davies' *Writers in Prison*. (1990) offers us a critical template that directs us to go beyond the mere recognition of the literary and intellectual significance of writing that owes something to imprisonment and its forms of classification. Instead, the critic directs us towards theoretical issues that help us to understand “the forms that prison writing takes, its content and how the prison experience might be read” (3). Davies also traces the origins of much of Western recorded (text) history and civilization to the prison experience of intellectuals and writers. He affirms:

Much of the influential literature of Judeo-Christian civilization was composed under conditions of incarceration or involuntary exile. Indeed, the Bible itself is a product of both prison and exile and the Platonic dialogues, notably *Crito*, *Apology* and *Phaedrus* is centred around the trial, imprisonment and execution of Socrates. It is impossible to understand Occidental thought without recognising the central significance of prison and banishment in its theoretical and literary composition. (3)

Essentially, Davies' discovery of the universality of prison experience through his analysis of the writings of incarcerated intellectuals of the Western culture is relevant to the focus of this research. In the context of African prison writings, the study notes the critic's postulation of the “dialectical relationship between the imagination of incarcerated writers writing not only in margin of the society that imprisons but also in a margin of the prison itself” (4).

The influence of Michel Foucault in understanding the interdisciplinary dimension of key parameters of Cultural Studies, especially on the aspect of prison as an institution of penology cannot be overemphasized. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) examines the birth of the prison with a particular focus on the modern penal system. His study is important because of his proposition that the modern penal system has been

established as a means by which to punish and that the punishment involves the supervision and organization of bodies in time and space.

Discipline and Punish are cross-generic and have applications to philosophy, history and criminology. Foucault's theory of the prison as a cultural construct and code provides a useful insight into the expressive motifs of African literature on incarceration. In his analysis, the critic further points out that the main aim of imprisonment is to punish but to order punishment, one must have power and this power comes in part from knowledge. Consequently, "the punishment in and through imprisonment, and the prison system" is directed at the prisoner's body, which in the long run is targeted at reforming the prisoner.

Another aspect of Foucault's philosophy is his model of prison as a physical place of penology. In this respect, the critic based his model of prison on Jeremy Bentham's concept of "**Panopticon**":

Bentham's Panopticon is the architectural figure of composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheral the building is divided into cells, each of which extends the the whole width of the building... All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a worker, a patient, a condemned man or a schoolboy. (1977:199)

Remarkably, the political setting in which Foucault based his philosophy of the panopticon was not an unjust political system that turned the majority of the population into criminals and dissidents. Rather, the theorist was more concerned about the "marginalized minority; homosexuals, the criminally insane, the deviant, and those who fell foul of society's norms" (Oswald, 2007:61). In this study, Foucault's discussion of the prison system is used strategically to provide insights into the motifs of African prison literature.



This study also views what Foucault has described as discursive strategies on the ‘concept of a discourse’, ‘consolidation of power and knowledge’ and ‘the question of the human subject’ Williams 2011:117) as vital to the classification of prison writings as texts that new historicists regard as “resolutely anti-establishment, always implicitly on the side of the liberal side of personal freedom and accepting and celebrating all forms of difference and deviance” (Barry: 175).

I also mention Foucault’s concept of Bentham’s Panopticon to foreground the existential matters of violence, death, torture and trauma which characterize the narratives of self-expression of prison experience by some African writers.

Bruce Franklin’s *The Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1989) identifies Afro-American and Euro-American prison writing as constituting the two formative traditions of the United States of America’s prison culture. The text particularly exposes the racist undertones of the American criminal justice system and its method of penology. Both Davies’ and Franklin’s postulations shed light on the interconnections and specificities of societal context, the prisoner and the prison.

In Barred: Women, Writing and Political Detention (1992) Barbara Harlow focuses on the expressive motifs of political prison writings. The critic foregrounds the writings of female political inmates from sociological and psychological perspectives. For Waliaula (2009:24), “the text highlights the technologisation of torture contribution in the 20th century and its attack on the person and the social body”. Another aspect of Harlow’s contribution to the discourse of prison literature is her generic definition of what constitutes prison writing. Harlow focuses on narratives of prisoners of conscience to make a distinction between what she calls ‘representation of prison in writing; and “the place of writing in prison” (1992:4). This distinction sheds light on narratives that mirror carceral culture as experiential reality and the

narratives that merely represent prison experience as a fictional re-creation of social reality.

