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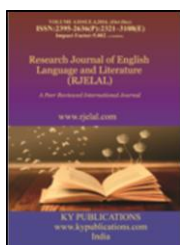
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PRISON AS A NEW FORM OF SLAVERY: AN ANALYSIS OF JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S  
*BROTHERS AND KEEPERS* AND GEORGE JACKSON'S *SOLEDAD BROTHER*

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ABSTRACT

To think that slavery days are over and people from minority communities in America don't face racial discrimination at the hands of public authorities would be self-delusional. Slavery still exists in the US but in a different form and with new mechanisms. Private prison system is one such mechanism through which racialized America is still maintained holding people of African-American and Hispanic origin in confinement for years irrespective of the fact whether there are actual crimes reported or not. High incarceration rate, nexus between the corporate companies and government agencies, racial prejudice against people of black underclass, dehumanization of prisoners in private prisons laced with racial bias and corporatization of prisons since 1980s which stresses on high occupancy rate in prisons regardless of the fact whether crimes are falling or not, are some of the critical issues that the paper seeks to address and examine with reference to two texts—*Brothers and Keepers* and *Soledad Brother* written by two African-American writers, John Edgar Wideman and George Jackson, respectively. Both texts offer a critical insight into the current private prison system in the US today and the oppression the inmates have to deal with on everyday basis.

**Keywords:** Private prison, occupancy rate, Neo-slavery, Dehumanization, Black Underclass

Introduction

If the antebellum period in America saw the sinister system of slavery holding people of African origin in confinement just because the color of their skin was black, today it is the prison system that revives the same mode of confinement. The dehumanization of African-Americans that one saw in the old slavery days seems to have been born yet again in another form today where, it can be argued, the prison system has subtly replaced the erstwhile system of slavery and is, in many ways, a new avatar of slavery of the past. The prison in contemporary America can be taken to symbolize the slave-holder

and the inmates behind the high fenced walls, the slaves. The only difference between these two forms of slavery is that while in the antebellum period, the slave was forced to till the land and served the slave-owner, today the prisoner is made to serve the industrialists or the corporate giants.

At present, there are more than 2.3 million people languishing in various American prisons, both men and women alike, out of which African Americans constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3

million incarcerated population.<sup>1</sup> While the prison population has been increasing rapidly, the number of prisons too is simultaneously going up. But there should be no room for speculation that there is a correlation between the rising number of crimes and the rising number of prisons or the prisoners. Rather, there lies something more sinister and vicious at the heart of the matter. As Angela Davis argues:

The term “prison industrial complex” was introduced by activists and scholars to contest the prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit (Davis, 84).

The above lines shed light on the fact that the growing prison population in many of America’s high-wall prisons or ‘correctional centers’ as the euphemism goes, has nothing to do with “the increased levels of crime” on the street or on road, rather with the sinister plan of both the corporate giants and the State to make big profits and thereby ingeniously bring back the old system of slavery which had kept the blacks always in a subservient and subordinate position. I would like to argue in this paper that the corporatization of prisons in the United States of America is something that has not only widened the gap between the black Middle class and the black Underclass where any underclass street-going unemployed person is a potential candidate for the prison, but also that it is because of this corporatization of prisons that the incarceration rates in today’s America has suddenly shot up and there is little that we can attribute to serious crimes. It is in this scenario that many cases of racial-profiling against African-Americans and people of Hispanic origin have been reported in the recent past. Besides, I would also argue that the criminal justice system in America has been racially biased and prejudiced towards the blacks where there is rigorous punishment even for minor crimes

<sup>1</sup> See NAACP report on incarceration rate in the US. Source: [www.naacp.com](http://www.naacp.com).

like bootlegging drugs or other State-banned articles. The prison system which was established with the aim of rehabilitating and restoring the offenders has belied its promise. Rather, it has taken the form of a place where the most inhuman and brutal practices are reserved for those who refuse to adjust to the ‘neo-slavery’ practiced within its premises. In addition, with reference to John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), I would also like to challenge the popular opinion held by many white Americans and the so-called “crossed over” blacks that an underclass product would inevitably end up as a criminal. That he/she has no future except in jail. The texts selected to substantiate the above argument are John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* and George Jackson’s prison narrative in letter form, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970).

