

## Censorship in Iran: A Writer's Journey from Silence to Exile

An Iranian writer reveals how state censorship threatened his creativity and forced him into exile, before finding hope in collective resistance.

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I have never told this story in its entirety to anyone—: not to my therapist, not to my closest friends, and not even to my family.

I've divulged bits and pieces of it to different people. When my friends back home in Iran asked me why I was leaving, I made up a thousand different reasons. When my friends here in Istanbul asked me what happened and why I came, I would givegave them only obvious reasons. I would telltold them that I couldn't stay any longer, that it was impossible for me to continue living there. I said that a part of me had died, that my ambition, courage, and hope for the future had dried up. But I didn't explain why. I couldn't connect the single moments into a coherent narrative. I've divulged bits and pieces of it to different people. Now, I want to tell this story, to you and to anyone who cares to hear.

One of those single singular moments: I am sitting at the corner of Baharestan Square, a few hundred meters from the Book House of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. On my cell phone, I have the tracking number of the book I had edited. I am telling a publisher friend

that the acquaintance she introduced to me is gone, and. “now Now what?” I ask. “What should I do now? Where should I go? Which room?”

I have to find a certain lady in a certain room. They say that no one will answer me with my long curly hair. I am wearing a formal shirt, though. I've tried to fix my hair. I am directed from the second floor to the third floor, from the third floor to the fourth floor, from the west side of the fourth floor to the east side of the second floor. I am lost in the corridors. I keep saying the number of the book. I say, that “I have come on behalf of the publishing house to protest against talk about the censorship of the book.”

I say, “that I want to talk to “Momayyez” ’ himself, .” the person who He had read the book and decided that the a scene should be removed. One character had showed the middle finger in his pocket that one character showed to another person character. in his pocket should be removed. We already had altered the middle finger to cursing in his heart. But the answer was clear: , “No way.” I got lost in the corridor of the rooms. They recommended told me to submit a written letter to the system, . which I had already done submitted a letter, but it remained unanswered. Eventually, we had to omit it [the curse?] the anger completely.

For two years, I was the editor of the translation desk editor of the most popular literary magazine in Iran. At the beginning of every month, my job was to select stories from many different submissions, recommend send them to translators, edit the translations, discuss every word with the translator, and finalize the text. But the final text was not really final. We had to send it to "Momayyez" and wait a few days for him to read it and return it with some notes. The

person in charge was a bald man who always spoke calmly, telling us to change certain parts of the text.

We had to make the kisses and sex into just "*intimacy*," replace "*alcohol*" with "*drink*," cover up the women's clothing a little, make the political references in the stories more obscure and incomprehensible. Soon, even the words "*drink*" and "*intimacy*" were added to the blacklist. In the stories, people drank Coca-Cola and got drunk. A man and a woman— – gays were completely out of the question— – got intimate just by talking to each other.

We fought over every single word.

Despite our efforts, deep down we knew that the removal of words was not limited to a single word or sentence; it was extensive and systematic. The removal of words was more extensive and systematic [than what?]. Deleting a word changes the a story's dynamic, and that changes human relations. Altering human relations impacts our perceptions of life and how we think about it. What was being removed was the most significant possibility that literature offers—: the re-creation of an alternative life, a way of thinking about life, the imagination of a life denied, a window into in a dim room to the open air. However, the air of freedom was not presentabsent, and. only tThe only breathing materialair was polluted and smoky. If you did not compromise anywhere, practically no magazine would be published.

Censorship is a phenomenon that is both strange and not new. The removal that occurred deletions was were never justified, and, more importantly, it never had a serious alternative. But if you did not compromise, practically no magazine would be published.

Let me share another story, another one of those singular moments: . You probably don't know Nasser Taqvai, . for For me he's one of the best directors in the history of Iran. However, 22 years have passed since his last film, and he has hasseveral different projects that remained half-finished in several different projects. A few years ago, the Cinematheque of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts held a tribute to Nasser Taqvai. They played one of his old movies, and then he himself, old and weak, came and spoke loudly and eloquently about Iranian artists.

Before that, the moderator had come and introduced him, "Everyone, clap your hands in honor of dear Nasser Taqvai, who is here with us and has fought against censorship for years." He said.

