

**Fundamentalism and Censorship in South Asia:
Mass Misapprehension of Nasrin, Murugan & Rushdie**

By

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A thesis submitted to Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Approval

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Abstract

Religious Fundamentalism and censorship in South Asia have incapacitated progressive authors like Taslima Nasrin, Salman Rushdie and Perumal Murugan resulting in a restricted dystopia deterring freedom of thought. Mass indoctrination and fundamentalist politics have always played a nefarious role in the misinterpretation and misuse of South Asian literature. Words of prominent authors have been taken out of context and used to rile communalism among ordinary people as political tools. It has been proved repeatedly that the disposition of conservative political ideologies is at odds with secularism and liberal literature. In this paper, I shall be decoding and analyzing the collective essence of three banned books in South Asia (*Split: A Life* by Taslima Nasrin, *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, and *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan) and the lives of the exiled authors in question through feminist, contrapuntal and post-secular lenses.

Keywords: Religious Fundamentalism, Freedom of Expression, Censorship, South Asian Authors, Feminism, Post-Secularism

Dedication

You have offered during my dark times the essence to my being that I have always been looking for: emotional growth. I express to you my deep admiration, gratitude, and unconditional attachment.

My dear Alfred Christopher D'Silva, I dedicate this work to you in recognition of your unswerving view of the world and your exceptionally kind heart.

Acknowledgment

My bachelor's thesis represents my constant fight with eroding mental health in contrast to the enthusiasm I had for said topic long before I started it. It constitutes the common thread of my life, sometimes in the twilight of candor and often at the dawn of emotional turmoil. I have, in the end, pulled through thanks to a lot of people cheering me on.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Any book worth banning is a book worth reading.”

- Isaac Asimov

We have all seen, time and time again, in the pages of history, the heinous act of book burnings and bans. We have read about the death of people who dared to be different and speak up. We have been spectators to bloodshed and sympathized with people fighting for a greater cause. We have watched authors get hunted down by governments because they exposed their wrongdoings through art and gritty letters. But how many of us wonder about a society free of control from above? We may simply think but do we dare to speak up against redundant regulations that would challenge and reform the status quo? Most of us choose to be silent bystanders since adhering to conformist ideals aid us in holding on to the little privilege that we think we have.

South Asia is a cesspit of unfeeling brutes in power who wait patiently with their jaws wide open to devour anyone and everyone daring to present a diverse perspective or criticize the state’s shortcomings. Implementing laws and adopting changes that would relieve the minorities is unfeasible for them for it poses a threat to them winning the approval of the majority and remain in power.

In *Between Sedition and Seduction: Thinking Censorship in South Asia* by William Mazzarella and Raminder Kaur, it is mentioned that “As with many social phenomena, the harder one looks at censorship, the stranger it becomes. At the most elementary level, it quickly becomes clear that the common understanding of censorship as the repressive action of states and state-sanctioned institutions will not get us very far. One might even say that there seems to be something of a correlation between the regulation of cultural production and the proliferation of provocative forms” (Kaur 4). This entails that censorship in itself is

not a bad thing, rather, the context of censorship either being intrinsic or extrinsic determines if it has negative connotations. One may argue that in many cases, censorship may be necessary to protect the sentiments of certain groups from being hurt as a symbol of solidarity. Scholars have previously argued that this may be a productive aspect of censorship and that it encourages people to be kind. However,

Censorship, applied to literary works, concerns the condemnation and prohibition of dissemination for moral, religious or political reasons. Censorship was organized in Medieval England as early as the 12th century (Flahiff 1) related to the inevitability of authors to gain ecclesiastical approval, while it gained importance with the dawn of the printing press, which put within the reach of the populations books that could convey ideas that were repudiated by the leaders. Book banning and censorship spread to all parts of the world as authoritarian regimes started to take over the minds and souls of the masses. According to the Holocaust Encyclopedia, the burning of books under the Nazi regime on May 10, 1933, was perhaps the most famous book burning in history. "Beginning on May 10, 1933, Nazi-dominated student groups carried out public burnings of books they claimed were "un-German." The book burnings took place in 34 university towns and cities. Works of prominent Jewish, liberal, and leftist writers ended up in the bonfires" (Rittenberg 2). Furthermore, burning "un-German" books was not a new occurrence among Germans. Students lit large book bonfires in 1817 to show their support for Germany's unity as a nation. Today's Germany back then was a loose cluster of cities at this time. The ideas of race and nationalism were permeating Europe at the time of censorship. But if we go way back, in Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang in 213 B.C, ordered a bonfire of books as a way of consolidating power in his new empire (Boissoneault 1). Hence, from here we can understand that book burning, book banning and censorship all come off as different instances of mass control and regulating different schools of thoughts for people in power to avoid criticism and accountability.

Religion back then was a tool of control and the law did not favor free thinkers who had the 'audacity' to question certain ideologies or schools of thoughts. Banning a book cost less according to such governments than reforming laws that would cater to critical thinkers, theorists and intellectuals. "That authoritarian regimes are trying to control culture is not surprising. What's surprising, however, is that they're still attacking the book" (White 5), says Harvard Literature Professor Duncan White, providing several of these examples himself. "It is thought that they should be content to control the Web, social networks and continuous information networks. So why do they worry about books?" (White 5) The answer seems obvious to him: in the age of all-digital, for dissemination as for surveillance, the book retains its value thanks to its basic characteristics. "The book exists in physical copy, you can't update it, it's not connected online, it can be burned, and all its strength is there," reviews the professor. Destroying multiple copies of a book found from different locations have been observed several times in history.

If we take a look at the situation in South Asia, with values of countries reminiscent of colonial appeasement of the whites, book bans and censorships are fueled by the demands of the public when it concerns religion: the opiate of the masses. The laws are shaped by public opinion that supports the current regime/government/power. A supposedly secular state would incline more towards the religion of the majority than have a law that would not only protect minorities but also encourage free thinking. Free thought is the bane of an administration's existence and free speech is the greatest enemy of flawed democracy. Free speech entails the right of everyone to think as they wish and to be able to express their opinions by any means they deem appropriate, in the fields of politics, religion, morals, philosophy, and more. As Noam Chomsky said, "If you're really in favor of free speech, then you're in favor of freedom of speech for precisely for views you despise. Otherwise, you're not in favor of free speech." A nation acclaimed for religious tolerance also has laws that

would protect those who blaspheme, speak up against or question certain theological practices. I believe that religious sentiments being hurt can only be pinned on the one being hurt and triggered and not the ones who are said to be “provoking” or presenting with varying thoughts, ideas and promises. One may argue that for societal harmony to prevail, one belonging to a particular community or religious sect should not blaspheme in someone else’s belief system. This, however, is reductive and limiting to the spread of newer thought and expansive philosophical perception. One’s faith is in their hearts and no other entity should have to power to waver them. My entire thesis is based on this idea of embracing one’s own faith/ideologies and not letting external forces dictate how to live it, along with possessing the capacity to curb one’s own extremist urges over hurt religious sentiments.

So as a secularist, how does one hope for the administrations in power to not give in to the public being offended and change censorship or blasphemy laws? Hoping that this research sheds light to the problem at hand and the probable solutions available.

1.1 Literature Review

“Classically, we imagine the censor as the very embodiment of the anti-intellectual.”

- Raminder Kaur

For centuries and time immemorial, writers and artists have experienced a great deal of suppression and artistic censorship all because political powers found them to be malicious towards the status quo, prompts that directly or indirectly challenged their hard-boiled administration. Throughout the course of history, political influence and religious authority have shared bed, creating a toxic union of mass manipulation and the vanquishment of individual thought and expression.

From Geoffrey Chaucer to Oscar Wilde to contemporary authors like Salman Rushdie, the propensity of groups in power to curb the spread of new notions instigating

change has only escalated. If a concerned party believes the book is religiously charged, or if a particular religious organization thinks the work is anti-religious, the title can be prohibited. In 1859, since its publication, *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin has been exceeded and challenged due to the revolutionary nature of the debate over evolution versus creation. The Bible has also been censored worldwide, with Spanish translations being outlawed in Spain from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The Bible itself has undergone a great deal of “regulation” whereby the highest authorities in Christianity have chosen to exclude many texts terming them “apocryphal” or “heretical.”

Moving to the present history in 1985, the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, a book infused with magic realism, old London nostalgia, and the Indian diasporic experience, caused a conflagration of public outcry and riots, especially from fundamentalist members of the Islamic world. It wasn't long before a private prosecutor attempted to obtain a summons for the author of *The Satanic Verses* to appear in court for blasphemy at the Old Bailey. A fatwa was issued by the then Iranian theocrat Ayatollah Khomeini calling for the Rushdie's death on the grounds of hurting the Islamic religious sentiment. As of drafting this thesis, South Africa and Pakistan have banned the book, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Malaysia, Somalia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Qatar following suit within weeks. *The Satanic Verses* was burned for the first time in the United Kingdom on December 2, 1988 (Swan 3).

As mentioned by Iranian author Amir Taheri in his article ‘Pandora’s box forced open’:

“When poor old Mr Manavi filled in his Penguin order form for 10 copies of Salman Rushdie's third novel, *The Satanic Verses*, he could not have imagined that the book, described by its publishers as a reflection on the agonies of exile, would provoke one of the most bizarre diplomatic incidents in recent times.” (Amir 5)

Amir also mentions how Rushdie's *Shame* was a hit in the Islamic Literary world even though it had "exposed some of the more medieval of Islamic practices, especially with regard to women" (Amir 5). This explains how hurting a leader's religious sentiments is not the issue and triggering public outcries as long as it does not challenge the leader's position or credibility. He further notes, "The Tehran bookseller, however, had overlooked an important feature of the Islamic fundamentalist philosophy of which Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is only the latest and arguably the most media-conscious representative: that authors are tolerated and even honoured only so long as their views happen to coincide with those of the ruling ayatollahs" (Amir 5).

