



Censorship, Exile, and Artistic Freedom in the Cases of Taslima Nasrin and Perumal Murugan: From Community Backlash to Networked Suppression

Dr. E. Justin Ruben

Assistant Professor (SL. G) – English, Department of Humanities, Coimbatore Institute of Technology, Coimbatore, India – 641 014

Email: justinruben@cit.edu.in

Abstract

This paper examines literary censorship as a continuum rather than a series of isolated scandals, using the cases of Taslima Nasrin and Perumal Murugan to trace how offense taken at fiction, memoir, and social critique escalates from local or religious mobilization into durable exclusion, and increasingly into networked suppression. Nasrin's novel Lajja and her subsequent memoirs, and Murugan's Madhorubagan (One Part Woman), share a common structure of harm: neither writer advocated violence, yet both were treated as security threats by state and communal actors alike. The paper documents at least two concrete, verifiable instances of realized censorship against each author — for Nasrin, the 2007 physical assault at a Hyderabad press club and her subsequent seven-month state-enforced confinement in Delhi that operated as a second, quieter exile; for Murugan, the December 2014 public burning of his novel in Tiruchengode and the coerced peace talk of January 2015 that produced his forced apology and public declaration of literary death. These episodes are read through four conceptual lenses: Stanley Cohen's theory of the moral panic, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the legal doctrine of the chilling effect, and danah boyd's account of networked publics. Together, these frameworks show that censorship rarely announces itself as censorship; it is enacted through public order, protective custody, or community sentiment, allowing state and non-state actors to accomplish informally what constitutional free-speech law refuses to authorize formally. The paper further argues that the same dynamics of mobilization and intimidation that once required an organized clerical authority or a physically assembled crowd now operate through social media, where offense can be manufactured and amplified within hours and where platforms themselves function as informal censors through content moderation. Drawing on India's existing legal architecture, including the Information Technology Act, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, and the Supreme Court's judgment in Shreya Singhal



v. Union of India, the paper contends that adequate statutory protection already exists but remains underused, slow, and disconnected from the institutional support authors need in the crucial early days of a backlash. It concludes with five policy recommendations: a narrow legal standard for restricting literature, preventive rather than reactive security for threatened writers, independent review panels insulated from local pressure, rapid-response institutional support for targeted authors, and stronger protections against the accumulated, often informal harms of coordinated harassment and de facto exile. The paper's central claim is that offline and online censorship are not separate problems but two expressions of a single continuum, and that protecting artistic freedom requires treating them as such.

Keywords: literary censorship; artistic freedom; Taslima Nasrin; Perumal Murugan; exile; moral panic; symbolic violence; chilling effect; networked publics; free speech law; social media censorship.

Introduction: Censorship as a Continuum from Community to Cloud

Literary censorship reveals itself most sharply when it is aimed not at propaganda but at fiction, memoir, and social critique that unsettle a community's sense of its own honour. The cases of Taslima Nasrin and Perumal Murugan demonstrate how writers can be punished for representing gendered suffering, religious hypocrisy, and local social norms even when their texts advocate no violence whatsoever. Nasrin's *Lajja* and memoirs such as *Dwikhandita* and *Amar Meyebela* triggered bans, fatwas, and exile, while Murugan's *Madhorubagan* (One Part Woman) provoked public shaming, a coerced apology, and a criminal complaint aimed at banning the novel (Nasrin; Murugan; "Madras High Court Judgment").

These cases matter because they expose a contradiction at the heart of democratic culture: societies claim to value free expression, yet they react to literary challenge with coercion whenever writers question religious identity, caste honour, or patriarchal authority. The legal record in Murugan's case and the long campaign against Nasrin together show that censorship is not only a state act; it is also a social process that turns fear, rumour, and moral outrage into durable exclusion ("Madras High Court Judgment"; "India's Madras High Court Refuses to Ban Controversial Novel"; "Silenced Voices").

What is less often recognized, and what this paper treats as its organizing insight, is that the contradiction does not resolve itself once a verdict is delivered. Nasrin's and Murugan's ordeals are best understood not as two isolated case studies but as two moments on a single continuum of silencing. That continuum begins with an offended local or religious constituency, escalates through public shaming and legal harassment, and increasingly migrates onto networked platforms, where the same dynamics of mobilization and intimidation now operate at greater speed and with far less accountability. Reading the two cases together, rather than treating the literary controversy and the digital controversy as separate chapters, makes visible a structural pattern: censorship rarely announces itself as censorship. It arrives dressed as public order, community sentiment, or religious injury, and it is precisely this camouflage that allows



offline mobs and online crowds to accomplish informally what constitutional law refuses to authorize formally.

