The Mercurial Nature Of Literary Censorship
A critical essay by Kevin Tan

According to Chuck Stone, Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of North Carolina, censorship can be seen as “the cyclical suppression, banning, expurgation, or editing by an individual, institution, group or government that enforce or influence its decision against members of the public -- of any written or pictorial materials which that individual, institution, group or government deems obscene and ‘utterly’ without redeeming social value ‘as determined by "contemporary community standards".’”

Literary censorship can be accomplished through the banning of book publications. Literary censorship can also be achieved through bowdlerisation. Named after English physician and philanthropist, Thomas Bowdler, bowdlerisation refers to a censor’s attempt to eliminate certain passages or sections of the original work while still letting it be published. Bowdler himself was famously known for publishing “The Family Shakespeare”, an expurgated version of the Bard’s plays. For instance, in Bowdler’s version of “Hamlet”, the “death of Ophelia” was described “as an accidental drowning” instead of a “suicide”.

Censorship, and by extension literary censorship, works on the assumption that a subject’s content “reinforce(s) dispositions”3. As J.M. Coetzee argued in “Giving Offence: Essays On Censorship”, it is “a feature of the paranoid logic of the censoring mentality that virtue qua virtue must be innocent, and therefore unless protected, vulnerable to the wiles of vice.”4 Though Coetzee was referring specifically to “state censorship”, his point applies equally to literary censorship. Literary censorship is built on the assumption that the average reader is naïve and impressionable.

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Literary censorship is often seen as a tool of despotic regimes to restrict expression. After all, it is a popular weapon wielded by countries such as China.\textsuperscript{5} \textsuperscript{6}

However, such a view assumes that it is only authoritarian governments that exploit literary censorship to control the hearts and minds of citizens. Most countries have practiced some form of literary censorship at one point or another. Restrictions were imposed and removed based on the cultural zeitgeist of that time. When used correctly, censorship helps to bridge the tenuous divide in terms of opinions and values between disparate groups of people. Setting creative limits helps maintain harmony across race, religion and within society.

Literary censorship should not be derided as an authoritarian tool that exists solely to be abused by despotic regimes. It is a complex instrument. To castigate censorship as something that should not be enforced is far too radical a notion. It is akin to saying that we shall no longer produce knives as they could be potentially used as murder weapons. All tools can be used for good and evil. Hence, censorship should be seen as a mercurial tool that morphs according to its user’s whims and fancies.

Some governments view books as subversive and could threaten the state. In the past, Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, was advised by his chancellor, Li Si, to consolidate his rule and ensure the unity of the state by suppressing the spread of knowledge. To this end, books and documents pertaining to poetry, history and philosophy were burnt. These texts contained stories about virtuous rulers from China’s past. Li Si believed that these texts could foment discontent against Qin Shi Huang’s totalitarian rule.\textsuperscript{7}

This particular example is often cited as a case of literary censorship being appropriated for authoritarian means. The scale of the act may


cause one to assume that literary censorship is a favourite tool of authoritarian governments to consolidate their rule. Such a view is fallacious as it is based on selective evidence. Literary censorship has been utilised across the world, by authoritarian and liberal governments.

Pre-revolution France maintained tight censorship over works they deemed offensive. In 1856, Gustave Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary” was accused of “outraging public morals and religious and good manners”⁸. This was largely due to how Flaubert’s protagonist in “Madame Bovary” engages in extra-marital affairs. Fortunately, Flaubert was eventually acquitted.

Similarly, in the United States (US), there have been instances of literary censorship taking place. Though the US constitution has enshrined freedom speech within the law in the form of the first amendment, freedom itself is not an absolute. In 1934, the United States Customs Service banned imports of Henry Miller’s “Tropic Of Cancer” due to its obscenity⁹.

In 1961, when Grove Press legally published the book, the publishers “found themselves helping to defend more than 60 cases brought against booksellers all across the US"¹⁰ It was only in 1964 when the US Supreme Court overruled state court findings on the book’s obscenity¹¹.

Sometimes, literary censorship is not proposed by regulating authorities. They can come from society itself. According to the American Library Association, 56% of book challenges made from 1990 to 2008 came from parents. Most challenges arose due to the desire of parents to protect their children from contentious ideas such as homosexuality.¹²

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Similarly in Britain, censorship was first formalised into law in 1857 when the Obscene Publications Act was passed in Parliament. Based on this law, the “test of literary morality was what a father could read aloud in his own home”. Consequently, “literary works were often prosecuted” and the law was criticised for reducing “literary standards to the level of what was morally proper for the young”\textsuperscript{13}. Authors such as Thomas Hardy struggled to write fiction that reflected their liberal ideas. In Hardy’s case, he faced difficulties trying to find a publisher for “Jude The Obscure”\textsuperscript{14}.

In certain cases, literature was oppressed due to prevailing geopolitical concerns. For instance, in 1944, George Orwell could not find a publisher for “Animal Farm” as no one was “willing to take on a fable that attacked Britain’s wartime ally, the Soviet Union”\textsuperscript{15}.

The aforementioned examples highlight how literary censorship is prevalent across the world. The authorities in question may not necessarily be imposing such regulation for their private purposes. The censorship of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary and Miller’s Tropic Of Cancer can be seen as a reflection of Western society’s conservative nature back then.

The fact that these books were eventually published and sold widely in the West is proof that literary censorship, varies across time. Books deemed offensive yesterday may be considered acceptable today. As Western society grew more liberal and multicultural, censorship regulations were relaxed, thus becoming tolerant and encompassing. Literary censorship may be a political instrument but it is dependent on society’s existing values and principles.

