

# The Influence of Authorities on Writers in a Society: Censorship Rules and Challenges Faced by Dissident Writers with Reference to Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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**Abstract** Censorship rules and laws are important in a society to avoid the circulation of objectionable or offensive contents. Whereas misusing such laws to suppress the nonconformist artists is unjustifiable and is an instance of exploitation and manipulation of law and principle by those in power. The anticipation of persecution discourages writers or the artists even to think against the authorities. Eric Maria Remarque is just one among the writers who have undergone the grave situations for raising a separate voice through his novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. This paper analyses the workings of ideologies and use of laws as means to suppress the revolutionaries. It also analyses how history is also manipulated and a fictitious version of history is propagated by the authorities by suppressing the dissident ideas with reference to the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

**Key words** Censorship; Power; Dissident authors; History; Ideology

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First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true...though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and

very commonly does, contain a portion of the truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied. — John Stuart Mill

## Introduction

The contemporary theory New Historicism has questioned the traditional idea of literature as something that is fanciful and fictional and history as a discourse that is composed of facts and evidences, and the central mission of historians as the accurate description of the past. Writers generally stand as the voice of the public; whereas in an authoritative society, historians are appointed by those in power to write in favour of the rulers. Therefore, the chances of history being biased and being judgmental are too high. This is why recently postmodernism also started doubting and questioning the concept of absolute truth and new historicism has taken into consideration the possibility of different versions of history being untold or suppressed. It's not only art that is used or demanded to be an ideological state apparatus through which the authorities can cultivate their ideologies but also the act of history writing is also manipulated for the same. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a novel that has challenged such an authority that has tried to suppress the history through its strict statutes and regulations.

In an article written by Bruce E Gronbeck titled “The Rhetorics of the Past: History, Argument and Collective Memory,” the professor argues that “To be sure, you can ‘know’ what you yourself can remember of events and even can read or see what others think they have experienced or remembered, but such knowledge is always partial, usually self-centered and even self-interested, and subject to the vagaries of surviving documentation” (Bruce 2). Thereby he emphasizes the fact that there is no ultimate history and the past is unreachable to the public most of the times. The factors that can influence the process of history writing include the historians or narrators’ own political views, vulnerabilities and flexibilities, the influence of power structure, the interests of the publishers and the existing censorship rules. Apart from these, Gronbeck has analysed in his essay that historians are engaged in a discursive practice. He says, “That practice, as I already have intimated, is simultaneously narrative and argumentative, concerned with what Spengler identified as *nacheinanderung* (one-after-anotherness) and *nebeneinanderung* (relationships between simultaneous events)” (Gronbeck 3). Therefore, a historian is expected to narrate the history one after another by

connecting related events to make it appealing as well as readable for both the reviewers and the common people. The reviewers in an extreme and intolerant society include any authority that would judge the work based on its ability to be an ideological state apparatus that supports the ruling powers to cultivate its views and ideologies. Besides, history has a major role in assigning different roles for the characters as heroes and villains, which is again the reflection of the interest of the existing power structures. It is because of this, the credibility and righteousness of the behavior of many national leaders and superheroes have been questioned even after many years, which again explains the vagueness of history. Most of the times, such constructed history is repeated and retold through other state apparatuses like educational institutions, religious institutions, arts and performances and like Homi Bhaba reminds, through different performative ways of the concerned authorities.

Germany during 1900s was a hub of art and culture where they celebrated the beauty and value of art and gave a lot of importance to aesthetic and artistic works. The leaders of the time were knowledgeable about the significant role of art in a society. It is because of this, Germany has invested a considerable amount for the purpose as discussed in *Banned in Berlin*, “Germany in the imperial era devoted enormous resources to creating, editing, publishing, distributing, marketing, reading, interpreting, and reviewing serious literature” (Stark xv). All the while, they were also aware of the power of literature to unmask several things using its power to reflect the society, including its ability to bequeath customs, beliefs and traditions to the younger generations and its role in establishing the supremacy of a culture over another. They were also aware of what Foucault called “decentredness” of power, which causes much pressure in the authority to act for retaining their traction. Therefore, they tried their level best to suppress all possibilities of a revolutionary voice. Stark in his introduction to the text analyses that “At the same time state and local authorities right up to the final days of World War I — expended much time and money prosecuting and trying writers; supervising, controlling, regulating, and censoring literature and the public stage; and hearing and arbitrating frequent appeals of their censorship decisions” (Stark, xv). In this manner, the authorities made sure that nothing revolutionary or skeptical has reached to the public through any means.