If Rushdie was pro-Khomeini, the events would not turn out the way they did. "Once the mullahs discovered that Rushdie, a stern artist with a strong personal interest in the cataclysmic developments of the Muslim world in recent years, was far more than a mere West-bashing militant, they decided that he too ought to be wiped out" (Amir 5). He also emphasizes that fundamentalist Islam's ideal future was one in which zikr, which is the simple recitation of conventional incantations, would completely replace fikr or critical thinking. His further research also notes the following: "Even Ayatollah Khomeini was for a time, in the 1940s, suspected of apostasy by those more zealous than himself simply because he had introduced a philosophy course at a theological school in Qom" (Amir 6).

What can be deduced from Amir's observations is that the leaders themselves are not perfect and their hypocrisies only indicate that it is not the divinity of religion that drives them to take certain actions but their thirst to exercise control over the masses and remain in power.

Next comes Taslima Nasrin, a woman deemed a recluse by the public because of her radical views on feminism and the emancipation of south Asian women lives life in exile all because she let the subaltern in her speak. Her first book *Meyebela* (My girlhood) racked up

so much controversy in Bangladesh, her homeland, that it led to acts of vandalism all across the nation including book fairs and Hindu temples. But why Hindu temples, one may wonder. Nasrin, who wrote about anti-communalism added gasoline to the deep-rooted tinderboxes of latent religious intolerance that has long been a plague since the British Occupation of the Indian subcontinent. Despite the backlash against her, she never backed down from voicing her thoughts regarding the overall injustices inherent in the system. Although recognized as a revolutionary in the western world, Nasrin was banished from her own homeland by the collective mob mentality of the illiterate masses. To this day, even after the publication of the bestselling *Split: A life*, she is still banned from coming back. In her 2014 art film *Nirbashito* (Ganguly), her final wish was to come back and live amongst her own people, the people she wrote for, fought for. Even after multiple fatwas and a headhunt, she does not wish to conform - a true advocate of much-needed reform.

In addition, the South Indian author Perumal Murugan, professed his non-existence on social media on accounts of multiple bans on his book *One Part Woman*, a brilliant social commentary on the evils of female subordination and stigma surrounding sexual liberation. He has urged publishers to discontinue the circulation of his books as a sign of utter defeat in the face of brutal Indian Hindu Nationalism. It's surprisingly mellow for all the noise it generated. The simple story with a tremendous undertow, set around a century ago, revolves on a couple named Kali and Ponna who live in a small agricultural hamlet in the Kongu region of south India. The story follows a childless couple that attends the Ardhanareeswara temple's chariot festival in the hopes of becoming pregnant. It is socially allowed for a woman to have sex with anyone for one night during the festival, and if she gets pregnant, the child is regarded 'God-given.' Local caste-based groups, however, protested the book in 2014, stating that it defamed women and insulted their community's religious sensitivities. Murugan pledged never to write again as a result of the violence, issued his literary obituary

on his Facebook page, and was forced to flee his house. He was arrested and charged with a crime. Fortunately, the court decided in the author's favor. In 2016, the Sahitya Academy Prize for Translation was awarded to the English translation of the book, *One Part Woman*.

I shall be using Edward Farley's journal article "Fundamentalism: A Theory" to delve deeper into the collective psyche of the masses and explain better the use of religion as a political tool. "The guiding premise of this essay is that fundamentalism is the response of religion to modernity" (Farley 1). Farley explains how religion is self-traditioning and self-transcending and does not require regulation for it to be able to warm hearts and help people cope. Religion has always been a jolly coping mechanism for the inquisitive ones and those in terrible situations. However, what faith and religion are not is manipulation and propaganda from those who do not even feel strongly about it. It is okay to have "charismatic founder or savior figures" with new messages and codes for life. What is not okay is to draw blood when some decide to opt out. Religion should be there to ensure peace and the moment it turns into oppression is when we label it fundamentalism. Anyone can create a cult and conjure up a following but that would simply equate to varying faiths and not the creation of organized religion meant to suppress human traits that are crucial to spiritual growth. "We would, however, miss the genius and cultural depth of the modern if, by focusing on these institutions, we ignored the way they engendered new human communities, different types of human individuals, and a new set of deep cultural values" (Farley 9). In this late capitalist society that rewards conformity and punishes individuality for the ordinance of wealth assemblage of the "elites", the meshing of religion and modernity is poison.

Furthermore, the theory of *Postsecularism* or post secular literary criticism ties into the circumstances of the authors and the essence of my paper as it unfolds the cancerous root of intolerance, duplicity and impertinence associated with fundamentalism even in the 21st Century. Scholars have been studying the return of non-liberal forms of religion, frequently

referred to as fundamentalism, in recent decades. What is commonly referred to as the "return of religion" is actually a "deprivatization" of religion, according to José Casanova. Religion sheds its veil of secrecy and appears in non-liberal ways on the political stage. The strong contrast between public and private religion, as well as the dichotomy between the religious and the secular, is untenable—it deconstructs, as philosophers like Jacques Derrida explains. (Derrida 2). According to Clayton Crockett who is a Professor and Director of Religious Studies at the University of Central Arkansas, “I call this inability to fully separate religion from secular politics postsecularism” (Crockett 6).

Religion did not totally vanish with secularization, according to Klaus Eder. It only went unnoticed by the general population driving other religious beliefs into the private realm throughout Europe. Post-secularism is his word for the recent reintroduction of religion to the public sphere (Klaus 2). In the current post-secular societies of South Asia with a history of secular states, authors like Rushdie, Nasrin and Perumal are shunned for exploring topics that align with philosophical ideals and countercultural prompts.

Moving to the feminist aspect of my paper dealing with the South Asian suppression of female voices and the defamation of their character, I will be using Seyla Benhabib’s article “Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance” to show the overlap of the death of man, history, and philosophy. The death of man was brought about by feminism's revelation of the inherently masculine subjectivity of reason, which refuted the "objective" ideas asserted as provided by western philosophy. The death of female history was brought about by feminism's insistence that the majority of official historical figures have been white male Christians who were the heads of their families and communities. This article explains with great clarity and conviction the suppression of female authors in nationalistic countries enforcing the subjugation of women. The repression of female sexuality and the affinity of nations wielding religion as a political tool incapacitates the advent of feminist thought and

authorship. Nasrin's demise is better understood through Seyla's observation regarding "a retreat from utopia," or "the debunking as essentialist any attempt to formulate a feminist ethic, a feminist politics, a feminist concept of autonomy, and even a feminist aesthetic."

Several other discursive articles from renowned journals will also be used in this paper to evaluate the impact of Postsecularism and critical theory on the thoughts of enlightened authors who write against detrimental societal norms, questioning the status quo and deciding to humanize historical figures who have been deified. The repercussions and backlash they face for their inherent non-conformism can also be analyzed through the theories mentioned above.

1.2 A Brief History of Literary Censorship in South Asia

"Book burning" is the term for the ritual burning away of books or other written materials. A form of censorship that results from cultural, religious, or political objections to the writings in question is the burning of books, which is typically done in a public setting. The practice of burning books has a long and tumultuous history.

Book burning has been practiced for thousands of years, from religious sects as "unsuitable material," to governments outlawing certain unsavory books on the subject of sex, government control, and so on, and there have even been some book burnings from the late 1800s to modern times simply to draw attention to the author of that book. Before a book can be declared illegal, someone must first read it and determine that it is unworthy of reading (Ovenden 7). A challenge, according to the American Library Association, is "an attempt to remove or restrict materials based on the complaints of a person or group." If the challenge is successful, a ban is imposed.

Hundreds of books are challenged for their contents each year in the United States, and thousands more worldwide. The demographic is different in South Asia given the

propensity of religion playing a definitive role in people's lives. It is easier to offend less educated people relying on religion as a coping mechanism than those who think freely in the western world. according to sources.

Until the current era, thousands of years had passed since books were burned. It was sparked by religious grounds such as "inappropriate material," which led to the government banning improper publications about sex, government control, and other topics. Book burning was popular in the late 1800s as a way to draw attention to authors.

For thousands of years, people of all backgrounds have targeted books and libraries, sometimes intentionally and sometimes as a result of war. The infamous burning of books and burying of scholars tragedy occurred during the Qin Dynasty and was one of the more extreme actions taken to destroy the ancient schools of thinking. This ordinance, which was enacted in 213 BCE, is largely responsible for the Qin Dynasty's poor reputation throughout history. According to Lois Mai Chan, "In an attempt to consolidate power, Qin Shihuang ordered the burning of all books on non-legalist philosophical viewpoints and intellectual subjects. All scholars who refused to submit their books were executed. As a result, only texts considered productive by the legalists (largely discussing pragmatic subjects such as agriculture, divination, and medicine) were preserved" (Chan 105) in her journal article "The Burning of the Books in China, 213 B.C". The historian further mentions that "His main purpose was not so much to kill out these schools of thought totally as to place them under official control." This entails that leaders, political and religious ones alike are more focused on the consolidation of power than being driven by a particular hate or distrust for revolutionary ideas or propositions that would contribute to spreading human "kindness" and also those that cater to the betterment of the masses. Just as Rebecca Knuth, author of *Libricide and Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural*

Destruction puts it, “A lot of ancient book burning was a function of conquest”. The act thus, has been fueled by the desire to conquer amongst other motivations of humans in power.

As per Knuth, the motivations for book burning shifted as the printing press contributed to the Enlightenment era while burning as a result of collateral damage persisted. The destruction of the U.S. Library of Congress during the War of 1812 or all the libraries destroyed across Europe during World War II can be considered as war ransacking and motive to incapacitate nations for a darker future. People saw information as a means of revolutionizing and challenging the status quo, and as a result, it became hazardous for its accessibility, no longer under the control of the elite. There is no better way to change the power balance while also sending a statement than by burning books as we have deduced. The common denominator among all forms of determined book-burners in the twentieth century is that the offenders, even if they are in authority, act or feel like victims in jeopardy.