The moderator was the same bald man who censored our stories. He was a movie critic and encouraged the fight against censorship, and at the same time he censored stories of our magazine stories. If the whole cCensorship is like Kafka's stories— - judgments that come suddenly from an unknown power— - and we are too would be Sisyphus liftingpushing a stone. We writers and artists are forever striving against a force that seems determined to defeat us at every turn. Sometimes I wonder what Sisyphus was thinking the first time the stone rolled back downhill.

One morning, I woke up from disturbed dreams to a phone call from my publisher. Little did I know that this call would shape the course of my life. Up until that point, I already had wrote written two books and translated several others, but it was my third work that held particular significance. A series of interconnected stories, it delved into the lives of isolated individuals

who were oblivious to the fact that they were inexplicably linked. Craving a connection with another being to alleviate their loneliness, these characters were mired in restricted by their own mental shackles, unable to perceive the limitless opportunities of the world beyond.

As I committed my thoughts to paper, I was mindful that my words would be scrutinized by the Department of Islamic Culture and Guidance. Consequently, I was acutely aware of the "red lines" that must not be crossed, such as explicitly depicting sexual acts or introducing political undertones. Rules that every writer in every authoritarian system is aware of.

One morning, I woke up from disturbed dreams to a phone call from my publisher. Little did I know that this call would shape the course of my life. When I woke up, I called the publisher, and they told me that the "corrections" of my third book had arrived. I said, "Well, then the work will be done with the some corrections?"

"You should check for yourself,," they my publisher said.

It was four pages. On top of it, they wrote to the publisher that the following texts should be observed changed or deleted to issue receive permission to publish the book:

A certain page, lines 9—11, "Hamid said..." must be deleted.

A certain page, such and such line: . this This phrase should be corrected or deleted.

So, I went down and thought, *'How am I going to fit these omissions and corrections together and survive preserve my stories at the same time?'* Pages 80– to 102 had to be deleted. Page 80 would be the third page of a one of the storystories, and page 102 would be where the female character of the story fades away.

In these meantimecrucial 22 pages, a bold woman entered the life of an isolated and shy man. The man and woman would talked to each other (seriously, all they did was just talking), and the essence of their relationship would changed.

They were walking walked together. The man was livinglived his life. The woman was livinglived her life. The woman would gowent to the man's house, and there they didn't know if they wanted to sleep together or not. (I had arranged this whole scene in a way that it wouldn't come out artificially in the envelope of their course of their conversation) . and eEventually they didn't sleep together. The woman would disappeared from the next day. The man, in the absence of the power that had animated his life, wandered around the streets in confusion to find some sense of belonging.

The following week, I returned to the Baharestan building, wandering around in confusion to find someone who cancould help me. It's strange how memories can disintegrate from one place to the next. I remember walking from one room to another in the library building, and then feeling confused in the surrounding streets afterwards. I don't recall what happened once I stepped in that room, but I remember every moment of being inside it. I don't know how long I

stayed, nor do I remember the exact order of our conversations., but I remember what happened there.

I stood in front of the room's door, . which had aA table blocking blocked it so I couldn't enter. A woman dressed in a black “chador” stood behind a computer and talked to me. I had given her the codenumber of my book, and she was looking half at the computer and half at me, probably reading from the "momayyezMomayyez" report. She told me to check the items and make corrections, . and I replied that they had asked me to delete 20 22 pages, but I didn't know where how to make the changes. She pointed out that they had boundaries and had written them on the website.

I knew she wanted me to revise the book again, and I told her that I had read the website carefully and followed the red line. She responded that there were many societal events that we couldn't write about, such as not being able to put a woman with "bad hijab" on the book cover.

Hesitantly I asked hesitantly if there was no a way to fix the problem, as if the problem was were me. She said no, and then looked at her computer and said that my writing was admirable, but I needed to rewrite itmy book.

The next few days were a hazy mix of slumber and consciousness. I never admitted to anyone that in those few fleeting moments, as my rage mounted, so did my shame. I was nearly certain that I had uttered those words demanding changes, . yet Yet in my recollection, I saw myself as

someone who stood frozen and speechless before the door and table. I yearned to cry out, but I restrained myself. I had stifled my own voice., all by myself.

