



Rithvik Ravikumar*

The unfortunate irony of freedom from the lens of those who have been to prison

Received May 2025; Reviewed June 2025; Accepted July 2025; Published September 2025

Abstract: Changi Airport is always a bustling place, yet you can feel a sense of tranquility. I could smell the scent of orchid flowers mingled with the warmth of freshly brewed coffee in the air. At its core lies the Jewel, where the Rain Vortex pours like a ribbon of silk, creating a misty environment with a surreal chill. I felt so rejuvenated, as if I was stepping into an alternate reality, a temporary shelter from Singapore's unforgiving tropical climate. Children on the sky train were mesmerised by the divine beauty of the scenic waterfall.

Keywords: freedom, imprisonment, emancipation



This work is licensed under a [Deed - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Changi Airport is always a bustling place, yet you can feel a sense of tranquility. I could smell the scent of orchid flowers mingled with the warmth of freshly brewed coffee in the air. At its core lies the Jewel, where the rain vortex pours like a ribbon of silk, creating a misty environment with a surreal chill. I felt so rejuvenated, as if I was stepping into an alternate reality, a temporary shelter from Singapore's unforgiving tropical climate. Children on the sky train were mesmerised by the divine beauty of the scenic waterfall.

The airport is more than just an aviation transit hub; it is an extensive portal to the unknown, an area where people fly between destinations with freedom that flows like background music, penetrating almost every corner that sound can penetrate. The panoramic greenery of the Shiseido Forest Valley forms an illusion of endlessness. I could hear crisp announcements echoing through the atmosphere, emphasising a world where freedom is an entitlement so intrinsic and abstract that it almost feels non-existent and unimaginable.

Beyond the vision of immersive freedom, Changi Prison exists where freedom does not move but completely stops. The prison creates a shadow extending past its thick concrete walls. The atmosphere here is stock-still, thickened by an unspoken burden and regret. Residue of monsoon rains has stained the prison metal gates, paying testimony to years of imprisonment. As I walked along Upper Changi Road North, some vehicles slowed down as passengers took unsettling gazes at the prison structure. A passerby took a quick glance at the prison walls, then briskly walked away. It was as if distance alone could help eradicate the prison's silent grip over their freedom.

Inside Changi Prison, time drags on. The air is dry, emphasising an environment where freedom seems nowhere to be felt or found. The overhead lights buzz, making the prison atmosphere bleached in cold monotony, creating shadows that never change. A YouTube video from SBS Dateline shows an inmate sleeping on a concrete floor. The hard surface carved into his back like stone. Sleep does not become an easy task, even a small movement may cause painful aches through his shoulders and limbs. Sleeping one night comfortably is a luxury that exists only outside the prison cell. Beyond the prison walls, life moves on, unfazed by the prisoners' sufferings. The clear distinction between the vibrant world at Changi Airport and the prison walls of Changi Prison implies that imprisonment is not only a loss of freedom but also a radical detachment from life itself. This begs the question: How

do imprisoned individuals view freedom, and what happens to this view when they leave prison?

In “Freedom so Close but yet so Far: The Impact of the Ongoing Confrontation with Freedom on the Perceived Severity of Punishment”, De Vos and Gilbert (2017) posited that constant visits of families intensify the inmate’s frustration at being confined in a cell as they develop hopelessness in the desperate act of experiencing freedom. The most direct confrontations with freedom in a closed prison are leaves and visits from family and other persons important to the prisoner, making freedom of the “self” more palpable in their minds. This twisted perspective of freedom affects inmates’ psychological state, which turns into hopelessness as they become more desperate to experience full freedom. This repeated encounter with freedom does not liberate prisoners; it rather reinforces their powerlessness. When they become familiarised with a life structured by regimentation and control, their craving for freedom diminishes. What remains behind is the concept of freedom that becomes increasingly abstract, distant, and elusive.

De Vos and Gilbert (2017) offer a powerful insight into how freedom becomes an increasingly abstract and elusive concept for inmates. Frequent family visits exacerbate the prisoners’ suffering by reminding them of what they no longer have access to. Slowly, freedom becomes a mirage to the inmates that is visible and recognisable yet unreachable. Some inmates emotionally relinquish freedom instead of craving for it, a coping strategy that transforms how inmates understand freedom. It signals a deep institutional effect; the system indoctrinates inmates into emotional detachment, normalising the absence of freedom. De Vos and Gilbert (2017) challenged the presumption that the inmates’ desire for freedom remains constant; however, some inmates will slowly acclimatise to survive without it, so some of them stop thinking about it. They reassess freedom as a fragile internal state that is shaped by mental conditioning and the physical barriers of the prison.