This paper argues that both writers became targets because their work disturbed dominant moral communities, and that the proper response, legal, institutional, and now digital, should have been protection rather than punishment. It further argues that artistic freedom is strongest when law, cultural institutions, and publishing systems respond to offense with debate, context, and security rather than with bans, forced apologies, or silence, and that this principle applies with equal force whether the threat arrives as a fatwa, a mob at a press club, a burning of books in a public square, or a coordinated pile-on across social media (“Madras High Court Judgment”; Nasrin; “Silenced Voices”).

Theoretical Framework: Moral Panic, Symbolic Violence, and the Chilling Effect

Before turning to the narrative particulars of each case, it is useful to name four conceptual lenses that this paper weaves through the analysis rather than isolating in a separate literature review. The first is sociologist Stanley Cohen's account of the moral panic, in which a relatively narrow deviation from communal expectation is inflated, through media coverage, political opportunism, and rumour, into a perceived threat to a community's entire identity and moral order (Cohen). Both Nasrin's feminist critique of religious patriarchy and Murugan's fictionalized fertility ritual were, in themselves, minor departures from prevailing sentiment; it was the amplifying machinery around each text, clerical networks in one case and caste associations in the other, that converted literary discomfort into a perceived civilizational threat.

The second lens is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the process by which domination is exercised not through physical coercion alone but through categorizations, gestures, and enforced silences that come to feel natural to dominant and subordinate parties alike (Bourdieu). Read through this lens, the demand that Murugan issue an unconditional apology and alter the depiction of his own hometown in future editions of his novel becomes visible not merely as a negotiated settlement but as an act of symbolic subjugation, one that required no physical violence to accomplish the same end that a court-ordered ban would have produced. The same lens clarifies why Nasrin's relocation to a government safe house in New Delhi could be described publicly as protection while functioning, in practice, as an extension of the very exile her attackers sought.

The third lens is the legal doctrine of the chilling effect, the recognition that a law or a threat of violence need not be enforced or executed to succeed, because the mere possibility of prosecution, mob action, or reputational ruin deters future speech among writers who never became the direct target of any single incident. This doctrine explains why the consequences of both controversies extended well beyond the specific books at issue: Murugan did not publish for roughly four years after his 2015 declaration, and other Tamil writers who addressed caste and sexuality moderated their work in the interim out of documented anxiety about facing a similar campaign.



Finally, Danah Boyd's account of networked publics, the audiences produced by social media, which are simultaneously persistent, searchable, replicable, and subject to invisible onlookers, explains why a grievance that once required an organized clerical authority or a physically assembled crowd to mobilize can now be assembled by a comparatively small number of coordinated accounts operating at a distance from one another (Boyd). This concept becomes central later in the paper, when the analysis turns from the offline mechanisms that first targeted Nasrin and Murugan to the networked mechanisms that have since absorbed and accelerated the same logic of communal offense.

Taslima Nasrin: Lajja, Memoir, and the Machinery of Exile

Taslima Nasrin's controversy began most visibly with *Lajja* (Shame), a novel she described as a protest against violence, hatred, and killings committed in the name of religion (Nasrin). In public accounts of the controversy, the book functioned as the literary trigger for an escalation of hostility against her, including a fatwa and death threats that forced her into exile from Bangladesh in 1994 (Nasrin; "Free Speech, Ban and 'Fatwa'").

Her memoirs became targets in turn. *Dwikhandita* and the Amar Meyebela sequence were subject to bans and recurring legal or political efforts at suppression, evidence that the objection to Nasrin's writing was never confined to a single scandalous text but extended to her broader feminist and anti-fundamentalist voice ("India Could Be Proud"; "Dwikhandita"). *Dwikhandita* was in fact banned outright by the West Bengal state government in 2003 and reached readers only after a court injunction compelled its release, a sequence that shows how state authority and communal sentiment worked in tandem well before either author's controversy migrated online ("Prolific Ex-Muslim Writer Taslima Nasrin Assaulted"). This sustained pattern matters analytically because a single scandal can be dismissed as an overreaction to one provocative passage, whereas a sustained campaign across multiple decades and multiple texts reveals a system attempting to discredit the author herself, independent of the specific content of any one book ("India Could Be Proud"; "Free Speech, Ban and 'Fatwa'").

