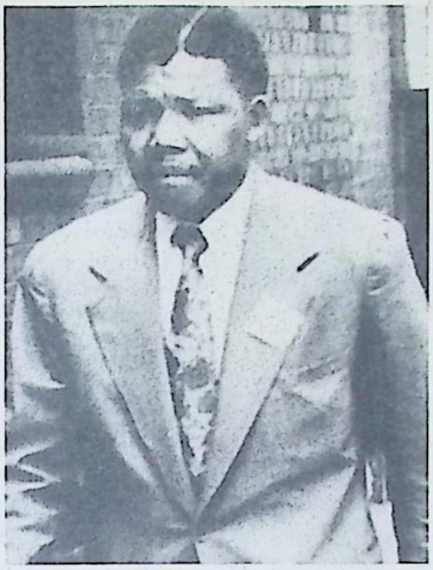
explained why apartheid was bad, why the ANC was not a terrorist organization but a movement for the freedom of all South Africans. Those prison guards respected him, for his self-esteem and for the respect he gave them.

Prison often does wonderful things to politicians who find themselves pushed into it by insensitive, fearful governments. In prison, political leaders have time to reflect on the future, have those moments when they can within themselves shape strategy for the emancipation of their nations. Prison mellowed Gandhi and gave Nehru the wherewithal to engage in intellectual pursuits and transformed Bangabandhu into a spokesman for his fellow Bengalis. It did all these things for Mandela. What prison deprived Mandela of was the love he could have, like any other man, shared with his family. His children grew into adulthood in his absence; his wife Winnie spent years in her own torment caused by the white supremacist regime.

There was the fundamentally human that defined the Mandela personality. He was a romantic man and appreciated the beauty of women. His first marriage was a result of love. And then he met Winnie, married her and gave her children. That love came to an end soon after his re-emergence into freedom in 1990, which again was proof that like other men whose lovers turn their backs on them he could feel his heart crack. Winnie's romantic links with other men did not embitter him, though. He did what a man in love and suffused in the principles of idealism does: he put the marriage to a peaceful end. And then he found a new, more mature and composed love in Graca Machel, the widow of the late Mozambique leader Samora Machel. In his final years, Mandela saw his love life, its romance and its idealism, gravitate to an intellectual plane in Graca Machel's company. They were made for each other.



Nelson Mandela in 1961. PHOTO: AFP



Nelson Mandela stands behind the bars of the former cell where he spent 18 of his 27 years as a political prisoner. PHOTO: AFP

A whole world changed in the twenty seven years Mandela spent in prison. When he was arrested by Pretoria's security forces in 1962, Harold Macmillan presided over Britain's political fortunes. Two years later, in late 1964, Winnie wrote to him to inform him that Britain's Labour Party, led by Harold Wilson, had come to power. This letter would not be given to him by his jailers until 1980, when Margaret Thatcher was in office at Downing Street, Ronald Reagan was about to win the White House and Francois Mitterrand was clearly headed for the Elysee Palace. In all these twenty seven years, the world had absolutely no idea of how Mandela looked, how different he was physically from the robust young politician who disappeared behind the high walls of incarceration in the early 1960s. Not until February 1990, when he walked into freedom, would the world have a fresh new sighting of him.

It was the statesman Mandela who returned to the world of the living in 1990. He got down to business in a manner that suggested he had never been out of touch with it. He worked with FW de Klerk on a new constitution; he let people everywhere know that South Africa's rugby team, all-white in the apartheid era, would remain the country's pride. He travelled to other lands, letting their leaders and people know that his rainbow nation, turning its back on reprisal and recrimination, was on its way to being a society of inclusiveness through being an amalgam of black, white and coloured. He took charge as president, served a single term and then let a new generation take over.

That was Nelson Rolilahla Mandela. In another day and age, he would be a prophet or a philosopher. And yet he was both, in the way he observed the world before stamping his moral authority on it, in our times.

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