

The Politics Of Offense: The Phenomena Of Censorship In The Contemporary Discourse Of Literature And Media

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Abstract

As long as literature and other forms of art and media have existed, they've been censored, banned, questioned and condemned. These forms of expression rouse emotions in a society and sometimes this emotion threatens the dominant narratives around powerful institutions. Sensing a possible sentiment of rebellion and a threat of dismantling the power machinery, they retaliate with force and punish authors by book banning, censorship, book burning and even threats to the life of the author or translator. Even though liberal ideology is much more widespread today, the sentiment of intolerance to different views and opinions is showing no signs of halting. From books to plays, films, advertisements, live performances, social media posts, television series, paintings, sculptures, cartoons – everything is vulnerable to being censored. From autocracies and theocracies to democracies, the urge to censor is prevalent in all societies. This paper discusses and tries to understand the phenomena of literary censorship.

Keywords: Literary censorship, Literature and the state, Power structures, Ideological power struggle, Identity politics

Art, in all its forms, is a statement from its maker to its audience. It could be the zeitgeist of an age captured in the pages of a beloved book, a starry night immortalized in the swirling brush strokes of a painter, a sculptor's skilled work unearthed centuries after a civilization's collapse, a musical rendition, a theatrical production, a film, a dance or even a living piece of history – in the shape of a monument – standing tall in a concrete jungle. As time goes on, perspectives towards and interpretations of art change, meanings are transposed and contexts diversify. Yet, the fact remains, art speaks, across the limitations of time and space.

The discourse surrounding a piece of art, a book for instance, is not just based on a writer-reader binary. Often, it is based on a complex dynamic of a writer – reader – state triad. The conventional way of understanding literature is trying to decipher its meaning but another way of understanding literature and its place in society is to study what it is not; more specifically, what it is not allowed to be. Literature has always faced external pressure to conform to ideals approved by the state and other powerful organizations (such as religious and other cultural authorities) and affluent individuals sponsored by the state. If this authority is challenged, states

often respond with measures such as book censorship, book banning, forcible shelf removal from libraries, book stores and schools to even more violent measures such as book burning and threatening to kill the author/ translator or even readers of the book. A more covert consequence of such threats is self-censorship wherein the author anticipating such violence chooses to censor his/ her own views.

Censorship in some sense is a part of our everyday conversations and behaviours. We all pick and choose certain words and actions that will garner social approval and acceptance. However, this is an aspect of human cognition and it is even subconscious to a large extent. What happens if in a democratic society, a powerful political or cultural structure composes and enforces rules and regulations that are a flagrant violation of supposedly guaranteed human rights such as the freedom of speech and thought? What happens when the narrative around literary works is controlled by the state and other powerful institutions to the extent that they can deem it moral or immoral and legally punish those who don't agree? How does this systemic negation and trivializing of important literary concerns impact us and our understanding of our world?

Censorship and banning by states is not only a universal phenomenon (across all forms of political systems – autocracies to democracies), it also stretches across all mediums (books, music, paintings, cartoons, advertisements, TV shows, live performances, news reports, the internet etc). Censorship of public discourse in order to maintain the political and social *status quo* is not a new practice but is in fact gaining traction as communication and information sharing becomes easier and more accessible every passing day.

Etymologically, the word Censorship evolved from the Latin word *cense* which means to judge or assess. In ancient Rome, the 'censors' was the name given to the officials who were in charge of taxation, census-taking and the supervision of public festivals. The censors were also tasked with keeping everyone's behaviour in check. They had the power to remove someone from the senate or strip someone of citizenship if their behaviour did not align with state principles. This idea of the state being a larger entity than individual citizens and the need for policing of thoughts to avoid questioning of dominant narratives has passed down from ages and is still alive and well today.