Two Instances of Realized Censorship

The pattern produced concrete, physical consequences on at least two clearly documented occasions. On 9 August 2007, Nasrin travelled to Hyderabad to launch the Telugu translation of her novel *Shodh* (Getting Even) when close to a hundred activists of the Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, led by three sitting members of the Andhra Pradesh legislative assembly, forced their way into the press club where she was speaking, hurled chairs, bouquets, and other objects at her, and struck her before her hosts could shield her from the crowd ("Taslima Nasreen Attacked in Hyderabad, India"; "Exiled 'Anti-Islam' Bangladeshi Writer Attacked"). The state's initial response compounded the injury: rather than acting solely against her assailants, police also registered a complaint against Nasrin under Section 153(A) of the Indian Penal Code for promoting enmity between religious groups, a legal manoeuvre that treated the target of an assault as if she were also its cause.



The Hyderabad assault set off a second, longer episode of state-enabled displacement. Clerics in Kolkata revived a dormant fatwa within days of the attack and circulated an open bounty for Nasrin's death, prompting the Indian government to relocate her to an undisclosed location in New Delhi, where she remained under continuous police protection for more than seven months, unable to leave the house or return to the West Bengal she had come to regard as her literary and linguistic home ("Prolific Ex-Muslim Writer Taslima Nasrin Assaulted"). In March 2008, worn down by the isolation, she left India for Sweden altogether, later returning to New Delhi only on the tacit condition that she not attempt to reside again in Bengal ("Prolific Ex-Muslim Writer Taslima Nasrin Assaulted"). Government protection thus functioned as a second, gentler form of exile: it removed the immediate threat of mob violence while achieving precisely the outcome her attackers had demanded, her permanent absence from the region whose language and culture had shaped her writing. Read through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, this second exile is the more instructive of the two episodes, because the state never had to admit that it was silencing a writer; it could describe her confinement as security rather than suppression, and the effect on her freedom to write and to be read in her own language was, for practical purposes, identical to a ban.

Nasrin's case also illustrates how artistic speech becomes a security problem without any evidence that the work itself incites violence. Even when a text provokes intense offense, the move from criticism to threat reveals a failure of institutions to protect dissent rather than a failure of the writer to exercise restraint. In that sense, her exile was not simply a personal tragedy but a sign of legal and political weakness, a lesson that recurs, in a different register, in Murugan's case ("Free Speech, Ban and 'Fatwa'"; "India Could Be Proud").

Perumal Murugan: Madhorubagan and the Weaponization of Local Offense

Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan* (One Part Woman) became controversial because it fictionalized a childless couple and a now-discontinued fertility ritual once associated with the annual chariot festival at the Ardhanareeswarar temple in Tiruchengode ("Madras High Court Judgment"). The novel had circulated without significant incident since its Tamil publication in 2010; the controversy ignited only in late December 2014, after remarks the author made at a literary event abroad drew renewed attention to the book's subject matter. Opponents framed the novel as an insult to the community's women and its temple deity and demanded suppression, notwithstanding that the work is fiction whose central concern is emotional and social distress rather than blasphemy ("Madras High Court Judgment"; "Indian Court Dismisses Charges Against Author Perumal Murugan").

Two Instances of Realized Censorship

The backlash was neither abstract nor confined to rhetoric. In late December 2014, roughly fifty members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh(RSS) gathered in Tiruchengode, cited specific pages of the novel they found objectionable, and publicly burned copies of the book in front of the local police station while demanding Murugan's arrest and a formal ban ("Writers Condemn RSS Burning of Tamil Author Perumal Murugan's Book"). For nearly three weeks



afterward, Murugan and his wife lived under the threat of a total hartal, or shutdown, in Namakkal, fielded abusive phone calls, and feared for their family's safety, while district officials treated the unrest as a law-and-order problem to be managed rather than a constitutional free-expression issue to be defended (“An Insider's Report of the Official Meeting”; “Writers Condemn RSS Burning of Tamil Author Perumal Murugan's Book”).