In South Asia, there is censorship that provides a broad and relative examination of cultural control in modern and colonial South Asia. These thought-provoking essays by notable academics widen our knowledge of what censorship could entail, beyond the simple restriction and suppression of public communication, by analyzing creative potential and its close relationship to its seeming opposite, “publicity.” The authors look into a variety of public cultural issues, ranging from cinema to advertising, street politics to political communication, and blasphemy adjudication to obscenity management.

Chapter 2: Islamists Unite: The Woman Living in Exile

28 years ago, the writer Taslima Nasreen was forced into exile, sentenced to death by a fatwa of the mullahs of Bangladesh for her book *Lajja* (Shame). Taslima Nasrin, born August 25, 1962 in Mymensingh, is a feminist writer of Bangladeshi origin. She has acquired

in the West the image of a fighter for the emancipation of women and the struggle against what she calls the religious obscurantism of her home country, Bangladesh.

Before being sentenced to death by the fundamentalists of her country and embodying the struggle of the women of the Indian subcontinent, Taslima Nasreen was a precocious little girl, a teenager passionate about literature and music, a young woman madly in love.

Now on the verge of her forties, she evokes, through these scenes - often delusional for a Western spirit - of Bangladeshi life, the events that marked her youth. Including an education conducted with an iron fist by a father who intends to impose, literally with a baton, supposedly “modern” ideas, under the resigned eye of a mother confided in devotion, for lack of a better refuge. Taslima revolts: her secret marriage to the young poet Rudro Mohammed Shahidullah, the supreme negation of all local conventions, is an unusual story - where romanticism and passion often rub shoulders with the unspeakable - which also marks the birth of an independent woman ready to fight for great causes.

We will find revolution in her book, banned for “blasphemy” in Bangladesh, the language both lively and effective of a remarkable writer. A doctor by training, quickly began a literary career and gained notoriety through her poems, essays and committed editorials.

In 1994, after the publication of an article in which she criticized the organized religion especially Islam for being biased towards women’s rights, she was the subject of a “fatwa” issued by extremist mullahs. She then went into exile in Sweden where she continued her work, constantly denouncing the social conditions of Muslim minorities and women.

Forbidden to stay in Calcutta, Taslima Nasreen fights a clampdown as the press celebrates every year the autobiography of Salman Rushdie, recounting his years of exile and fatwa, anonymity, refuges, to be forgotten by fundamentalists who claimed his head. But another international novelist is still under this threat, and far from having the same freedom

as Rushdie today. For her feminist positions in the face of religion, and particularly the dominant one in Bangladesh, Islam, the former gynecologist had already been threatened and molested. In the summer of 1994, the mullahs sentenced him to death for his novel *Lajja* (Shame), dedicated to the fate of a Hindu family in the face of religious tensions in the region (Zafar 167). In Europe, Taslima Nasreen “discovers the laws of exile under close surveillance”, but persists: “Let us not let ourselves be won over by fear. This would be the first victory of the fundamentalist snake.” (Smith 6).

Even in front of Western journalists, the author had to face ostracization that reduced her to a “Salman Rushdie in petticoat, but devoid of literary qualities, eager for attention”, along with blows on her private life. The following December, she was awarded the Sakharov Prize but still stuck in exile. Taslima Nasreen had still not given up and mentions in an interview with Warren Allen Smith: “No matter where I live, I will continue my fight.”

2.1 Nasrin’s Tug of War with The Mullahs and Misogynists

Taslma Nasreen was forced to leave Bangladesh in 1994, after a great controversy erupted over her book *Shame*. A novel that offended the religious feelings of the country’s Muslims, and had precipitated her into a flight away from the violence that ensued. “For me, Islam is incompatible with human and women’s rights. It is not Islam that we need to fight ignorance, but a civil code based on gender equality and secular education for all” she explained again in 2007 (BBC News).

Since then, she has been waiting to be able to return safely to her country. “I am waiting for the day when the government of West Bengal (capital, Calcutta...) will allow me to return to Kolkata,” she said from Delhi, where she currently resides. To date, the government has not responded to her requests, while the novelist wishes with all her heart to return to Calcutta, “my adopted land”, she says. “No other place on earth suits me so much.”

Her current mental state was unearthed by several interviews and journalists from global channels and magazines including CNN, BBC and FOX.

During a press conference in August 2007 in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad, Taslima was violently attacked. According to Tara Khandelwal from the feminist organization She The People, “Taslima Nasrin’s story displays her immense strength and self-conviction. She is unafraid to voice her strong opinions even after multiple fatwas have been issued against her” (Khandewal 2016).

2.2 Forced exile and loneliness

In November 2007, the author was forced to leave Calcutta, where she resided, following violent demonstrations challenging the renewal of her visa. After many trips, and a detour in particular to Paris, she settled in Delhi, in an undisclosed place, with the prohibition to make public appearances.

As such, her Twitter account serves as a lever for communication with the outside world, and nearly 49,000 followers follow her. It is true that her twitter persona and her credibility as an author is extremely contrasting. What she writes on twitter are sometimes borderline irrational such as correlating people’s appearances with their backward actions. However, all these may be shoved aside when looking at the bigger picture. The social media tweets and posts do not reflect who she is as a person. Even if she is deemed a recluse by the public, it does not take away from what she accomplished through her writings. Taslima Nasrin the author and Taslima Nasrin the twitter social justice warrior does not mesh in many cases. Her bitterness for being wronged by South Asian governments ooze out of her tweets which does more harm than good to her already “tarnished” public image. Despite the mockery and public condemnation on her social media accounts, Nasrin keeps writing new pieces and tweets triggering social narratives while being unapologetically herself.

Moreover, Nasrin has rallied several intellectuals in the country to her cause, including the winner of the Magsaysay Prize, Mahasweta Devi. “As an author, why cannot Taslima have complete freedom to write? It is the readers who decide what they want to read. She should be allowed to come back. Then she can continue to write.” She adds, “I sincerely hope and wish that Taslima returns to Kolkata, and can write as she did before. Writing, in this state, is not an offense. This government came to power because people elected it and wanted change” (Devi 15).

Her writings are not appreciated by the commons (rather condemned) because of the current state of Post secular South Asia.

2.3 The perpetual quest for change

As a resistance to change, the political authorities would rather have their hands tied, says Professor Sunandoi Sanyal, who accuses the government of silence. “Perhaps they are afraid of a violent reaction from Islamist fundamentalists. The people who previously criticized the decisions are now in power, but they remain tragically silent.” What he fails to understand is that the political authorities are the ones triggering these public aggressions by catering to the majority in law, ideas and religion.

It is that 34 years of power for the communists have recently come to an end, with elections that have placed Mamata Banerjee, an independent politician of the Trinamool Congress in May 2011. A defeat then historic, suffered by the Left Front, and then began a hope for change. Human rights activist, Sujato Bhadra, who tried lifting the ban on Dwikhondito (Split) testified: “the author is a feminist attempting to emancipate the feminine of her own country and to secure for them a respectable position in the society in Bangladesh and eager to the restoration of democracy and secularism opposed to the religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh so as to enable her to come back to her own motherland, the

urge whereof is apparent in volumes from her writings.” She further added, “we will continue to make our voice heard to demand the return of Taslima.”

Dwikhondito was banned by the Bengal government in November 26, 2003, but the Kolkata High Court lifted the ban later (Jain 2007). Bhadra termed Taslima’s move to withdraw the pages as unfortunate. Fortunately, in India, the ban was fully uplifted without making changes to the book as the Judge Dilip Kumar Seth, J noted in the case:

“In any event the author was concerned with the politico-religious impact on the society emerging in Bangladesh only and not in India. Therefore, she cannot be said to have intended to insult the religion or religious beliefs of any class of citizens of India to outrage their religious feelings. By no stretch of imagination such an intention even without being deliberate or malicious could be discovered from the alleged offending passages of the book” (Seth 2005).

Her stay in the country is still refused. Nasrin is yet again the recipient of scorn both in her homeland and in South Asia; alienated and lost.

However, Nasrin knows how to be optimistic, explaining that the authorities in India have offered her asylum, which brings her closer to her country. “I continue to write. As far as the issue is concerned, this freedom that I love so much, and which is the very substance of my books, as well as women’s rights, the right to social equality, human dignity in the face of obscurantism and religious fundamentalism.”

She concluded: “My literary crusade goes against these dark and anti-humanist forces. These same forces that not only turn society backwards, against all progress, but that have also banished me from a city that is also my home” (Nasrin interviewed by Bhadra).

2.4 *Shame* and *Split*: Inspecting the writings

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

— Taslima Nasrin, *Lajja*

Lajja (shame) tells the tale of a Hindu family (the Datta) trapped between the history of Bengal and Bangladesh, communalism and friendship. Since the partition, the two religious’ communities, Hindus and Muslims, have clashed. The catastrophe here is the destruction of a mosque in India. Because, on the other side of the border, Hindu fanatics have destroyed a mosque, Sudhamoy Datta and his family, like thousands of other Bangladeshi Hindus, will suffer violence and persecution. During the country’s independence, they had hoped to build a republic where the two communities would live in mutual respect and, why not, friendship...

“Let humanity be the other name for religion” (Nasrin 78). A novel testimony against all fundamentalism, wherever they come from, *Lajja* tells us about the collapse of this dream. Each of the characters will live it in their flesh and blood. “Aggressive, crazed Hindus had broken the Babri Masjid and the Hindus of Bangladesh were expected to atone for the wrongs done by those people” is a line she mentions in *Lajja* (translated by Penguin) that shows how she has detested communalism and not Islam.

For having written this book, a bestseller in India and widely distributed in Bangladesh despite the censorship that hits it, Taslima Nasrin now knows the exile and the daily threat of the fatwa. This work, whose translation has been hailed as an event in Western countries, touches us and concerns us as closely as possible.

