

**“YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE WRITTEN ME LIKE THIS”: METAFICTIONALIZING
SHAHRIAR MANDANIPOUR'S *CENSORING AN IRANIAN LOVE STORY***

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Abstract:

In one of his interviews with Larry McCaffery, when asked about the early metafiction writers like Vladimir Nabokov and Robert Coover and about the present state of metafiction, David Foster Wallace retorts critically. He says:

But when you talk about Nabokov and Coover, you're talking about real geniuses, the writers who weathered real shock and invented this stuff in contemporary fiction. But after the pioneers always come the crank turners, the little gray people who take the machines others have built and just turn the crank, and little pellets of metafiction come out the other end...¹

*Wallace's comment depicts the exact scene which the metafictional mode of writing is witnessing since the late 1990s to early 21st century. From an indispensable literary technique which had the capability to criticize, satirize and draw our attention to the discrepancy and parallels that exist between the real and the fictional world with deep political implications, metafiction has been reduced to just a mere trick, a prank to exhibit wit. In the last few years we have witnessed an unwavering publication of metafictional works usually clubbed in the category of experimental fiction which have nothing new to offer and thus take recourse to the act of turning the said technique bland. The publication of these novels rather than augmenting metafiction has turned it into a marketable stunt to be relished by the readers who are nothing more than consumers of the language. Novels like *The Eyre Affair* by Jasper Fforde, *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry* by Gabriella Zevin and *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke among others can easily be put into this category. What is most disheartening about this phenomenon is the fact that one of the most significant aspects of metafictional writing among others, if not overt, was the emancipation of the reader from the position of a consumer to an active participator. The publication of these novels sadly is doing exactly opposite what the pioneers were fighting against. This paper will try to delineate how Shahriar Mandanipour's novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* topples the clichéd logic of using metafictional techniques as a way to fight the crimes Realism as a genre is said to have committed. In the selected novel, the author would use the metafictional technique (among others) as an indispensable medium without which the story cannot be told.*

Key Words: *Metafictional technique, realism, emancipation of the reader, Consumer.*

What is pertinent here is to understand the fact that metafiction came on to the literary scene along with the shift from Structuralism to Post-Structuralism. This shift in itself encompasses the shift from representation to the act of how the thing is being represented, that is, the shift from the object to that of medium. As a medium, language thus became an obsession with the post-structuralist philosophers. One can see an almost exact reaction with novelists of the time as well - writers like John Barth form a definitive stance against a reaction towards Realism. His position becomes clear in his essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' whereby he reiterates the act of introducing some new forms with which to detail the contemporariness of the world. What Barth is actually critiquing is the “used-upness of certain forms or

exhaustion of certain possibilities" (162) of literature per se and an immediate need to redefine the same. In almost the same vein, J. G. Ballard in his introduction to the 1973 novel *Crash* pens a visionary statement while talking about the shifting dimensions of the world we live in and how a writer now has a greater responsibility to write and 'invent the reality' thereby. He writes:

I feel that the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind - mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality. (4)

Ballard's comment exactly captures and warns the shifting roles of life and and proposes an immediate need to invent the reality against the fictional we as humans are pitted against. It is precisely at this juncture in literary history along with the post-structuralist insistence of the linguistic problematics that Metafiction as an important narrative technique comes into birth. Michel Foucault further elucidates this shift philosophically through his brilliant analysis of Velazquez's painting *Les Meninas*. The analysis of Foucault's description about the painting provides a philosophic framework about the uses of Metafiction as the subject of the painting is that it is a painting about the art of painting itself. In his book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault goes on to discuss how the painting with its depiction of a painter looking directly at the onlooker turns a mere viewer into a subject. He writes:

The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter's gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators; in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. (4)

Just as the gaze of the painter in the painting replaces the spectators in a ceaseless exchange in almost the same manner a metafictional novel replaces the author from its essential epistemic position and places the reader in its position. This exchange of the reader in place of the author cannot take place unless and until the linguistic condition of a narcissistic text is made possible. What is equally important in this connection is Maurice Blanchot's assertion in relation to the shifting movement of literature per se and the need to comprehend it within the confines of linguistic assertion. In his essay 'The Disappearance of Literature', he writes:

One sometimes finds oneself asking strange questions such as 'What are the tendencies of contemporary literature?' or 'Where is the literature going?' Yes indeed, a surprising question, but what is more surprising is that, if there is an answer, it is an easy one: literature is going towards itself, towards its essence which is disappearance. (*The Blanchot Reader* 136)

All these writers and philosophers alike categorically propose a breakage with the earlier modes of writing and suggest in their own fashion a way to deal with changing circumstances.

