



History and Implications of Banned Books in Select Writers

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history books have been banned for a series of reasons based on political, religious, sexual and social or moral grounds. Many people think that book banning was something that happened only in the past. However, the practice of banning and burning books exists till date. Every year, various attempts are made to ban books that are considered inappropriate for the readers, children in particular, as they are the ones greatly influenced by what they read and see, unless properly guided by parents and concerned authority. Thus, books are banned or either challenged with the best of intention to protect children from being demoralized or misguided. According to the American Library Association (ALA), which is the oldest and largest library association in the world, a challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group, while banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather it is an attempt to remove the material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access to others. To challenge a book or material is the first step towards book banning. Thus according to the ALA, a successful challenge would result in removal of those materials.

The act of banning or challenging a book is a matter of serious concern as it restrict one's freedom to read. Banning a book deprives one from learning, to reason out the good and the bad and thus one fails to learn realistic problems. As mentioned earlier, books are mostly banned to protect students and young people, as the opposing side believes that books that encourage extreme violence, profanity or foul language should be banned in schools and libraries. It is to be noted that when a book is banned, everyone

involved in it feels the impact – from the author, to the publisher but it is usually the readers who feels the greatest impact, particularly the students. Books that are part of a curriculum are there for a reason, they contain a message or theme or a life lesson that growing minds should be taught. And when these books are banned, students lose learning those critical lessons and ultimately lack imagination, thereby making them slaves to the present world of technology. By reading and learning the diverse contents of books, one experiences creativity, as in the words of Lev Grossman, “Young minds – young brains – need stories and ideas like the ones in those (censored and banned) books in order to grow. They need ideas that you disagree with. They need ideas that I disagree with. Or they'll never be able to figure out what ideas they believe in” (“Lev Grossman”).

To ban a book simply because the book contains something someone doesn't like would be unfair because it will rob students of cultural diversity and will diminish their chance to view the world with an open mind. It is completely impractical to try and control the environment that children live in. All the violent or challenged things that parents are trying to keep away from their children, the political truth and mess that various governments are trying to destroy in this world will come to light for everyone and pretending they do not exist or trying to erase them instead of embracing them and learning from them to look forward for a better future is not the answer. Some of the greatest people on this earth have looked at their environment and formed their own opinions against society. Certain banned books teach students that they can carry on with them and it is their opinion that shapes their action. Books have been banned since the past two thousand years. Some of the most

controversial books in history are today regarded as classics. The Bible, for instance, is the most read book in the world today among the many books that have been banned over the past two thousand years, and so are the works of Shakespeare. Despite living in a free and modern society, the drive to ban or challenge books seems unavoidable. When we look back as early as 259-210 B. C., the Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti is said to have buried alive 460 Confucian scholars to control the writing of history in his time. Then in 212 B. C., he burned all the books in his kingdom, retaining only a single copy of each for the Royal Library and those were destroyed before his death. In A. D. 35 the Roman Emperor Caligula opposed the reading of *The Odyssey* by Homer because he thought the epic poem expressed Greek ideas of freedom. Religious writings were not spared as well. In 1525, six thousand copies of William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament were smuggled and burned by the English church as the Church authorities believed that the Bible would be available only in Latin. Similarly in 1624, Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible was burnt in Germany by order of the Pope. Some of Shakespeare's plays also landed in controversy for projecting the royal family in a dark shade. In the original version of *Richard II*, the king is being deposed from his throne. However it was not well accepted by the royal family. The scene was later removed from the play after Queen Elizabeth I ordered to remove it. Shakespeare's *King Lear* was also banned from the stage until 1820 in deference to the insanity of the reigning monarch, King George III. In 1885, the library of Concord, Massachusetts, excluded Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* from its collection as the book according to the committee was "rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." Later in 1929, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was banned in the Soviet Union because of "occultism." Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* was banned by the governor of Hunan province in China because according to him animals should not use human language and it was disastrous to put animals and humans on the same level. Thus, we see that the list of banned books seems to have no end.

