

# License to Write: Encounters with Censorship<sup>1</sup>

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It was a debate about censorship that made me turn to writing. I was sixteen, in the last year of my primary education, and I had just been introduced to Dickens and Stevenson by one of my teachers. I came from a rural community in colonial Kenya; books were a rare sight in our lives. For me and my friends who were used to oral stories around the fireside in the evenings, it was quite a discovery that people could actually tell stories through writing. And such interesting stories too, that one did not have to wait for the evening to hear; one could read them, as I most certainly did, at any time of day and night and even under the desk in class during a boring lesson. For me these writers were a special category of beings. I wanted to join their company. Outside the classroom, I shared my secret desire with one of the students, with whom I also shared books that came my way. And why not? was his response. It was then that the debate began.

I believed that one needed a license to write, that if one wrote without some kind of formal permission, one would be arrested and most certainly be thrown into prison. If teachers needed training and a certificate in order to teach, why not writers? But my friend had a different view and said that one did not need a license to write, that there was no way one could be imprisoned for writing books. This exchange took place in 1954 and later, the following year, he and I went to different schools. He went to a teacher training college and I went to secondary school. As far as I was concerned, that was the end of our unresolved debate. But my friend never forgot the exchange and in his first year, his first act was to write a story, which he called a book, in order to prove to me that one did not need a license to write.

That was in colonial Kenya, then seething under a state of emergency declared by the British colonial state in 1952, in its fight against the Mau Mau guerrilla struggle for independence. As part of its anti-nationalist fight, the British colonial state had banned songs, dances, books, and newspapers that were deemed to be on the side of the independence movement. Although this did not become apparent in our debate, my own concerns may have been derived from that environment of censorship. My friend never went beyond the first chapter, but he had made his point. He had not asked for anyone's permission to write his unfinished book.

Although he never finished the book, he did complete his training program and became a licensed teacher. Most important, he was not arrested and imprisoned for his unfinished, unpublished book.

I was to recall that debate when the police of an independent Kenya came for me at midnight on December 31, 1977. Their first act was to raid my home library. They collected any books with titles that bore the words socialism or politics. But what seemed to make them happy was their seizure of my typescripts of the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* [I Will Marry When I Want], whose license to perform at Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Center, Limuru, had been withdrawn by the state six weeks earlier. The debate kept recurring in my mind when I was stripped of my name and any rights to books and writing material at Kamiti Maximum Security prison. All incoming and outgoing letters had to go through a prison censor.

Under those circumstances, I could not help but reflect on censorship and the free circulation of ideas, recalling the debate my friend and I had engaged in twenty-five years before. We did not give it the name censorship, but our exchange had been about the basic issue that underlies the question of censorship: the right to freely express and receive ideas.

Censorship is an act of regulating the shape, form, and content of ideas by a religious or secular authority with powers to initiate and carry out punitive measures in the name of a higher moral good of a group, community, or nation. It involves the evaluation of an intellectual product by a set of moral needs. At the University of Jena, in accordance with the tradition of a German state in the nineteenth century, one of the rulers proclaimed that what he wanted from the university was not educated men, but obedient subjects. Quite often, the authority is the one that defines the moral need. It becomes the sole judge of the correct relation of the offending ideas and practices to the authorized moral need. The end is clearly to control the conduct and opinions of a community through a regulation of their intellectual diet so as to bring about conformity to an established norm of political beliefs and ideologies. Censorship becomes the means of containing an opposing view, especially one that seems to challenge an

existing view of the desirable moral order.

This is well illustrated in the play *The Life of Galileo*,<sup>2</sup> in which Brecht dramatizes the struggle between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican systems. Galileo, with the newly invented telescope, is able to prove the truth of the Copernican system—that the earth is not the fixed center of the universe. He returns to Florence with the belief that once the pope and the defenders of the old system look through the telescope, they will be able to see the truth for themselves and hopefully abandon their old belief in the immutability of the earth. Some of the experts look and argue fervently against what they see. Others refuse to look through the telescope. Galileo pleads: “Gentlemen, I beseech you in all humility to trust your eyes.”

