

Murder of the word: Banning of the selected novels of the twentieth-century South Asia

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Abstract

In an age of rapid proliferation and dissemination of information through visual, graphic, printed and multimedia material, we still encounter a disturbing practice of libricide, smothering and challenging our notion of free exchange of ideas. Libricide is an extreme form of censorship, protest and hate mongering spanning across different times and spaces. It is an established fact that knowledge is power and libricide is a wanton desecration of knowledge. Book burnings are insidiously powerful and symbolic acts of eliminating ideas/values and the resultant concomitant is the intent to erase the cultures or beliefs deemed as a potential threat to the ruling powers. It is a strategic and calculated destruction to obliterate supposedly 'blasphemous' or 'politically seditious' content from the psyche of common masses. The history of exterminating books, sometimes coupled with eliminating the writers, is as much a part of current milieu as it was of earlier times. The world has witnessed biblioclasm at its worst in the twentieth-century. South-Asian countries, where the religious fervour and communal vigour overpowers all other sensibilities, have particularly been vulnerable to the vandalism caused upon the publication of a work, part or whole of which is deemed sacrilegious or defamatory to a religious community, political group or social setup. The present paper attempts to uncover the history of banning and burning of two novels (*The Satanic Verses* and *Lajja* written by Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen, respectively), and the serious repercussions which followed in its wake. Along with the death threat faced by novelists, the libricide also served as a prelude or a corollary to the massive human destruction caused by the riots they provoked in its aftermath.

Keywords: encounter, libricide, biblioclasm

Introduction

"...where they burn books they will afterwards burn people."
(Heinrich Heine)

In the contemporary era, the practice of institutionalized censorship of books and its more violent form, libricide have problematized and challenged our notion of uninhibited exchange of ideas. The history of exterminating books, sometimes coupled with eliminating the writers, is as much a part of current milieu as it was of earlier times. The world has witnessed biblioclasm at its worst in the twentieth-century.

"...even if it is true that our libraries are overflowing with books, never before in the history of mankind has there been a century as destructive to books as the twentieth."
(Hans van der Hoeven)

"The First Amendment of the United States Constitution protects the right to freedom of religion and freedom of expression from government interference." For UK, "Article 10 of the Convention goes beyond free "speech" and guarantees freedom of "expression," which includes not only the spoken word, but written material, images and other published or broadcast material." This is similar for most other democratic countries including the third world. The Article 19 of Indian Constitution gives all the Indians the freedom of speech and expression. This freedom, though, is subject to "public order, decency or in relation to... defamation or incitement to an offence" (Kumar 32) and as a

result, in case of an uproar against any act of expression, governments tend to play safe and choose the easier path by banning a work to maintain 'communal harmony' and to undo the hurt a work had caused to the religious sentiments of a community.

While having a brief look at the history of banning of the books and practice of libricide in India, it is understood that the country had indeed not witnessed these trends of biblioclasm till almost a couple of decades after the nation got its independence. The constitution provides the freedom of speech and that of expression with restriction "on grounds of (i) public order, (ii) morality, (iii) decency, (iv) friendly relation with foreign state and (v) in the interest of the security of the State" (Kumar 158). This practically means that any book can be banned on one of the grounds in any given situation but still the banning of books in the country has been based on a whim rather than on sound academic or legislative grounds. Girja Kumar makes a strong comment by saying that "[l]aw and intellect do not mix together very well" (163). The censorship in India has seen an upward trend historically. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was one of the first novels banned by the Supreme Court of India in 1965, while in contrast the courts in USA and Britain had taken a contrary decision on banning of the novel. *Kama Kala* by Mulk Raj Anand was banned on the grounds of profanity as it "contained photographs from the temples of Konark and Khajuraho" (Kumar 160) which otherwise, ironically, appeal to the devotees visiting these temples. Prior to *Satanic Verses*, the books that were banned with the blame of injuring religious

susceptibilities were *Rama Retold* by Aubrey Menen and *The Lotus and the Robot* by Arthur Koestler. V.S. Naipul's *Area of Darkness* and Ronald Segal's *Crisis in India* were "considered unsympathetic to India" (Kumar 161). James Laine's *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* was banned due to allegedly wrong portrayal of Shivaji and his origin and development. Joseph Lelyveld's *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his Struggle with India* was banned in Gujarat in 2011 for highlighting Gandhi's relationship with his close friend Hermann Kallenbach hinting about some homosexual elements in their relationship. *The Hindus: An Alternative History* by Wendy Doniger was banned for "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage the feelings of any religious community" in February 2014. Ironically, most of these instances of banning of the books were executed as administrative measures. For instance, import of books or any periodical publication from China in any language was banned after 1962 Indo-China War and this ban was lifted almost three decades afterwards which meant that the universities and institutions providing facilities for research and training in Chinese studies were doing without the appropriate authentic Chinese source material all these years (Kumar 165). Can't we contemplate to whom was such blanket banning a bigger loss – to our own nation or to the "so-called enemy country" (Kumar 165)?

