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## ***Crack down on Books-*** Censorship, Burnings, Bans and Challenges of Literary Works: Some Glimpses

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### **Abstract**

Any discussion related to censorship, ban, book burning and challenges can be traced back to the literary scuffle of Plato and Aristotle. Almost every student of literature knows that Plato banished poets, the practitioners of mimetic art from his ideal society on the grounds that such representations are dangerous because they stir the emotions and people tend to imitate what they see and hear. But Aristotle paved the way for all subsequent arguments against censorship through his influential theory of catharsis. However there are still the arguments of Plato influencing the thinking of censorship and religious authorities, and general public assuming that audiences' behaviour is influenced by the stories they are exposed to. The control over the dissemination, publication and distribution of literary book is still operational all over the world. The journey of a book from the hands of the writer to those of the reader is not always easy and, mostly same is true of their understanding and popularity.

The present study will attempt to give briefly some insights on censorship on literary works in select nations. It will deliberate on the background, causes, and various authorities/organizations responsible for censoring books, burnings, bans and challenges leading to their suppression, at times attempting to show how such works, were later on well received, read widely and attained canonical status.

### **Keywords**

Censorship, Literary work, Publication, Dissemination, Book burnings. Suppression, Canonical, Theory of Catharsis

## **Introduction**

It is widely known fact that literature is one of the richest sources that contains the knowledge of social consciousness. It portrays the impression of social norms and values as well as modes of thought of a given age. There is also another crucial function of literature, namely it exerts an influence — through its readers — upon the very formation of these norms and values. Annabel Patterson says that “literature is a privileged medium by which matters of serious public concern could be debated.” In order to control this debate, governments have engaged in some methods, including censorial measures. Therefore, suppression of governmental criticism has been and remains its first priority. Apart from political arguments, books can be banned on religious, sexual, or social grounds.

A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others. Due to the commitment of librarians, teachers, parents, students and other concerned citizens, most challenges are unsuccessful and most materials are retained in the school curriculum or library collection. Books usually are challenged with the best intentions—to protect others, frequently children, from difficult ideas and information. Book burning, is the ritual destruction by fire of books or other written materials. Usually carried out in a public context, and is generally motivated by moral, religious, or political objections to the material, with a desire to impose the censorship on the book. The burning of books represents an element of censorship and usually proceeds from a cultural, religious, or political opposition to the materials in question. Book burning can be an act of contempt for the book's contents or author, and the act is intended to draw wider public attention to this opinion. The word “banned” is often used in a sense of suppression, removed from circulation by an authority.

## **Discussion**

Censorship can be subtle, almost imperceptible, as well as blatant and overt. John Stuart Mill wrote: “*If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.*” (ON LIBERTY) Book censorship implies that when some authority, government or otherwise, takes measures to prevent access to a book or to part of its contents. It can be enacted at the national or sub national level, and can carry legal penalties. Books may also be challenged at a local community level, although successful bans do not extend outside that area. Similarly, religions may issue lists of banned book.

Generally censorship refers to the suppression of spoken or written expression. In literary terms this has taken different forms at different times, and the category has been used for a variety of phenomena. From the advent of printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century roughly through the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe prior censorship was the norm. “this earliest form of literary censorship dealt almost entirely with the suppression of political opposition and

religious dissention. From time to time there were short-lived efforts to prevent the publication of books on the grounds of their obscenity or lasciviousness but the real spur to this kind of censorship was the knowledge that literature might get into the hands of the lower orders of society and would incite them to perform obscene or lascivious acts of the sort described in these books, a problem not much encountered until after 1695”(Thomas, *A Long Time Burning* 8) During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout much of 20<sup>th</sup> century prepublication vetting was replaced in Europe by a subtle form of control. “Authors were free to publish anything they liked to as long as they could find a publisher, a printer and the book seller responsible to do their respective task related to / of the text”.(E.Ladenson). Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, governments in most of the countries exercised the right to post publication suppression following legal proceedings, as a result the publication industry exercised its own form of control on publications. Since authors and publishers, and often printers and book sellers were subject to fines and even jail sentences if the work was found culpable under this system, all concerned had a considerable stake in avoiding legal proceedings. In the West, censorship has not gone away but it has taken different forms emanating less from centralized government forces than from the citizenry itself, often in forms of local pressure groups. Interestingly, banning of a book, ironically often has the effect of making people seek out the book .The action of banning the book creates an interest in the book which has the opposite effect of making the work more popular.