It is his friend Sagredo who later enlightens Galileo, showing him that censorship has more in common with the fear of truth than the defense of truth:

SAGREDO: Galileo, I see you setting out on a fearful road. It is a night of disaster when a man sees the truth. And an hour of delusion when he believes in the commonsense of the human race. Of whom does one say “he’s going into it with his eyes open”? Of the man on the path to perdition. How could those in power leave at large a man who knows the truth, even though it be about the most distant of stars? Do you think the Pope will hearken to your truth when you say that he is in error, and yet not hear that he is in error? Do you think that he will simply write in his diary: January the tenth, 1610—Heaven abolished?<sup>3</sup>

We tend to think of censorship too often in terms of the secular powers of the erstwhile communist regimes and right wing dictatorships of the twentieth century. But in fact historically, religious institutions and orthodoxies have been the censorious sites of those intellectual diets deemed harmful to the faith and morality of their adherents. The *Index Librorum prohibitorium* (Index on Censorship) of the Catholic Church initiated in 1559 by Pope Paul IV, with its list of prohibited texts, became the model for those lists so beloved by colonial and postcolonial powers.

Censorship, whether carried out by religious or secular institutions, has as its immediate and main objective the prevention of the consumption of an intellectual product in the form of words, exhibitions, or performances; that is why lists of the forbidden become the principal form in which censorship expresses itself. This is also the form that conjures up images of a group of men sitting down in half-lit corridors of power with scissors or pencils in their hands ready to rule and cut out the undesirable word in a newspaper or undesirable image on celluloid. This is the form that is replete with absurdities and comical contradictions satirized in James Thurber’s story of the land of “The Wonderful O,”

where the letter “o” is banned from the alphabet. You can see the consequent disaster: good and god become gd.; orange becomes range.

In her paper “Stage and the State: The Censorship of Richard II”,<sup>4</sup> Ruth Underhill tells of the censorship of parts of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. All plays at that time had to be approved by a court-appointed master of the revels. Three editions of *Richard II* were published without the abdication scene, a phenomenon not dissimilar to that of the censorship of Shakespeare in the reign of Haille Sellassie of Ethiopia. In a production of *Julius Caesar*, it was not Brutus who stabs Caesar, but Caesar who stabs Brutus, for how could a monarch with claims to divinity die at the hands of a common mortal?

Some of the absurdities arise from the fact that the censors cannot possibly have the time and the stamina to read all the books and watch all the videos being produced. In Banda’s *Malawi*, the censorship board became the main underground distributors of forbidden videos. The members would sometimes take home the juicier videos to show and titillate a trusted few, and of course, the trusted few had their own trusted few. Later, the board imploded under the weight of its own contradictions. To simplify their tasks, such boards are often guided by key words that become the signal for placing the work on a prohibited list. This can result in a censorship board prohibiting a book which is actually favorable to the regime. The South Africa apartheid regime once banned Anne Sewell’s book *Black Beauty*, the story of a horse, because of the implication that black could be beautiful. There, the word black was the signal. The Kenyan government simplified its task by simply outlawing all books published in Peking. So, in the eighties, we had the absurdity of people being sentenced to long prison terms if they were caught with a text by Einstein if the book was published in China, particularly Peking. But the same work was presumably harmless if it was published by any of the Western publishing houses. Marx, Lenin, Castro, and Mao, published by say, Harvard University Press, were safe to read; but the same texts became revolutionary and subversive if they carried a Chinese imprint. The police who raided my home library were looking for Chinese publications of books that bore any titles with politics, socialism, and liberation.

When my novel *Matigari* became known in 1986, people started talking about the hero as a seeker of truth and justice. The Moi regime, thinking that the people were talking about a real live character, sent the police to arrest Matigari, the main character. Later the regime banned the book.

The absurdity can also come from the victims of censorship. There is a poem by Brecht on the subject of burning books which satirizes such a situation. The

poem tells of a certain regime that once commanded that all books with harmful knowledge be burned publicly. But one of the best writers, one whose works had always been critical of the regime, was dismayed to find his books were not on the list of those to be burned.

