

Life in Hiding: Censorship Challenges faced by Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan

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Received: January 2, 2023

Accepted: February 18, 2023

Online Published: February 22, 2023

doi:10.11114/smc.v11i2.5940

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v11i2.5940>

Abstract

Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan have made significant literary contributions to modern Indian Literature. The study focuses on the authors' post-traumatic mental conditions and societal anxiety. Controversies were prompted by Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2010). Due to their literary career, the writers were forced to leave their hometowns involuntarily into exile also underwent self-censorship and self-exile. This paper examines the societal worries that the authors experienced regarding the books, which were published after the controversies surrounding their censored and banned works. The study distinguishes the implication of censorship and writers' freedom of expression in the contemporary era of Indian literature. The diverse mental state of the authors during enforced self-imposed quarantine and global pandemic lockdown are interrogated. The paper focuses on the authors' physical and psychological problems caused by opposers' conservative views towards their writings. The paper also details the authors' resilience amid political, and social pressure.

Keywords: Indian literature, dissident writers, self-exile, censorship, banned books

1. Introduction

Dissident writers are those who profoundly disagree with an established political, religious, or philosophical insights and perspective. The study has taken a global perspective on dissident writers, their novels, social ideas, and protests. These dissident works are frequently written in solitude or exile. Books are officially banned, publications are consciously destroyed, and the freedom to write is threatened on both artistic and cultural levels. Censorship is the removal of any passages from books that are generally considered to be obscene, or politically unacceptable. Informally imposed censorship is referred to as self-censorship, whilst official censorship is known as state censorship. Book banning is a form of censorship in which some aspects of books are ignored while banning or prohibiting a piece of writing results in its total annihilation. Mark Ames addresses Sergi Dorkeno's theory of "vertical vs horizontal censorship" in his book *The Geometry of Censorship and Satire* (2015). Horizontal censorship, a form of self-censorship born from psychological fear, satisfies the norm of the socio-political. Although vertical censorship is the oppression being enforced, both try to demonstrate how dominant power suppresses ideas. Contemporary milieu, outraged mobs burn the books of defenceless writers, restricting artistic expression and freedom of criticism. As Johnson and Johnson say, "Novels that protest specific conditions in a given time provoke immediate responses and often bring tangible changes in policies and laws" (Johnson & Johnson 2002, p.ix) Notable works on dissident writings that abound are George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), Charles Dicken's *Bleak House* (1852), Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Rabindranath Tagore, Subramanya Bharathi, Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad C Chaudhuri, V S Naipaul, Khushwant Singh, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and Ramchandra Guha are Indian writers, their creative dissent has enabled multiple conversations about politics, society, and culture. Dissident intellectual Ambedkar devoted most of his life to addresses social vices (the caste system, untouchability and discriminations, oppression of peasants and workers) through extensive writings and activism. As Salman Rushdie stated in a letter to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, India was the first country to explicitly ban *The Satanic Verses* (1988),

On Oct. 5, the Indian finance ministry announced the banning of my novel, “The Satanic Verses,” under Section 11 of the Indian Customs Act. Many people around the world will find it strange that it is the finance ministry that gets to decide what Indian readers may or may not read. (Rushdie, 1988)

and the West Bengal government banned Taslima Nasrin’s *Dwikhandito* (2003). Censorship is exhibited within the varied socio-cultural output under numerous words like ‘blasphemous,’ ‘offensive,’ and ‘obscene’. The study meticulously compares the dissident novels of Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan, victims of violence, known for their critical writings like *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and *One Part Woman* (2010) which are thought-provoking. Violence and violation become part of the authors’ daily lives. Dissidents Rushdie and Murugan were subject to censorship, expulsion, and forced exile. The diverse mental state of the authors during the times of forced self-imposed quarantine and global pandemic lockdown are examined.

2. Brief Introduction of Authors

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie, is an Indian-born British Writer, and most celebrated contemporary novelist. His allegorical writings scrutinize historical and philosophical problems through surrealistic characters. Rushdie’s melodramatic prose style toward sensitive religious and political subjects made him a controversial figure. He is the first Indian-born British writer to win the Booker Prize. After the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran claimed that *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is blasphemous against Muslims and sentenced the author to death. Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) was published as an allegorical novel as a response to the oppression of his freedom of speech.