### **Major Reasons**

Of the numberless, the major three reasons of offensiveness in the literary works are sexual, political, and religious. Since all these three are intimately connected. It is not easy to distinguish them. Adultery for example is a standard plot for novels and a favourite target of censorship efforts. Many works such as the novels of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* , and D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* 1928 as well as number of other novels banned in Islamic countries contain all the three reason mentioned above. The 1989 Iranian Fatwa pronounced on Salman Rushdie by Iranian authorities for his *Satanic Verses* 1988 was a religious decree on grounds of blasphemy, but in such contexts religious is a political category that necessarily extends to representation of social and sexual concerns.

In addition the use of dirty words has led to the hue and cry against works like Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* both of which published in France were banned in English speaking countries for some years. Racial denigration has also become a source of concern. Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, was banned on the use of the word ‘nigger’. Novels were seen a considerable threat to the sexual as well as the political status quo. In the *Madam Bovary* trial, the public prosecutor emphasized the fact that novels are mostly read by girls and women who were unable to distinguish between the fiction and the real life would be corrupted by her example.

A number of canonical modernist novels all cross the world have been the object of either censorship or mere attempts of it on them. These novels with their emphatic critique of modern society have invited censorship on them. Literary history is witness that the birth of every literary work is not normal but at times they are killed in their infancy or made to feel

suffocated until the time comes when the book feels good to the public and the authorities and it starts enjoying the fame it deserves.

In England many books were not allowed to reach the public hands until late. *Adam Bede* was published in 1859 whereupon it was attacked in the United Kingdom as the “vile outpourings of a lewd woman’s mind” and withdrawn from British libraries. Beginning with Oscar Wilde’s trial of 1895, the other cases like Joyce’s ‘canonical modernist novel *Ulysses*’ was first published between 1918 and 1920 in Margaret Anderson’s *Little Review* in New York in a serial form. Despite having been expurgated by Ezra Pound in order to avoid censorship has long been considered one of the most important works of Modernist literature, but anti-vice forces in the US took issue with the book’s brief metaphorical reference to masturbation. After a 1921 trial in which it was declared obscene, *Ulysses* was banned in America until 1933. Originally published in Paris, it also remained banned in the UK until the 1930s. Later on ‘the novel was brought out in an unexpurgated form by Sylvia Beach in 1922.’ (E.Ladenson) D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was originally privately printed in Florence in 1928 to avoid the censors – a move that lost the author substantial income. Considered obscene, it was banned in the UK, Ireland, Australia, the USA, Canada, Japan and China. Penguin Books successfully challenged the UK ban in 1960, on the grounds of ‘redeeming social merit’. The book sold over 2 million copies in its first year of publication.

Furthermore, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall published in 1928, the tale of a wealthy young woman tormented by her love for another woman is considered a thinly autobiographical account of Hall’s own struggle with her sexuality. Despite depicting nothing more incendiary than a kiss between the two women, the book was subject to an obscenity trial and banned on the grounds that it was likely to “deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences”. The book returned to print in 1949 and has gone on to sell millions. The novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov initially failed to find a US publisher and appeared instead in France, but was banned as obscene in 1955. British Customs also banned the book in 1955, Argentina in 1959 claiming it reflected moral disintegration, New Zealand banned its import in 1960 and South Africa instituted a ban in 1974 because of the ‘perversion theme’.

In America the journey of the writers has never been smooth and their books have either been banned for ever or for a short period. There are many cases of book burnings reported. However the time heals the burns of the writers and they come out as the destiny directors in the ideology or in their own literary pursuit. The cases of the books poorly received or not received at all the in America too are not few. “In America a country which had no coherent federal censorship law much of the cracking down job on literature was undertaken by private organizations accorded semi official functions who worked with Post Office and Custom Bureau.” (E.Ladenson)

The now canonical and classic works were not received warmly but banned censored , burnt or challenged. The first ban of Mark Twain’s American classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884 labelling it “trash and suitable only for the slums.” Objections to the

book have evolved, but only marginally. Twain's book is one of the most-challenged of all time and is frequently challenged even today because of its frequent use of the word "nigger." Otherwise it is alleged the book is "racially insensitive," "oppressive," and "perpetuates racism."

*Animal Farm* was banned in the USSR and USA for Communist material in its introduction. In 1963 the John Birch Society in Wisconsin challenged the use of the phrase 'masses will revolt'. The novel was banned in 2002 from schools in the United Arab Emirates. E.M Forster finished *Maurice* in 1914 but refused to allow publication until after his death. To bring out a frankly homosexual novel that did not, as he put it, end 'with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact' would have made him vulnerable. The book has been banned in a regional high school in USA, copies being seized from students as they read them in class. Personal attacks on the teacher, Penny Culliton, who introduced the book, have been so vehement that her job has been put in jeopardy.

