

# The Creative Launcher

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## Censorship and literature

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### Abstract

In this digital age, where we are in a free and democratic society, we have a long history of literary censorship. In an age of unparalleled freedom and free exchange of ideas, free speech faces a grave threat from intolerant religious and cultural groups. Censorship in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century is not as it was practiced in middle-ages imposed by the state machinery, but it is more of a systematic silencing. The present paper discusses the need for artistic freedom, how the artist/ writer must be free to create his own creative world without being bothered by the social norms and standards.

**Keywords:** Artistic Freedom, Censorship, Free Speech, Creativity

It is often said that freedom of expression and creative freedom go hand-in-hand in a democracy, however since times immemorial, the freedom of artists and writers has been challenged. If you look up history, we find that emperors, despots, autocrats, religious leaders and clergy have imposed restrictions on art literature and other forms of creative expressions. Censorship has followed free expression of men and women like a shadow throughout history. Oxford Dictionary defines censorship as, “the suppression and prohibition of any parts of books, films and news that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable or a threat to security.” This definition has two-fold meaning– (i) certain factors give rise to censorship including obscenity, security etc. and (ii) there is a governing body that imposes censorship.

The origin of the term censor can be traced to the office of censor established in Rome in 443 BC. In Rome the idea of good governance included shaping of the character of people hence censorship was regarded as an honorable task. In ancient China too, censorship was considered a legitimate instrument for regulating the moral and political life of people. Perhaps one of the earliest and the most famous case of punishment or censorship during the ancient times was when Socrates was sentenced to drink poison in 399 BC on the grounds of corrupting the youth, although he may not have been the first person to be severely punished for violating the moral and political code of his time. There are still some societies where censorship is considered a benevolent task in the interest of the public. Struggle for freedom of expression

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is as ancient as the history of censorship. Euripides defended the true liberty of free born men i.e. the right to speak freely.

In the Christian era, during the middle-ages, free speech was a challenge to the guardians of Christianity even more so as orthodoxy became established. In order to fend off a heretical threat to the Christian doctrine, the church leaders introduced helpful measures. As more books were written, copied and circulated, those ideas which were considered heretical and subversive were spread beyond the control of the rulers. Consequently, censorship became more rigid and punishment more severe. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century increased the need for censorship. Although printing helped the Catholic mission but it also helped the spread of the protestant reformation. Censorship in Europe took on a whole new meaning with the introduction of the index of prohibited books ordered by Pope Paul IV in 1559. It was a list of books which were considered heretical and profane and this index was issued 20 times till it was abolished in 1966. The most famous author that the Catholic church banned was Galileo and the most famous victims were Joan of Ark, 1431 and Thomas Moore, 1535. The Catholic Church controlled all the universities and all publications in the 16th century and nothing could be published without the permission of the king. All this was done to control scientific and artistic expression that was perceived potentially threatening to the moral and political order of the society. However, censorship was dropped after 18th century but the freedom of expression was controlled on new grounds that were national security, libel laws, criminal acts on obscenity and blasphemy. So now courts became the new controllers. E.g in America there were no censorship laws but only libel laws, so the courts became the new testing grounds for free expression libel laws continued the restraint and the persecution of the artists. In addition to these, there were restraints on the freedom of expression in different forms in different countries for example colonial government had control over publication in their colonies, and racial division prevented press freedom in South Africa and USSR witnessed the longest and the most extensive censorship era till the 20th century.

The politics of censorship continued in the 20th century with books like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were banned on either ground of racism or licentiousness. During this time, in the Indian context, *Angaarey*, a collection of short stories by Sajjad Zaheer, Rasheed Jahan, Ahmed Ali and Mahmuduz Zafar was published in 1932. The book was written as a provocation against religious and social orthodoxy of Indian Muslims. The book invited the ire of both the clerics and people and there were violent protests against it leading to its ban in 1933. The book was conceived to be insulting to Muslim sensibility and fatwas were issued against the young writers and there were open demands for their execution as well. Rasheed Jahan, the only woman writer in this collection was often singled out for censure and even threatened on several occasions. A similar charge of obscenity and vulgarity was brought out against Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto, for their stories which was tried in a court.

