
PRISON LITERATURE IN PERSPECTIVE: A STUDY OF THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY AS A PRISON NARRATIVE

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Abstract:

Among all the works of literature produced in different prisons of the world across the human history, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (ca.524) holds a prominent position. Boethius was not the first person in human history to have been incarcerated for his beliefs and work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, belongs to an extremely rich tradition of writing, now called Prison Literature. Boethius was a learned man who had profound knowledge of Christian traditions and was also well-versed in Classic literature; however, he found himself in the dark chambers of prison awaiting the king's order for his execution regardless of the status and position he had before. While he was in the prison, he did not lose his nerves. Lady Philosophy visited him as a source of hope as he went on meditating and reflecting on life and its different shades. Prison actually became the place where he could think about some of the most important questions that human beings have ever asked about the nature of good and evil, providence and free will and time and eternity; thus, the prison becomes a place where Boethius is physically in chains but he enjoys the liberty and freedom through his unquenchable imagination. The present paper is an attempt to read *The Consolation of Philosophy* as a piece of prison literature. An attempt shall be made to look into the mind of the author for understanding the depths that his work attains in an otherwise highly restraining and controlling atmosphere.

Keywords: Prison Literature, Boethius, Prison, Imagination and Freedom.

Introduction

Prison Literature is not something new in human history. It is as old as the human history itself. Since the dawn of human civilization, the powerful people, clans, families, tribes and very recently states and empires have been subjecting their opponents to incarceration, control and systematic restraint. The history of homo sapiens has been a history of conflict; and, the conflicts of various and varied natures have always given birth to such circumstances where a state, an empire, a powerful tribe or a clan has crushed its enemy, real or imaginary, through imprisonment and incarceration. Prison, of course, is a place where a human being or an animal loses freedom and dignity, which he is entitled to as a normal citizen of the world. It is also a place where a human being is 'marked' as someone who is a danger for the outside world; therefore, supposed to be isolated from the society to whose peace and stability he is a threat. Prison is a site for denial and negation. A class of human beings is with a legal justification subjected to denial of all those rights which a human being outside the prison enjoys; in fact, the prisoner is subjected to negation of his normal identity. Psychologically speaking, Prison is a place of total torment designed by homo sapiens for the reform of such fellow human beings who they believe are a threat to peace, stability, law and order or are non-conformists to a dominant belief system or political structure. As prisons could be formal as well informal, since the dawn of human civilization prisons have been there. Amidst restrictions, control, chains, torture and denial of normal life, is it possible that human beings could afford to be imaginative, creative and uplifted in spiritual domain? One of the most illuminating answers to this question is offered by Prison Literature.

What is Prison Literature? It is the body of fictional and non-fictional work that incarcerated writers and thinkers have produced behind the bars. Poetry, novels, plays, letters and much of non-fictional staff is now referred to as Prison Literature or studied as Prison Literature. Such a literary or non-literary work could be aimed at resistance, expression of one's feelings and thoughts about different things, love and anguish, memory and loss, intense reflection or imaginary flight from the physical chains or the prisons walls. It could be also an act of self-assertion aimed at the defiance of charges leveled against the prisoner. What is worth noting is that a prison writer has always been a sensitive soul who uses the power of writing to express his anguish or give a new meaning to his ongoing crisis; it won't be out of place to state that human beings have always been meaning-making species as whatever conditions they live in they use their language to create new meanings out of that physically and mentally depressing condition, thereby defying the power that be by creating a new world out of the system of control and power of denial and annihilation. Prison Literature,

throughout the world, is an expression of all these themes. Language, thus, does not remain a mere tool of expression for a prisoner; it, rather, becomes a consolation also for the prisoner. Noted scholar of Prison Literature, Rivkah Zim, thus defines Prison Literature in her book *The Consolation of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethius to Primo Levi* (2014):