The second concrete instance of coercion followed directly from the first. On 12 January 2015, the Namakkal District Revenue Officer convened a “peace talk” between Murugan and four protesting organizations. Murugan was not permitted to address his accusers directly; the officer instead mediated the exchange and, over the course of the meeting, pressed him to escalate a prepared statement of regret into an unconditional apology, then required him, with only fifteen minutes to decide, to agree that he would alter the fictional depiction of his own hometown and delete the passages that had caused offense from all future editions of the novel (“An Insider's Report of the Official Meeting”). Murugan left that meeting and, within hours, posted an announcement on Facebook that the writer in him had died, a symbolic act of self-erasure that captured, more precisely than any court filing could, the psychological cost of sustained communal pressure (“Author Perumal Murugan Has Died”; “An Insider's Report of the Official Meeting”).

Even the Madras High Court's eventual exoneration of Murugan did not fully close the matter. When his translator, Aniruddhan Vasudevan, was named a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi's translation prize in 2017, the same network of objectors petitioned the Madras High Court to block the award; the translator ultimately declined the honour rather than reopen a legal battle over a book that had already cost its author years of silence (“Translator of Perumal Murugan's 'One Part Woman' Declines Sahitya Akademi Award”). This episode demonstrates that reputational and institutional censorship can outlast the formal legal case by years, a point this paper returns to in its policy recommendations.

The Madras High Court Judgment: Fiction Restored

The Madras High Court ultimately quashed the criminal case against Murugan and rejected the demand for a ban. The judgment, widely summarized in legal and media coverage, is remembered chiefly for its clear position that a reader who dislikes a book should close it rather than seek to ban it (“Madras High Court Judgment”; “India's Madras High Court Refuses to Ban Controversial Novel”). Coming more than a year after Murugan's declaration of literary death, the ruling could restore his legal standing but could not retroactively undo the professional silence, the fear experienced by his family, or the chilling signal already sent to other writers working in Tamil on subjects touching caste and sexuality.

Legal Analysis: Protected Offense versus Punishable Harm

Legally, the two cases illustrate the difference between protected offense and punishable harm. Democratic free-speech law generally protects speech that disturbs, criticizes, or challenges communal norms unless it crosses into direct incitement, credible threat, or narrowly defined illegal conduct (“Silenced Voices”). The evidence reviewed here supports the view that



both Nasrin and Murugan were punished primarily for critique, representation, and symbolic transgression rather than for incitement (“Madras High Court Judgment”; Nasrin; “Free Speech, Ban and 'Fatwa'”).

In Nasrin's case, state action and social pressure worked together, and the result was not only censorship but exile, one of the harshest outcomes available for a writer, because it removes both physical safety and audience access simultaneously. Her experience suggests that when a legal system treats religious offense as a legitimate basis for restriction, even indirectly through supposedly protective custody, it effectively outsources censorship to the most aggressive moral actors in a society (“Prolific Ex-Muslim Writer Taslima Nasrin Assaulted”; “Free Speech, Ban and 'Fatwa'”).

Murugan's case offers the reverse legal lesson, though its path there ran directly through an uncontested act of coercion. The forced apology extracted at the January 2015 peace talk shows what happens when a district administration prioritizes short-term public order over an author's constitutional rights (“An Insider's Report of the Official Meeting”); the Madras High Court's later rejection of the ban shows what happens when a judicial body, insulated from that same immediate pressure, is asked to weigh the same facts. The judgment reinforced a principle vital to literary culture: the law should not become a tool for enforcing literary comfort. It protects fiction as fiction and refuses to confuse community displeasure with legal injury (“Madras High Court Judgment”; “India's Madras High Court Refuses to Ban Controversial Novel”).

The Case for Artistic Freedom

A strong case exists for artistic freedom on the evidence of both cases. It protects marginalized voices, enables criticism of power, and allows fiction to explore taboo subjects that public institutions often suppress. Nasrin's feminist critique and Murugan's portrayal of reproductive suffering both expand the range of visible human experience, and that expansion is one of literature's principal democratic functions (Nasrin; “Madras High Court Judgment”). Understood through Cohen's framework, both controversies also show how a moral panic converts this expansion of visibility into a perceived attack: the very act of making previously private suffering, whether religious doubt or childless grief, legible to a wider public was experienced by the offended community not as literature but as exposure, and exposure was answered with an attempt at erasure.