Paul Gready's *Autobiography and the Power of Writing: Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era* (1993) written against the backdrop of the apartheid system in South Africa, examines the importance of political prisoners' artistic expressions as acts of political resistance. Gready's argument that "autobiographical prison writing is the most comprehensive articulation of this oppositional power of writing" (399) provides insight into why artistic commitment is a tool for self-expression for African-incarcerated writers. In his study of the prison memoirs of South African writers such as Breytenbach, M. Dingake, M. Diamini, Ruth First, Emma Mashinini and Albie Sachs, Gready affirms that "the power of writing is a contested arena. Prisoners write to restore a sense of self and world, to reclaim the truth... to seek empowerment in an oppositional power of writing" (399). Because of this perspective, Gready's discourse aligns with the proposition of this study that commitment to the craft of writing for incarcerated intellectuals is an act of self-expression for witnessing and truth-telling "of the crucible of incarceration with its textures of violence, pain and suffering seems universal to demand factually insistent narratives" (490). Gready's article is also important because it examines other issues that are common to most prison writing: the ideas of gender, language, self-image and identity, racism and violence found within the prison system and the writing of prison authors.

Following Frederic Jameson's (1986) formulation of 'Third World literature as a national allegory', Lovesey's "Chained Letters: African Prison Diaries and National Allegory" (1995) is a more expanded critique of African Prison literary texts as counter texts to official histories. The critic explores Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Ngugi's *Detained* and Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of Abino Terrorist* to consider the African prison diary as an allegory of the structuring of national histories: He says:

The African prison diary brushes against the grain of official histories of the prisoner's activities, it re-writes



official master narratives of national history... The writer reflects on the process by which official and un-official colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial histories are encoded. (37-38)

In place of the foregoing, Lovesey argues that the imprisonment of African political activists is the “incarceration of the creative national spirit seeking to define and celebrate national freedom” (32). In essence, Lovesey’s essay showcases how the subject of artistic commitment for African political detainees is an avenue for them “to confront the linguistic debasement of the prison environment, the unwillingness to define the conditions of imprisonment and the offer of release for silence. The prison diary writes the story of the nation’s contradictions from within its very centre” (32). Lovesey’s essay is important because it also compares the prison diary to other forms of prison writing and the use of metaphor, which is a common peculiar artistic feature of prison writings.

In “Politics and Human Rights in Non-fiction Prison Literature”, Ogwude (2008), explores the political contexts that generate non-fiction prison texts in the countries of Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria respectively. The critic relates political context to the various stages of repressive states of governance in the continent (72). In her overview of Ngugi’s *Detained*, Soyinka’s *The Man Died*, and Saro-Wiwa’s *A Month and a Day*, Ogwude highlights the status of non-fiction as an artistic mode to reach the common man. According to her, “These works are intended to communicate with ordinary people, the ultimate purpose being to correct and to urge better governance of the African nation-states of Nigeria and Kenya” (73). Consequently, the essay brings to the fore the issue of preventive detention for patriotic African writers and how it violates every single “substantive basic human right; the right to life, liberty, health and expression (78). Ogwude highlights the writers’ artistic response to their ordeal. She contends:

Like all political prisoners, they write in defiance of oppressive regimes. Writing helped to keep the demons

of the mind at bay and they knew that they had to keep their minds and heart together and protected from the brutality of near demonic state. (83)

Ogwude's essay is important to the aspect of self-expression in this study as it relates the subject of imprisonment to politics and human rights, particularly in countries like Kenya and Nigeria.

Moreover, to leverage Ogwude's appellation of non-fiction as "New Journalism", the study examines Chris Dunton's "Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror: Strategies of Representation in Nigerian Prison Writing*" (2005). In the essay, Dunton focuses on the strategies of representation in Nigerian Prison writing using the memoir of the female Nigerian journalist, Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror*. The critic examines Anyanwu's autobiographical narrative in the light of Soyinka and Saro-Wiwa's prison diaries. The essay foregrounds their common characteristic concerns and strategies of representation.