#### ***Brothers and Keepers***

*Brothers and Keepers* by Wideman is a semi-autobiographical novel which tells the story of two brothers, both products of the black underclass, who take different roles and routes in their lives as they grow up. The elder brother, John Edgar Wideman, ends up as a writer who lives a respectable life in a city called Laramie, Wyoming having made his way up into the black middle class, albeit guilt-ridden. While his younger brother, Robert Wideman, ends up as a prisoner serving life-term in Western Penitentiary, Pittsburg for an armed robbery and murder. The Wideman family can be seen as a site of two contraries where one is a street man and the other, a middle class black man. What is intriguing to note here is that although both the brothers are the product of the same underclass ghetto environment and pressures, one is a story of success and the other, a story of failure.

The success story of John Edgar Wideman can be read as a miraculous victory by an underclass black man who, through hard work and unwavering determination, beats the ghosts of socio-economic insecurity and achieves what popularly had been thought as beyond his grasp—a berth amongst the Talented Tenth.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that his ‘crossing

<sup>2</sup> Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) argues that the best among the

over' has definitely provided him with a middle class perspective on the world around where he can see his progression from the stagnant world of the underclass into a middle class world which is full of opportunities and prospects. However, we need to be alert to the fact that his perception of the underclass world is not prejudiced or unnecessarily biased as one can see in the case of Bill Cosby. Bill Cosby can be seen representing the lot of those who have crossed over; those who have risen up the socio-economic ladder with a typical black middle class mentality which is apathetic and indifferent to the people hanging at the lower rung of the society. His is an attitude which Michael Eric Dyson calls "Afristocracy"<sup>3</sup> where the black elite blame the black poor for all the things that go wrong in the black world, and curse them for not doing enough for a better life. Whereas John Edgar Wideman despite his earlier flight from the ghetto life and the "demons his brother Robby personified" can be seen reconciling the two contraries and abstaining from a view which is characteristic of Afristocracy. His is a

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blacks whom he called "the talented tenth" must lead the black race. This would free other blacks from their inferiority complex and 'double consciousness' i.e. instead of looking at themselves from the eyes of the white man, they would look at themselves from the eyes of the black man and would never look down upon themselves. However, Du Bois was criticized for bringing in elitism into black studies by later critics and theorists for privileging the "crossed over" blacks over those who did not "cross over."

<sup>3</sup> Michael Eric Dyson in a response to Bill Cosby's infamous speech at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemoration of the Brown vs Topeka Board of Education coins the terms "Afristocracy and Ghettoocracy." By Afristocracy he means the belief-system and views of "upper-middle-class blacks and the black elite who rain down fire and brimstone upon poor blacks for their deviance and pathology, and for their lack of couth and culture." Whereas, the term Ghettoocracy stands for the black poor, "the desperately unemployed and underemployed, those trapped in underground economies, and those working poor folk who slave in menial jobs at the edge of the economy." See Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York: Civitas Books, 2005).

self that is very much guilt-ridden—something that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls "succeeding much but enjoying less"<sup>4</sup>, and non-triumphalist in some sense of the term since he cannot reconcile with the fact that his younger brother is serving life-term in jail while he is living in a cosy apartment in Laramie with a future beaconing him.

John Edgar Wideman raises some important questions about the criminal justice system as well where the boundaries separating the prisoner and the visitor get blurred. He primarily adopts a philosophical tone throughout the narrative and does not let the narrative lapse into a sociological tract on prison reforms. He argues that the line separating the outsider and the insider get blurred when a visitor steps into a prison territory. He says that the visit turns the outsider into an insider given the squalor and the abominable conditions the prisoners are held in. He makes this comment when he pays a visit to Robert Wideman, his younger brother serving life term for an armed robbery and murder, with his mother, wife and kids. The following lines bring out this argument explicitly:

The visitor is forced to become an inmate. Subjected to the same sorts of humiliation and depersonalization. Made to feel powerless, intimidated by the might of the state...We are on the keepers' turf. We must play their game, their way. We sit where they tell us to sit. Surrender the personal possessions they order us to surrender. Wait as long as it pleases them to keep us waiting in the dismal afternoon. We come whenever we are called. We allow them to pass us through six-inch steel doors and don't protest when the doors slam shut behind us...We let them lock us in without any guarantee the doors will open when we wish to leave. We are in fact their prisoners until they release us (52).