While banning of books has not been a non-existent scenario in India, the plundering of libraries and burning of books has also seen an ascendant tendency in the country. Rebecca Knuth shares while talking about cultural destruction that Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune was pillaged by Hindu nationalists "because it provided documentation for historical works that challenged their myths" (2). The tradition of libricide is not limited to the jurisdiction of India as many similar instances happened in neighbouring countries as well as in the disputed state of Kashmir. Knuth explains:

"Hindus have attacked Muslim books in India, and Muslim militants have shredded the written works of Kashmir's Hindus. The Sinhalese in Sri Lanka burned the distinguished Tamil library; Saddam's forces obliterated Shiite libraries in Iraq; and the Taliban destroyed Afghanistan's secular and Persian works." (201)

The political forces exercise their power in a way that the mightier community takes guard against the minority, in many instances, with the help of government machinery to serve the purpose in most of the cases. Knuth notes that:

"In the scramble for power, books and libraries sometimes fell victim to communal demonstrations, as in India, where right-wing Hindu groups regularly attacked Muslims and their institutions, or in Kashmir, where the Muslims purged the region of Hindu Pandits and their books." (13)

Punjab also witnessed libricide during 1980s when Indian Army attacked the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. In the guise of their combat against the militants in June 1984, the army plundered the whole Sikh Reference Library situated in the complex. While materials including manuscripts dating from the early times after the conception of the Sikh faith, rare books and other publications were burnt, a lot many of those had been taken away by the Indian Army. Though the Indian government kept claiming "that the materials inside the Sikh Reference Library had been destroyed in a fire ignited by the

cross-fire between the militants and the army" (Ovasdi 351) while the librarian of the Sikh Reference Library maintained that he had witnessed the library intact after the combat was over on 6 June 1984 but when he visited the library a week later, the Army had burned the library down. A non-government organization ENSAAF reported that "in April 2004, the Union government filed an affidavit in a court case acknowledging that it possessed many articles, including rare handwritten scriptures and documents, and wished to return them" (qtd. in Ovasdi 351) though the government's 'wish' never materialised.

South-Asian countries, where the religious fervour and communal vigour overpowers all other sensibilities, have particularly been vulnerable to the vandalism caused upon the publication of a work, part or whole of which is deemed sacrilegious or defamatory to a religious community, a political group or a social setup. The present paper attempts to uncover the history of banning and burning of two novels (*The Satanic Verses* and *Lajja* written by Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin, respectively), and the serious repercussions which followed in their wake. Along with the death threat faced by novelists, the libricide also served as a prelude to the massive human destruction caused by the riots they provoked in its aftermath.

Both these novels fall under the domain of religion, though in two different ways. *Lajja* presents the picture of a socio-cultural and political conflict between the two religious communities despite having a shared lingual heritage whereas *The Satanic Verses* has been termed as the 'most blasphemous' of all the written novels. The infamous decree by Khomeini about Rushdie is well known. Weinberger quotes Khomeini whose word was considered law by millions of Shiite Muslims, "The author of the 'Satanic Verses' book, which is against Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death." (114). Upon Rushdie's issuance of apology in reflex to the *fatwa*, Khomeini maintained, "Even if he repents and becomes the most pious Muslim on earth, there will be no change in this divine decree." (Weinberger 114)

In case of *Lajja*, the vandalizing mob was supported by extremist fanatics who had assumed the task of avenging upon the 'other community' for the demolition of Babri Masjid and murders that took place in its aftermath. While the pillaging was going on, the whole nation remained mute spectator. The custodians of religion and culture perhaps thought how a woman could raise her voice against the 'justice' being done to 'the wrongdoers'? Nasrin's demand for the secular face of the nation was ill-timed, uncalled for and tasteless for these extremist groups. Her portrayal of characters criticizing religion in general had been taken by the fundamentalists to be the criticism of their own religion and a decree was announced calling the death of the author with a bounty on her head. Margaret Bald writes, "Nasrin is an uncompromising critic of patriarchal religious traditions" and that "Nasrin's newspaper columns, her bold use of sexual imagery in her poetry, her self-declared atheism, and her iconoclastic lifestyle aroused the fury of fundamentalist clerics." Even before the publication of *Lajja*, "[b]y early 1992, angry mobs began attacking bookstores that sold her works. They also assaulted