However, Nasrin’s *Dwikhandito* (*Split: A life*) translated by Penguin is more of a social commentary than a mere biography. It talks about events from most of her previous

works. *Split: A Life*, Taslima Nasrin's memoir, is a harrowing tale of the difficulties she has endured as a woman who speaks out against fundamentalism and violence against women.

When I first heard about her memoir *Split: A Life*, a translated version of the Bengali original about her life in Bangladesh, I was excited to read it because of its authenticity and harsh critiques of religion and misogyny. Nasrin's life, experiences, and revelations in Mymensingh and Dhaka are chronicled in this book. She bares her soul as she recounts her encounters and interactions while living in a confining milieu. The book is an honest depiction of a woman's life, and the attempts to silence her voice are not just shameful but also heartbreaking. Nasrin has been unable to make much of a difference despite her attempts to stop certain injustices against the women around her, such as the marriage of a sixteen-year-old domestic servant to her seventy-year-old employer, detailed in the novel. The reader can sense her rage and fury as she expresses it in her writing. Numerous incidences of patriarchy and tradition trump basic human rights and decency, such as Nasrin being demoted to a lower rank despite being equal in rank to the other officers, or poor women undergoing sterilization in exchange for financial benefits, are described in *Split* with a painful honesty that elicits both anger and sympathy from the reader (Nasrin 153).

As stated earlier, Nasrin's writing is just like that; uncompromising and candid. Nasrin does not hold back when it comes to criticizing these things, and she isn't afraid to call them out for what they are. The section titled "Lives" is capable of reducing anyone to tears and sting the conscience. The narration is evocative and passionate, bringing forth Suhrid's pain and longing for love while generating equal pain and empathy in the reader.

Here are a few samples of her free and incisive writing that would make even a conservative and stubborn soul to contemplate the state of society sooner or later –

“So the only course had been the one available to most women if they wishes to escape their father’s house – exchange it for their husband’s” (257).

“Suffice it to say I lost the argument because Rehman had more authority than I did – he was a man” (82).

“I discovered my country’s poverty in these camps. I trembled and I wept” (126).

Nasrin’s intensely personal, and often heartbreaking, revelations and confessions make the reader feel as if they are closer to her than if they had met her in person. It creates the impression of being inside Nasrin’s head, learning both the positive and the terrible aspects of her personality. Her admissions of her own weaknesses and failures, or confessions, make her seem more real and accessible.

Apart from the personal experiences, the biting commentary on the social and political structures is thought-provoking and aims to pose questions that may elicit indignation and rage in those who are unable to see it for what it is – a mirror of the society we live in. “When living women barely had any freedom it was too much to ask the same for someone who was dead” (97). Then she adds, “It was amazing that we lived in a country where both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition were women.”

Nasrin has always been anti-religious (organized religion) with her rigid ideologies mostly adopted from her traumatic incidents as a child. In South Asia, she believes that religion is a political tool that rarely benefits women. “Do nations need a religion? It is the people who need it. The nation is not one individual; it is a guarantor of safety for people of religious and ethnic identities” (254).

Hence, the truth to the words garnered enough approval and appraisal from the women she was writing for to rile up the men that oppressed. It stuck the ego of the collective masculine in the country and their idea of the dispersal of control onto the ones beneath them

were exposed. More women started to stand up to their oppressors starting from the patriarchs at home. This is where Sayla Benhabib's discourse of postmodernism and feminism comes into play. "The feminist counterpoint to the postmodernist theme of "the Death of Man" can be named the "Demystification of the Male Subject of Reason." Whereas postmodernists situate "Man," or the sovereign subject of the theoretical and practical reason of the tradition, in contingency, historically, changing, and culturally variable social, linguistic, and discursive practices, feminists claim that "gender," and the various practices contributing to its constitution, is one of the most crucial contexts in which to situate the purportedly neutral and universal subject of reason" (Benhabib 3). The case with Nasrin and her South Asian condemnation can be easily explained with Benhabib's contrasting theory of postmodernism versus feminism. Nasrin's ill-treatment even by several scholars and writers in her homeland, especially the male authors stem from the clash between the supposed superiority of their male egos. It is mentioned in *Split* how the male poets she used to consider her well wishers and close friends, sharing her transcendent thoughts over tea, turned out to be vicious serpents. This proves that Nasrin was not biased towards Islam and the Mullahs. She criticized all men who wronged their counterparts. She condemned the maliciousness in their hearts. "Until very recently neither did women have their own history, their own narrative with different categories of periodization and with different structural regularities" (Benhabib 4). Thus, we can say that the reactions to Nasrin's writing were not limited to fundamentalists but also the misogynists in the vicinity. Nasrin racked up more enemies belonging to varying social processes than just the fundamentalists. Hypocrites, liar, bootlickers and many others were on the same boat to keeping her out of her homeland only to stop her from instigating change, the first of them being "their" "good" women.

Moreover, the Western media, for their own propaganda portrayed Nasrin in an anti-islamic light that made her banishment even stronger to uplift. "Bangladesh was an Islamic

theocracy, and Nasrin was anti-Islam and the sole feminist speaking out against religious fundamentalism, women's oppression, and patriarchal structures of the society" (Zaman 47). Those who have read her works are all aware of Nasrin being a generic Atheist speaking up against social injustices. Hence, Nasrin became a puppet of the west due to religion being wielded as a political tool in both sides. As pointed out by Zaman:

"The Western media were anxious to portray themselves as secular and democratic. There was no rigorous analysis of the Nasrin affair in the context of transnational politics, inter-communal violence, colonial legacies or the role of the state in consolidating power in the sub-continent. The Western media's treatment of Nasrin ignored the strengths of existing feminist groups and of the secular forces which had a long historical tradition in Bangladesh" (48).

To conclude, the banning of Nasrin's works and her exile originated from a spark in the name of religion. "In the early stages of the Nasrin controversy, liberal forces including writers, journalists, poets, and literary critics applauded Nasrin's boldness and supported her freedom of expression. Intellectuals, activists, journalists, and secularists formed a coalition and supported Nasrin's writings, but her confrontational stances, attacking well-known people personally through her column, and the geo-politics of her book, *Lajja*, cross-cut national boundaries and challenged what Grewal and Kaplan (1994) call "inadequate and inaccurate binary divisions." (Zaman 49). Just as Khushi Kabir remarked, "Taslima went for the jugular, and we're not ready for that. There's simply too much at stake. You have to learn how to deal with the situation - how to handle the bearded ones. And that is something that Taslima never understood", I believe that Taslima's demise was caused mostly by her lack of awareness in a cruel world and her propensity to tell the truth. To me, there is a fine line between innocence and boldness. Nasrin broke the barrier only to pay for what the

inefficiency of a flawed system. Authors like her should be protected at all costs because innocence needs to prevail above all else.

Chapter 3: Khomeini's maneuver: The man with a bounty on his head

"From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable."

- Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, one of the most divisive works in recent literary history, was published three decades ago this month and almost immediately sparked worldwide protests, some of which were violent.

Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's top leader, issued a fatwa, or religious decision, demanding Muslims to kill the author a year later, in 1989. Rushdie was compelled to go into protective hiding for the better part of a decade after being born in India to a Muslim family but by then a British citizen residing in the United Kingdom. What was – and continues to be – the source of this outrage?

3.1 The Dissension

Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* gets to the heart of Muslim religious beliefs, challenging some of its most sensitive precepts in dream sequences.

Muslims believe that the angel Gibreel – Gabriel in English – visited Prophet Muhammed and recited God's words to him during a 22-year period. Muhammed, for his part, repeated the words to his disciples. These statements were later written down and turned into the Quran's verses and chapters.

These basic principles are addressed in Rushdie's novel but are not crucial to what he truly wants to convey. The story deals with immigration and the desire of the very flawed and humane characters to fit in. Many argue that Rushdie writes to provoke and cater to the Western audience and collect cookie points for acceptance. However, once you start reading

and analyzing his works, it becomes evident how the man is no different from any other author out there. He writes to provoke the human conscience and to appeal to the masses to ask questions. Rushdie explicitly mentions in an interview how he strayed from stereotypes in the plotline as much as possible. So, the outcry and reaction in the Muslim World regarding the contents of the book are ridiculous in the sense that Rushdie essentially wrote for them. His only mistake in my opinion is that he made it too obvious. In the world of literature filled with critical minds addicted to decoding all that is encoded, obvious labels and overtness are classified as nothing short of imprudence. This impudence of certain authors, however, can never justify bounties being placed on their heads.

3.2 Challenging verses and committing social blasphemy

For many Muslims, Rushdie's fictional retelling of the crucial events in the formation of Islam implies that the Prophet Muhammed, rather than God, is the source of revealed truths.

Some experts have defended Rushdie, claiming that his irreverent mimicry is designed to test whether it is possible to distinguish fact from fiction. It is a cry for the humanization of the characters and in a way questioning the humanity of deified and untouchable historical figures. Gibreel is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is a dream, according to literary expert Greg Rubinson mentioned in his book *The Fiction of Rushdie*, Barnes, Winterson and Carter.

Rushdie has advocated those religious texts should be open to debate since the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. "Why cannot we have a discussion about Islam?" In a 2015 interview, Rushdie commented. "It is possible to respect people and shield them from prejudice while remaining critical of their beliefs and even harshly criticizing them."

This viewpoint, on the other hand, differs from that of those who believe the Quran is God's literal word.

In 1998, Iran's government announced that it would neither carry out Khomeini's fatwa or urge others to do so after his death. Rushdie now resides in the United States and makes public engagements on a regular basis.

Threats to his life are still present 30 years later. Despite the fact that huge protests have ceased, the themes and issues highlighted in his novel continue to be widely contested.