The history of literature is replete with incidents of brutal repression of authors and poets. In ancient Greece, Socrates was executed for 'corrupting the youth of Athens' and for not believing and questioning the gods of the state. Ironically, the Greeks are credited with the invention of democracy but Socrates's execution shows the dangers of democracy i.e., when it descends to mob rule. In 212 BCE, Chinese emperor Shi Huang Ti burnt books and buried scholars in order to (literally) rewrite the history of his rule. Ancient Roman poet Ovid's book *Ars Amatoria* which is basically like a western *Kamasutra* got him exiled from his state. The ancient world's great learning center – The Great Library of Alexandria was burnt down by the order of the ruling Caliph Omar. The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* forbade Catholics from reading 'heretical' texts by Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon, John Milton, John

Locke, Nicolas Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, Blaise Pascal and many others. This index came into place sometime in the sixteenth century and was abolished in 1966 by Pope Paul VI.

In Elizabethan England, the ‘star chamber’ was a group of powerful royalists who maintained a strict control over publications to protect the reputation of the royal family. Even today, the term ‘star chamber’ is used as a pejorative to describe a secret meeting held by executives to carry out a nefarious agenda. In 1640, the English Parliament abolished star chambers. However, in 1643, the English Parliament introduced The Licensing Order which required all published materials to be issued a license before publication, to register all published material and its details such as author’s name, publisher’s name with a government body, to legally be able to destroy any book deemed damaging to the government and to arrest and jail offending authors and poets. This incident shows the Parliament’s reason to ban star chambers wasn’t done with the intention of fostering free speech but rather to transfer power of the censorship machinery from the royalists to the Parliamentarians.

Mysterious disappearances and deaths of poets is a near constant refrain especially in authoritarian regimes. Russian poet Osip Mandelstam and his wife were gifted a vacation voucher by the Stalinist regime which was a guise for his arrest and sentencing to a ‘correction camp’ where he died of hunger and extreme cold. Nobel Prize winning Chilean poet Pablo Neruda died under mysterious circumstances – rumoured to be an execution by the oppressive Chilean regime.

One of the most famous – rather infamous – examples of censorship in recent times is of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. This was the first book against which a fatwa urging to kill the author was issued by the Supreme Leader of Iran. There were violent protests against this book and it was banned in many countries. Since these protests were already afoot in other countries, this book was never published by an Indian publisher. However, there is a ban on importing this book to India. In February 1989, the American Cultural Center in Pakistan was attacked in which six protestors were killed. Bookstores in the United States and the United Kingdom that carried the book and defended the right to read were bombed. Rushdie’s Japanese translator was stabbed to death in 1991. His Italian translator was also stabbed but survived the attack. His Norwegian publisher survived a gunshot attack. His Turkish translator was attacked by a mob of arsonists who set fire to a hotel in which he was staying. Though he escaped, thirty seven people died in that fire. Rushdie himself being an influential British citizen was provided security and did not face any attacks. The UK government broke diplomatic relations with Iran due to the fatwa. Rushdie has apologized for the controversy but it has made little to no impact on the perception of this controversial book.

The crux of the censorship debate is the tussle between individual freedom and public welfare (or what is perceived as public welfare). The state claims that censorship is for the public good and will protect its populace from material that might ‘corrupt’ their minds. A free-thinking writer is presented as seditious and a notorious anti-national who wants to disrupt peace and provoke people. Every state’s ideal is to set up a committee which evaluates material before they are released to the public so they can censor it accordingly. For instance in India, although (at the

pre-publication stage) no such committee exists for literature, movies require the approval of the Central Board of Film Certification. The members of this committee are picked by the party in power. These members may or may not have any relation to the film industry or to film-making in general. Hence, there is no guarantee that the censorship they recommend is based on some kind of artistic experience or is just state-sponsored coddling of people. A valid question relevant in this context was raised eons ago by John Milton in his famous speech *Areopagitica*. He asks if the censors do not get ‘corrupted’ by reading or viewing potentially dangerous material, then why do they assume the public would? Why do states assume that readers are not astute and discerning enough to form their own opinion about texts – just like the censors do?