Another oft-cited argument against literary censorship is how it is an anathema to the creative process of writers. In an article in “The New Yorker”, writer Salman Rushdie argues that the “creative act requires not only freedom but also this assumption of freedom”. Rushdie believes that “when censorship intrudes on art, it becomes the subject; the art becomes ‘censored art’ and that is how the world sees and

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understands it.”\textsuperscript{16} Essentially, Rushdie’s argument can be summarised as one that views literary censorship as an obstruction to artistic freedom.

Though Rushdie may be correct in arguing how censorship restricts writers, it is based on the assumption that all readers are rational and objective in how they approach their reading. Readers do not necessarily possess similar values as the writer. As such, some readers may get offended if they are unable to identify with the writer’s arguments particularly those pertaining to religion or race.

On 7 January 2015, the “Charlie Hebdo shootings” took place. “Charlie Hebdo” is a French satirical weekly newspaper that has published articles mocking religions such as Catholicism and Islam. The cover of the paper’s 2011 issue, which featured a cartoon of Prophet Muhammad, sparked off the shootings. This was because any depiction of Prophet Muhammad was seen as forbidden in some interpretations of Islam. This precipitated in the shootings that took place. 2 brothers, Said and Cherif Kouachi, forced their way in to the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris where they killed 12 people.\textsuperscript{17}

The “Charlie Hebdo shootings” can be seen as the product of a conflict between French laws and Islamic views on blasphemy. In France, authors and individuals have the right to satirise people, public actors and religions.\textsuperscript{18} This is in conflict with how Muslims take the view that the satire of Islam and of their religious representatives is blasphemous and punishable by death.\textsuperscript{19}

Though a singular case, the “Charlie Hebdo shootings” illuminate the dangers of not imposing any form of literary censorship. Arguments like Rushdie’s ignores the friction that may occur in the multi-cultural and globalised world we live in today. Restricting artistic freedom may be a necessary evil as it helps manage discourse and brokers compromise between the values of separate groups. The preservation of stability

between different parties defined by their race or religion takes far greater precedence than artistic freedom. In Singapore, a relatively young country as compared to the aforementioned ones, literary censorship is starting to be discussed more widely. This is partly due to the Singapore’s high literacy rate\textsuperscript{20}. The conservative nature of Singaporean society has shaped the national discourse on what Singaporeans should or should not read.

In 2014, Singapore’s National Library Board (NLB) announced that it would destroy three children’s books with pro-LGBT family themes. One of the titles, “And Tango Makes Three”, was based on the story of Roy and Silo, a same sex male pair of chinstrap penguins from New York City’s Central Park Zoo. The book details Roy and Silo’s attempts to start a family. Eventually, the zookeepers provide Roy and Silo with an egg, which hatches a female chick. The chick is named “Tango” by the zookeepers\textsuperscript{21}.

This incident had brought to the fore the simmering tensions between religious conservatives and gay-rights activists. This is largely due to Singapore’s treatment of the LGBT community. Though the state criminalises homosexual relations as seen in Section 377A of the Penal Code, the government has noted that “the statute is not proactively enforced, and all citizens, regardless of their sexual orientation, are free to lead their lives and pursue their activities in their private space without fear or violence or personal insecurity”\textsuperscript{22}.

In the case of “And Tango Makes Three” and the other two titles, it was finally decided that the books would be shifted to the adult section. I recently did a search of “And Tango Makes Three” on the NLB online catalogue and noticed that there was only one copy available for borrowing at Tampines Regional Library. Though the books have avoided their demise, one cannot help but wonder if restricting its circulation in libraries would still equate to some form of literary censorship.

\textsuperscript{22} Decision to retain Section 377A ‘carefully considered, balanced’ (2015, December 12). Retrieved November 07, 2016, from \url{http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/decision-to-retain/2341326.html}
Another prominent case would be the National Arts Council’s (NAC) withdrawal of the publishing grant for Sonny Liew’s graphic novel “The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye”. According to a statement by the representative of the National Arts Council, the book was deemed to contain “sensitive content” and “potentially undermines the authority or legitimacy of the Government and its public institutions”. The “sensitive content” was speculated to have been due to the book’s portrayal of Singapore’s former Prime Minister, the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.23

Though the publication of the graphic novel was not explicitly banned, the withdrawal of the $8000 grant can be perceived as the government’s way of restricting artistic freedom. Yet, if this were intended as a form of literary censorship, then it would have failed entirely.

The graphic novel has enjoyed great sales. Books Kinokuniya Singapore sold out “its stock of 500 copies...at all its branches”. Kinokuniya’s representative described the book’s launch as being “more than three times that of a very successful book launch at our main store”24.

Like the restricted circulation of “And Tango Makes Three”, the withdrawal of NAC’s grant for “The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye” is a relatively soft form of literary censorship. Both books are not explicitly banned though the government has taken decisive action in stating their position against these works. If anything, both cases suggest that literary censorship will continue to exist in some form or the other as compromises need to be made amongst the various social groups.

Ultimately, questions on literary censorship are open-ended. There are no definite answers to society’s views and values. The history of literary censorship across the world has shown how preferences change. Books that were censored in the past could very well be promulgated in the future.

Literary censorship is not static and set in stone. It can change with respect to a country’s values. To view literary censorship as a tool of autocratic regimes may be correct but it is limited and narrow. It fails to consider how literary censorship can be shaped by society as well.

Perhaps it would be better not to view literary censorship solely as a nemesis to freedom of expression. Instead, one should perceive it as a political tool that manages a country’s intellectual discourse. Like any instrument, it can be used and abused.