A Summary of the Book in Question

At dawn on a winter morning, a jumbo-jet explodes over the English Channel. In the midst of scattered limbs and unidentified objects, two unlikely silhouettes fall from the sky: Gibreel Farishta, the legendary Indian actor, and Saladin Chamcha, the man of the Thousand Voices, self-made man and anglophile before the Lord. Clinging to each other, they land safe and sound on a snowy English beach... Gibreel and Saladin were chosen (by whom?) to be the protagonists of the eternal struggle between Good and Evil. While the two men bounce from the past to the present and from dream to adventure, we are spectators of an extraordinary cycle of tales of love and passion, betrayal and faith, with, at the center of all this, the story of Mahmoud, prophet of Jahilia, the city of sand - Mahmoud, struck by a revelation where satanic verses mingle with the divine.

The story is directed by Gibreel (Gabriel) Farishta: the Angel, in Urdu — from the Persian fereshté. Fifty years earlier, in 1935, Muhammad Iqbâl, the inspiration of Pakistan, had made the Archangel dialogue with Satan, in his poem in Urdu: Bâl-i Jibrîl (Gabriel's Wing). This time, however, Gabriel is the legendary "star" of Indian cinema. Is he an angel or a demon? Both, no doubt, because, for Rushdie, he embodies the eternal struggle of Good and Evil. It is he who transmits to the inspired Prophet the divine Word, which, finally, is

expressed through the mouth of Mahound. So, it is not a historical novel — hagiographic even less.

3.3 Magic Realism and its Valuation

Rushdie wrote *The Satanic Verses*, applying a touch of magical realism to the headlines: the hijackings, the pilgrimages to Mecca, the brutal London of immigrants, and the British unrest of the Thatcher period. He makes the prophet a comic figure he calls Mahound, a secular version of Muhammad and borrows the title of the book from a passage from Quranic science in which the words spoken to pray to the other gods than Allah (female gods, nothing less) seem to have been put by the devil in the mouth of the prophet. In his book, these prayers become those of Mahound. The book deals with the “humanization” of figures deemed “beyond human” and perfect. This however leads to unnecessary deification and intolerance amongst humankind which is also the biggest argument against organized religion.

“For me,” Rushdie wrote in one of his website’s online pieces, “of all the ironies, the saddest thing is to have worked for five years to give a voice and a romantic consistency to the culture of immigration to which I belong, and to see, at the end of the day, my burned book, most often without having been read, by the very people he speaks of, people who might find some pleasure in reading it and many identify with it. Cruel irony too: there is already in the book all that it will provoke, blasphemy trials, demonstrations, and an imam at war “by proxy” (Rushdie 2011).

The Satanic Verses is not just a provocative book: it is prescient. As mentioned by Pinaki Chakravorty, “Condemning Rushdie for *The Satanic Verses* requires deciding whether or not fiction is a factitious cover for the malicious diatribe. The answer is far from easy, but no straightforward diatribe could have offended more easily. *The Satanic Verses* is everywhere alive to their own meaning, profaning with ambiguous purpose but with full

mindfulness. It only injures so well because it assaults so knowingly” (Pinaki 10). Pinaki further adds how the law and literature discrepancy results in book bannings and public aggression. As I have mentioned earlier, the common citizen with below average intellect and a faithful heart is unable to grasp the gravity of socially challenging ideas and succumbs to the tunes of those in power who are affected by them. Literature challenges the law for accommodating holes that serve specific groups (politicians, religious leaders, capitalists in general) and law mocks literature for not being pragmatic enough to govern human nature. Moreover, Pinak mentions in his article titled ‘The Rushdie Incident as Law-and-Literature Parable’:

The Rushdie incident implicates an author who had previously aspired to make his fiction a quasi-legal instrument of political and social change, but who, upon success, insists that politically opinionated fiction how should not be the same as politically motivated action for purposes of legal condemnation. The visible material effects of *The Satanic Verses* make Rushdie's assertion of literature's quasi-legal power believable; yet equally believable are his later caveats about fiction's limitations as lawmaker. (Pinak 2214)

This law and literature disconnect is yet another reason why the ever-growing cycling nightmare of fundamentalism and governmental censorship against free literary thought is being sustained throughout history. “The incident pinpoints a further discrepancy between law and literature by underscoring the different conceptions of authorial intention assumed by a "multivoiced" literary novel and by the "univocal" legal society that condemns it” (Pinak 2214). One may argue that in a monoculturalistic society, a multivocal book like *the Satanic verses* is bound to cause outcries. To that I shall refute by presenting the palpable: no society is truly ever monoculturalistic; it is the majority that gets to voice their concerns where the minorities become an invisible statistic. Rushdie wrote for the world, and he wrote for

humanism. It was blatant and raw, and when taken out of context, it appeared to be an attack on the collective religious sentiment of the people he wrote for. Rushdie got in trouble previously for portraying the fictitious Indira Gandhi in a bad light in *Midnight's Children* and for *Shame* for “flippantly fictionalizing more than one generation of Pakistani politicians, angering those among them who were still alive” (Pinak 2215). When *The Satanic Verses* was published in September 1988, Rushdie “expected that the mullahs wouldn't like it.”¹

Hence, the chain of events related to Rushdie paints a picture of an authors struggle to voice his words out despite seemingly having Western protection. Pinak mentions, “The profusion of legal activity against the book in the few months after its publication was nevertheless surprising. General protest without the color of law ubiquitously legitimated legal interposition, if not the exact legal action taken. This also shows how grey the whole incident was as “many Muslims offended by The Satanic Verses were nevertheless opposed to Khomeini's fatwa” (Pinak 2216) as it put them in a bad light in the sense that it indicated the fragility of Islamic faith.

Moving on to the book at hand, Gibreel Farishta, one of the main protagonists, has a sequence of nightmares in which he transforms into his namesake, the angel Gibreel. Gibreel meets another important character in these dreams in ways that reflect the classic Islamic story of the angel's visits with Muhammed.

Furthermore, Rushdie's Mahound inserts his own words into the mouth of the angel Gibreel and issues edicts to his followers that neatly support his self-serving goals. Despite the fact that Mahound's imaginary scribe, Salman the Persian, doubts the legitimacy of his master's recitations, he records them as if they were the words of God. Salman, for example, ties Mahound's sexist ideas to actual Quran sections that place males “in charge of women”

¹ Bandung File: Interview with Salman Rushdie (Channel 4 (London) television broadcast, Feb. 14, 1989), in THE RUSHDIE FILE, supra note 6, at 21. The term mullah refers to a Muslim clerical and legal authority

and grant men the authority to strike spouses from whom they “fear hubris” in Rushdie’s novel.

Rushdie appears to throw doubt on the Quran’s divine nature through Mahound. He is portrayed as a businessman, similar to most preachers these days. In the chapter named Mahound, the dilemma of the prophet hoping to spread monotheism in the polytheistic city of Jahilia when faced with the opposition is relatable and repetitive. What is so special about this narrative is being able to view multiple possibilities of what might have happened through the grounded eyes of the characters and involved parties. The chapter touches upon feminist ideologies by putting up a stark contrast to the woman and her Goddess Al-Lat and Mahound’s God through Jahilia’s power and politics.

Puppet of Both the East and The West?

Born in Mumbai to a Muslim family, British writer Salman Rushdie lived and taught in the UK, before being sentenced to death in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini. Deemed blasphemous by the Iranian mullah, the fatwa against Rushdie has never been lifted because it is theologically impossible. In the literary world, the phenomenon is a topic of controversy as it upsets the foundations of our modern societies, based on freedom of expression and imagination. There are counterarguments against Rushdie along with with educated Muslims (some of them non-practicing) criticizing Rushdie for catering to the western audience. “Authors are not innocent parties either, some of them like Rushdie pander to a western readership, and so speaking ‘ill’ of Islam gets him plenty of attention in the west which is terrified of Islam thanks to America’s ‘war on terror’” (Mowtushi 2021)². As a refutation, I bring to light Rushdie’s propensity to criticize the West and bring down Indian Authors doing what he is accused of. This is explained well in Malise Ruthven’s *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam* which is an excellent book that brings sanity to the Rushdie

² Sent as Feedback by my thesis supervisor Mahruba Mowtushi, PhD.

affair. It puts forth a good analysis of what prompted Khomeini to declare a fatwa against Rushdie as many more followed suit. The author makes the point that rather than this being a worldwide thing, the protests and book burnings also happened in the UK where some parts of the Islamic communities were finding it difficult to integrate into Western culture and saw Rushdie as a traitor (Anthony 2019). This was by no means completely widespread; he drew attention to the Islamic feminist women's group in London who protested in support of Rushdie who was making a point against some of the misogynist elements of Islam in *The Satanic Verses*. *The Satanic Verses* is a very relevant book in the author's coverage of the history of Islam in the UK and the analysis of the differing opinions towards Western culture and how immigrants integrate.

Furthermore, Kenan Malik provides an analytical assessment of the relationship between "multiculturalism" and the societal balkanization that aided the emergence of Islamic extremism in *From Fatwa to Jihad*, and therefore places the controversial fatwa in a fascinating and enlightening perspective. Malik debunks both the "Islamophobia" and "Islamophilia" groups' fallacies, offering many convincing (and quotable) passages in support of the right to write, publish, read, and offend. In addition, with his clever marshaling of several passages from *The Satanic Verses*, *From Fatwa to Jihad* doubles as an inordinate critical analysis of Rushdie's novel along with the racked-up controversies. It also examines how multiculturalism has exacerbated the situation now that the bought peace has gone, as well as how British politicians' attitudes are equally to blame.

Rushdie wrote the book also as a counter discourse to the treatment of immigrants in the UK as foreign policies under Margaret Thatcher became more and more unfair and cruel after 1979 (Sharma 599). The atmosphere was conservative and uncaring to the "foreigners" or the immigrants. The alienation caused them to live in despondency day after day which halted their emotional growth and enlightenment. The immigrants were subjected

to hate crimes for the most part. White radicalization in UK took a hideous shape after the advent of Margaret Thatcher and her anti-feminist, anti-Islam policies. Unfortunately, Rushdie ticked off the very people he wrote for just like Taslima Nasrin's case.