But what was even worse was that I didn't recognize my own anger. I told myself that I should be honest with myself, that worse things had happened to many people, and that my book wasn't worth that much anyway. In the outside world, I don't know what was lost. Inside myself, I had lost my sense of values. When I should have been brave, I was a coward. When I should have thought of an alternative, I stopped thinking altogether.

I didn't write anything for two years, and. I haven't yet written a good story. In all my stories, I had tried not to reveal the core of the story and the characters' feelings, instead focusing on the network of meanings and emotions. But now the core of my story was this: I couldn't defend myself, ; I couldn't console myself. Instead of brandishing my middle finger, I shifted it into curses inside my heart. My own anger had turned into silence. Meaningless dotted lines in the middle of the story. I had lost the lines and lines of feelings and meanings. I was exiled inside myself, lLike one of the helpless characters in my book who had lost their connection to the world., I was exiled inside myself,

Censorship constrains the realm of human expression, stifles creativity, , and not only censors words but also thoughts. In solitary moments when one readers seeks a point of connection, they find themselves surrounded by dots that they must connect themselves. One cannot access voices that have been silenced. I too was left alone, dead silent.



Before me was an unpredictable system that intentionally mixed signals and noise. To destabilize the stable, it must itself be unstable. It aims to confuse people. Without a clear boundary, anything can become a red line. Fighting against the red line becomes futile and exhausting, nearly impossible.

Over the years, many Iranian directors and writers have attended foreign festivals and claimed that censorship in Iran is not severe and that we can still find ways to tell our stories. Some have even praised censorship for inspiring new forms of expression unique to Iranian story-telling. In an interview, director Taqvai pointed out that censorship may have contributed to the distinctive signature of Iranian cinema.

However, many later discovered that negotiating with censorship was a dead end and were either forced into exile or left to abandon their creative work. Their careers were left unfinished. In an interview, director Taqvai pointed that censorship has led to the discovery of new forms of expression and may have contributed to the distinctive signature of Iranian cinema, but But no one talks about those who were silenced, the stories that could not find a form of expression, and the ideas that remained unspoken. My book was one of those that was left unfinished. I could not find any other way to express myself. Eventually, I made the decision to leave the country to rediscover myself.

My book ended with the story of a young man who, after ending a relationship, desperately attempts desperately to heal by forming a new relationship. On the day of the agreement between Iran and the West on the nuclear program and the lifting of sanctions, he goes to the house of a

girl to keep her company during this historic moment. They watch the news together and witness the moment of agreement. As they get physically closer, the young man realizes that he is still raging and grieving, that he is still unable to tolerate intimacy.

He leaves the house and joins the crowd in the streets who are celebrating and expressing their anger. This young man is the only character in the entire book who finds a connection to the outside world. and He understands that the path to healing is not personal but collective.

The next day, he wakes up and remembers scenes from his lost relationship. He recalls his girlfriend asking him, "What's your story?" Then he realizes that he has never told his own story and begins to narrate it.

When I left Iran for Istanbul, I never imagined that I still have unfinished business there. My plan was to observe my homeland from a distance and reinvent my storyteller identity in a new language, within a new life. But in the past five months, it became apparent that I am not done with Iran. and that cClosure would not arrive anytime soon; . I had only fled.

Over these months, the unmistakable voices of Iranian women and people have grown louder, drowning out the silences. They have arisen against the red lines, and grasped that fighting on the red line with this oppressive regime is foolish, and. insteadInstead, they must fight with the whole weight of their being against oppression's very existence. Though I am not a woman, their powerful voices resonates within me.

Every person possesses a story of humiliation, . and eEach narrative contributes to the collective voice, a of deep-seated resentment. When I watch street demonstrations in my second home, I hear my own voice amidst the slogans of arising from Iran's streets, . a A cry that I never made, . and do not know when it emerged.

I understand now that my second home only becomes a true home when I no longer carry my anger and sorrow; . my My first home only becomes a home when I can narrate my anger and grief loud and clear. Similar to the boy in my story, I realized that the journey towards healing is never a personal one. ; it is collective.

To move forward, I must express my suffering and rage. One day, I will recount this story again, without a stumble or a pause, from beginning to end. I have no doubt that it will be a happier story, full of hope and redemption.