Perumal Murugan is one of Tamil literature’s widely read and influential writers. He is a versatile Indian novelist and literary chronicler, a full-time writer who retired as Tamil Professor and Principal at Arignar Anna Government Arts College, Namakkal, Tamil Nadu. The writer is well known for using the Kongu Tamil dialect in his writings. Murugan’s *One Part Woman* (2010) novel titled in Tamil as *Maadhorubaagan* and translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan has won the Sahitya Akademi Award. Despite the Tamil work being published and distributed for four years, disputes were raised following the publishing of the English translation. Opposers of the novel found that the book is morally offensive and blasphemous. Under social pressure, the author retracts his artistic writings and goes into self-exile.

The research paper focuses on dissident authors, who faced psychological anxieties triggered by societal pressure. Their works are censored and prone to banning concerning political and religious terms. This study raises the issue of how much a dissident writer is permitted to write about social, religious, and cultural contexts.

3. Literature Review

The study scrutinizes the distinction between religious fundamentalism and the politicization of religion against the writings of dissidents. The politicization of religion causes the censorship of dissident writings in the literary arena. The study also considers the social challenges faced by writers Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan. Along with the problematic connection between dissidents and violence, the thematic emergence of historical and political ideologies of dissident writers is also discussed.

Eva Konig’s “Between Cultural Imperialism and the Fatwa: Colonial Echoes and Postcolonial Dialogue in Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*” (2006), refers to the first book published following his fatwa. The paper states how Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) reveals that a dictatorship’s oppressive system limits freedom of expression and imagination.

Amit Shankar Saha’s “Exile Literature and the Diasporic Indian Writer” (2009), demonstrates that despite peculiarities there is an inherent state in all dislocated lives, whether it be forced migration or voluntary migration. It considers not only geographical displacement but also a sociocultural sense of displacement. Since the exiles of writers are a problem in the present era, these exile states elicit a feeling of rootlessness and displacement.

Mini Chandran’s “The Writer, the Reader and the State: Literary Censorship in India” (2017), analyses the societal pressure that drives a writer to abandon creative writing as a formidable censoring force, potentially more destructive than the repressive state.

Priyanka Tripathi’s “Reading Perumal Murugan’s *One Part Woman* within the Spectrum of Translation, Worship and Censorship” (2018), analyses the public pressure and prejudice the book experienced, the court trials, and the censorship that Murugan faced. The translation of regional Tamil novels into English and the response are discussed. The novel’s aspects, such as religion, gender, and caste, cultural aspect have been clarified.

Anushmita Mohanty’s “‘A Censor is sitting in My Head’: The Censorship Trial of Perumal Murugan’s *One Part Woman*” (2021), states the Madras High Court trial that focuses on questions of both informal and official censorship. It shows that judiciary draws distinctions between formal and informal censorship, positing this difference as self-evident,

the author reconstructs the incidents and disturbances that led to the novel's ban.

4. Methodology

The study examines how fundamentalist beliefs restricted and outlawed the writings of rebel authors, Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan. Personal trauma and memory of incidents involving controversies in exile have been experienced by them. The main argument of the research report is that writing can make people feel better. The comparison of the writers Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan indicates the previously unrecognized correlation among the literary texts. When two works are compared, similarities and differences between them are revealed due to questioning and critical analysis. Meanwhile, the study contrasts and compares the text and viewpoints of authors from various cultural backgrounds. The dissident writers' works are a reflection of their determined mental state as they fight against restrictions on free speech and artistic expression. The research empirically looks at Rushdie and Murugan's creative writings.

5. Threats of Violence and Social Anxieties

The term dissident has a long and multifaceted history in Indian literature. In an Indian democratic society, everyone has the right to freedom of speech and expression. Most of the writers who delve into social problems through their critical writings were brandished as dissidents'. Despite the challenges, nonviolent dissidents' viewpoints were made known through their writings. Even in modern society, those writers become victims of violence resulting from a collision of ideas. This is illustrated in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* (2010). The novel *One Part Woman* (2010) narrates the life of a childless couple living in a society in which fertility is seen as a moral failing. The novel's power lies in the sensitive and emotional childless wife who decided to have a sexual relationship with a stranger to conceive. This is a part of the festival to honour a holy deity that followed years ago in the region of western Tamil Nadu. Fundamentalists who haven't even read the book claim that Murugan insulted their community's sentiments. Since they dispute those rituals are not a part of their religious beliefs and Murugan's description of the ritual of sexual freedom during the chariot festival in the book is a make-believe tale, not a history. The opposers of his novel failed to recognize his profound sense of history.