What we can infer from the above lines is that the State has the power to turn any person into a prisoner and dehumanize him/her. And if it is about racial difference, then the chances are even strong

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<sup>4</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, *Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

for unannounced incarceration. Besides, it is also arguable that the prison authorities not only target those who belong to the underclass and have not made much progress in life, but also those who have risen up the socio-economic ladder. John Edgar Wideman's harrowing experience in the Western Penitentiary as a visitor is a testimony to the above fact who is a successful black man now. This also suggests that the discourse of race affects people of all sections of society whether they belong to the middle class or the underclass, albeit the people from the lower strata are the first and direct targets of such institutionalized racism. The following lines make the point clear when the police enter John Wideman's apartment searching for his brother, Robby and his friends:

Only after two Laramie Police Department detectives arrived at dawn on February 12, a day too late to catch my brother, and treated me like a criminal, did I know I'd been one? ...I was black. my brother was a suspect. So perhaps I was the fourth perpetrator. No matter that I lived four hundred miles from the scene of the crime. No matter that I wrote books and taught literature and creative writing at the university. I was black. Robby was my brother. Those unalterable facts would always incriminate me (25).

As I argued above that the prison system in contemporary America is a new avatar of slavery which is now known as neo-slavery, the dehumanization that the slaves underwent during the antebellum period is something that they still continues in the prisons. Although the whole rationale behind the prison system was to rehabilitate the offenders and then release them with a new outlook towards life outside, this is something that is glaringly missing today. Rather, the policy of 'keep-the-misfit-away-from-the-society' is being practiced across the United States and those who resist against the police repression and oppression are put to extremely brutal and barbaric punishments. John Wideman's daughter, Jamila, comparing the prison his uncle, Robert Wideman was locked up in, with a cage where the animals are kept, refers to the dehumanization the inmates are subjected to in prison houses. Besides,

Wideman's mother's insistence that Robby be treated as human first, then as criminal, too refers to the same point. All we can say is that, as Angela Davis argues, "...prison is an ideologically created abstract site where undesirables are deposited (16)."

#### **Soledad Brother**

Like *Brothers and Keepers*, *Soledad Brother* (1970) too is a prison narrative in epistolary form by George Jackson who was also a victim of the prison system. The narrative can be read as a sociological tract on the American prison system and the reforms which are needed both in the prison system and the judiciary.

George Jackson belonged to the underclass like John Edgar Wideman and his brother, Robert Wideman. He too was an underclass product and got victimized by the prison system like Robby. He too, like Robby, got stringent punishment for an armed robbery and was continually denied parole due to his untamable behavior. After the looting incident in 1960, he was awarded 'one year to life' sentence which meant that if he did not adjust to the dehumanizing and abominable conditions of the prison, he would not be paroled. Since George Jackson never adjusted to the prison system, which, as I have argued above, was a new form of slavery, he was sent to isolation or solitary confinement many a time, and when he allegedly opened fire upon a non-inmate (some police official), he was shot dead.

Jackson's letters give an authentic account of what happens inside the prisons and how the contemporary prison system replicates the antebellum period. They talk about the brutal practices employed to turn the socially ostracized misfit into a permanent misfit that the thought of the free world and release loses its importance. The letters talk about the violence inflicted upon the prisoners by the guards who foster "racial fights" among various inmates and sadistically derive thrill out of the killing or blood-letting. They refer to the unfair and corrupt justice system which keeps even the minor offenders longer in prisons. They reveal the exploitation of the inmates as they are underpaid for the hard work they do. All in all, the letters can be read as a revelation about the inner

workings of the prisons and how they still maintain a racialized America.

The denial of parole to George Jackson for ten years reeks of the institutionalized racism that still has a stronghold in America. His crime was that he resisted and protested against the inhuman and unjust treatment meted out to the inmates in Soledad and San Quentin. Besides, his links with the Black Panther Party and other black rebels too subjected him to victimization and utter brutalization in these prisons for national security reasons. Such a scenario leads to some important questions on the role of prison system and their functioning. One may ask if Jackson was committing a crime by raising his voice against the oppression and inhuman treatment meted out to inmates. One may further ask if a prison is meant to rehabilitate the prisoners or to subject them to unimaginable brutalization as Jackson writes about in his book. Does rehabilitation mean oppressing a prisoner to an extent that he is forced to submit to the stereotypes floating around about himself and his community and if released, comes out having lost all faith and trust in the justice system and every other social system meant for the good of people? Don't the blacks and other minority communities have any democratic rights? Or their rights come at a compromise in a white society where even the middle class blacks treat other underclass blacks with contempt and distrust, a sign of their interpellated and 'oversized' self resulting from their "having arrived" position?