The traditional war stories of the country portrayed a romanticized version and celebrated glories like valour, honour, fame, prestige, dignity and triumph. The realistic facts including the miserable conditions of the military people were masked by the glorification of war. The students were recruited to the military troops through the charismatic speech of the officers, and many others were

enlisted forcefully leaving them choiceless and helpless. The unbiased narration of all such realities can be seen in the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The hapless condition of adolescents and youngsters on the war front is well portrayed in the novel. The dark times spoil the beautiful ages of their life. The insults and totalitarian attitude of the superior officers, the pressure both physical and mental thrust upon the inexperienced and junior warriors, their lost past, detachment from home, unconnectedness are all sketched in a realistic manner, which made the work a target of the agrarian military aristocrats.

The rustic military masters confiscated the work of some writers and artists, prosecuted many for violating the laws against the state. Many were sued for “lese majeste,” that is the crime against the sovereign power. Therefore, the sovereignty made sure about the supervision over the writers to limit and confine their reach over the readers. The censorship rules, the purging of academia through massive book burnings, the rules, the guides, laws and commands that were issued during the time were all just a part of the safety measures taken by the arbiters on the top of the Nazi party. Therefore, in such a society, the approach of authorities to a work like *All Quiet on the Western Front* is quiet predictable.

### **Ideal Art verses Social Literature**

The idealist conception of art has been created and proclaimed and has made registered in the minds of people through constant reminders. The leaders who are well aware of the dangers of the power of the written word, as a part of subduing all the possible channels of resistance, keep reminding the authors about the limited role of writers. Emperor Wilhelm II in his famous speech in 1901 in Germany, delivered a detailed lecture on the nature of true art and the danger of artistic modernism. He declares that “art takes its models from nature and God’s eternal laws and the artists of classical antiquity expressed most perfectly these eternal unchanging laws of beauty, harmony, and aesthetics” (Stark xvii). Thereby he demands the artists to stick to the ancient rules where art was just an appraisal of the beauty of the nature, because that is the riskless and manageable form where art would be just a piece of work that would praise any kind of beauty. This is whereas just one side of the coin and the other side which is inevitable is the art’s role of mirroring the society. The beauty of the nature is stagnant and the poets and artists of all the time praise the same nature using different tools, whereas the elements that are changing in each period’s and society’s literature are the cultural differences and the reflection of what is happening in that particular society. Many hidden histories and different versions of history have been discovered using the literature produced

during the particular period. Especially the social novels, banned books, works of revolutionary writers and those works that faced much challenges from the supreme leaders of the society speak a lot more than authorized history books or famous and cultivated versions of history.

Foucault in his “Order of Things” has introduced the term “episteme,” the cultural and political ideas that determine the body of knowledge at any given time. Any writing that is produced at any point of time is moreover the product of the political supremacy of the society, which could be an influential religious politics, sexual politics, state politics and the like. The dominant political extremists keenly watch everything that reach to the public and use censorship as a major tool to suppress the dissident voices.

### ***All Quiet on the Western Front as a Social Novel***

Erich Maria Remarque is a novelist who has showed unfailing courage to portray the bare realities of the life of military people in the front. Even though he served the German military during the First World War for several years, after publishing *All quiet on the Western Front*, the authorities mercilessly declared him as a traitor. He was declared as the enemy of the country, which led to his exile and even to the massacre of his own sister. This shows the enormous amount of courage and self-sacrifice that is required from the part of the people who volunteer to question these authorities or who want to portray a different version of history than the cultivated version.

Traditional war literature when glorified and celebrated war by associating the elements of valour, honour, courage and patriotism, this novel has adopted the realistic method in which Remarque gives a graphical representation of the things happening in the camp and war front in an objective manner. At a time when the soldiers refused to speak openly about the things happening even to their parents or friends, Remarque’s open statement in the novel ripped the mask of mentor and guardian wore by the authorities in the society.

He says openly how the soldiers become mere puppets in the hands of the authorities. Thus he says, “An order has turned these silent figures (Russian soldiers) into our enemies; an order could turn them into friends again” (*Remarque* 133). He exposes and barely narrates how these soldiers become the tools who are supposed to get injured and get killed for the voracious and greedy authorities who just pass commands to the young militants. He dares to show the adverse and destructive effects of war not only on the soldiers but also the mass as whole, including its effects on the economy, health, education, work and even the family

both physically and psychologically. The trauma that the war leaves behind after a war is also well portrayed in the novel.

His open criticism on the unmindfulness and disregardness of the government is also a reason for the book to be marked as a rebellious and disloyal record that can misguide the subjects of the society. In the novel he says, “Why on earth should a French locksmith ...attack us? No, it’s just the governments” (Remarque 141). The conversation that follows discusses how war is a need of generals like Kaiser and political leaders for “Generals get famous because of wars” (Remarque 141). Thereby the author declares that every soldier is a scapegoat of someone else’s ego. No soldier has got interest in war, neither they have joined the troop out of passion but compulsion and tricky words of the generals and superiors.