A world free of censorship cannot be imagined and may not necessarily be an exemplary one. Children below a certain age aren’t mature enough to read or view sexually explicit or extremely violent material. Hence, censorship and banning of violent video games, music videos with abusive lyrics, age restriction of erotic or horror films, monitoring internet access and defining the appropriate reading ages for novels like *Beloved*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Lolita* etc are steps that are encouraged by parents, teachers, psychologists and the state alike. Apart from this context, censorship is also encouraged on social media and news media to make language more politically correct and inclusive. Such as, use of words like ‘visually impaired’ or ‘specially abled’ instead of ‘blind’ or ‘handicapped’, using transgender people’s preferred pronouns, using words like ‘actor’ to describe a female actor rather than ‘actress’ so as to keep the focus on the profession instead of gender, use of words with ‘x’ like ‘womxn’ instead of women so as to include transgender women (who were not born women), ‘Latinx’ instead of ‘Latinos’ to be inclusive of queer people of Latin America and ‘Mx.’ instead of ‘Mr.’ or ‘Ms.’ for people who would rather not be labelled by gender, letting go of ableist words such as ‘retarded’ or ‘dumb’; homophobic slurs like ‘faggot’ or ‘dyke’ and racist words like ‘nigger’ or ‘sand monkey’. A physical manifestation of this phenomena is the concept of ‘safe spaces’ in University campuses where students of marginalized groups come together to discuss the issues they face without judgement from others.

There are many who do not agree with this new language of political correctness. A recent example of this is J. K. Rowling, author of the famed *Harry Potter* series, who reacted to an article titled “Opinion: creating a more equal post Covid-19 world for people who menstruate” (Sommer, Kamowa, Mahon) by tweeting, “People who menstruate. I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” (@jk_rowling) There was a severe backlash to her tweet with people calling her transphobic and willfully ignorant of trans issues. An author of her stature and popularity can easily access information that menstruation is a hormonal process and trans-men do experience menstruation and all its associated symptoms. Times of India reported on this controversy, “The denial or invisibilisation of men who bleed is the main reason why most trans men experience dysphoria, or discomfort with one’s assigned biological sex... Artist, educator, activist and India's first performing drag king Durga Gawde, who is a non-binary person, recently wrote about how the stress from their dysphoria manifested in the form of serious issues with their period since the age of 11... Gawde found Rowling’s statement hurtful because ‘someone in her position of power is giving power to people who hurt the trans community at large. We don’t need that. There is enough pain and

suffering that trans people already go through all over the world.’...Inclusive language like ‘people who menstruate’ is helpful, as is destigmatizing and normalizing menstruation for all...” (Joshi, Desai)

The social media battlefield of what is politically correct and what is hurtful and offensive is ongoing and each day a new issue either unites people in learning about others and how to converse about their diverse life experiences or unites people in hurling abuses and vitriol at the other for being The Other. Language is social codification – it is always ongoing – surrounded and influenced by ideologies at large. As critic Stanley Fish says, “(there is) no such thing as free speech; no such thing as a public forum purged of ideological pressures or exclusions.” (Fish 16) So, how do we study censorship and its long term-effects on the discourse of civil society? Professor Michael Holquist says in his paper “The Paradox of Censorship”, “To be for or against censorship is to assume a freedom no one has. Censorship *is*. One can only discriminate against its more and less repressive effects.” (Holquist 16)

The censorship of literature has a long, multifaceted history – from pre-publication licenses such as the Glavlit in Soviet Russia who made offending writers ‘disappear’, post-publication controversies and bans such as the Rushdie affair, library censorship where the librarian’s decision can influence which books are bought by the library or as in the case of Soviet Russia, two completely different cataloguing systems – one for privileged readers and the other for ordinary readers – the authorities decided who was a privileged reader and they could access ‘controversial’ books. Publishing houses being for-profit organizations also choose which manuscripts to publish and what to censor within those manuscripts.