A simple reason is enough to challenge or ban a book, simply because the contents of the book are unacceptable to a particular section of people, group or religion. In 1989, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic*

Verses was banned in many Muslim majority countries, including India and a fatwa was issued against him because the contents of the book hurt the religious sentiments of the Muslims which will be later discussed in depth in the chapters ahead. It is to be noted that the more controversial the book is, the more is the curiosity to read the book. Most of the controversial, banned books in history are now regarded as classics. Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* despite its controversial content went on to win the Whitbread Award in 1989. Though the book is still banned in many countries, yet I believe the book is being read by many simply for the pleasure of reading. In the words of Judy Blume, "Let children read whatever they want and then talk about it with them. If parents and kids can talk together, we won't have as much censorship because we won't have as much fear" (qtd. in Safire 125). According to former ALA President Carol Brey-Casiano, "Not every book is right for every person, but providing a wide range of reading choices is vital for learning, exploration, and imagination" (American Library Association). Even religious texts like the *Bible* and the *Quran* were banned for religious reasons. Some of the reasons for book censorship are as follows:

Political Ground: Throughout history, tyrants, totalitarian states, church institutions and democratic governments alike have banned books that challenge their assumptions or questioned their activities. Political suppression also occurs in the name of security and to safeguard official secrets and is often used as a weapon in larger cultural or political battles. Political suppression most commonly occurs when books support or examine extreme political parties or philosophies such as fascism, communism, anarchism etc. *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Marx, which is regarded as the founding document of Communism has been banned, burned and censored since its publication in many capitalist countries because of its political content. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) was also banned in many US countries for exposing the dark side of Belgian colonization of the Congo, by focusing on one of the largest acts of genocide committed up to that time. Also the book *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinback was also banned because Steinback didn't give enough credit to the community for helping migrants while *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison was banned because of the book carrying content regarding black nationalism and Marxist ideas.

Racial Themes: Books are often challenged and banned for being ‘oppressive’ and ‘racially insensitive’ towards a particular race or country. Such books encourage racism among children and present a negative picture in the mind of the children. Mark Twain’s *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is one of the most-challenged books of all time and is frequently challenged even today because of its frequent use of the word “nigger”. Twain’s depiction of blacks in the book, particularly Jim, represents the tendency of the dominant white culture to saddle blacks as childish, less intelligent than whites, superstitious beyond reason and common sense, and grossly ignorant of standard English. Thus, the book was no longer available for classroom use at the elementary and junior high school levels. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is another controversial book for its description of African people as ‘savages’. It was Chinua Achebe who accused Conrad and his novel of racism which will be discussed in the chapters ahead. *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* (1964) by Roald Dahl, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) by Malcolm X and Alex Haley and *Gone With the Wind* (1936) by Margaret Mitchell are some books that were challenged and banned to some extent because of its racial content and portrayal of the black Africans in a ‘dark image’.

Presence of Witchcraft or Magic Themes: Books that contain magic or witchcraft themes have always been a topic of controversy for concerned parents who feel that such books encourage children to practice witchcraft and make a child believe in magical world. Books such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum and *The Harry Potter Series* (1997-2007) by J. K. Rowling are some common examples of books that were challenged due to its presence of witch and witchcraft- the former for portraying good witches which was “theologically impossible” since the opposing side believed that all witches are by nature evil; while the later was challenged for its content of witchcraft and is the most challenged book of the 21st century according to the American Library Association.

Sexual Content: One of the top most reasons of books being challenged or banned is its explicit sexual content. Very often parents and school boards have objected books that contain certain sexual passages inappropriate for young people and students. Many books have come under the scanner judged on sexual ground. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlett Letter*

(1850) – a tale of an adulterous entanglement that results in an illegitimate birth was banned on sexual ground and has been called pornographic and obscene though there are no sex scenes and sexual language. Similarly, Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952) was challenged and called for ban in schools due to its “pornographic” passages. Many parents believed that it was too depressing and a real downer for young adults and students. Judy Blume’s *Forever* (1975), Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita* (1955) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison are some other controversial books due to its sexual content.

Social Ground: Books are also banned based on various social grounds unacceptable to a particular society, group or religion. It may be due to presence of immoral acts portrayed in the book, age inappropriateness; presence of violence, alcohol and other acts that tend to demoralize one’s moral or gives out a wrong message to the audience (readers). The category of censorship on social grounds is a bit more elusive than the other categories. Essentially, books under this ground “have been censored because their subject matter or characters do not conform to the social, racial or sexual standards of their censors” (*Censorship Histories of World Literature* 333). Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlett Letter* (1850), for example, was censored by some earliest readers on the grounds that Hawthorne sided and sympathized with Hester Prynne as opposed to her husband.