The existing laws that were capable of persecuting Rushdie were dated back to the colonial period where freedom of thought and press were highly regulated to facilitate the British legacy. As mentioned by Ahmed:

During the course of the campaign to ban *The Satanic Verses*, the Indian Muslim parliamentarian, Syed Shahabuddin alluded to the existence of laws in the Indian Penal Code under which, he said, Rushdie could be prosecuted. These laws, he explained, criminalized insulting religious beliefs and wounding religious feelings. But [that] these were not recently enacted law. On the contrary, the laws and the Code date from the colonial period. These laws enabled the colonial state to assume the role of the rational and neutral arbiter of supposedly endemic and inevitable religious conflicts between what is presumed were its religiously and emotionally excitable subjects. (Ahmed 173).

So, the very laws that oppressed the Indian subcontinent were being used by the geographical victims to hush their own voices if the argument is to be made reductive.

A mere spark is required for the said crowd to get kindled because not everyone out there are literary enthusiasts. Not everyone has the time to scrutinize or assess what an academic wrote about their religion. Not everyone will understand if a piece of writing is meant to be thought-provoking or simply to provoke. Rushdie mentions in his letter to Rajib Gandhi in a New York Times article: "When Syed Shahabuddin and his fellow self-appointed guardians of Muslim sensibilities say that "no civilized society" should permit the publication of a book like mine, they have got things backwards. The question raised by the book's banning is precisely whether India, by behaving in this fashion, can any more lay

claim to the title of a civilized society.” As a refutation to Rushdie’s grievance, one may say that banning this book was necessary for India to curb the brewing of already prevalent communalism. To that, I would say that if the preexisting laws and policies were not biased, to begin with, there would not be this big of a public outcry in the first place.

Asad Ali Ahmed mentions in his article “Specters of Macaulay: Blasphemy, the Indian Penal Code, and Pakistan’s Post-colonial predicament”: “The law is not concerned only with ending or resolving conflicts but can also be the means of their expansion and perpetuation... [therefore] Sovereignty should no longer be thought of as a formal *de jure* property that the state exercises over its territory, but as a performative practice of power exercised upon bodies and populations. This enables sovereign power to be understood as tentative and unstable” (Ahmed 179), India’s ban on the book had more to do with the Government’s yearning to gain the favor of the Muslims in the country than prevent communal violence. As Ahmed puts it, “Blasphemy laws are inherently prone to being read too widely and this is a dangerous thing is especially since it requires only wounded sentiments to initiate and authorize criminal charges. Accusatory practices have thus been too dangerously democratized” (179).

Moreover, Raminder Kaur mentions how “Foreign scholars of cultural regulation in India will often be told something like “In theory I am all for freedom of speech and expression. But in a society like ours...” Those who staff the formal institutions of cultural regulation (the courts, the censor boards) lean on this combination of cosmopolitan idealism and apparently “pragmatic” particularist vigilance in order to protect an excitable, indiscriminate, and ignorant majority from its own worst tendencies” (Kaur 15).

Keeping the hypocrisies of the power wielding ones in mind, the state of postsecularist South Asia can be altered by making the public aware of the truth through

digestible media accessible to all. That way, the masses will be accommodating to critical thought even if they are incapable of it.

Chapter 4: Hindu Nationalism: The man who professed his own death to the world

“The wretched people around us do not see what a man has. They only see what he does not have.”

— Perumal Murugan, *One Part Woman*

4.1 Perumal Murugan’s Epilogue

Nearly seven years ago, Perumal Murugan, a renowned Tamil writer and professor had announced on his social media that the “Author Perumal Murugan has died.” He added to that he was “no god” and that he was not going to “resurrect himself” and that he would continue to survive as a teacher as he had always been. He had further announced that none of his works should be published and that he would compensate all his publishers and further that he had chosen to be left alone in obscurity.

Such a drastic decision was made following the mass outcry that arose as an aftermath of the publishing of his book *One Part Woman*.

Under the orders of a body known as the “peace committee” stitched together by the Namakkal District administration, Perumal Murugan was ordered to erase the controversial portions of his book and withdraw the book from store shelves.

One Part Woman sees a historical analog in Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* after the infamous fatwa, set against the backdrop of Hindu nationalist fury consuming India. Similarly, the story at the heart of the book has been overwhelmed by outraged feelings and conjecture about the author’s future. The Kongu Vellala group, backed by local Hindu right-

wingers, claiming that the novel portrayed their religious customs and women in a negative light in Murugan's instance.

Murugan's unrivaled ability to capture Tamil speech reveals the complex organism of the society he so deftly depicts: men's double entendres towards Kali affirm their own masculinity as much as they mock him; women use their only freedom, the freedom of speech, to put other women in their place; and, most importantly, the unrelenting barbs of a judgmental, caste-ridden, patriarchal society alienate a couple yearning to be ordinary.

Aniruddhan Vasudevan's idiomatic translation captures the original's mood and serves as a continual linguistic reminder that, as English readers, we are but tourists in this authentic pre-independence Tamil society. *One Part Woman* is a surprisingly peaceful, sensual read for a book that received death threats and was burned by mobs.

In Briji Jose's article "One Part Woman: The Book On Trial For Acknowledging The Invisible", he mentions, "Artistic freedom, on the other hand includes not only the artist's right to free expression but his right to publish, exhibit and produce his work free from governmental control and it also includes the public's right to see and hear what he/she produces" (Jose 2). This was said against the backdrop of the "freedom to offend" concerning the freedom of expression as a whole. Moreover, the author adds the Indian aspect of the same issue into the mix to show the double standards and lack of reformation in the system: "Indian context freedom of expression though present in the Indian constitution for the last half-century, it is hardly supported by the political culture of today. In order to understand this issue we have to take into account the complete ethos of the Indian society with its various castes and religions" (Jose 1). It is not just India as a nation but the whole of South Asia can be considered the hub of the same problem being widespread. "The problems of censorship are so complex that it cannot be neatly divided into problems of political censorship or that of obscenity. At any point in history censorship by society is used to

silence women and is used to manipulate stereotypes” (Bhave 10). The observation is critical in explaining why book censorship is so frowned upon as the intentions of societal suppression of women and thought become clear as day. It is a tool to sustain Eastern Tradition and obsolete conventions that are detrimental to human growth of the collective conscience and consciousness.

Authors like Perumal Murugan tried challenging the norms and ended up getting so much backlash that he had to conform by committing social suicide.

4.2 *One Part Woman*: Kali and Ponna versus societal expectations

*One Part Woman*³ is a story set in British Colonial South India. It follows a childless couple Kali and Ponna who find themselves shunned and ostracized by members of their community, especially the male members of the community. The novel is set in Tamil Nadu in the 1940s. Ponna is a devoted, submissive, and subordinate woman, the kind that appears when her husband snaps his fingers, and who only exists in the Tamil male imagination. Kali is quite fond of her and has a primordial, reflexive longing for her that doesn't quite qualify as love.

Ponna is humiliated and rejected by the community since she is seen as a “barren” lady, while Kali is pushed to marry a second wife. Thousands of temple visits, prayers, and donations have accompanied twelve years of childlessness. When nothing else works, the couple is urged to attend a nearby temple's festival, where social conventions are removed for one night, all males are considered gods, and ladies wishing children are allowed to have intercourse with strangers. The artistic story is as frantic as a religious celebration in the build-up to its finale; present and past come in and out of focus as if on the cue of deafening cymbals. The couple finds themselves trying anything available to them so that they can

³ Raman, Kalyan. “Myth and Reality.” *Indian Literature*, vol. 58, no. 1 (279), Sahitya Akademi, 2014, pp. 187–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44754502>.

conceive- from making offerings at various temples to walking around the *varadikkal*, a rock formation believed to cure barren women. Having failed to gain any positive result, the couple looks toward the festival of the god “Maadhorubaagan”.

The deity known as Maadhorubaagan (which is the name of the book in the Tamil language) is an androgynous being. On the fourteenth night of the celebrations, a carnival takes place, where the rules of marriage pertaining to sexual fidelity are relaxed and consensual sex between unmarried men and women, is accepted. Any child conceived as a result of the unions during this night is considered, *sami pillai* or “God-given”.

The couple looks to the festival as a chance to finally conceive but, this opportunity soon begins to stand as a wedge threatening to drive the couple apart than actually bring them together.

At its core, *One Part Woman* is a story of a couple whose loving marriage becomes strained by external forces of societal expectations of what a family should look like. In addition, it is a glaring exposure of how the strict and visibly discriminatory caste system (which prevails in India still) stands as an obstacle to happiness and the availability of opportunity.

4.3 Reception and Backlash

One Part Woman was first published in 2010 in the Tamil language and since then up to the point of the unjust inquisition leveled against him has run into many editions and was also translated into the English language which was published in 2013. *One Part Woman* was also long-listed for the National Book Award for Translated Literature and had won the ILF Samanvay Bhasha Samman for writing in Indian Languages, amongst other accolades. Despite such prestigious tributes, what was it that had come together in such a potent concoction to have caused the author such utter humiliation and dejection that he had to

declare his own death in the world of writing? Writer and commentator V. Geetha⁴ suggests that Murugan's persecution had come at an opportune time that made him a perfectly vulnerable victim. In the Gounder Community, a caste community of peasants, political disenfranchisement (as is the problem with many other lower caste groups) had contributed to further internal divisions. As a result, in such a situation, it becomes visibly difficult to put pressure on governments to improve representation and see that even secular demands see the light of day. In V. Geetha's words:

*"[They] seek to overcome internal class divides through a renewed appeal to caste solidarity, and what better way to forge the latter than invoke a sense of threatened class honour."*⁵

What this often entails is the disciplining of woman for having fallen in love and marrying outside of their castes, or protests, prosecutions, and even death threats levelled against "progressive writers or activists who address cast and gender concerns in tandem and critically."

