

# Writing in the Time of Online Surveillance & Censorship

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## Abstract

*Voltaire's most often quoted words, 'Although I disapprove of what you said, I will defend to the death your right to say it,' are analysed critically through the lens of women's' writings and their censorship in modern times.*

*This article critiques the new development of online surveillance and the backlash that women writers face when they write on socially sensitive subjects. It defends the rights and liberty of free speech and expression.*

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Every writer goes through the journey which starts from silence and reaches to speech. In this journey he relies on his words. These words are the currency of the writer and like currency the more they circulate the greater is their value.

Today most of the writers are talking about the power of the words. They are returning their awards in protest of the increasing intolerance. They know very well that their words can bring change in a society. Be it the French revolution or Russian revolution, writers, intellectuals and philosophers played a major role in bringing about change in the government. Karl Marx's 'Das Capital' has become the Bible of the working class people and Simon de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' has given strength to the feminist movement all over the world. All of us are well aware of this fact.

Writing is not a hobby for any serious writer, (I am not talking about professional and popular writers here).but it is a personal struggle for someone, it may be the feeling of anger for somebody or it may be to see dreams dissolve like a dewdrop evaporating on a rose petal. According to the Tamil writer, Bama, this is what happens in creative writing. She says that for her, 'writing in a situation of social exclusion is to experience it as breaking the unbroken and forced silence of a victim, and allowing the militant in the victim to speak.'

I think this is the reason why the writer speaks.

When the writer writes about daffodils, sun set and sunrise, about his love and beloved, no one objects. Readers enjoy reading such stuff. But, when he writes about politics, social system, and religion and tries to analyse it, he has to face public outrage. Sometimes his voice is hushed or silenced by society. The way it has been done in case of Perumal Murugan, a Tamil writer recently. All of you know that he has written a kind of suicide note on his Face Book wall.

He wrote, "Perumal Murugan, the writer is dead. As he is no God, he is not going to resurrect himself. He has no faith in rebirth. As an ordinary teacher, he will live as P. Murugan. Leave him alone."

In this note he thanked everyone who supported him and upheld the freedom of expression, and announced the withdrawal of all his novels, short stories and poems. He also told his publishers not to sell his books and promised to compensate their losses. The readers were advised to burn their copies of his books. This note ended with an appeal to caste, religious, political and other groups to end their protests and leave the writer alone since he has withdrawn all his books.

What was Murugan's crime? Our so called cultured people made his life miserable alleging that Murugan's novel has insulted the women of the community and degraded a Hindu deity. Madhurobhagan (One Part Woman, the English translation, came out last year) is a sensitive portrait of the disappointment of a childless peasant couple set in, a town near Namakkal.

It's a gripping fictional account of a poor, childless couple, and how the wife, who wants to conceive, takes part in an ancient Hindu chariot festival where, on one night, consensual sex between any man and woman is allowed. Set in the early years of the 20th century, the novel discusses how the wife is cajoled and convinced by her family to attend a temple ritual that allows a woman to beget a child by entering into sexual union with a stranger. The child born of this union is called sami pillai or God's child, since the stranger is perceived as a representative of God. Murugan explores the tyranny of caste and abnormalities of a community in tearing the couple apart and destroying their marriage. In such marriages the women, suffer untold humiliation even today. And that is why Murugan's translator Aniruddhan Vasudevan said, "If anything deserves to be banned, it is this control over women's sexuality."

India has a long history of banning books - usually for allegedly offending religious and community sentiments, misrepresenting the country or perceived obscenity - but such a drastic reaction by a writer who has been clearly intimidated is never known before.

Why did Murugan take this step? I feel this is the way he wanted to show his protest against censorship of society. These people who wanted to ban Murugan's novel have also declared that, 'this is not the end but the beginning.' They have said no writer who dares to touch the so-called Hindu sentiment will be able to live in Tamil Nadu.

It is not only in Tamil Nadu or in India but all over the world writers, as well as, artists are facing this threat. We have many examples of writers and artists like Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, Malala, James Lane, M. F. Hussain or the team of Charlie Hebdo, who were targeted by different communities, castes and religions.

All of us know that free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of the man. The right to freedom of expression is recognized as a human right under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It states that "everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference" and "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice".

Though we have this right, sometimes Governments restrict speech with varying limitations. Common limitations on speech relate to libel written statement harming somebody's reputation, slander, obscenity, pornography, sedition, incitement, fighting words, classified information, copyright violation, trade secrets, non-disclosure agreements, right to privacy, right to be forgotten, public security, public order, public nuisance, and oppression.

Censorship begins when Government and other regulatory authorities have policies restricting the freedom of speech for political or religious reasons. As a writer I feel everybody is free to say what he or she wants. Sometimes I may not agree with others, I may not like their opinions but I don't have the right to stop anyone from expressing his or her opinion.

There is a famous quote, not actually Voltaire's but he meant that when he use to talk about Liberty. It says, 'Although I disapprove of what you said , I will defend to the death your right to say it.'

Voltaire is right. But, in spite of this we have different kinds of censorship all over the world. Censorship in literature and the arts is a universal phenomenon—more so in the case of women.

As a woman writer now I would like to focus on different types of censorship which most of the women writers face in India as well as in the world. In most of the countries women find their voices suppressed in the name of culture and tradition. This may be the reason that they try to express themselves through words. They write because it is a matter of survival, the way to escape the enclosed environment of home and family, and the only way to express their feelings, desires and frustrations, anger against system.