Censorship on Select Writers:

Censorship on Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*: This novel has met with certain censorships; many of the ideas that the book promotes are anything but fact as claimed by the author and so it goes directly to the heart of the Catholic faith. Brown’s story is little more than a well-crafted, cleverly written diatribe against Christianity, especially its Roman Catholic sector. In the book, we find that Opus Dei and the Vatican are covering up the story of early Christianity, including the secret that Jesus fathered a family. A monk, guided by the head of Opus Dei, goes on killing spree to keep the secret under wraps. Opus Dei’s members are projected in the novel as people who harm other people and even Silas is presented as a person who commits serial murder. In pursuing the Holy Grail, the novel even uses the word “monster” to describe Silas because of his physical appearance which is very scary. It thus brings negative image to the institution and its members that exist in real.

The novel, though a work of fiction, contains a ‘fact’ place where Brown claims the factuality of the work.

However, the book lacks accuracy and misinterpretations of history. Also his misinterpretation of the Bible poses serious threat to Christianity and raises doubts on its belief. Also, throughout the novel, Opus Dei members are always represented doing something negative and project a negative image of the organization. Thus, beyond the issue of whether or not Christianity is true, readers must also ask themselves that is far more basic to the story: Does it correctly present historical events? Does it accurately represent Christian teachings? Henceforth in Brown's own words, "When you finish the book, like it or not, you've learned a ton" (qtd. in Garlow 9).

Censorship on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: *The Satanic Verses* questions the nature of faith through a portrayal of its origins. Although no explicit mention is made of any specific religion or book, a secondary narrative within the novel is clearly engaged in a metahistorical rewriting of the founding of Islam and the genesis of the Qur'an. The questioning of the Qur'an itself was serious enough, but we also come across several insulting descriptions of Muhammad, or Mahound in the novel, such as his temptation and his manipulative nature. Muhammad is referred to as "Mahound" in the book, a slur used by the European crusaders to denote the demonic false prophet of the Moors. Even the names of Mahound's wives and companions are the same as those of the historical Prophet. Further, Mahound divides his life between the oasis of Yathrib and the town of "Jahilia." The Prophet Muhammad's life was similarly divided between exile in Medina – which was known in pre-Islamic times as Yathrib – and Mecca. Muslim historians and scholars use the word "Jahilia" to denote pre-Islamic Mecca. The Arabic word means "ignorance", meaning ignorance of God in pre-Islamic times. Rushdie however insists that his way of portraying Muhammad was not in order to degrade him, but merely to make him more vivid and "even more worthy of admiration" (Rushdie 1992, 18). As he claims, even "the greatest human being must struggle against themselves as well as the world" (Rushdie 1991, 18). According to Malise Ruthven, *The Satanic Verses* "mounted a twofold challenge to the Almighty", by attacking the sacred text itself as well as the Prophet (Ruthven 7). Not only did the novel challenge the absolute authority and authenticity of the Quran, but furthermore, by satirizing Muhammad, picturing him in a brothel as a conman – the novel questioned the moral integrity of a man revered almost as God (*Satanic Verses* 7).

Islamic tradition considers the Prophet Muhammad human. Criticism of him is sacrilege, but not blasphemy. Casting doubt on the divine revelation itself, however, is blasphemy according to Islamic law. Muslim scholars and religious leaders saw Salman Rushdie's rewriting of the incident of the satanic verses as a deliberate distortion of Islamic history. To them Rushdie is guilty of a double blasphemy – the first being the profaning of the Qur'an, in all senses of the word, and the second being the deliberate distortion of Islam and Islamic history. However, it can also be easily argued that many of those who protested against the book without the means to judge or to evaluate the facts within the fiction ended up the dupes not of Salman Rushdie but of their own imams, mullahs, and community leaders. The grassroots protests against *The Satanic Verses* began with the circulation of photocopies of selected passages of the novel. The leading protestors had read only these pages, devoid of context, and countless more had merely been told about the book before being exhorted to protest. The question, however, of how any one community or individual responds to *The Satanic Verses* remains rooted in issues of cultural difference and culturally encoded readings.