The Counter-Argument: Weighing Social Harm Against Free Expression

The strongest argument against unrestricted expression is that provocative works can deepen social conflict in already fragile settings. Some critics worry that literature can be used to ridicule beliefs, inflame identity politics, or intensify mistrust among communities. Yet that concern does not justify blanket censorship, because the same logic could silence nearly every serious writer who addresses religion, caste, sex, or inequality (“Silenced Voices”; “India Could Be Proud”). Neither Nasrin's memoirs nor Murugan's novel called for violence against any group; the social conflict that followed each book was manufactured by organized actors who chose



escalation over engagement, a choice that a free-expression framework can name as a distinct social harm in its own right.

Toward a Proportional Response

The better answer is a proportional response. Governments should intervene only where there is a direct threat, harassment, or a legally defined incitement to violence; otherwise, the remedy should be counter-speech, interpretation, and public discussion. This approach preserves both social peace and intellectual honesty (“Silenced Voices”; “Madras High Court Judgment”).

Yet proportionality has grown harder to calibrate as the terrain of censorship itself has shifted. Both of the concrete instances examined above, the Hyderabad assault and the Tiruchengode book burning, were organized and publicized well before either incident reached its peak intensity, using telephone trees, party networks, and word of mouth. The remainder of this paper turns to how the same dynamics of mobilization, and the same demand for an author's silence, now operate through social media, compressing the time between local grievance and coordinated backlash and complicating the search for a proportional legal response.

From Mob to Mouse-Click: How Networked Media Extends Offline Censorship Platforms as Force Multipliers for Offline Backlash

Both cases examined above unfolded through the accelerant of networked media rather than in spite of it, even though the precipitating events were physical. Murugan's own declaration of his “death” as a writer, discussed above, was posted directly to Facebook, on a platform that had already helped protesting caste and religious organizations distribute copies of the novel and mobilize local opposition on a scale that informal, offline organizing alone was unlikely to achieve (“Author Perumal Murugan Has Died”; “Politics of Literary Oppression”). Social media did not originate the offense taken at Madhorubagan, but, consistent with Boyd's account of networked publics, it compressed the distance between a local grievance and a coordinated, sustained campaign, turning what might once have remained a district-level dispute into a cause that could be organized, escalated, and publicized at speed (Boyd).

Nasrin's experience illustrates the same dynamic from a different angle. Her continuing presence on social media keeps her writing and public statements in constant, immediate circulation, so that praise and condemnation now arrive within minutes of a single post, a pattern of instant mass reaction that did not exist during the print-era controversy over Lajja or even during the 2007 Hyderabad assault, which required physical travel and physical assembly to execute (Nasrin). Where the fatwa against Nasrin in the 1990s required an organized religious authority to issue and publicize a formal edict, and where the 2007 mob required three sitting legislators to physically lead a crowd into a press club, comparable hostility today can be generated by an unaffiliated crowd of individual social media users acting in loose coordination, without any single institution ever needing to take responsibility for the outcome.



The New Censors: Algorithmic and Networked Suppression

Social media compounds artistic censorship in a second, less visible way: platforms themselves increasingly function as informal censors through content-moderation systems that were never designed with literary or artistic nuance in mind. Visual artists elsewhere have documented how algorithmic moderation flags or remove work depicting the body, protest, or identity regardless of artistic context, effectively imposing a private, commercially motivated censorship regime that operates below the threshold of any formal legal process (“On Social Media, Art Censorship”). Although Nasrin and Murugan were principally targeted through community mobilization and legal complaint rather than platform moderation, the same logic increasingly applies to literary discourse: reviews, campaigns, and public statements about a controversial book can themselves be throttled or removed by platforms responding to mass reporting from the very groups organizing a backlash, allowing an offended community to weaponize a platform's own moderation tools against the author it objects to.