Resistance may sometime enhance chances of survival, but this seldom sufficient; for personal or political reasons, the persecuted captive may decide one must survive morally or be spiritually intact, which is why some prisoners regard suicide as a paradoxical means of self-preservation; similarly, martyrdom. Such prisoners have always used various means to preserve and defend themselves against corrosion of fear, uncertainty and disinformation. Writing is one of the most important and durable of these methods. In captivity, writing is often a continuation of the author's ordinary vocation, but confinement and repression also prompt dissidents to speak out, either in self-defense or for their cause. Many prisoners wrote personal accounts that interpret their past, recorded present interrogations or suffering, and preserve memorial images of themselves and others as historic testimony." (Zim, 1)

A similar definition is found in Wringer who in his paper "I'jaam, An Iraqi Rhapsody: Defying Violence with Words" writes that "Prison Literature is a genre in which authors usually express their individual or collective struggle against an oppressive regime. In this way, prison literature could be regarded as a literary testimony of oppression and resistance that can clarify the specific facets of violence within a particular socio-political context" (Wringer, 2019,1); and Clair Westallin her edited book on prison writing titled *Prison Writing and the Literary World: Imprisonment, Institutionalization and Questions of Literary Practice* notes that "Prison writing in its varying modes can also provide opportunities for the incarcerated to express themselves, critique the system of detention, and document their struggle for survival and sanity." (Kelley and Claire 2021, 1); and, Harlow Barbara in her seminal work titled *Resistance Literature* offers a similar kind of definition as she states that prison writing mainly seeks a "re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of collective enterprise and struggle...they are not written for the sake of book of one's own, but rather they are collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle." (Harlow, 1987, 120)

Thus, self-preservation, survival, meaning-making, self-assertion, freedom, consolation, defiance and other such issues are some of the most common features of Prison Writing. What, however, could be the most illuminating feature about prison writing is the educational value that it offers not only for the incarcerated but the incarcerating agency of power as well; thus, prison writing could be actually seen as a silent dialogue between the powerful and the powerless, wherein the incarcerated powerful attempts at educating the powerful and seeking his enlightenment through a written dialogue which in a way subverts the understanding of the powerful by showing him the alternative truth of things and transitorizes of all the ephemeral realities. If seen in this way, it is not only the writer's individual self that becomes important it is the self of the other as well that is given recognition and whose modification is sought latently or manifestly. The present paper is an attempt to read Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* as a piece of prison writing that not only lights up the soul of its writer but goes on to light up the king who produces and manufactures the chains of the author.

Journey from darkness to light in *The Consolation of Philosophy*

The Consolation of Philosophy is one of the most lyric and profoundest works in literature, philosophy and theology. This work was not written by the author in a library or at home while enjoying the best of his leisure time; it was rather produced when in the words of Rivkah Zim "Power Politics, court intrigue, forged letters, and no opportunity to mount a defense against lying informers led Boethius, by his own account, to a death sentence in a 'lonely place of banishment'" (Zim, 26); Boethius "inspired hatred for 'freely following his conscience' to 'resist evil' and 'defend justice'" (Zim, 26); and, in such circumstances and such a dark phase of life, the internal light of Boethius inspired him to write *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a work that not only consoled the afflicted soul of Boethius but also became a magnum opus work of enlightenment, education and healing for hundreds and thousands of prison writers across the human history and cultures. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a clear indication of the deep learning that Boethius had of the Classical Literature, Philosophy and religious traditions; what, however, is more important and interesting about this work as a piece of Prison Literature is the capability of Boethius to overcome the darkness of the prison with the help of his internal light which not only strengthened his resilience but also enhanced his meaning-making potential in the darkest phase of life. The work is, thus, one of the most powerful documents of education and of journey from darkness to light; or, to quote Rivkah Zim:

Boethius's text established many of the themes and forms that spoke to and for later writers in prison. These include: consolation from the expressive power of ordered lyric meters set against the disorder of injustice and suffering in the real world; the importance of a well-stocked mind and imagination in maintaining resistance to oppression (memories of literature, learning, and life sustain the prisoner; images of nature mirror the order of creation and bring the beauty of the

external, visible world into the confines of the prison); the expressive potential of paradox in reconciling apparent contraries and celebrating the creativity that may arise under situations of adversity 'a process of gain by loss'. (Zim, 27)

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca.480-ca.425) was a man of letters and was "allied by birth, upbringing, and marriage with the last patrician families of ancient Rome" (Zim, 22); with such a background of lineage and learning tastes, he was poles apart from many of his contemporaries in the ruling class, "most of whom had come to power with the Ostrogoths- a barbarian nation-during Boethius's life time"(ibid). Boethius's learning and tastes of scholarship were classic through and through and inclined towards the golden age. He nurtured the ambition of reviving the contemporary Latin learning and would want to use commentaries on Plato and Aristotle as the modal for the revival of contemporary knowledge system. Having been well-versed in Greek philosophy and literature and owing to his idealization of Greek culture and ancient Roman institutions came to carry political implications for Boethius and cost him his life. Rivkah Zim gives the account of his imprisonment in these words:

By 522 he was Master of the Offices-a position comparable to head of the civil service-and the most powerful Roman in Theodoric's administration of the Western Roman Empire. But such good fortune was short-lived. Since Theodoric ruled Italy under the nominal, but increasingly tenuous, control of Constantinople, loyalty to the old Roman imperial culture (by this time vested in the Greek-speaking eastern empire), might be construed as political disloyalty to the new order. Boethius claimed that his unspecified actions in defense of the Senate-a bastion of patrician Roman interests-at a time of crisis in relations between the eastern and western parts of the empire, had laid him open to a charge of treason (ca.523-524). This charge led to his disgrace, exile, and execution at Pavia. Details of the conspiracy charges and, similarly, of the actual conditions under which he was held in Pavia are uncertain. Yet he appears to have had opportunities to write one last work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in which he drew on earlier cultural memories, personal experience, and scholarship. (Zim, 28)

Adversity was thus converted into an opportunity by Boethius. The external darkness of the prison cell was lit up by the internal light of Boethius. The prisoner Boethius sought freedom from chains through his imagination wherein he would enjoy dialogues with the best of advisors, lady Philosophy, thereby breaking the monotony of the prison and lighting up its darkness. Rivkah Zim would have it that " This Prisoner's situation reflects the unjust persecution of a righteous individual who says he went into politics because he thought that he could make a difference in public life by applying philosophical principles"(Zim 23); by doing so he would want to benefit others, which, in other words would mean opposition of selfish and unprincipled men in the corridors of power; an act which would lead him to prison, the darkness where the light of *The Consolation of Philosophy* was germinated.

The Consolation of Philosophy opens with a complaint by the prisoner who is emotionally charged and is not able to cope up with his present state, his fall from office and the subsequent prison life. The prisoner laments that " in the effort to keep his conscience clear and do what was lawful and right, he offended a lot of people who were more powerful than he was"(Zim 29); this is, indeed, something perennial in politics of resistance and something which makes Boethius in the league of martyrs like Socrates whose proclamation is loud and clear that it is sinful " to assent to a lie or to obscure the truth" (Zim 29); the prisoner (Boethius) makes it clear that he had been punished for the crime " to protect Roman liberties"(p.14)and pours his heart out against the sentence in these words: " Whatever I may have done, I did not deserve to be treated in this way for a charge such as this. My accusers know that this is all nonsense, and they dress up their accusations with the further slander that I committed some kind of sacrilege in campaigning for high office" (p.16)". With this emotional complaint begins *The Consolation of Philosophy* but the forthcoming pages do not show a man grieving and grunting in pain, rather Boethius appears to have overcome the pain to such an extent that he is now absorbed and lost in ideas that reflect self-sufficiency, resilience, forbearance and highly reliable as after the initial complaint of suffering and pain he goes on to create " his second persona-a surreal feminine personification of his life's vocation, the love of wisdom: Philosophy"(Zim,24). Lady Philosophy comes at a stage when the Prisoner needs to be brought back to his senses and requires be comforting and healing. The prisoner is told that "It is time for healing, not lamenting" (Zim, 30); in other words, imagination and writing become a source of healing for prison writers in general as it happens with Boethius. Professor Rivkah Zim explains the scene in these words:

He is lost, she decides, because he has forgotten who he is. Yet the prisoner soon recognizes this stern but kindly authority figure as his former nurse. She sits on his bed, wipes the tears from his eyes, and identifies him as the man "brought up on the milk of my learning": a philosopher. The prisoner is struck dumb with amazement, and we, as readers, are also intrigued and enchanted as she attempts to clear the "blinding cloud of worldly concern" from his eyes. She is a commanding yet compassionate presence, and the initial impact she has on the Prisoner (and Boethius's readers) retain its force throughout the work. She towers over him (as his intellectual superior), and after a while he recognizes the lady Philosophy, his first and last teacher. (Zim, 30)

Writing in the form of poetry, novel, drama or in non-fictional mode thus actually become a therapy for the tormented soul of a prisoner, as it enables him to share his thoughts and feelings with the outside world from which he stands cut off. The dialogues between the Lady Philosophy and the Prisoner in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, though imaginative in nature, are also a dialogue of the Prisoner with the outside world; in fact, a subtle way of educating the uneducated because of whom a learned man like Boethius falls behind the bars. These dialogues with the Lady Philosophy are also a consolation for everything that he loses and restorative as well; therefore, the torment of loss, memory, agonies of the prison and exile are curbed to damage the internal peace and self-awareness of the Prisoner who is brought back literally and figuratively to himself. As he regains his composure, he learns and learns very fast from the teacher, the Lady Philosophy. The learning of the Prisoner is not of the things and ideas that are new to him; it is rather of the ideas that he had momentarily lost sight of because of the pain and agony of the prison and his fall from grace; therefore, as he regains his composure, philosophical ideas, poetry and all the sublime ideas that he had read and absorbed throughout his life come back to him as if they were tangible reels in front of him. One may, for example, consider this advice of the Lady Philosophy that the Prisoner receives: "Avoid vice...and cultivate virtue; lift up your mind to the right kind of hope, and put forth humble prayers on high. A great necessity is laid upon you, if you will be honest with yourself, a great necessity to be good, since you live in the sight of a judge who sees all things" (Boethius, 175).

There actually lies not only therapy and healing for the bruised soul of the Prisoner but also a message of self-restoration aimed at reminding the Prisoner that light is born and nourished in darkness itself provides one is self-aware and honest with one's self; similarly, there is a reassurance also "since you live in the sight of a judge who sees all things" (Boethius 137) hence no scope for worries and no need to be under the pressure of fear and guilt.

Written in sections of alternating prose and poetry, *The Consolation of Philosophy* begins with the description of the conditions in which Boethius wrote the book; in prison cell while he was waiting for his execution by the authorities for the sin that he had never committed. He is actually miserable in such a condition but the Lady Philosophy brings joy to him through his imaginative engagement with his life-long love of philosophy and theology.

As Boethius call on the Muses to help him writing such poetry as would aptly capture his despair, an "awe-inspiring" female figure, the Lady Philosophy, suddenly shows up and kicks the Muses out of his room; she reveals herself as Lady Philosophy and helps Boethius in remembering his former self as a serious student of Philosophy; as a result of which Boethius, weeping upon being reminded of his love for Philosophy before he landed in the Prison, is cheered up and considers Philosophy's reappearance in his life like sunlight peering out of the sky after a thunderstorm.