Meanwhile, opposers burnt his book and the entire town collapsed due to the protest. In December 2014, a group of people claim that the novel consists of obscene offences against their community and women. The copies of the novel were burnt, his photos beaten and kicked, and a group of religionists demanded the banning of all his works. AR Venkatachalapathy, a historian and friend of Murugan described, "One of them threatened to cut off [Murugan's] hand in a public meeting...The threat of violence is very real" (Doshi, 2016). In the literary-cultural domain of Indian writing, artistic freedom is repressed by political and religious/community constraints.

On the other hand, Rushdie experienced similar turmoil even before Murugan. The notion of opposing dissident voices has a long history beyond national borders. The publishers, editors, and translators of the novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) received the fatwa. A fatwa is an Islamic legal final judgment that carries the death sentence. The author described the history of Islam and three male angels in the novel who were females in the Koran Verses. The book's title incriminated Satan and denoted the book as blasphemy against the beliefs of Muslims. Iran's then-supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini condemned the novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and the novelist received a fatwa in the year 1989. The trauma which detailed in the text, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012) is referred to as Rushdie's "Fatwa Mirror". Rushdie's post-fatwa writings are a memoir of events and thoughts regarding the burning of effigies and the banning of novels. Beginning in India, banning spread to Pakistan, South Africa, England, and America. Rushdie endures identity loss as a result of Scotland Yard's decision to restrict his public spaces. After being excluded from entering the city of London and hiding in his home for nearly ten years, his official identity, self-esteem, and self-perception were all harmed. Salman Rushdie has been threatened for years and was recently stabbed for his writing, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) which was written 34 years ago.

On August 12, 2022, in New York, at Chautauqua Institution, Rushdie appeared to deliver a lecture on artistic freedom, he was attacked by a 24 years-old, Hadi Matar, who stabbed him multiple times in the neck. The author was stabbed on stage and severely injured. This leads to the realization of the dissidents' right to freedom of expression and voices of opposition on the grounds of the sensitive socio-political and religio-cultural framework in today's polity. They encountered social anxieties that were triggered by their writings. Any literary work that offends the existing ideological regime in terms of religious sentiment is suppressed. These fundamentalists have the ability to silence the voices of dissent.

6. Self-exile and Traumatic Mental State

Exile, whether self-imposed or forced is a calamity to writers. Authors like Taslima Nasrin and Ramachandra Guha even in exile, continue to contribute through their creative writings. Hence, it is considered both a liberating and

outrageous experience that depends on an individual. Dissident authors are villainized for a so-called offence related to religion/community, for instance, Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin in their homelands for allegedly hurting the religious emotions of people. Eventually, Salman Rushdie become a victim of political exile and oppressive regimes. The author's fatwa forced him to live in exile, because of the novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). He spent years hiding in London under police protection, rarely appearing in public for almost ten years [1989 to 2002]. Later he was questioned by BBC news regarding his death fatwa, and he replied: "It doesn't feel good, I'm a dead man" (*Rushdie Thought He Was 'Dead Man' After Fatwa*, 2012). Self-imprisonment is forced by circumstances in a hermetic world in a political reality where everything appears to be threatening.

Perumal Murugan's anxiety towards violence, and the burning of effigies, and books was reflected on his Facebook wall, "Author Perumal Murugan is dead. He is no God. Hence, he will not resurrect. Hereafter, only P Murugan, a teacher, will live" (Lal, 2015). He added a gratitude note supporting his freedom of imagination and expression. Murugan announced to the publishers that he was withdrawing all of his novels, poems, and short stories, and would pay for their loss as a result of not selling his books. The Facebook post ends with a request to caste, religion, and political groups to end their protest since Murugan has withdrawn all his works. Later, the Madras High Court's judgment to uphold the freedom of expression, speech, and writing declared that Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2010) had nothing offensive. In the concluding judgment, the court commented "Let the author be resurrected to what he is best at. Write" (Sekaran, 2016). This final sentence was a revelation to the author, triggering him to continue writing. Author Perumal Murugan, a doctorate in Tamil Literature with more than two decades of teaching experience attempted to provide a cultural outline of society that existed a century ago.