Fatima Taj, the Urdu writer says,

***Who should I talk to***

***Where should I go***

***Where should I turn for shelter***

***Alone in this darkness***

***I will choke to death***

This fear of choking to death makes them write.

I always feel most of the women don't write to gain fame or recognition but to share their feelings, thoughts, their anguish, the emotional turmoil and mental confusion they suffered as a result of restrictions they face.

As a woman writer what kind of censorship do I and my contemporary women writers face?

Friends we talk about equality on the basis of caste, religion and gender. But, do we really have equality? In this modern, global world in spite of being educated, how many of us are free to take our own decisions. How many of us are free to express ourselves the way we want to? One of our Marathi poets could not use the words which express sexuality. Because in our society, the so called 'ideal woman' does not use these words. Their husbands will read what they write and will tell them what they should write. Even the husbands who are considered to be extremely liberal will not be so when it comes to their wife's writing. They will check their mailbox. Sometimes they will check their emails, messages, comments, likes and dislikes on WhatsApp and Face Book.

I feel that one of the most superficial and cosmetic changes of modernisation seems to be that, today, educated men are apparently more accepting of the progress made by women. Men appear to appreciate their wives, daughters, sisters getting educated, going out and getting jobs and even writing. But actually women are free to write only on those issues which do not upset the status quo, which will not create waves by questioning patriarchal power. If their writing steps beyond these invisible boundaries, it becomes unacceptable.

So the censorship for women starts from their own home and relatives, both men and women, who are the members of this male dominated society. Most of the women writers – married or unmarried - admit that familial pressure can affect their writing.

Women find their voices suppressed in the name of culture and tradition. They are told that a precious cultural heritage is being desecrated by such writing. So women go on writing about families, beauty of relationships, different experiences that have touched them. So their writing is restricted to their domestic life experiences.

Though they want to write about politics, religion or any social issue they are not allowed to write.

There is one more serious censorship, women as well as men writers face: that is self-censorship. When any writer writes a novel or a short story it is considered as fiction. But readers will try to find the characters of that story in the real life of the writer, especially the woman writer. This may be the reason why women prefer writing poetry, rather than prose, as poetry is abstract.

In the past, the writers who broke these taboos had to go face court cases. Mridula Garg, the Hindi writer had to face this as she had dared to write in her novel called Chittkobra that the sexual act was devoid of any pleasure for her heroine—it was mechanical and her thoughts lay elsewhere. Even the Marathi writer, Vibhavari Shirurkar, had to write with a pseudonym, as society would not have approved of her writing.

These are old stories but today in this digital world also women writers face a threat from the society. Due to the internet, Facebook and WhatsApp, we are more exposed to the readers. There will be immediate reactions to your writing. Recently, my poem has been published in a Marathi newspaper. Almost instantaneously I received nearly 70 phone calls, 40-50 WhatsApp messages and a few emails. Many of them appreciated my poem, as it was having political context. But I also received near threatening calls against my poem.

Most of us are living and writing in the society which pre-decides your role as a woman, and keeps a constant watch on your actions and your words.

I share one incident. Two years back I presided over a Women Writers' meet at Nagpur (Lekhika Sammelan). There were several speakers who spoke on different issues, on those two days. One session was on the experiences of media reporters. One of the reporter said, 'when she was writing a story on widows of the farmers who had committed suicide, most of the women said that their life had not changed much. They were having the same routine. The only thing they did not have to experience now was the beating which they used to get from their drunkard husbands.

'Against this backdrop, I elaborated in my valedictory speech in that Sammelan, that many Indian women don't know what is love, and are exploited throughout their life and treated like dirt and a commodity by their husbands, and beaten every day. Such women feel relieved after the death of such partners. They don't complain about their lives as our society does not permit such expressions. But, when their husband who has tortured them dies, somewhere inside of the women there is a release and they breathe fresh air, experience a freedom that they have not done before.

But my statement was distorted by the media and the next day headlines read, 'Women feel happy when the husband dies.'

I was surprised. One news channel reporter wanted to interview me. He wanted to find out what exactly I said. I told him, I never said that they are happy. And I didn't speak about all women. I spoke about those women who go through the torture throughout their life. I told them yes, I said, that such women are relieved on their husband's death as they are not treated as human beings.

On Facebook I received a lot of objectionable comments. Sadly, somebody even said that when Neeraja's husband will die, she will celebrate, she will be happy and so on.

The moot point is that when you start analysing and criticizing religion, customs and traditions, social system, and politics you have to face censorship.

Women have increasing pressures in this so called modern world. Women who have started their journey with Savitribai Phule towards “the light of the free words” and became aware of their rights, might be forced to take a reverse turn and go back to same old days.

This is happening. Some forces are active in bringing old customs and traditions back. We, as women and women writers are being targeted by different intolerant groups.

I feel today people are becoming more and more intolerant. They seem to forget Voltaire's statement that 'Although I disapprove of what you said, I will defend to the death your right to say it.'

You may disapprove with me but you cannot silence my voice. As they have done with Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi.

I know it is very difficult to write in the time of this surveillance. But as a writer I will write what I feel, what I want to say. That is what a writer can do.

