



Contextualizing Literary Censorship in Pakistan: The Legacy of Colonial Penal Codes

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In 1932, the literary landscape of colonial India was irreversibly changed by the publication of *Angaaray* (Burning Embers), a collection of nine short stories and a one-act play in Urdu, with contributions by Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Mahmud-uz-Zafar, and Ahmed Ali. Denounced as vulgar, obscene, and deliberately insulting to the emotions of North Indian, upper-class Muslims - the very section of society the writers themselves belonged to, and had intended to criticise - the collection was banned in the United Provinces shortly after its publication, under Section 295 A of the Indian Penal Code (1927). This code, which specifically targeted "Deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs" would go on to be co-opted by not just the colonial authorities, but by the governments of independent India and Pakistan, following the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent.

Literary censorship in Pakistan, therefore, relies on such early cases to set a precedent for its modern enactment, with *Angaaray* being only one example of many. The collection is widely credited as the informal start of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA); the founding members were all contributors to the

collection alongside other famous names from literature such as Mulk Raj Anand, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, and M. D. Taseer, to name a few. Even after the formation of the PWA, which aimed to address and portray the 'radical changes' taking place in the subcontinent's society, as well as offer protection to writers persecuted by the colonial authorities for sedition, censorship continued to be a problem. The infamous Lihaaf trials of the 1940s, which targeted "Lihaaf" ("The Quilt") by Ismat Chughtai and "Bu" ("Smell") by Saadat Hasan Manto, similarly found the two short stories to be 'vulgar' and 'obscene' - what exactly in them that was so, however, could not be determined by the accusers despite an extended trial in Lahore. Chughtai was never charged again; meanwhile, Manto was charged for obscenity and sedition for five of his short stories before and after Partition: "Kaali Shalwar" ("Black Shalwar"); "Dhuan" ("Smoke"), "Bu" ("Smell"); "Thanda Gosht" ("Cold Meat"); and "Upar, Neechay Aur Darmiyaan" ("Above, Below, and Middle"), with his trial and fifth trial taking place in independent Pakistan, only shortly before his death in 1955.

Manto's trials for obscenity and sedition represent a wider disillusionment with the state of Pakistan after

Partition, particularly for those progressively-inclined writers, artists and intellectuals who had supported the call for a new and separate country that would safeguard the rights of minorities. The crackdown against freedom of expression, however, made it clear that the status-quo established by the colonial government would only be upheld by the new state's establishment. Thus, those who held conservative values that matched with Pakistan's increased inclination towards Islamisation, even before the regime of President Zia-ul-Haq, seamlessly fit into the power vacuum created by the exit of British imperialism, setting up a neo-colonial form of leadership that would go on to curtail freedoms, both of expression and civil liberties, through Pakistan's short history.