Chronicling the German war and its events, Remarque directs his hilarious condemnation on the war and as much against the military authorities for the mental torture they place on the helpless lads who fight on the front. The Nazi party hails both the novel and the novelist as icons of treason — A real instance of infidelity to the government as well as the institution of military. The anti-war tone of the novel has aggravated the anger of the authorities who expected to portray the war as a glorious part of the history of Germany. However, the realistic portrayal of the war has made the novel so appealing and revealing, which the authorities marked as the cowardly version of the war, which has defamed the country.

### **The Portrayal of Appearance Verses Reality**

Paul, the protagonist of the novel, stands as a representative voice for the inner thoughts of all young lads fighting in the front. They are recruited in to the army by presenting a romanticized version of the life in the army, where they would be the heroes fighting for the country, and the whole country would praise their glorious deeds that would protect the country. It’s only after getting into the camp they understand that their desires, longings and needs are contradictory to the role thrust up on them by the superior officers or even the people of his country. They demanded these youngsters to be courageous and sacrifice their life for the betterment of their country. They are deprived of proper food, lodgings, latrine or even the weapons. However, they are demanded to adjust with the available little things for the advancement and fame of the country, which is totally against their dreams and ambitions. This apparent contradiction between the actual self and the forced self is pretty reflected throughout the novel. This is evident from the continuous whispers happening in Paul’s mind. For instance, when he is in his house for vacation, the discrepancy between the way he expresses himself and his

real thoughts is evident when he speaks in his mind “Oh Mother, Mother, to you I’m still a child — why can’t I just put my head in your lap and cry? Why do I always have to be the stronger and calmer one? I would like to be able to weep for once and be comforted...” (Remarque 126). This shows how much struggle he has in his inner mind and the effort he has to take to portray himself as a stout, stable and powerful young militant. This appearances verses reality makes the life of the young people psychologically challenging. This psychological disposition of Paul and his friends are delineated in the novel, which has the ability to act as a revelation that can appeal the readers.

Such socially responsible novels which portray an unfamiliar side of the truth, though face ample challenges from the officials of the society, if survive the excruciating torture, can act as an eye drop that can clear the vision of the society by making them realize the actualities and also by awakening them by helping to realize their real potential. This is exactly why authorities do not want such authors to come up or to publish and circulate their writings. As a result, they ban books, do massive book burning, use censorship as a weapon and even exile the author from the country. In such cases, most of the writers either stop writing or at least hesitate to publish the book for not to risk their own life or that of their acquaintances. Authors like Taslima Nasrin and Salman Rushdie are also among the contemporary writers who have gone through grave situations for being outspoken and irreverent, according to the definitions of those controlling powers.

Louis Althusser, a prominent figure among the Marxist thinkers, in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” analyses how dominant social systems enforce their control by molding human subjects through ideology and how they reproduce themselves. It is evident in the case of any dominant system. There would always be certain ideologies that circulate around the subjects, which because of the habituation would seem normal, and in order to sustain the power, the authorities make sure that the subjects are reproduced and the order is well maintained. They use different institutions, such as religious and educational institutions to reach out to the public and use them as state apparatuses to cultivate ideologies. Althusser has also opened a new window through his essay “A Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre” by analysing the relations between art and ideology. In the essay he says that he does not rank “real art among the ideologies, although art does have a quiet particular and specific relationship with ideology” (Maoilearca 1480). Since pen is a powerful intellectual sword that can be used to manipulate the subjects, writers are often expected to write in favour of the influencing social system. The censorship rules and other methods compel and insist art also to work as a state apparatus, the

rule which declared writers like Remarque as a threat to the society. The probability of arrest, prosecution, banishment, threats, risk, murder, bloodshed and like make an ordinary writer think twice and again before writing against the authority. Being irreverent and plain-spoken though make them the villains of the time, later help them to become the superheroes who have showed the courage to portray the facts. It not only helps to record a different version of history but also to make the subjects aware of the workings of the ideologies.

### **Conclusion**

In short, in every country there are certain ruling power structures that would influence the government, law and administration; however, in some societies, there are various extreme influential and controlling forces who take any intense or severe steps to bring the subjects under their command. Such extremists use their authority over the governments and laws to suppress any opposing expressions. Remarque's experience is also not different; all the problems he has faced are just because he has published the novel which has the content against the Nazi party and the military superintendents. This is not an isolated situation, but any writer in an intolerant society, who volunteers his time and craftsmanship to reach out to the public should also be ready to be treated as a traitor, terrorist, blasphemer, etc. The penalty they have to pay for this would include their own lives. They have to risk the safety of their family and even have to be ready to face banishments and like situations. Nevertheless, such works can speak a lot more than the sponsored books that carry over the ideologies of the particular power structure, and like New Historicism argues, they can even portray a different history, that is, the suppressed version of history. At the same time, it is a powerful weapon that can work on the intelligence of people to make them realise the actualities and can give them the courage to act through its rhetorical power.

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