Nasrin at a book fair and destroyed a stall displaying her books.” (Bald 175)

The reasons of the demand for banning these novels were different and the logic behind the controversy relating to each novel is intriguing too. Can you find rationale behind demolition of a 500-year old mosque to reclaim the mythological land of the birth of the god Rama? Do you see any logic behind such a havoc taking place in India, and the flames catching the nooks of the loins of the population in a different geographical space in Bangladesh just because the community in question is a majority here and a minority there? Instead of showing any feelings of remorse for the horrific events that took place in Bangladesh, the masses called for a ban on the work that foregrounded the reports about umpteen instances of lootings, killings, rapes, ransacking of houses, and cold-blooded murders of Hindus in the country. The violent protests, persecutions, demonstrations, and vandalization of public property as acts of mirroring retaliation against the ‘obnoxious writers’, however, defies any common man’s capability to reason. How can such impingement on writer’s artistic expression through violent display of emotions be justified? Menon postulates, “Whether extremist, militant, fundamentalist or chauvinist, ‘thought police’ exist in every part of the world and go about the business of silencing, as effectively as ever. And the trend is growing.” (5)

The Bangladeshi government banned Lajja in July 1993 on the grounds that it had "created misunderstanding among communities." But if I go by the documented details given in the novel in form of figures and facts, there is nothing that may create any such misunderstanding. A fatwa calling for her execution was issued by a Muslim cleric of the Council of Soldiers of Islam, a militant group based in Sylhet, Bangladesh in a daily newspaper on September 24, 1993. She was charged with ‘blasphemy and conspiracy against Islam’.

Nasrin, a fearless writer, has never deterred from voicing her rebellious opinions about religion. Her newspaper column ‘Nirbachita’ became more militant when ‘salish’ courts reinitiated the outlawed punishments over women such as burying them deep and stoning for adultery, burning them at stake, and flogging them publicly. According to her, politics and religion should be kept separate in watertight compartments and should not be allowed to adulterate the concept of secularism. In the novel, Sudhamoy and Suranjan act as mouthpiece of the author’s own views on religion and they are atheists except for their Hindu names. Suranjan raises a rhetorical question, “Why don’t we work to free all State policies, social norms and education policies from the infiltration of religion?” He further suggests in the novel,

“... if we want the introduction of secularism, it does not necessarily mean that the Gita must be recited as often as the Quran is on radio and TV. What we must insist on is the banning of religion from all State activities. In schools, colleges and universities all religious functions, prayers, the teachings of religious texts and the glorifying of lives of religious personae, should be banned.” (138)

Nasrin stated that “. the Koran, the Vedas, the Bible and all such religious texts" were "out of place and out of time” (Bald 176), and, “. The problem is the intolerance of the fundamentalists. I fight with my pen, and they want to fight

with a sword. I say what I think and they want to kill me. I will never let them intimidate me” (Bald 364). In 2007, Nasrin was attacked by protesters at Hyderabad Press Club at release of the translation of one of her books. More than a decade after the first efforts to censor Nasrin, she still faces bans of her writing and threats against her life.

The Satanic Verses was published on September 26, 1988. The novel caught the ire of Muslims all across the world as soon as it was published. The novel seems to acknowledge “the hidden foundations of the faith of Islam, and Islam’s deep indebtedness to the milieu of sixth-century cult practices in pre-Islamic Arabia.” The novel also treats a “prophetic character” resembling Muhammad in a satirical way. The name Mahound is an old European slur on the Prophet’s name. The title *The Satanic Verses* was one main culprit that raised a furore among the Muslims worldwide as the term ‘Satanic Verses’ has a very negative connotation for faithful Muslims. “These verses, allegedly part of an early version of Qur’an, were referenced in early Arab biographies of the Prophet (but not in the current versions of the Qur’an)” and worked as a compromise between the pre-Islamic polytheistic cults of Mecca and Muhammad’s intended monotheistic faith (Maroney 7). Abu Simbel in the novel “asks for Allah’s approval of Lat, Uzza and Manat” (Rushdie 74), to which Mahound responds: “It is not suggested that Allah accept the three as his equals. Not even Lat. Only that they be given some sort of intermediary, lesser status.” (Rushdie 75)