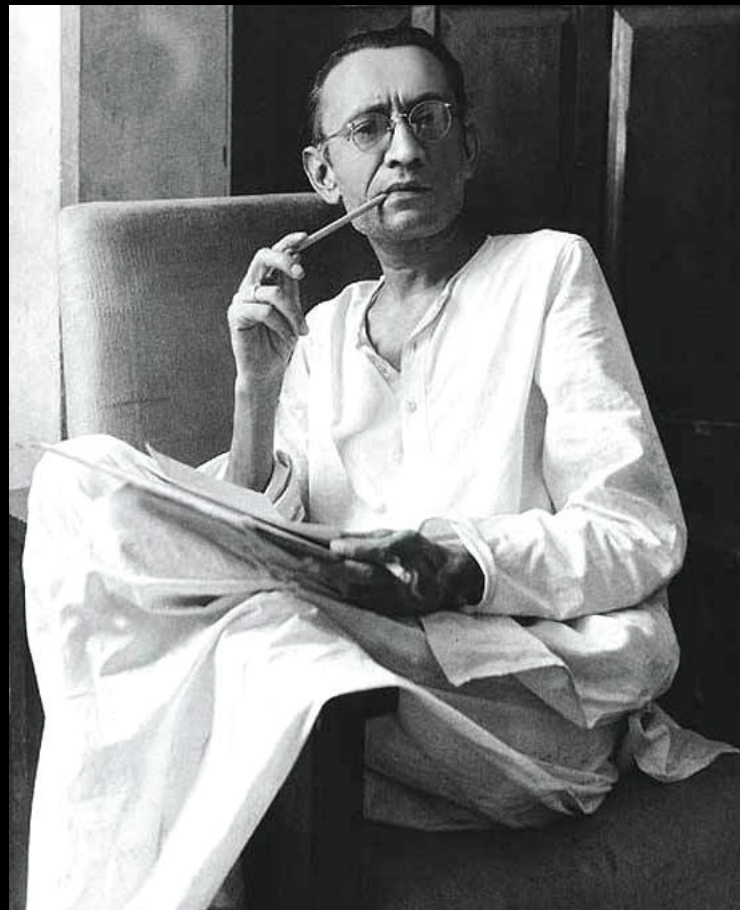
The legacy of measures such as 295 A taken by the colonial state still reverberate in the modern context of Pakistan. Alongside religious offence, a key component of laws that aim to curb dissent is to ensure there is no criticism of the military, a direct result of Pakistan's many military dictatorships dressed up as democracies. In Kamila Shamsie's 2022 novel, *Best of Friends*, an integral part of the characterisation of Zahra is her abject fear in the face of threats her father receives as a sports journalist. He makes the mistake of not referring to Zia-ul-Haq when applauding the Pakistani cricket team on their performance. The next day, and several days after, the family lives in terror after military and government-aligned acquaintances show up at their home, making veiled references to what we now understand to be enforced disappearances, unless her father apologises on-air for his omission. He refuses to do so, but is saved from a guaranteed unfortunate fate by the death of Zia on the very day his unapologetic segment is to go on the air. However, the novel insinuates that the experience of the fear is what leads Zahra to become a lawyer and human rights activist. Despite this fortunate ending, this section of the novel not only highlights the realities of press censorship, albeit on a smaller scale, but portrays the realities of living, even as an average person, under the regime of a government that does not and cannot abide by any form of criticism, due to its undemocratic and precarious identity that reads anything except overt praise as outright dissent and sedition.

Literary censorship, as well as its representations in literature, is also intrinsically linked to the repression of other forms of expression in Pakistan. In 2012, YouTube was banned, and remained so until 2016; in 2023, Wikipedia was banned, although the decision was reversed within a few days. A common excuse for such initiatives is the dissemination of 'blasphemous content'; 295 A, a remnant of British colonialism, is now a part of the Pakistan Penal Code, in a special section known as the Blasphemy Laws, carrying a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Human rights groups state that these laws are constantly misused and appropriated to settle personal scores and vendettas. The most disturbing legacy of such penal codes, however, is the public-led targeting of individuals and organisations, with little to no regard for investigation, evidence, or the truth. Angaaray's ban was prompted after protests in the United Provinces, and the public burning of the

collection; Manto was targeted by both the colonial state and its postcolonial descendant due to readers' objections regarding his subjects, from the private lives of individuals to satirical renderings of political leaders. Dissent, therefore, whether against the government as a whole or merely against those with wealth, power, and status, was and still is equated with illegality.

As we enter 2023, censorship is more rampant than ever, although the cultural productions that it targets have grown more resilient. *Zindagi Tamasha* (2019) and *Joyland* (2022), both banned and/or censored by the state for objectionable content that would offend the sensibilities of the average (conservative) Pakistani, serve as filmic representations of the genre of realism and trend of socially-conscious films, geared towards a modern society that finds its outlook increasingly regulated and repressed according to the whims of those in power, whether in the PTA, PEMRA, or not-so-mysterious powers seated in Islamabad.

In a country with one of the highest poverty rates in the world, and an average 60% literacy rate¹, censorship of this kind has been actively damaging the country's rate of progress for decades. Encouraging an inability to critically engage with content that is disagreeable at worst, history dictates that a propagation of the colonial penal codes causes these laws to morph into beasts such as blasphemy laws, leading to street vigilantism, curtailment of rights, and a reluctance to create art that could, if given the chance, significantly alter ways of thinking for the better.



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