*Lord of the Flies* remains as provocative today as when it was first published in 1954, igniting passionate debate with its startling, brutal portrait of human nature. It has become one of the most frequently challenged books in the USA and considered 'demoralising inasmuch as it implies that man is little more than an animal'. The Toronto School Board banned this classic from all schools, claiming it was racist for use of the word 'niggers'. Even Golding's Nobel Prize in literature did not protect the book. The publication of *Madame Bovary* resulted, in 1857, in Flaubert being taken to court in Paris for offending public morality. Even though he was acquitted, the book remained controversial. In 1864 it was placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum by the Vatican, the English publisher, Vizitelly, was imprisoned in 1889 for publishing 'obscene libels' and as late as 1954 it was blacklisted in the USA by the National Organisation of Decent Literature. *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley has been charged with being sordid, immoral and obscene. It has been condemned for vilifying the family, for giving too much attention to sex and for encouraging illegal drug use. Many cite the sexual promiscuity of the Utopians, as did the Board of Censors in Ireland when it banned the novel in 1932. It is also considered to be 'depressing, fatalistic and negative' and has been frequently challenged in schools throughout the USA.

The books that shaped America were not received warmly but censored or challenged at different times. Again and again, the Pulitzer-prize winning novel *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, the most influential African-American writer of all time is assigned to high school English students. And again and again, parental complaints are lodged against the book because of its violence, sexual content and discussion of bestiality. Next, *The Catcher in the Rye* by, J.D. Salinger, 1951. Young Holden, favourite child of the censor was frequently removed from classrooms and school libraries because it is "unacceptable," "obscene," "blasphemous," "negative," "foul," "filthy," and "undermines morality." And to think Holden always thought "people never notice anything." Shortly after Ernest Hemingway's, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1940 publication the U.S. Post Office, which purpose was in part to monitor and censor distribution of media and texts, declared the book nonmailable. In the 1970s, eight Turkish booksellers were tried for "spreading propaganda unfavourable to the state" because they had

published and distributed the text. This wasn't Hemingway's only banned book – *A Farewell to Arms* and *Across the River and Into the Trees* were also censored domestically and abroad in Ireland, South Africa, Germany and Italy.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's, *The Great Gatsby* 1925 is perhaps the first great American novel that comes to the mind of the average person; this book chronicles the booze-infused and decadent lives of East Hampton socialites. It was challenged at the Baptist College in South Carolina because of the book's language and mere references to sex. In a real head-scratcher of a case, a Texas school district banned the book *Moby-Dick; or The Whale*, Herman Melville, 1851 from its Advanced English class lists because it "conflicted with their community values" in 1996. Community values are frequently cited in discussions over challenged books by those who wish to censor them.

In addition, in *The Scarlet Letter*, according to many critics, Hawthorne should have been less friendly toward his main character, Hester Prynne (in fairness, so should have minister Arthur Dimmesdale). One isn't surprised by the moralist outrage the book caused in 1852. But when, one hundred and forty years later, the book is still being banned because it is sinful and conflicts with community values, you have to raise your eyebrows. Parents in one school district called the book "pornographic and obscene" in 1977

Harper Lee's great American tome *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960 stands as proof positive that the censorious impulse is alive, even today. For some educators, the Pulitzer-prize winning book is one of the greatest texts teens can study in an American literature class. Others have called it a degrading, profane and racist work that "promotes white supremacy." The recent and notorious example is the *Harry Potter* novels which received phenomenal worldwide popularity were attacked as books breeding and promoting witchcraft and Satanism. In 2002 a pastor in New Mexico conducted a public burning of the books denouncing the series as "a masterpiece of Satanic deception".

A reader would be aware that parents of students in Advanced English classes in a Virginia high school objected to language and sexual content in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. Suppression authorities on literary works in America continue to control all the books considered offensive.