In addition to the above, the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP) has visibly ushered in a renewed vigor in the ranks of the Hindu fundamentalist Right and their *bhakts*. The Hindu Right feeds on these ideological sentiments and finds these individuals a "constituency worth nurturing."⁶

Furthermore, V. Geetha also suggests that Murugan had in the past, through essays criticized the school system run by members of the Gounder community as being "broiler schools" in that their pedagogy could be comparable to raising battery poultry. In addition, the author had also hailed the actions and policies of a collector in his district who had aimed to instil transparency in the system, much to the dismay of certain "vested" quarters. This meant that there was in effect no protection from local law enforcement and local government

⁴ Geetha, V "Notes on a Literary Death." *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol.50, No. 4 (January 24,2015), pp. 16-18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24481537>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

administration for Murugan when the mob had stood outside his door with pitchforks and torches.

Perumal Murugan, and his wife were subjected to insult after insult for apparently having shamed the women of the Gounder community in his writings and shamed the community as a whole and for having brought insult to the religious sentiments of the same. He was subjected to appear before a “peace meeting” so called where he was made to apologize for what he had written. Prosecutions were leveled at him in the highest courts of the land.

Manash Bhattacharjee⁷ in his discourse on the political force of hurt, comments at the very outset how Hurt has become more than simply just a buzzword and that as a political tool can be used to stifle all forms of creative expression. He describes hurt as the “new moral and ethical limit” and states that one’s freedom of expression ends where another’s feelings of hurt begins.⁸ On the banning of Murugan’s *One Part Woman* warned that the ease with which authorities and states give into sentiments of hurt open wide avenues for Right wing groups like Hindu nationalists to utilize the very same sentiments to censor and ban and even violently attack and carry out reprisals against groups whose thinking is ideologically different from their own. He draws attention to the fact that the subcontinent as a whole is deeply influenced by post-colonial trauma and that the drive of the Hindu right is to create a more religiously uniform nation state, which is motivated by hate and distrust of the other owing to alleged harms created in the course of past history. He adds that although this is inherently the case, those expressing hurt at a piece of literature state that their reactions are not based on such things as post-colonial trauma, but is for the act of the hurt-giver. In the words of Manash Bhattacharjee, “All that may be profoundly untrue.”⁹

⁷ BHATTACHARJEE, MANASH. “Hurt: Old Sentiment, New Claims.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 46/47, Economic and Political Weekly, 2015, pp. 24–26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44002857>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

In a spirited statement¹⁰ made by artists, historians, and scientists, against the growing and alarming influence of intolerant Hindu right wing groups to which the current government continues to provide subtle support, after having highlighted numerous examples of deaths and exiles of free-thinkers and also mentioning the intimidation of Murugan into self-imposed death, the makers of the statements revealed the growing tendency of the ideology of the ruling right to be exceedingly anti-creativity and fiercely intolerant. They have called that the rights to expression and dissent be protected and have warned that a government that fails to do this has lost democratic legitimacy.

To conclude, what had befallen Perumal Murugan is by all accounts gravely unfortunate and forms a thread in an ever-being-woven tapestry of oppression and stifling of creative expression at the hands of Hindu right-wing groups and their cronies. In the world's largest democracy, it is deeply alarming to see the flames of intolerance and deep-rooted divisions in an allegedly "essential" caste system designed to ensure "social equality" being fanned by opportunistic groups who would much rather burn a book in exchange for ticks on a ballot than actually read it for its worth as a piece of good literature.

Chapter 5: The Analysis and Verdict

The rationale behind blasphemy laws, it is submitted, has been greatly obscured over time. It is therefore pertinent to ask if God is at all capable of being offended by the actions of human beings. Such a question has been contended with by Helen Pringle wherein she had concluded that the understanding of the law pertaining to blasphemy began to radically shift when we began to understand that God was incapable of being offended (Pringle 39). As such, the passage of time has seen a gradual viewing of blasphemy laws as archaic and

¹⁰ Menon, Anjolie Ela, et al. "Statement of Artists." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 44, Economic and Political Weekly, 2015, pp. 4–5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44002786>.

unnecessary. The offence of blasphemy in the United Kingdom was based on the idea that a denial of Christianity and Christian values and teachings was liable to “shake the fabric of society which itself was at the time built on the self-same values. The offence of blasphemy is originally understood to be an offence “requited *to* God” (Pringle 31).

The Rushdie Affair in the late 90s appeared to drive blasphemy laws to the forefront of contemporary discourse, because at a time when western democracies appeared to be moving toward a consensus as to the desirability of abolishing the offence of blasphemy, the apparent outrage caused through the *Satanic Verses* caused a vast majority of Muslim immigrant populations in the United Kingdom to force the prosecution of the author Salman Rushdie under existing blasphemy laws which at the time were denied owing to the fact that existing blasphemy laws in the UK were meant to only protect attacks against Christianity. At the same time, however, the Court had also opined obiter that there should be no laws against blasphemy against Christianity but instead laws to prosecute individuals that perform any act that is calculated or likely to incite revulsion or violence by holding religious beliefs to scurrilous contempt. (Slaughter 158). In light of these, two things immediately come to mind, namely, that such commission of the offence mentioned must have been done with clear intent i.e. conscious calculation. For example, the recent placing of the Holy Quran at the feet of an idol at a Hindu Mandap during Puja Celebrations in Bangladesh in 2021 may clearly fall into this category of action (The Daily Star 2021).

In her analysis, Pringle issued a disclaimer that at no point in her discourse did she ever hold that the freedom of speech and expression is an absolute right, but highlights the fact that the focus of blasphemy is no longer God but of those who believe (which defeats the purpose).

5.1 Fundamentalism and the Freedom of Expression

Religious fundamentalism and its various forms of expression in the world stand as an obstacle to freedom of expression. Moataz El Fegiery in his treatise titled “*Taking Beliefs to Court: Blasphemy, Heresy, and Freedom of Expression under Islamic Law*”¹¹ has stated that the existence of blasphemy laws can fuel terrorism and violence. He explains that since blasphemy laws exist, hard-liner views, which advocate the death penalty or allow for open declarations and calls for the death of people who have expressed views critical of and established majoritarian religious order, are afforded a sense of strong social protection and acceptance in the form of a theological and/or ideological cover. Quoting, Amjad Mahmoud Khan¹², he states that nations that criminalize blasphemy tend to foster an environment where terrorism is more prevalent.

Blasphemy laws exist at a juncture between religion and politics. This however is under no circumstances something benign. Considering the nature of blasphemy laws, they are often too wide and very poorly defined, relying on ephemeral concepts such as “feelings” or “hurt”. This apparent lack of definition provides scope for all kinds of interpretation as to what may constitute apostasy and heretical pronouncements. As explained by Moataz El Fegiery, what constitutes apostasy becomes a de-personalized objective fact without any relation to the intentions of the individual concerned.¹³ In such a status quo, the unfettered use of blasphemy allegations in the public sphere often serves as a tool against political opposition and outright dissent. The existence of blasphemy laws do not serve to protect an omnipresent, and omnipotent God and/or his chosen prophets which by no means (religious

¹¹ El Fegiery, Moataz, et al. “Taking Beliefs to Court: Blasphemy, Heresy, and Freedom of Expression under Islamic Law.” *Islam and Human Rights: Key Issues for Our Times*, edited by Geneive Abdo, Atlantic Council, 2017, pp. 8–12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03717.5>.

¹² Mahmoud Khan, Amjad “*How Anti-blasphemy laws engender terrorism.*” *Harvard International Law Review* 65(2015)

¹³ El Fegiery, Moataz (p.3)

or pragmatic) are capable of being affected by criticism or offence of human conception. It instead is often used to oppress doctrines that are fundamentally at odds with the majoritarian viewpoints. For example, the religious doctrines of the Shia, the Baha'iyya, and the Ahmadiya are often considered blasphemous to Sunni Islam and blasphemy laws are used to silence and sideline expression.

A great shift is needed for a “peaceful management of religious diversity”. Citing the example of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in its interpretation of Freedom of Expression and Religious Tolerance under the European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), El Fegiery suggests that blasphemy laws should reigned in in terms of a strict interpretation and distinction between what constitutes critical and legitimate engagement with religious doctrines and gratuitous insult. A defined approach will aid in accommodating freedom of expression more comfortably and prevent untoward incidents resulting reactionary tactics to alleged blasphemy. As far as the ECtHR is concerned, in the case of *Otto-Preminger-Institut v. Austria*¹⁴, a state may rightly restrict offensive attacks on religion and will not be held in contempt of freedom of expression. However, a balance must be struck where religious people must tolerate and accept the denials of their religious beliefs and even the propagation by others of doctrines hostile to their faith (*I.A. v. Turkey*).

In the case of Taslima Nasrin and her exile from Bangladesh, the existence of fundamentalist thinking has served to obscure the message that the author's work was initially meant to convey. Her work in her own homeland of Bangladesh is often viewed with disdain and ridicule regardless of the fact of whether they have been actually read or not. It is the view of the exiled author that her work aims to expose and bring to light the oppression of women under a patriarchal system that is deeply rooted into subcontinental society.

¹⁴ (Nov 25, 1996)

Commentators such as S.M Shamsul Alam in his treatise titled “*Women in the Era of Modernity and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Case of Taslima Nasrin in Bangladesh*”¹⁵ agree to such a position. It is pertinent to note that Nasrin’s works were written at a time when *fatwas* were being issued frequently against women, especially those in rural areas seeking social and financial independence.¹⁶ The tragic cases of Nurjahan Begum who committed suicide after ingesting insecticide following the humiliating execution of a *fatwa* declaring her second marriage adulterous, and the burning of girl’s schools in Satkhira following the declaration that girls schools were anti-Islamic, during the 90s come to mind. Nasrin’s writings, when given the due attention it deserves in order to properly analyze the works are a staunch stance against the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism as seen from the perspective of the woman who is traditionally oppressed by the patriarchy. Instead, they have been described in “astonishingly simplistic caricature”¹⁷: “She advocates free sex and open marriage. A woman should be allowed to have four husbands” (Alam 20). Hence, Nasrin’s ideologies are aligned with radical western feminism which makes her own people experience a ‘culture shock’. Her works should instead be viewed rightly as a discourse of gendered self-representation. Furthermore, her work is a critique of nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism.¹⁸ Her work offers an often-ignored perspective, that of the woman in the race that is societal development. Continually perpetuated reductivist practices such as this threaten to further strengthen the zeal of the zealot and thus perpetuates practices that stifle expression that is vital to bring positive change to society.