This dual role of social media, as an accelerant of the mob and as a mechanism through which the mob can suppress an author's own voice, is captured in PEN America's typology of online abuse, which identifies coordinated cyber-mob attacks, doxing, and astroturfing as patterns in which a grievance that appears to arise spontaneously from a broad public is often organized by a comparatively small, motivated group operating through multiple accounts (“Defining 'Online Abuse'”). Understood this way, the pressure that drove Murugan to declare himself dead as a writer at a physical peace talk in a government office, and the pressure that has kept Nasrin displaced from Bengal through a supposedly protective house arrest, are pre-digital instances of a phenomenon that social media has since made faster, more anonymous, and considerably harder for any single actor to be held accountable for.

Legal Safeguards: How Artists Can Face Backlash Without Fear

India's existing legal architecture already offers artists partial, if underused, protection against this newer, networked form of censorship. The Information Technology Act, 2000, criminalizes identity theft, the non-consensual publication of private images, and the publication of obscene material used to harass a target under Sections 66C, 66E, and 67, while the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, oblige platforms to appoint grievance officers, acknowledge complaints within twenty-four hours, and remove clearly unlawful content, giving a harassed writer or artist a formal, time-bound channel through which to demand a platform's intervention rather than relying on public sympathy alone (“Cyberbullying Laws in India”; “Tackling Online Abuse”). The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which replaced the Indian Penal Code under which Nasrin herself was once charged, similarly criminalizes anonymous criminal intimidation under Section 351 with enhanced punishment specifically for threats made anonymously, a provision directly relevant to the coordinated, often pseudonymous threats that both Nasrin and Murugan describe having faced (“Cyberbullying Laws in India”).



The Supreme Court's judgment in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* remains the single most important legal safeguard for artists operating in this space, since it struck down the vague and broadly worded Section 66A of the IT Act precisely because its language could be used to criminalize offense rather than genuine incitement, reaffirming that online speech deserves the same constitutional protection against vague, overbroad restriction as speech in print (“Tackling Online Abuse”). Read alongside the Madras High Court's own insistence that a reader who dislikes a book should close it rather than demand its ban, *Shreya Singhal* supplies the digital-age extension of the same principle argued throughout this paper: that offense taken online, however loudly amplified, is not by itself a legally sufficient basis for silencing an artist (“Madras High Court Judgment”).

What artists still lack, however, is not a shortage of statutory provisions but a fast, accessible, and specifically freedom-of-expression-oriented mechanism for invoking them. The National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, the mandatory grievance-officer system, and the criminal provisions described above all require a targeted individual to identify the correct legal category, gather evidence, and pursue what can be a slow process, precisely when a coordinated online campaign is designed to produce an immediate chilling effect (“Cyberbullying Laws in India”). A meaningful defense against social-media-fueled censorship therefore requires pairing these existing legal tools with the institutional support recommended below: publishers, universities, and writers' associations equipped to help an artist document abuse, file a platform complaint or police report within days rather than months, and keep publishing and speaking publicly while that process unfolds, so that legal recourse operates alongside continued presence rather than as a substitute for the silence a networked campaign is designed to enforce.

Policy Recommendations for Protecting Artistic Freedom

First, states should adopt a narrow legal standard for banning books or prosecuting authors. Offense, outrage, and claims of insult should never be enough on their own to justify censorship; the threshold must be direct harm or legally recognizable incitement (“Madras High Court Judgment”; “Silenced Voices”). Such a standard would reduce the ability of local pressure groups, whether a caste association in Tiruchengode or a political party's activists in Hyderabad, to force premature state intervention.

Second, law-enforcement agencies must treat threats against writers as serious security issues rather than as public-order nuisances. Nasrin's and Murugan's experiences both show that delayed or ambiguous state protection invites mob pressure and normalizes intimidation; in Nasrin's case, police initially treated the victim of an assault as a suspect, and in Murugan's case, a district officer treated a constitutional rights violation as a matter to be settled through negotiation rather than protection. Security for writers should be preventive, not only reactive (“Prolific Ex-Muslim Writer Taslima Nasrin Assaulted”; “Madras High Court Judgment”).

Third, governments should require independent review before any literary restriction, online or offline. A panel including jurists, literary scholars, civil-society representatives, and human-rights experts could help distinguish explicit incitement from symbolic critique, creating



procedural distance between public outrage and state punishment, and preventing a single revenue officer or local police station from becoming the de facto arbiter of a writer's fate, as happened at the January 2015 peace talk ("Madras High Court Judgment"; "Silenced Voices").