At this juncture, the research focuses on the intertwinement between the authors' mental state regarding their life threats, the banning of books, and controversies. In the end the trauma they endured during the phase of alienation created anxieties about the rigid ideologies followed by societal groups. The authors' unique responses to the controversies were investigated in terms of intellectual and emotional aspects. Despite all the post-traumatic stress, the dissident spirits of Indian literature resurrected from their metaphorical death.

7. The Resilience of the Authors

The publication of the surrealist postmodern novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) forced him to hide for ten years. Meanwhile, his first novel after the fatwa was published, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) a creative response to the dictatorship of Ayatollah Khomeini. The critic's response to the novel is, "Haroun and the Sea of Stories can hardly be read as anything other than an allegory of Rushdie's present predicament" (Tanjena G.R. & Dhawan R.K, 1992, p.198). As a brief literary fantasy, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) combines traditional fairy tale elements with the author's own imaginative and surreal creations. It functions as a story about a child's quest one which depicts a young boy journeying to a far-off place in search of a happy ending. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) is a powerful political allegory that confronts current issues, such as writing limitations imposed by fundamentalist regimes and environmental pollution caused by careless multinational corporations. Similarly, Perumal Murugan's work *Poonachi : Or the Story of a Black Goat* (2019) is the first fictional work written after his self-imposed quarantine, where the main protagonists are nonhuman animals instead of humans. In one of his interviews, Murugan said he doesn't want to comment on the controversy "I am not defined by controversy; I am defined by my writing" (Karthikeyan, 2017). *Poonachi : Or the Story of a Black Goat* (2019) is undoubtedly the resurrection of the author. However, focusing on the post-fatwa narratives, the author Rushdie himself declared in an interview that,

And if you show my books in chronological sequence to somebody who knows nothing about my life, I don't think that reader would say, 'Oh look, something terrible happened in 1989, and all the books after that are affected.' I think they would see continuity in the literature. There's no great disruption. And I'm proud of that—the fact that I was able to go on being myself as an artist. (Beard, 2015)

In contrast, Murugan announces his self-obituary in his Facebook post and after the protest, threat, and court cases he pleads to his opposers to leave him and his family alone. This made him leave Tiruchengodu and moved to Chennai. Later, Murugan returned with a poetry collection, *Oru Kozhaiyin Paadalgal (Songs of a Coward: Poems of Exile)* (2017) written in his exile. During the launch of his book of poems in Delhi, he admitted that,

Between December 2014 and June 2016, I couldn't so much scratch a line in the first three months. As though the fingers of my heart had become numb. I couldn't read a thing. Even when I turned the newspaper my eyes would scan the print but my mind would not absorb a word. I'd flip through the pages like an illiterate person and fold them away. I consoled myself that there were things to do in this world other than reading and writing. And I did my best to turn my attention to them. But it was impossible. It was then that I realized the full meaning of the Tamil phrase, 'nadaipinam', 'a walking corpse'. (*Perumal Murugan Ends Literary Exile*, 2016).

Murugan called himself a “Coward” in his work *Songs of a Coward: Poems of Exile* (2017) following the disputes. He persistently conceals his political and cultural elements in his book *Poonachi* (2016). The author's emotional cowardice demonstrates his inherent tendency to resist. Since literature is a representation of reality, critical writers suffer when they explore realities with strong religious or cultural overtones. The social transformation brought about by the dissidents is stifled by censorship even though they become the voice of society. For offending fundamentalist religious sentiments, they silenced dissident voices in the arts and literature through imprisonment, torture, and even execution. For instance, Maqbool Fida Husain received death threats for his painting of the Hindu God and the fundamentalist forced him into exile.