¹⁵ S. M. Shamsul Alam. “Women in the Era of Modernity and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Case of Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh.” *Signs*, vol. 23, no. 2, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 429–61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175098>.

¹⁶ Page 7 of 34

¹⁷ Page 20 of 34

¹⁸ Page 20 of 34

The Islamic Revolution of the 1970s that had begun in Iran has seen a misappropriation of the Islamic faith in modern politics by those who seek power through the reimposition of *shariah* (which in itself is wide open to interpretation)¹⁹. It is opined that if islamists had not attempted to impose their belief systems with such harsh cruelties, there would be no satanic verses offensive to the faithful. In light of such an inflammatory response from fundamentalists the world over, the art that exists in the pages of Rushdie's "*Satanic Verses*" would never be fully appreciated for the amazing piece of human literature as it stands. Islamic fundamentalism and hegemony threaten to create a world that is devoid of artistic expression and a world that will have disastrous consequences for the basic human rights of citizens and especially women.²⁰ Uproar on the grounds of "hurting religious sentiments" have the toxic effect of subverting the state-imposed system of law and order by legitimizing religious vigilantism and open expression of violent threats against life and property, a sort of "extrapolitical sanctity"²¹.

In Perumal Murugan's case too, the situation described in the preceding paragraphs ring true. Contemporaneous to the writing of this paper, the world's largest democracy continues to struggle with an internal identity crisis, where Hindu Right Wing fundamentalist and nationalist groups continue to pull at the strings of national and local government to establish (albeit subtly) a Hindu nation state. There have been killings and lynchings over the finding of beef in trains and markets and persecution of minorities in the provision of basic requirements necessary for a comfortable life. At the same time, there have been killings and

¹⁹ Afshari, Reza. "Ali Mazrui or Salman Rushdie: *The Satanic Verses* and Islamist Politics." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 16, no. 1, Sage Publications, Inc., 1991, pp. 107–14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40644703>. (At page 4 of 8)

²⁰ Page 4 of 8

²¹ Page 5 of 8

lynchings over forbidden intercaste marriages and love affairs. Murugan's self-declaration of his death as a writer is but a link in this chain of events that continues to place irrational ignorance over rationality on a pedestal that it does not deserve.

As was stated earlier, there is a great and pressing need to bring much needed reform or perhaps the total abolishment of laws on blasphemy. But South East Asia, this will be far from easy. The growing grip of fundamentalism, from whichever religious class it originates, continues a great deal to hold sway over what is published and what is not. At times and dangerously so, this surge is often used as a tool either through subtle means or openly to curry support in favor of a government in power to give the impression of being responsive to the hurt voices of a constituency. This, needless to say, is dangerous and results in deaths, exiles, and more importantly for the purposes of this paper, a growing chokehold on the neck of artistic expression.

5.2 A Ray of Hope: Perumal's Case and the whittled yet reforming Indian Law

The freedom of expression is enshrined as a fundamental right under Article 19(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of India. However, it must be noted, that under certain conditions, the freedom of expression may be suspended. It is therefore not an absolute right. According to international law, the restriction on freedom of speech is required to comport to a strict three-part test (Govindu 642). First, the restriction must be one that is lawfully imposed. This implies that such restriction must be imposed following the due process of law. Secondly, the restriction must be done to pursue an aim recognized as legitimate. Third, the restriction itself must be proportionate in order to recognize that aim. Citing the case of Sakal Papers (P) Ltd. v. The Union of India, V. Govindu states that it is not open to the State to curtail freedom of the press for the promoting the general welfare of a section or group of

people unless its action can be justified by a law strictly falling under the auspices of Article 19. Furthermore, the Freedom of Press cannot be curtailed on such omnibus grounds as in the case of the freedom to carry on business, trade, or profession (Govindu 642).

Having at its disposal such well-defined and entrenched provisions of the law, the Indian Supreme Court has on many prominent instances established the victory of the freedom of expression over the misguided “justice” of the mob which is offensive to the freedom of expression (Govindu 642).

At this point in time, it seems that in a country falling into the growing influence of Hindu Nationalism under the current regime of the BJP and other vested quarters with kindred ideological leanings, the Supreme Court of India continues to stand as a stony bastion against the crashing tide of narrow mindedness. Such was the instance in the author Perumal Murugan’s case.

In the case of Perumal Murugan vs. The Government of Tamil Nadu, the Madras High Court, ruling in favor of the author, had deemed all actions taken against Murugan as unconstitutional. It declared too that the findings of the ‘Peace Committee’ to be without the force of law. In observing the so called “community standards” test, the Court had ruled that the novel was by no means obscene by contemporary standards. The novel was not found to appeal to the sexual activity of others but was about the strife of a childless couple looking for ways to bear children and facing societal stigma and scorn as a result of being unable to do so. The Court further stated that those who would find the material offensive could simply choose to not read the book and that banning books simply because it offended the sensitivity of a certain group of people was not a solution. Finally, and by no means the least, the Court had directed that it was the duty of the state to protect artistic expression from threats by non-state actors.

When the High Court of Madras had poetically stated “Let the author be resurrected to what he is best at: Write” (BBC, 2016), they had not only reinvigorated a persecuted author but had successfully cemented the strength of the freedom of expression against the offensive effects by non-state actors thus fortifying the law above all else.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Expression is the process used to manifest in a language, verbal or not, an emotion, a feeling, a thought, an idea, a concept. The forms of expression are multiple, whether oral, written, visual or behavioral. Freedom of expression is the result of a difficult construction throughout history, especially in the last two centuries.

However, freedom of expression is not an equally distributed thing. Can we have freedom of expression when we are miserable, without work, without shelter, a national of totalitarian countries, facing a hierarchy?

The dogmatism and arbitrariness of the political and religious powers that have succeeded each other from antiquity to the present day have developed a more or less rigorous control over freedom of expression and communication. Some things are better left unsaid. Some paid with their lives or their freedom, because their word disturbed public order or hindered the power in place. Let us mention Socrates, Galileo, Solzhenitsyn. But you can never completely gag freedom of expression. As society is constantly evolving, the limit itself evolves, and always leaves a gap, which the legislator can only try to reduce.

Moreover, the law is not limited to censorship. Indeed, all legal systems limit freedom of expression. And Claude Lévy Strauss stressed that the forbidden, understood as a rule instituted by men, is the most certain mark of the passage from nature to culture. Certainly, freedom of expression is the guarantor of the moral, political and aesthetic progress of

humanity. It requires an uninterrupted emergence of innovative ideas that will be disturbing at first glance, but will later become very constructive. We need limits so as not to offend consciences, but we must also go beyond limits to raise consciences. The exercise of philosophy requires absolute freedom. The philosopher cannot ask himself intellectual taboos a priori. If we want to reach a fragment of truth, we must be able to examine hypotheses without any restriction and confront all the information in the field that thought considers. The free expression of ideas, however, is not without its many problems. For example, can we declare that all ideas are equal and deserve unlimited expression? It must be admitted that the expression of all monstrosities is possible, that all delusions can arise at any moment. Society must defend itself from this. It must protect itself from it.

Hence, Freedom of expression is limited by a moral and legal code linked to respect for others in many nations. Anything more or less than that becomes ineffective and unnecessary. The Hippocratic Oath, the code of ethics of lawyers, any function that comes into contact with the privacy of the person is regulated in this way (right of reservation of civil servants, bankers, accountants, journalists). But in most cases the law “shelters” majorities and the State against criticism, opinions that contradict the function of a State governed by the rule of law, calling out their crimes against humanity and many more backwardness. This tendency of states to avoid being held accountable has given rise to the suppression of art and culture; the censorship of literature.

The authors and their works I presented in the thesis receiving backlash is a glorious example of the flawed system at work. Rushdie, Nasrin and Perumal wrote to provoke individual thought and consciousness instead of provoking their belief system. It is just that people who are not even readers mistook neural prompts as disrespect. Backed up by the state politics and rivalry of the east and the west, the masses upsurged for the wrong causes.

Thus, it can be settled that the censorship of literature in South Asia can never be an effective retort to the post-colonial bitterness of the East. It serves the West more and makes the lives of the commons living there worse. Humans are the amalgamation of converging identities. Shunning one for being traitorous by choosing certain aspects of such personas is limiting to mental growth. Hence, if states could adopt secular policies and not worry about losing power to the masses would be a giant leap of faith indeed, but would open doors to tolerance, love and harmony.

To conclude, I wish to reminiscence about a particular event concerning my mother that changed the very dynamic of our mother-daughter relationship. The day I brought in the last copy of *The Satanic Verses* home; my mother screamed at the top of her lungs demanding I burn it. I calmly asserted in humble words: Read, mother and I shall throw the book away for your sake after you are done. Being a writer herself, she could not say no.

I still have the book with me. The only thing that has changed in our household is that my mother has transcended her previously limiting thoughts. She is no more afraid of Rushdie's three Goddesses, Lat, Uzza and Manat, visualized as direct oppositions to God in the story. She understands that she is the goddess in her own home and no longer the puppet of the patriarchs (viz. her husband, his father and brothers). She is now an independent author of mystery books addressing deeply-rooted cancerous social issues.

This is the kind of world I dream of where people are given chances to raise the anti-questions and not get into political or communal trouble for their natural inquisitiveness.

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