Perhaps the most infamous case of censorship and persecution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is against Salman Rushdie for his book *The Satanic Verses* written in 1988. He was accused of blasphemy by the Muslims across the world for portraying the prophet in the negative light. A

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“fatwa” was issued ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie. In this context the Taslima Nasreen too has suffered the wrath of the Muslim clerics for depicting the traumatic conditions of minorities in Bangladesh in *Lajja* in 1991 and like Rushdie, is still living in exile since then. Now if we closely look at the pattern behind the censorship from the pre-Christian times through middle-ages to the modern age, we find that anything which posed a threat to the religious authorities, monarchy or the controlling authorities was considered unfit for publication. Voices which dared to differ from the normative pattern in society were silenced and this systematic silencing of the voices that dare to venture out of the acceptable norms of society has continued in the contemporary times as well.

When we discuss censorship in literature there are opinions that say there is no censorship in literature as the books that are banned do get released after a few years or a few decades for the masses to read. But when we talk about censorship in the context of the creativity we are led advertently to the questions of restraints and limitations that the society or the authority imposes directly or indirectly on the writers and how a particular writer responds to these restraints, how it affects his psyche and whether it affects their creativity in any way. After the fatwa was issued against Salman Rushdie, in 2012, he wrote an account of his life in banishment. He named it *Joseph Anton*, taken from Conrad and Chekhov, in whose works a sense of homelessness is prominent. The selection of the title itself shows how the author constantly suffered from a sense of rootlessness, exile and alienation from homeland.

Perumal Murugan, a Tamil writer who has won many awards announced his death as a writer in 2015 on social media. He went into seclusion and requested all his publishers too to remove his books from circulation. He wrote *One Part Woman* in 2010, which was translated in English and published in 2014. His writings are known for exploration of caste and ritual related violence in Hindu society. He has long been harassed and pressurized by extremists following his treatment of social issues. He faced assault and public humiliation to such an extent that he had to announce his death as a writer. He said in an interview that “a censor is seated inside me now. He is testing every word that is born within me. His constant caution that a word may be misunderstood so, or it may be interpreted thus, is a real bother. But I’m unable to shake him off” (The Hindu).

In times like these a writer feels that his freedom is, in fact, imperfect and broken. Nick Cohen in his book *you can't Read This book: Censorship in the Age of Freedom*, argues that the traditional opponents of free expression - religious fanaticism and Plutocratic power are thriving in many respects and are finding the world a more comfortable place in the 21st century, then they did it in the 20th century. He further writes that “we don't live in a regime of censorship and surveillance but we don't live and write or think in a Republic where freedoms are guaranteed.... situations like these-place much harsher burden on the writers, forcing them to wonder every time they write, if they risk prison, or mobs at the door or threats to their family or their lives.

In the contemporary world on the one hand we are witnessing powerful protests for racial and social Justice and for greater equality and inclusion across our society, on the other hand, we see a set of new moral attitudes which weaken our norms of open debate and tolerance

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in favor of ideological conformity. In July 2021 issue of Harper's magazine, a letter was published signed by 152 writers including Margaret Atwood, Martin Amis and J.K Rowling stating that "The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more restricted. Censoriousness is spreading widely, an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.... It has become common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgression of speech and thought.

Censorship in 21st century is not what it used to be in the middle-ages, imposed by the state machinery. It has assumed the form of systematic silencing of the contradictory views. Banning of books is not the only criteria, more questionable is the way the books are removed from the public platforms e.g. in *Such a Long Journey* by Rohinton Mistry was accused of making derogatory remarks about Maharashtrians and subsequently the book was dropped from the Mumbai University syllabus.

In order to avoid trouble the writers, publishers and even broadcasters are censoring themselves to stay out of trouble – a form of pre-censorship. E.g BBC dropped an animation film 'Popetown' amid fears of offending Roman Catholics. Censorship selects and excludes, it rejects and silences and as a result, good forms of art and their creators remain deprived of recognition. Deconstructive criticism has shown that a text can have layers of contradictory meanings, which can be interpreted in multiple ways and the freedom to interpret a text and the freedom to choose what a reader wants to read, belongs to his/her fundamental right.

Constricting the boundaries or ostracizing a writer for expressing ideas contrary to normative thinking is a violation of Human Rights too. It ends up restricting the intellectual prosperity of a society. If we continue to stifle creativity we will be left with a one dimensional homogenous world, a world in monochrome.

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