. . . He rushed to his desk

On wings of wrath, and wrote a letter to those in power

Burn me! he wrote with flying pen, burn me! Haven't my books

*Always reported the truth? And here you are*

Treating me like a liar! I command you:

Burn me!<sup>5</sup>

In its attempts to prevent the consumption of the intellectual product, censorship can go beyond this legalistic form of lists of books to be banned and burnt. Censorship can reach out to the means of realizing the intellectual product. A regime, an authority, can bar access to the performance space, for instance. This can take crude forms. In 1982, the Kenya Moi regime literally locked the Kamiriithu performers out of the National Theater; the University of Nairobi, then outlawed the group. On March 12, 1982, the regime sent three truckloads of armed police to raze to the ground the open-air theater built by the villagers. But barring access to the performance space can also take the less crude form of withdrawing public funds for the arts. Mayor Guliani of New York exemplified this form when he threatened to withdraw funding for the Brooklyn Museum because he objected to certain items in the exhibition. A regime can also bar access to the means for literary production—pen and paper for instance. I experienced this at Kam\_t\_ Maximum Security Prison where I ended up writing my novel, *Devil on the Cross*, on toilet paper. But outside the prison walls, for instance where publishing houses are controlled by the state, the allocation of paper can determine the subject matter for intellectual production. It happened in many of the communist regimes in the East. It happened in many publishing bureaus of the colonial regimes in Kenya, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), and South Africa, where the colonial state only funded the production of books by Africans if the writers shied away from politics.

Now, one of the most important means for the production of knowledge is language; the suppression and devaluation of languages is one of the surest ways to prevent the realization of the product of intellect. In Fascist Spain, non-Spanish languages, for instance Euscara, were driven underground. Some time ago I was invited to give a few lectures in the Basque country where I was told the most harrowing stories of parents teaching their children the languages forbidden by Franco's fascist regime, often risking their own lives to keep their languages alive. When Africans were carted from Africa to America and the Caribbean islands, the

first act of intellectual suppression was the repression of African languages. At the assimilation of Hawaii into the United States in the nineteenth century, the Hawaiian language was banned until 1978. The same happened in colonial Africa. The books and newspapers banned in Kenya at the time that I was having that debate were only those written in African languages. In postcolonial Kenya, the same hostility toward African languages continues, and part of the reason I was put in a maximum-security prison was the fact that I wrote in an African language.

Intellectual production in the world today is dominated by a handful of European languages. This is best exemplified in the operations of the United Nations. Part of my joy in being at New York University was their willingness to house and fund a journal in the Gikuyu language, *Mutiiri*. NYU also supported the recent and first ever conference on writing in African languages, held at Asmara, Eritrea in January 2000—out of which came the Asmara Declaration in which African scholars and writers from different parts of the continent affirmed their belief that African languages have the right, the duty, and the responsibility to speak for the continent.

But we should not forget the political and economic environment, which often means that a given community and social class is unable to produce ideas, either because of the economic restraints, or because of the political environment of the repression of democracy.

Let me now touch on one more form in which a given regime can adversely affect the production of knowledge: controlling the body of the producer. This is often a by-product of the climate of political repression in general. Throughout history, intellectuals have been hounded into prison, exile, or death. I can think of the better known cases such as the execution of Socrates in ancient Athens, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the burning of nonconformist intellectuals during the Spanish Inquisition, or the lesser known cases, the killing of writers in apartheid South Africa and Idi Amin's Uganda. I cannot think of a single country in the history of ideas where intellectuals have not escaped prison or death by flight to other countries. Even Plato had to temporarily flee to Egypt. Aristotle fled Athens, saying that he was not going to let Athens offend twice against philosophy. Jesus and Mohammed also took flight to other countries. Controlling the body of the producer is not only an attempt to prevent further realization of the intellectual production on the part of the affected intellectual, but also an exemplary warning to the population as a whole. The affected intellectual is made an example of what would happen to other rebels against the authorized norm.