Remarkably, Kasimi Djiman's "Prison Literature as Historiography: Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*" offers a theoretical basis for how prison writing might be read. The essay aims at "acquainting students with the fundamentals of what is known as "prison literature", drawing on the features of narratology as postulated by Gerard Genette. In the work, the critic outlines the generic significations of the "paratext, intertext, the narrative voice, as well as the plot" evinced outside and within to produce *The Man, Died* as a document of the sad history of the Nigerian civil war (1967 – 1970). (<https://www.ufhb-dptanglaisis.com>).

Another important book we consider useful in understanding the poetics of African prison writing is Rachel Knigton's monograph *Writing the Prison in African Literature* (2019). Using the comparative and transnational approach, the scholar examines selected prison memoirs of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ruth First, Wole Soyinka, Nawa El Saadawi and Jack Mapanje and highlights the various artistic tools which the writers engaged to define



the prison and how the institution affects their mind, body and imagination as political detainees.

These research works are also in tandem with Doran Larson’s “Towards a Prison Poetics: Prisoners Writing (Criticism and Interpretation)” (2010) in which he examines Martin Luther King Jr’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Wole Soyinka’s *The Man Died*, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* and George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*. He confirms that “by analysing tropic veins common to all prison texts, we discover a generically coherent body of literature as germane to discussions of justice generally as the body of law or penology” (1).

The foregoing aforementioned texts point to the direction of identifying a coherent body of texts we could generally classify as Nigerian prison literature, which I believe, should include Obafemi Awolowo’s *My March Through Prison*, Olusegun Obasanjo’s *This Animal Called Man*, Kunle Ajibade’s *Jailed For Life*, Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s “Animal Can’t Dash Me Human Rights” (cited in *Gathering Seaweed – African Prison Writing* 313) and Ogaga Ifowodo’s “A Room Of My Own” (*Gathering Seaweed – African Prison Writing* 128-135). We also have Chris Abani’s *Kalakuta Republic* (2000) (cited in Kasimi Dijiman’s “Prison Literature as Historiography: Wole Soyinka’s *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*”. (<https://www.ufhb-dptanglais.com>))

In the area of teaching the literature of confinement as a course, this study considers Marc Larmont Hill’s “A World Without Prisons: Teaching Confinement Literature and The Promise of Prison Abolition” (2013) an important article. Hill says “Exposing students to canonical and contemporary slavery, political, personal and non-carceral confinement literature provides a fecund space for discussing important issues of social justice and analyzing literature through new lenses” (19).

To this end, the critic identifies the genres of literature that should be categorized and taught as confinement literature. In Hill’s evaluation, slave

narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and Fredrick Douglas' *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglas* provide both classic and accessible examples of confinement literature. He maintains that slavery confinement literature serves as a springboard for drawing parallels between slavery and modern-day methods of imprisonment. Hill also mentions a range of philosophical and religious texts that can be used to expand students' understanding of political confinement. Examples include the "Book of Revelations" written by the Apostle John as a prisoner of Rome on the Island of Patmos, and Plato's *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo* which details the trial, prosecution and execution of Socrates as a result of his unconventional beliefs and teachings. In essence, teaching the literature of confinement, especially as artistic works of self-expression, provides a window of opportunity for educators to emphasize, as Hill says, "restoration over retribution, investment over punishment and humanization over criminalization" (2013:23).

Conclusion

The definitive artistic and thematic features that have emerged from the narratives of self of personal prison experience by some African writers will hopefully form reference points for other researchers in their analysis and discourses of the emerging narratives of the experience of human captivity from other sites of confinement such as kidnappers' and human traffickers' jail-houses. In addition, this study, hopefully, shall raise a new consciousness in the approach to analysis of African autobiographical narratives of self-witnessing and truth-telling as a way of re-assessment of the poetics of African literature as a regional world literature of the 21st century. Above all, political prison writings belong to a version of the narratives of telling what happened inside a purposely closed and guarded social space of the experience of human atrocity, and they deserve to be heard not only for their evidentiary value but for their artistic beauty and symbolism. Prisoners of conscience write with a sense of moral and political commitment to re-write what the state authority has written and finalised concerning them.



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