In “Sensing Freedom: Insights into Long-term Prisoners’ Perception of the Outside World”, Irene Marti (2021) explains how sensory exposure to the outside world can alter prisoners’ experience of imprisonment and their perspective of freedom after release. Prisoners from the Switzerland prison facility had the opportunity to view “mountain peaks and woods, and not just a narrowly defined piece of sky”, helping them to stay briefly attached to the outside world. Marti (2021) argues that this exposure can create a profound sense of

alienation. Some prisoners may experience temporary autonomy, but others may perceive them as painful reminders of a world they no longer belong to, a world that, for most of them, has become a figment of memory. This emotional detachment exposes how incarceration is not only physical confinement but a painful process that alienates prisoners from everyday life, and this alienation will not stop after release. For many ex-inmates, the outside world still feels strange and overwhelming, reframing freedom not as immediate happiness and peace, but as a challenging reintegration into a world that has drastically moved on without them. This reintegration is filled with psychological distance and broken connections. Marti (2021) reinforces the belief that freedom is not only about physical release but also the capability to fully engage with the world past the prison walls.

Marti's (2021) article strongly asserts that freedom can alienate instead of liberating ex-prisoners. She expressed how the very notion of freedom becomes agonising as it represents a world that has neglected and stigmatised ex-prisoners. However, Marti's powerful conclusion lies in what happens after the inmates are released; freedom is not a return to normal life, but a conflict with society that continuously and pervasively stigmatises them. Even though ex-inmates are free, they still feel socially and emotionally left out. Social rejection, employment boundaries, and public opinion create an outside world as captive and controlling as prison, thereby galvanising a faux sense of community for them. As a result, many begin to detach not because they reject reintegration but because freedom after prison itself feels belligerent, dehumanising, and painful. Imprisonment not only detaches people from society but also changes how they connect to society altogether. Freedom that was once desired now requires reintegration into a world that is not willing to welcome them back, a world that has somehow condemned them for their doing. This challenges any notion that freedom is permanently redemptive; instead, it can be a part of further marginalisation and oppression, further othering these ex-inmates in such a judgmental world.

De Vos and Gilbert (2017) and Marti (2021) uncover a myth that prison release promises freedom and emotional restoration. De Vos and Gilbert explain how inmates' frequent encounters with freedom through family visits make it feel more like a fantasy or illusion than a reality. Freedom becomes psychologically unachievable. Hence, some inmates decide to ease the pain by emotionally detaching from freedom altogether. Marti expands this by emphasising how, after prison release, many ex-inmates feel alienated from a world that

pushes them away. They disclose an unfortunate paradox: when freedom is stigmatised, it turns into a disabling force. Freedom gives movement without purpose; it provides presence but refuses space and place. It also worsens alienation instead of reinstating identity. Ex-inmates not only return to society, but they are also exposed to public opinion, prohibition, and condemnation. Without removing stigmatisation and restoring social acceptance, freedom remains an empty idea, moot, and senseless. Rehabilitation does not start at the prison entrance, but in a society that is determined to help reintegrate those who were once cast out. In a city where freedom catches flight daily, freedom is a real test that lies not in departure but in return.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Rithvik Ravikumar is an undergraduate student at Nanyang Technological University Singapore, undertaking Mechanical Engineering. He has a deep interest in social issues.

References

- De Vos, H., & Gilbert E. (2017). Freedom so close but yet so far: The impact of the ongoing confrontation with freedom on the perceived severity of punishment. *European Journal of Probation*, 9(2), 132-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2066220317710393>
- Marti, I. (2021). Sensing freedom: Insights into long-term prisoners' perceptions of the outside world. *Incarceration: An International Journal of Imprisonment, Detention, and Coercive Confinement*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/26326663211013703>
- SBS Dateline. (2025, March 4). *Inside Singapore's maximum-security prison: New season*. SBS Dateline [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_oDFsbrEKQ&list=WL&index=1&t=318s