There has always been clandestine literature circulated by the author among her contemporaries and some manage to smuggle their manuscript abroad and get it published in another country. For those who can’t adopt these measures, censorship leads them to write between the lines which will be understood by their esoteric readers. In fact, Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges has said, “Censorship is the mother of metaphor.” Borges is echoing Foucault’s ‘repressive hypothesis’ where he explains how censorship due to the strict Victorian codes of morality led to the covert writing of seemingly unlimited pornographic material.

There is abundant proof of literary censorship in the western literary tradition going all the way back to Socrates. But there aren’t many accounts of ancient Indian writers being exiled or killed due to their writings. While Plato advocated the banishing of poets from the ideal kingdom for writing poetry which is ‘removed from reality’ and ‘arouses dangerous emotions’, the *Rasa* theory celebrates art that causes roused emotions and deems this to be the true motive of good art. The majority of ancient Indian writers were *rishis* whose meditations were focused on achieving spiritual bliss – often achieved via literary/ poetic insights. Perhaps, the holy stature given to art prevented ancient Indian literature to be subject to censorship. Literacy was a luxury only a few were granted (on the basis of their caste and social standing), hence literature was never perceived as a dangerous force that could impact majoritarian views.

By the time of the British occupation of India, the invention of the printing press had made literature much more accessible and widespread. The British set up a number of laws to censor

books, conduct surveillance of authors and made pre-publication licensing mandatory. In fact, many of those colonial-era censorship laws still exist and are enforced today.

After India's independence in 1947, the focus shifted from state sponsored censorship to censorship due to the offended sentiments of different religions and communities. A diverse country like India struggled to ensure a free voice for its authors while also acknowledging the sentiments of the myriad of voices under its new democratic ambit. Thus, a new form of censorship began in this era – censorship due to societal demand (as opposed to state control).

The turbulent political climate of The Emergency brought back state censorship of literature with a new and determined force. In an era as volatile as this, one can only imagine the amount of self-censorship that authors must have practiced. The state censorship machinery was at its most powerful and dangerous during this era.

Indian society today has managed to weaponize social media in order to make the government bow down to its censorship demands. Social media can be a democratic place where opinions of all sides can be expressed. But often, the 'hashtag' wars fought on sites like Twitter are nothing less of an online lynch mob with tweets instead of pitchforks. There is a rampant 'cancelled culture' online wherein social media users, taking offense to something a celebrity has said or done, try to cause maximum damage to them, hence 'cancelling' them.

This culture began as a way to boycott powerful people who commit serious crimes and are only given a slap on the wrist by the law. For instance, it was an open secret that Hollywood's Oscar winning producer Harvey Weinstein uses his position as founder of Miramax studios to solicit sexual favours from young girls hoping to get their big break at the movies. In 1998, actress Gwyneth Paltrow said in an interview, "(Weinstein) will coerce you to do a thing or two." (Giller) In 2005, singer Courtney Love jokingly said in an interview, "If Harvey Weinstein invites you to a private party in the Four Seasons, don't go." (Funny Democrats)

There were many such comments reported as entertainment news and quickly brushed aside. Finally, in 2017, The New York Times published an article accusing Weinstein of soliciting sex and paying off eight women – who were employed by Miramax as actresses, production assistants, interns etc. That article had a snowball effect and over time, ninety women have accused Weinstein of sexual harassment and/ or rape. According to the victims, these incidents took place between 1980 to 2015. They also accused that the HR department of Miramax, their senior employees, agents, publicists and lawyers of being complicit in keeping this secret and even arranged these meetings and arranged payments to these girls to avoid lawsuits. On 11 March 2020, Weinstein was sentenced to 23 years in jail. Even though the 2017 New York Times article (the journalists involved won a Pulitzer for their reporting) brought the attention on Weinstein, it was actress Alyssa Milano's 15 October 2017 tweet, "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." that kick started the #MeToo wave. A torrent of #MeToo statuses by high profile celebrities followed; the movement quickly proliferated to all corners of the internet and every other female owned account had a #MeToo status. One among them was actress Rose McGowan's tweet where she publicly accused Harvey Weinstein of raping her in

1997 and paying her \$100,000 as hush money (Ortiz). Her public accusation of a powerful director spread like wildfire and slowly one by one, more women started coming forward accusing Weinstein of assault.