The fatwa revolutionized Salman Rushdie's life and literary career, thirteen years after exile, he published the autobiographical novel entitled, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012). In the novel *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012), he revealed his life through a fatwa mirror, using the fictional character, Joseph Anton. He exposed his traumatic emotions by reflecting on the discourse of recollecting thoughts and incidents of the fatwa. Writing allegorically under a repressive regime illustrates the author's vitality. The situation may not be the same for all political or self-exile authors, who faced a variety of unanticipated quarantines that had a significant mental impact on them, which is shown in their writings.

8. Self-Imposed Lockdown vs Global Pandemic Lockdown

The disturbing factors of creative writing including barriers such as the pandemic, COVID-19 all over the world, influence the writers' emotional condition. Rushdie and Murugan went through both literary self-imposed quarantine and global pandemic lockdown. Rushdie said that the world pandemic damaged his mental state and that he discussed his writings at the time of the epidemic in one of his interviews, “I thought, Yeah, you know, half a million people are dead, but it's a great time to be a novelist” (*Will a Better World Emerge From COVID-19? Salman Rushdie Says No if Previous Plagues Are Anything to Go by | CBC Radio*, 2021). When Rushdie was asked about the pandemic lockdown, he compared it to his decades of hiding, he replied that “It's sort of, I guess, the difference between somebody being threatened in the public square, and an avalanche descending and destroying the town” (*Will a Better World Emerge From COVID-19? Salman Rushdie Says No if Previous Plagues Are Anything to Go by | CBC Radio*, 2021). Meanwhile, Perumal Murugan's expressed his views on his literary exile and national wide quarantine in his speech,

My literary isolation was my personal concern. Today, the entire society—why, the entire world—is under lockdown, its people isolated. This causes me unbearable misery. At first, I felt a small sense of glee, some epicaricacy in thinking, ‘Well, let the world go through what I did.’ As if nature were taking revenge upon the entire world on my behalf. Then, I thought how silly this was and cleansed myself of the thought. I think, perhaps this ability to cleanse myself of ill-will is the major difference between these two periods of quarantine (Mitra,2020)

The study discusses the authors' early feelings of insecurity and fear caused by censorship and banning, as well as the author's anxieties about the current pandemic. The ground-breaking fictional works of the authors have similar creative and socio-political themes. The re-evaluation of the global attitude toward the sensation of anxiety is reflected in their works. The dissident text of the authors expresses the notion amongst the political, national, and cultural context in literature and resists social injustice.

9. Conclusion

Indian Literature put forward social revolution through the dissident voices and their equivalence and uniqueness of writings. In contemporary Indian literature, writers like Damodar Mauzo, Goa's award-winning author, and S.Hareesh, a Malayalam novelist faced multiple death threats. On a positive note, these dissident Indian writers have already established excellence by winning numerous literary awards. The mutuality of dissident authors Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan are selected for comparative analysis for variable factors given above. The fact that both authors represent authentic dissident voices within the country allows a comparison of the two individuals' ideologies and the exiles they endured. Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan express interpretations of religion in their novels. Rushdie defends his right to talk about such a subject in his post-fatwa novel *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012) by claiming that he is familiar with Muslim culture and has the freedom to challenge the holy book from a secular Muslim perspective. He vented his anger, anxiety, and emotional pain caused by his fatwa and exile. In the memoir, he also demonstrates the post-fatwa spirit of resilience. Dissident authors have written about their disagreement with an established political, religious, or governmental system or institution. Since they are humiliated and oppressed and their literary works are being exploited, authors, who support the freedom to dissent in the nation, like Nayantara Sahgal, have returned their Sahitya Academic Awards.

Dissident writers continue to contribute to society through their writings and communicate their ideas on socio-political, religious, and cultural concerns even after being victimised and suppressed by the dominant forces in society. Rushdie

and Murugan overcame the superiority of political power and liberated themselves. This demonstrates the vitality of the writer's literary creation even after their alienation and fear. Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan chronicle the Indianization and nativism in their writings, in particular as writers of Indian literature in English. The socio-historical and cultural significance of Indian mythology is explored in their narratives. They were also criticised for their stand on hegemonic religion, community norms, the political system, and socio-economic issues. Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan are labelled as dissidents, suppressing their freedom of expression, and they were forced to live in exile. Due to political and societal pressure, the authors turn to self-censorship and self-exile, but the authors' resilience as dissidents is expressed in their creative or critical works.

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