The Lady Philosophy declares to Boethius that the wise people have always been persecuted "by the forces of evil" for their beliefs; in other words, she reminds him that he is in the league of Socrates, Mansur Hallaj and all such great men of human history who were persecuted for their ideas by their own people; such a statement in itself is a healing for the prisoner further reinforced by this statement of the Lady that "God the Creator watches over" the Universe, including human beings and thus the assurance that his misfortune is "not the haphazard of chance."

Fortune happens to be the subject of their discussion in Book 2 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Fortune is personified as a sadistic goddess who gleefully turns a "wheel of chance", thereby randomly propelling people upward to success or downward to ruin; in other words, Boethius is made to understand that fortune being something random he should not take his condemnation and death sentence personally; or, in other words, he is guided to develop a negative capability towards misfortune and sorrow and develop a welcoming attitude towards the same if he wants to get rid of the pain that the condemnation has brought upon him; furthermore, the world being a 'vale of soul making', adversities of this type, if accepted and received with open arms, are only going to lift him spiritually and intellectually, hence a consolation in itself. The chapter ends with this message that Fortune and the material possessions she brings to a man are simply irrelevant to the actual achievement of happiness or happiness in the real sense, neither good nor bad by itself, but serve as a useful reminder to people that happiness is actually transitory and fragile in nature.

As the discussion proceeds, in Book 3 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius and Lady Philosophy break down the nature of happiness and finally come to this conclusion that true happiness of a person depends on his relationship with God. Lady Philosophy contends that as every human being wants to be happy and happiness "leaves nothing more to be desired" (Boethius 48) because "it contains in itself all that is good"; (Boethius 48) people, in their quest for happiness, pursue five things- "wealth, position, power, fame and pleasure"; (Boethius 49) however, all these things do not actually make people happy as wealth does not solve all of man's issues and enhance and intensify his greed for more wealth, thereby making him dependent upon things that are lowly in nature; political power and positions turn on the worst of instincts, thereby making powerful people "discredit" the offices they hold; thus making the powerful

paranoid about losing their power, which is more a curse than a blessing; similarly, fame is generally based on “false opinions” of people and goes to the most “shameful” people, not the most virtuous; and lastly, as for as pleasure-seeking is concerned, it is lowly and animalistic in nature and is bound to lead a man to “great illness and unbearable pain”; therefore, if one has to look for true happiness, Lady Philosophy advises Boethius, then he has to look for and develop complete “self-sufficiency”, which would have “wealth, position, power, fame and pleasure” (Boethius 49) but only as a unity as pursuit of happiness through only one of them can throw people out of balance and lead them to give up others.

How does one develop a holistic attitude towards all of them? What does it take a man to develop the attitude of Unity for the pursuit of “true” kind of happiness? Lady Philosophy reminds Boethius of Plato who argues that God is the “supreme good” in the universe and the supreme good is the same as the sum of absolute “sufficiency, power, glory, reverence and happiness.” (Boethius 64) As God is all these things, it naturally follows that He alone is “perfect happiness”; and, it also means that one can only find true happiness by unifying oneself with God, by seeking His refuge in His “shining light “and by seeking to understand the truth Him as He “regulates all things” (Boethius 79) in the Universe, which act in “harmony and accord” (Boethius 80) with Him; therefore, it naturally follows that man has to be satisfied and content with His scheme of things and has to accept His decisions even though there might be an adversity apparently, there is bound to be His mercy and goodness in some other form. Chapter after chapter, Philosophy, thus, continues to educate, console and heal Boethius by unveiling the nature of true happiness which cannot be caged and controlled in worst of the situations.