The Times of India of 25 January 2012 reported that reading *The Satanic Verses* is not illegal in India. The ban invoked in case of *The Satanic Verses* was on its import to the country. When the ban was enforced on 5 October 1988, it was made clear that the book could not be imported to India but the copies that had already been imported to India sold like hot cakes. The soft copies of the novel available on the Internet can be downloaded anywhere as the clause of import does not work there. The reason I selected these works for my paper goes to reinstate the fact that the ban actually backlashes on those who hold the flagship of the ‘sacrosanct’ religion. Instead of the anticipated suppression, the voice of dissension is not gagged rather such bans arouse curiosity of critics as well as masses and stimulate them to engage more with these works. Girja Kumar rightly says that “the judgement against the book has done more for the book than was possible through the efforts of its publishers, distributors, booksellers and the press combined” as “[f]orbidden fruits are always sweet” (157). Moreover, it is almost inconceivable, then, to speak of censorship and silence in the twenty-first century; the very idea of such a force operating in the era of internet is absurd. Yet, consider this: a serious weighing up of the pros and cons of publishing a controversial text is part of most publishers’ editorial and marketing decisions today, no matter which part of the world they happen to be in.

Rushdie remained unharmed as he went into hiding about which period he writes in his memoir *Joseph Anton* but the attacks on *The Satanic Verses* have not been innocent as they claimed the life of the Japanese translator of the novel Hitoshi Igarashi who was killed by being repeatedly stabbed in the face. Thirty-five people were killed in a Turkey hotel on 2 July 1993 while the Turkish translator of the novel had to run for his life by fleeing with help of a fire department ladder.

Norwegian publisher William Nygaard was also shot thrice on 11 October, 1993 in an unsolved crime but he was lucky to survive. Rushdie himself had to cancel his plan to tour India during the 2012 Jaipur Literary Festival when there were reports that he would be at the target of Mumbai underworld.

The 'stakeholders' of religion believe that there is a subtle line between art and the sacrilege which an artist should never attempt to cross and which, when they believe is transgressed, the artist should be brought under fire, his/her work banned and burned, and if possible, the writer be eliminated so that such efforts could be nipped in the bud. Religion enjoys the position of the unquestionable in the discourse where all other participants of culture are open to scrutiny. This indeed harms religion itself in the longer run as any religion gets diluted with time. Why religion is given this supremacy in the cultural context and why the rioters are let loose to oppose, loot and plunder any kind of art has the vested interests in the power discourse.

Book burnings are insidiously powerful and symbolic acts of eliminating ideas/values and the resultant concomitant is the intent to erase the cultures or beliefs deemed as a potential threat to the ruling powers. It is a strategic and calculated destruction to obliterate supposedly 'blasphemous' or 'politically seditious' content from the psyche of common masses. In keeping with her radical stance, Nasrin says:

Many believe that I have criticised Islam in 'Lajja' and the Muslim fundamentalists of Bangladesh have issued a fatwa against me – both untrue. I have not criticised Islam in 'Lajja' and the fatwa is not because of Lajja. The fatwa is because I have criticised Islam in many of my other books. ("I Did Not Criticise")

The intention behind writing and publishing a work of art is a very important factor as far as the freedom of expression and seeking a ban on this freedom is concerned. However, to fathom the real intention of the author is a subjective matter. At times, a storm rises from nowhere upon the publication of a work that is harmless and the controversial content is completely unintentional. On the other hand, such content is sometimes easily avoidable but artists still choose to stir the calm oceans of the consciousness of the masses. Such artists are probably allured by the fame and money that such a controversy may garner. We, as humans, have some ethical responsibilities towards one another. It is not an unjust demand from artists to do a good deal of research before they touch upon a work of art that might be vulnerable, or may raise a storm among masses upon its publication. Undoubtedly, the other side of the picture is that an artist is necessarily and innately a critic of the society from which he takes the raw material for his piece of art and such a work of art may naturally contain the corrective, improvising stances which might be of bitter-sweet nature to his audience. Hence, academicians have a big role to play in inculcating the notion of tolerance among the youth of the nation in a way that it becomes a habit as intrinsic as anything else they seek from their pupils.

The character played by Boman Irani in the movie 'PK' brings out the harsh reality of intolerance in a satirical way when he says, "If you want to live in this country, do not mess with religion." The relevance of these lines is equally applicable in case of all forms of the art in the world in general and

particularly in India, be it M. F. Hussain's paintings, Rushdie's novel, or movies talking of any viewpoint other than that is 'socially acceptable'. I shall conclude here leaving an open question for all of us to ponder on. Should we meekly follow such suggestions and let religion continue to enjoy the highest pedestal position beyond the territories of discourse even in the twenty-first century, or should there be a debate to weigh the argument in support and in opposition of the freedom of expression to both the extreme levels that might lead to a middle path on basis of the negotiation between the two extremes?

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