Weinstein's case is a story of the benefits of 'cancelled culture' and how social media becomes a safe space for victims to speak out. But unfortunately, it isn't always the wealthy predators that are brought down by hashtags – oftentimes; it is just celebrities who have a differing opinion than others. When in 2018, actress Swara Bhasker tweeted about the Kathua rape case (where an eight year old girl was raped and murdered in a temple by the priest, his son, his nephew and four local police officers) and said, "I am Hindustan. I am Ashamed. 8 years old. Gangraped. Murdered. In 'Devi'-sthaan temple. #Kathua". Many people interpreted this as an attack on Hindu faith and accused Bhasker of being an 'anti-national' and 'communal'. People started tweeting demanding her to be arrested, demanding her upcoming film to be banned, encouraging their supporters to not watch her films and putting pressure on companies like Amazon India which she endorses. Due to the furore, Amazon India cancelled their endorsement deal with Bhasker (endorsements are a major chunk of actors' earnings – sometimes even more than films). (Das)

Twitter controversies often become national controversies and social media seems to be the new place where the demand for censorship is conceived and its plan of action is hatched. Authors today often feel as if they have to walk on eggshells in order to not offend anybody's sentiments or their livelihoods and sources of income will be snatched by the online, faceless mob. The era of satirical political cartoons is almost gone as seemingly no one can stomach irony anymore. This is the era of the TW warning. TW stands for 'Trigger Warning' and it is usually done before articles that mention rape or brutal violence so people who've been victims of sexual trauma don't have to relive or be reminded of it. Like most things, TW also started with good intentions – so as to keep media a safe space for people struggling with trauma related mental health issues. The 'triggers' have been redefined, and any opposing, nay, differing view can be deemed 'hurtful' and social media becomes an echo chamber of people repeating: "I'm offended!"

Almost all calls for censorship have one thing in common – they fear what impact the offending material will have on the reader. However, the reader's opinion is never sought while making censorship demands. This may also have something to do with the medium – films being a more popular genre invite a lot more criticism for censorship as compared to books. But nevertheless, the fact remains, censorship results in sanitized, cookie-cutter literature which threatens the very purpose of books as agents of questioning and consequent reforms!

The censorship of literature is a form of cultural regulation. The repression of meaning creates new meanings. Though censorship is a limiting force anywhere, in an autocratic regime, it is normalized to the extent of being considered a legitimate part of the official machinery. In regimes like these, freedom of speech is non-existent and the choice is between living a self-censored life or ending up in a 'correction camp' – a euphemism for dying a horrific death. At least in such cases, one knows who the enemy is; whose sinister propaganda is at work and why.

In democracies, however, freedom of speech is guaranteed for all citizens excluding hate speech, seditious material that threatens the unity and integrity of the country or promotes violence, libel, leaking confidential information, excessively vulgar or abusive content etc. Since these are impossible to precisely define, the gray area between what should definitely be censored and what should definitely not be censored is a battleground of political ideologies, societal norms and artistic imagination. The proposal to censor something in this gray area causes a debate in civil society – this debate is critical because here the majoritarian view will emerge. In an ideal world, views and opinions would be independent and well-informed but majoritarian views often get a generous helping of political / societal / religious / cultural mobilization coupled with one-sided reporting from the mainstream media. Needless to say, such ‘constructed’ majoritarian views are rarely in favour of the author. Hence, even if in a democracy, free speech is suspect and vulnerable, where do we go from here?

Professor and author Sue Jansen says that censorship is the knot that binds power and knowledge (Jansen 1). The one who regulates artistic production and controls the dominant narrative around it is the most powerful.

This is why a study of literary censorship is a valid, viable, relevant and important study.

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