In addition, we also see a nexus between the police system and the American media which branded radical black prisoners like Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver as 'political militants' who by raising their voice against the brutality of the police system were trying to make people aware of the racial bias the state administration holds against the black community, especially the black underclass which is solely blamed for all the wrong things that go on in the white world. Our attempt should be not to treat prisoners as the dregs of society who need to be weeded from the system or as someone who possessed inherent criminal streaks since birth, hence to be dealt with tough. Rather the jaundiced racialized perception towards people from non-

white communities needs to be dismantled before one undertakes the task of making a better society and a better world.

#### **Private Prison and Occupancy Rate**

Private prison is a for-profit prison system in which individuals convicted of minor or serious crimes are transferred to private or corporate companies by government agencies and thereby paid for providing ultra-modern rehabilitative facilities to the prisoners. Private prisons came into existence in the 1980s, under the governments of Ronald Reagan and Bush Sr., but reached their zenith in the 1990s under William Clinton when a.) "Wall Street stocks were selling like hotcakes, and b.) when Clinton decided to cut down the federal workforce which resulted in the Justice Department's contracting of private prison corporations for the incarceration of undocumented workers and high-security inmates" (Pelaez, 2008). As a result, two largest prison industry corporations, Correctional Corporation of America (CCA) and Wackenhut which largely controls immigrant-detention centres across the United States, came into existence controlling 75% of incarcerated population of America ever since.

Jackson in his book, *Soledad Brother* talks about the predicament of the inmates who suffer the most whether they accept the job assigned or refuse to do it. The reference to the work that the inmates are ordered to do and the underpayment that they are made to receive is something that is connected with the broader argument of prison industrial complex and the corporatization of prisons. Vicky Pelaez argues that the prisons in the US today have taken the shape of a big industry where the corporate stakeholders can invest wholesale and maximize their profits. Since, till date the number of prison population has reached the mark of 2 million—mostly Black and Hispanic, the prison industry for the corporate giants spells like a pot of gold. It is a place where "they don't have to worry about strikes or paying unemployment insurance, vacations or comp time. All of their workers are full-time, and never arrive late or are absent because of family problems; moreover, if they don't like the pay of 25 cents per hour and refuse to work, they are locked up in isolation cells."



In addition, Andy Kroll in an article argues that the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), nation's largest owner of private prisons, is making big money in the prison industry. Before setting up a private prison or correctional center, they ask the state to abide by the occupancy rate which means that whether the crimes are rising or going down, the prisons must be at least 90 percent full all the time. This contract between the corporate heads and the government illustrates the fact why so many people from African and Hispanic origin are serving prison terms for long for non-serious offences like trespassing, breaking and entering, possession of illegal drugs, bootlegging, street crime etc. To keep the occupancy rate high, individuals are framed for charges/offences they have hardly committed and what forms the lot of these individuals is the minority underclass, especially African-American and Hispanic who pay the price for being racially 'Other.'

#### Conclusion

These two articles reveal how the corporate giants have tightened their grip upon the prison industry in the US and how their pressure upon the state administration to meet the occupancy rate is leading to cases of racial-profiling and the increasing incarceration rate. Angela Davis too argues that for the industrialists, the prison is a site of cheap labour where they can maximize their profits. Hence, it is arguable that there is a direct link between corporatization of prisons and high incarceration rate amongst the blacks which leads to many incidents of racial-profiling or branding of individuals from a particular community as "evildoers or misfits" on everyday basis. Since the people belonging to the black or Hispanic underclass are the easy targets as they are popularly held as misfits or street-men, and since the justice system too is colluding with the industrialists or the corporate world, it is arguable that the chasm between the black middle class and the black underclass would further widen and incarceration rate would further go higher if the corporate giants are not stopped before it is too late. But, as James Surowiecki argues, with Donald Trump in power who himself is an industrialist and is popular for his anti-minority stance, the future looks bleak for both the

incarcerated population and those who would be made to join it as "he (Trump) would doubtless look forward to expand their reach" to keep the trouble-makers at bay.

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