"On a discussion of censorship and ban, the book *You Can't Read This Book: Censorship in an Age of Freedom* by British journalist and free speech campaigner **Nick Cohen** is a worth quoting. The fear (that a writer could end up "offending" someone, somewhere) is what Cohen's book is about: how in an age of supposedly "unparalleled freedom" and free exchange of ideas, free speech faces a grave threat from intolerant religious and cultural groups on the one hand and stifling pro-rich privacy laws on the other." (Wiki censorship) So grave is the threat, he argues, that you can actually "end up dead" for simply writing a book. "The traditional opponents of freedom of speech — religious fanaticism, plutocratic power and dictatorial states — are thriving, and in many respects finding the world a more comfortable place in the early 21st century than they did in the late 20th," the book argues. Cohen's views are best illustrated by the continuing campaign of harassment and

intimidation of Salman Rushdie over *The Satanic Verses*, published over 20 years ago. The ugly scenes witnessed at the Jaipur Literature Festival where he was prevented from making an appearance or even addressing it through a video link despite the fact that the book is already banned in India and he has not broken any Indian law are a chilling reminder of what we are up against.

Barely days later, there was a replay of similar scenes at the Kolkata Book Fair. The target of attack this time was Tasleema Nasreen as a Muslim group — the All India Minority Forum — accusing her of “insulting Islam”, forcibly prevented the release of her new book *Nirbasha (The Exile)*. The line of attack was the same as at Jaipur. Nasreen, they said, was “anti-Islam” and her publishers had “deliberately” organised the release of her book at the fair to “hurt” the community.

Faced with fear of violence, the organisers of the Fair, like their Jaipur counterparts, were left with no option but to give in. As an official of Publishers and Booksellers Guild put it they could “not risk” violence.

Rushdie and Nasreen became victims of a particularly virulent form of Muslim extremism that, it must be remembered, coincided with the rise of an equally virulent form of the Hindu Right. The row over *The Satanic Verses* happened at the height of BJP's often menacing campaign to build a Ram temple on the site of Babri Masjid which then still existed. It is not a coincidence that the Muslim “leaders” such as Syed Shahabuddin who pressured the government into banning the book were the same lot who were leading the rival campaign to protect Babri Masjid. They were also emboldened by the Iranian fatwa against Rushdie.

Nasreen's troubles over *Lajja* were, in a sense, fallout of the same phenomenon of which Rushdie had been a casualty: the rise of the mullahs on the subcontinent for a variety of reasons, both domestic and global. It is important to underline the context, especially of the Rushdie affair, because it is often assumed that Indian Muslims were always this intolerant. The fact is that until the Rushdie affair, Indian Muslims had not been involved in any major censorship row; and nor since then except over the Prophet's cartoons as part of wider global protests.

The history of literary censorship in India precedes the Rushdie affair with books, magazines, maps banned on grounds ranging from the “hurt” sentiments and “obscenity” to “threat” to national security. In the 1970s, it is reckoned, the largest number of banned books related to perceived misrepresentation of India's policies or its leaders. Books and foreign magazines such as *Time* and *The Economist* are routinely banned for depicting Kashmir as a disputed territory. Indian customs have sweeping powers not to allow any printed material to enter the country that they deem “objectionable. Here are some of the literary works which faced either temporary or permanent ban in India in recent years. Rushdie's 1995 novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* was temporarily banned after Shiv Sena protested that a character in the book resembled its leader Bal Thackeray.

*Lajja* by Taslima Nasreen about religious extremism and set against the backdrop of anti-Hindu riots in Bangladesh as a reaction to the demolition of Babri Masjid was banned in 1993

for “offending” Muslim sentiments. *Such a Long Journey* by Rohinton Mistry, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, ran into trouble with the University of Mumbai which dropped it from its English syllabus in 2010 after Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray's family alleged that it contained “derogatory” remarks about Maharashtrians. In addition, *An Area of Darkness* by V.S. Naipaul, published in 1964, was immediately banned for its negative portrayal of India and its people. It is known to one and all that the novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence remains banned in India on grounds of “obscenity” more than 50 years after Britain lifted the ban in 1960. The literary works with subjects generally perceived as offensive will not have a smooth circulation in India.

*The Satanic Verses* has been banned in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Qatar, Indonesia, South Africa and India for blaspheming the Prophet Mohammed and insulting Islam. In 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa calling on all good Muslims to kill the author; as a result Rushdie had to go into hiding. In India it was banned in 1988 after Muslims protested that it was “blasphemous” and offended their religious sentiments.

### **Conclusion**

In literary writings subjects perceived as offensive has not changed much. The major list of offending factors are sexually explicit material, offensive language, violence, promotion of racism, homosexuality, anti-family, grave adultery, politics and blasphemy. However literary works will continue to get written and their smooth distribution or their suppression is determined by how they are written and perceived. But it is a proved fact by history of literature that the first bad impression of a literary work is not always its last and lasting impression either. However, suppression and cracking down on a work becomes a must when the situation and the circumstances demand.

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