Fourth, publishers, universities, and literary organizations should build rapid-response support systems for targeted authors, extending into the digital space where campaigns now spread fastest. Public readings, contextual essays, panel discussions, legal aid, and coordinated platform-complaint support can reduce isolation and help readers understand controversial texts as literature rather than as literal declarations. Nasrin's and Murugan's cases both show that context is often missing precisely when controversy escalates, and that the absence of organized support left each author facing a well-organized opposition largely alone in the crucial early days of the backlash (Nasrin; "An Insider's Report of the Official Meeting").

Finally, states should strengthen protections against coordinated harassment, online abuse, forced apologies, and de facto exile, treating all four as points on the same spectrum of censorship rather than as unrelated harms. Modern censorship often works through accumulation: threats, economic pressure, reputational damage, and, increasingly, algorithmic suppression can silence an author even when no formal ban ever exists. A serious free-expression policy must therefore protect the whole ecology of publication, both its offline and its networked dimensions, rather than the final legal judgment alone ("India Could Be Proud"; "Silenced Voices").

Conclusion: The Continuum of Silencing and the Case for Structural Protection

Taslima Nasrin and Perumal Murugan reveal the same democratic fault line from different directions. Nasrin's case shows how religious fundamentalism and political weakness can drive a writer into exile, first through direct assault and fatwa, then through a supposedly protective house arrest that achieved the same result by gentler means, while Murugan's case shows how a coerced, government-brokered apology and a public book burning can silence a writer for years before judicial protection is finally able to restore his literary freedom ("Prolific Ex-Muslim Writer Taslima Nasrin Assaulted"; "An Insider's Report of the Official Meeting"; "Madras High Court Judgment").

Their experiences also show that the mechanisms of silencing have not remained static. What began, in Nasrin's case, as an organized clerical fatwa and, in Murugan's case, as a physically assembled crowd burning books outside a police station, has since found a faster and more diffuse counterpart in networked publics, where offense can be manufactured, amplified, and directed at an author within hours rather than weeks (boyd; "Defining 'Online Abuse'"). Understood through Cohen's moral panic and Bourdieu's symbolic violence, both the offline and the online mechanisms achieve the same end: a community that finds a text intolerable does not need a court to ban it if it can make the author's continued presence, in a town, in a language community, or on a platform, intolerable instead.

Their works also prove that art is often most valuable when it is most uncomfortable. Lajja and One Part Woman forced readers to confront religion, sexuality, reproduction, and honor, and



that is precisely why they became targets. A society that cannot tolerate such writing has not solved disagreement; it has merely made dissent dangerous, whether that danger arrives as a mob in a press club, a bonfire outside a police station, or a coordinated storm of comments and complaints (Nasrin; “Madras High Court Judgment”). The task for law, institutions, and platforms alike is to ensure that the discomfort a book produces remains a matter for readers to argue about, and never again a license for anyone to decide, on a community's behalf, that the book, or its author, should cease to exist.

Works Cited

- “An Insider's Report of the Official Meeting That Persuaded Tamil Writer Perumal to Withdraw His Books.” Scroll.in, 15 Jan. 2015, scroll.in/article/700717/an-insiders-report-of-the-official-meeting-that-persuaded-tamil-writer-perumal-to-withdraw-his-books. Accessed 4 July 2026.
- “Author Perumal Murugan Has Died, Hounded by Hindutva Groups, Author Puts Up Poignant Post.” The News Minute, www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/author-perumal-murugan-has-died-hounded-hindutva-groups-author-puts-poignant-post-17772. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Edited by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, Harvard UP, 1991.
- Boyd, Danah. “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications.” *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, edited by Zizi Papacharissi, Routledge, 2010, pp. 39–58.
- Cohen, Stanley. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. MacGibbon and Kee, 1972.
- “Cyberbullying Laws in India: Understanding the Legal Framework and Penalties for Online Abuse.” Finlaw Associates, finlawassociates.com/blog/cyberbullying-laws-in-india-understanding-the-legal-framework-and-penalties-for-online-abuse. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Defining 'Online Abuse': A Glossary of Terms.” Online Harassment Field Manual, PEN America, onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Dwikhandita.” Wikiwand, www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Dwikhandito. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Exiled 'Anti-Islam' Bangladeshi Writer Attacked.” NBC News, 10 Aug. 2007, www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna20204125. Accessed 4 July 2026.
- “Free Speech, Ban and 'Fatwa': A Study of the Taslima Nasrin Affair.” International Islamic University Malaysia Repository, irep.iium.edu.my/2575/3/Free_speech_Mahmudul.pdf. Accessed 3 July 2026.