As Philosophy goes on unveiling the true nature of happiness to Boethius, he feels “very happy” about Philosophy; in fact, such is the effect of healing words of Philosophy, the apparent adversity that Boethius is confronted with is immediately dispelled; however, there arises in the mind of Boethius a doubt about God in Book 4 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*: if God is all-merciful, all-knowing and absolutely benevolent, why does then Evil and sufferings exist in the world, something which resonates with his own condition. Philosophy responds to the question by saying that evil is the same as weakness because it is unnatural, hence contrary to God; therefore, it naturally follows that wicked people have “weakness rather than strength”; (Boethius 91) were they strong like God, they would do what is good like God; therefore, if human beings are evil, they are so because they are weaker than God and because they are powerless in absolute sense of the word in comparison with God; in other words, evil is not something real; it is the sum of the errors people make while pursuing goodness and happiness in the wrong ways; thus, in the words of Philosophy, “evil is nothing” and evil people are subhuman so much so that when the evil are free to “achieve their desires”, (Boethius 92) this in itself is a punishment for them as such a pursuit make them less happy and when God unleashes His wrath upon the evil people He intends to set them on “the path to right”, thereby making them happier and more virtuous. With this explanation, Boethius proceeds to ask another very important question to Philosophy: Why God lets people err in the first place? Philosophy responds to the question by seeking his attention to God’s plan for the Universe, Providence and the way this plan plays out in time, Fate. According to Lady Philosophy, people can only see the temporal perspective of Fate and they tend to forget and ignore God’s purely benevolent Providence; for example, God can teach the virtuous “self-discovery through hardship”, or reward the evil so that they may learn to “abandon wickedness in the fear of losing happiness”; in fact, when people see others do evil, they would want “to be different from those they hate...and become virtuous”, (Boethius, 109) thereby making the point that “all fortune is certainly good” (Boethius, 111)but it is up to man how he takes it.

The correspondence of ideas thus continues chapter after chapter till Boethius asks the Lady Philosophy if God is responsible and has foreknowledge of everything that people will do, do people then really have free will. To this question, the Lady Philosophy answers that God knows and can know about the things that are going to happen without causing them to happen as God’s knowledge is greater than humans; He has divine intelligence and human beings are limited to reason and sense-perception alone; therefore, He can know what people are going to choose before they have chosen it. As God’s existence is “eternal”, it means He lives outside time; while people see past, present and future, God sees all things “as though they are happening in the present”; in other words, Philosophy contends that God is like “an eye that is present to watch” the whole universe at the same time; thus, having fully assuaged Boethius’s concerns about the nature of evil and human free will, Philosophy encourages him to pray to God, “avoid vice”, “cultivate virtue”, and “be good” since God is “a judge who sees all things.” ((Boethius 137)

Conclusion

The Consolation of Philosophy is thus a monumental piece of work in Philosophy, Literature and Theology authored by Boethius while he was condemned by authorities for his convictions and beliefs; as a piece of prison writing, it not only lights up the dark chambers of the prison for the writer but also proves the fact that while a man can be physically

incarcerated mind and imagination of human mind is something that no stonewalls can subject to any limits. As a piece of prison writing, *The Consolation of Philosophy* establishes the fact that human being is a communicating animal; if not allowed to engage himself in direct communication with fellow human beings, he can satisfy this need by engaging himself in a written communication with an imagined audience, thereby continuing to share his thoughts and feelings with a far more intensity than otherwise. Prison writings are testimonials of healing for the imprisoned writers; *The Consolation of Philosophy* proves this fact beyond any measure as it helps Boethius in his self-discovery which proves balm to his physical and mental injuries caused by the incarceration. Moreover, *The Consolation of Philosophy* is not only education and enlightenment for the incarcerated writer, it also educates and enlightens the audience that was going to read it after the publication; in other words, Boethius becomes a pioneer in the genre of Prison Literature which time and again reveals the fact that human mind/imagination is capable of anything and it can cultivate hope and flowers of meaning in the darkest of the dark adversities. In short, *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a consolation for an incarcerated soul which when reminded of the meaning of life converts adversity into an opportunity; and, in fact, such a piece of writing is an act of self-preservation by the writer and defiance also against the king who manufactures the chains for him.

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