Censorship on Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*: Through *The Heart of Darkness* Conrad puts many perspectives of racism and imperialism right on the table but allows the readers to develop his/her own opinions. Conrad's work exposes certain truths regarding the chaotic atmosphere of post-colonial states worth examining even though the novella's holistic view of imperialism is rather ambiguous and racist statements undoubtedly exist. Many readers had classified Joseph Conrad as racist. Chinua Achebe believed that Conrad was more racist in his novel *The Heart of Darkness* because of his ugly description towards the Congolese and that the novel supported the white colonizer's behaviors towards the natives. However, V. S. Naipaul provides an appropriate resolution to Achebe's reading of the novel as an unquestionably racist piece of literature when he says:

We read at different times for different things. We take to novels our own ideas of what the novel should be; and those ideas are made by our needs, our education, our background or perhaps our ideas of our background (Naipaul 213).

Conrad novella is not overtly racist; overall, the natives appeared better humans than the Europeans. In fact, Conrad's ignorance led to his conformity to

racism. His ignorance of not completely “granting the natives human status” leads him to social categorization. C. P. Sarvan wrote in his criticism, quoting Achebe: “Conrad sets up Africa as a foil to Europe, a place of negations . . . in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (Sarvan 281). The novel thus gives a real image of what happened during the 19th century and the Congo was just an example. Conrad paid more attention to the damage that colonization did to the souls of white colonizers. Edward Said in his “Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*”. *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) states:

This imperial attitude is, I believe, beautifully captured in the complicated and rich narrative form of Conrad’s great novella *Heart of Darkness*, written between 1898 and 1899 (Said 24).

The novella is thus a work of great art that reflect the evils of imperialism knitted in its complicated narrative form. In other words, the novella depicts social issues and the need to address them.

Censorship on Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

This novel addresses moral issues. Lee uses situations throughout the book to force readers to examine moral issues and discern right from wrong and the vital importance of standing up for truth and justice, as Atticus displays in the novel. The book is a true piece of literature and Atticus’ message should be heard in the midst of all the global conflicts that we hear of on the news every day. To think of children suffering across the world because of a tyrannical regime or an unfair justice system is a depressing notion. Thus, whether such books have changed the world for better or for worse is debatable. But, in a very concrete way, they have helped to keep our history alive and have opened the door to discuss and think of the various issues around us. Every book impacts the reader’s mind in a way or the other. It should be left to the individual to what kind of book or for that matter, any form art, he/she indulge in. The novella is thus a work of great art that reflect the evils of imperialism knitted in its complicated narrative form. In other words, the novella depicts social issues and the need to address them.

Art causes people to look a little closer at the social issues, at other people and their emotions, at the environment that surround them, and the everyday objects and life forms around them. It helps them see what is there but not easily perceived. The artist

brings out that which cannot be seen or felt easily. It is when society sees and feels clearly on these things, it provides opportunities for change in thought or appreciation of the message behind the art. Art may include a range of artistic productions including paintings, sculptures, plays, novels, photographs, etc. Art is usually about self-expression because the artist feels strongly enough about what they are doing to try and put it into a form that they, and others, can come to terms with. We make art because there is something inside the creative person that needs to get out. The poet, musician, actor, and visual artist all have a desire to express what they feel and to create something of great value. Art fulfills an expressive function when an artist conveys information about his or her personality, feelings or worldview. It is a type of therapy or a form of meditation. Many do art for the pure joy of it. According to Tolstoy’s theory of art, art is about the expression of feelings and the joining of people together in shared experience of those emotions. Thus he says –

Art begins when a man, with the purpose of communicating to other people a feeling he once experienced, calls it up again within himself and expresses it by certain external signs (Tolstoy 38).

Censorship is a tool that hinders the artistic growth of an artist. It thwarts and limits his creativity and expression. Every artist is unique and gifted in his own way, and it is only through art that his uniqueness is displayed. But when censorship comes between the artist and his uniqueness, it takes away the artist’ soul and another great work of art tend to disappear. Thus, at the present age, one must do away with censorship and book banning but in fact, encourage artists to come up with more artistic and creative work.

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