- “India Could Be Proud of Having a Writer Who Criticises All Religions: Interview with Taslima Nasrin.” *The Caravan*, 28 Sept. 2015, caravanmagazine.in/vantage/india-proud-having-writer-criticises-all-religions-interview-taslima. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “India's Madras High Court Refuses to Ban Controversial Novel.” Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2016, cbldef.org/2016/07/indias-madras-high-court-refuses-to-ban-controversial-novel/. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Indian Court Dismisses Charges Against Author Perumal Murugan.” *Publishing Perspectives*, 7 July 2016, publishingperspectives.com/2016/07/india-court-perumal-murugan/. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Madras High Court Judgment [PDF 676 KB].” *The Hindu Centre*, 5 July 2016, www.thehinducentre.com/resources/article8815833.ece. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “MLA In-Text Citations: The Basics.” *Purdue OWL*, Purdue University, owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_in_text_citations_the_basics.html. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- Murugan, Perumal. *One Part Woman*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Grove Press, 2013.
- Nasrin, Taslima. *Lajja*. 1993.
- “On Social Media, Art Censorship Is Alive and Well.” *Hyperallergic*, hyperallergic.com/on-social-media-art-censorship-is-alive-and-well/. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Perumal Murugan and the Politics of Literary Oppression.” *Sydney Review of Books*, sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essays/perumal-murugan-and-the-politics-of-literary-oppression. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Prolific Ex-Muslim Writer Taslima Nasrin Assaulted, Subjected to New Bounties for Murder, Exiled Again.” *Ex-Muslims Persecution Project*, persecution.exmuslims.org/cases/prolific-ex-muslim-writer-taslima-nasrin-assaulted-subjected-to-new-bounties. Accessed 4 July 2026.
- “Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression.” *Taylor & Francis*, 2024, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Tackling Online Abuse.” *Drishti IAS*, www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/tackling-online-abuse. Accessed 3 July 2026.
- “Taslima Nasreen Attacked in Hyderabad, India.” *Humanists International*, 9 Aug. 2007, humanists.international/2007/08/taslima-nasreen-attacked-hyderabad-india/. Accessed 4 July 2026.
- “Translator of Perumal Murugan's 'One Part Woman' Declines Sahitya Akademi Award.” *The News Minute*, www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/perumal-murugan-s-translator-and-sahitya-akademi-award-winner-aniruddhan-vasudevan-declines. Accessed 4 July 2026.



- “Writers Condemn RSS Burning of Tamil Author Perumal Murugan's Book.” Scroll.in, 27 Dec. 2014, scroll.in/article/697505/Writers-condemn-RSS-burning-of-Tamil-author-Perumal-Murugan-s-book. Accessed 4 July 2026.

Cite this Article:

Dr. E. Justin Ruben, “Censorship, Exile, and Artistic Freedom in the Cases of Taslima Nasrin and Perumal Murugan: From Community Backlash to Networked Suppression” The Research Dialogue, Open Access Peer-reviewed & Refereed Journal, Pp.01–14, Volume-05, Issue-02, July-2026, <https://theresearchdialogue.com/>



This is an Open cess Journal / article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY-NC-ND 3.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. All rights reserved.





CERTIFICATE

of Publication

This Certificate is proudly presented to

Dr. E. Justin Ruben

For publication of Research Paper title

**Censorship, Exile, and Artistic Freedom in the Cases of
Taslina Nasrin and Perumal Murugan: From
Community Backlash to Networked Suppression**

Dialogue' Peer-Reviewed / Refereed Research Journal and E-ISSN: 2583-438X,
Volume-05, Issue-02, Month July, Year-2026, Impact Factor (RPRI-4.73)

Dr. Lohans Kumar Kalyani
Editor- In-chief



Dr. Neeraj Yadav
Executive-In-Chief- Editor

Note: This E-Certificate is valid with published paper and the paper must be available online at: <https://theresearchdialogue.com/>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.64880/theresearchdialogue.v5i2.01>