One could argue that there has always been a struggle between forms of censorship and forms of a restless

search for knowledge. The biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in some ways exemplifies this struggle. Note that the forbidden fruit is literally the one that grows on the tree of knowledge. In that case, the choice confronting Eve is that between authorized bliss in the Garden of Eden and the risky business of knowing. The development of ideas begins with the desire to know and to try out that which has not been tried before. Development of human society, at least the intellectual part of it, begins with the desire to bite the forbidden fruit, and this desire and willingness to do so has always been part of the make-up of those at the frontiers of knowledge.

Among the books that slipped through the prison censor at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison was Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and in it I came across a statement that I held onto in my prison days. Aristotle argues that the investigation of truth was both hard and easy. "An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all, a considerable amount is amassed." He goes on to say that "we should be grateful, not only to those with whose views we may agree, but also to those who have expressed more superficial views; for these also contribute something, by developing before us the powers of thought."<sup>6</sup> This must be one of the earliest defenses of diversity and tolerance for contradictory views and positions. "Do I contradict myself?" asks Whitman, and he accepts this as part of his reality. Mao tse Tung once talked of a hundred thoughts contending so that a hundred flowers could bloom.

I love the image of the flower, for it is expressive of the beauty of diversity, but also, the essential equality on which diversity must be founded. For no flower is really more of a flower than another flower because of its different color, shape, or size. A flower is also a product of a process—the roots, trunks, and branches—but it is also the beginning of a new process, for it is the flower that carries the seeds for a new tomorrow.

Given the nature of development as a struggle between what has been and what will be, I believe that there will always be forms of censorship as the old try to conserve what *is*, particularly through the instrument of the state as a centralized authority, and the new try to re-form what is already there. So there will always be a struggle between the tendency towards conformity and the tendency towards reformation. But while censorship may not end, it must surely be put on the defensive for it to justify itself on the bar of reason, necessity, democracy, and that principle so well enshrined in Article 19 of "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Everyone has the right to the freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that art as an embodiment of the possible is essentially at variance with censorship. Universities are not there to produce obedient subjects, but seekers of truth who subject even the call for obedience to rigorous scrutiny. Universities should institutionalize the struggle for the opening of the frontiers of the possible in the enhancement of human freedom in equality and diversity.

I find the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his 1967 "Letter to the Fourth Congress of Soviet Writers" instructive not only for literature but for knowledge in general.

Literature cannot develop in between the categories of "permitted" and "not permitted," "about this you may write" and "about this you may not." Literature that is not the breath of contemporary society, that dares not transmit the pains and fears of that society, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers—such literature does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a façade. Such a literature loses the confidence of its own people, and its published works are used as wastepaper instead of being read.<sup>8</sup>

My friend was right after all; one must never need a license to think, and we all have to work toward a world in which no one needs a license to think, write, and circulate ideas.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Based on the keynote address given on September 15, 2000 at the Symposium on Censorship organized by the Department of Art and Public Policy, Tisch, NYU.

<sup>2</sup>Bertolt Brecht, *The Life of Galileo in Bertolt Brecht Plays*, trans. Desmond I Vesey (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1961), I: 229-334.

<sup>3</sup>Brecht, *Galileo*, scene 4, 265 and scene 3, 257.

<sup>4</sup>Ruth Underhill, "Stage and State: The Censorship of Richard II," *Individual Studies*, 1995, [electronic text], Department of English, University of Victoria.

<sup>5</sup>Bertolt Brecht, "The Burning of the Books," *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willet and Ralph Manheim with the co-operation of Erich Fried, trans. John Willet (New York: Routledge, 1998), 294.

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, <<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/a/a8m/book2.html>>, [Book II, Chapter 1, 1.

<sup>7</sup>United Nations, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 19, 15.

<sup>8</sup>Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, "Letter to the Fourth Congress of Soviet Writers, May 16, 1967", trans. Nicholas Behell and David Burg (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), vii-xii; quote on ix.