Although a barrage of definitions in conjunction Metafiction are in vogue whereby some define it as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact" (Waugh 2) or as a form of writing obsessed with its own craft, mindful of its own "textual awareness" (Hutcheon 1), what is pertinent here is to focus on Mark Currie's definition. Mark Currie defines metafiction in a light quite different from his predecessors. He writes: A metafiction is not definitely a novel whose author is both a writer and a critic, but a novel which dramatizes the boundary between fiction and criticism (3). According to this definition a metafictional work, other than being narcissist and self-conscious, takes upon the task of not only fictionalising the world in a narrative conundrum but also at the

same time indulges in the act of commenting upon what is being said. A metafictional narrative thus works simultaneously on two edges, that is, of the fictive and the critical. It is this particular designation of Metafiction that we find Mandanipour's narration frequently indulging in throughout the work. Not only is the novel trying to depict a love story between the protagonists in the censored society of Iran but it is at the same time discussing the ways how the same can never be possible without taking recourse to experimentalizing or metafictionalizing the narrative.

The story of the novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* takes place at different levels literary as well as linguistic, where the personal and the social, if not 'burned away', take different recourse parallel. To simplify, three narratives run parallel to each other first there is the official love story between the two fictional protagonists Sara and Dara, written in bold letters with some sentences and passages crossed out, which the author Mandanipour wants to submit to the Ministry of Culture and Guidance. The second narrative is the story of Sara and Dara written in plain text, but which is not intended to be part of the official story, nonetheless written in order to give the readers some more information about certain events and actions of the characters. The third narrative is that of a fictional Mandanipour who makes the reader aware about the various problems regarding literary, cultural, political, social and economic problems and events that have happened and still continue to happen in Iran. This narrative also includes the writer's constant meetings and exchanges with the particular person called Porfiry Petrovich, the head of the censoring committee, and the one on whom depends the fate of the publication of the love story Mandanipour is writing. The story is weaved within the margins of censorship and the constant policing of the main censoring body alias Porfiry Petrovich (other than the self-censoring narrative of writer himself). Raha Namy sees these intertwined narratives or "layers" as she calls them essential to portray "the layered existence that marks contemporary Iran". For her, the life in contemporary Iran "cannot be exposed, except by a layered narrative of the kind Mandanipour uses; the uncertainty of life by merging reality and fiction." Towards the middle of the novel Mandanipour mouths an interesting proposition from one of his character who happens to be a poet lecturing on Censorship in a state-run cultural center. Mandanipour writes:

That night . . . I quickly walked to a state-run cultural center where, as an exception, they had allowed an Iranian poet to give a lecture . . . The poet's speech was about censorship. . . This great poet's discovery was that censorship drives a poet or a writer to abstain from superficiality and to instead delve into the layers and depths of love and relationships and achieve a level of creativity that Western poets and writers cannot even dream of. (*CILS* 138)

The poet's discovery in the novel about censorship is itself the whole craft of Mandanipour's novel the act of telling a story situated, from the beginning till the end, in Iran fraught with certain peculiar censored and uncensored information about contemporary Iranian culture, politics, customs, prejudices, a constant mingling of the private and public, fact and fiction, social and political at one and the same time becomes a tale of certain dexterous ideas conscious of their existence in a censored atmosphere. It is this consciousness of the characters of the novel *as characters in the novel* which renders it a tone often employed by American writers to showcase 'the end of the novel' era. However, what is essential in relation to Mandanipour's novel is the fact that this consciousness in the characters is not brought out by some post-structuralist manifestation but by the problems of a society under constant surveillance. It is the act of censorship by the authorities and the people alike that compel the writer to take recourse to metafictional writing. In other words, it is this censoring atmosphere prevalent throughout the novel that the writer becomes conscious of his vocation as a writer which thereby makes his writing self-conscious.

Linda Hutcheon describes metafictional writings as "fiction about fiction - that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1) or what she describes as "Narcissistic Narrative", a narrative obsessively and primarily conscious of its own existence as a narrative. This thing is quite explicit in *CILS* from the very beginning from the very onset of the novel

while Mandanipour is weaving his official love story between the two main characters and regularly censoring it, he makes continuous stops to define and enlarge the reader's vision to comprehend the story together with the different nuances of Iran. The incorporation of various verses from Nizami's poem *Khosrow and Shirin*, in the very first chapter, defining it and commenting on it both from the cultural and political standpoints is not just a casual act on the part of the author to assert that covert sexual imagery has a long history of its own in Iranian literary history but a critical venture on the part of the author to build the plot of his novel on censorship which forms an important part of Iranian history. In connection with this Mandanipour writes:

In this romance, as in all romances, there are many incidents and events that impede Shirin and Khosrow from meeting each other and from being alone together away from the eyes of the fiercely devout who behaved much like modern-day censors. (*CILS*21)

Mandanipour writes a critical commentary on the poem in the very first chapter bringing together different nuances of Iranian landscape thus making at the very start the crux of his novel which will dwell deep into the various events (imaginative or factual) where the problematic relationship between literature and society will be foregrounded. Mandanipour's subsequent narrative throughout the novel is composed of the various problems, other than political and moral policing, within Iran of censoring names (discussed mainly in Chapter 2 of the novel), of pornography (*CILS* 51), of film and media censorship (discussed elaborately in Chapter 4), of Sex Education (*CILS* 98), of sartorial measures throughout history (*CILS* 106), about the state of Music (*CILS* 152), of Iranian Feminists (*CILS* 166), of censoring magazines (*CILS* 183), of judiciary (*CILS* 194), of the condition of prisons in Iran (*CILS* 198), of economic problems (*CILS* 241) etc. are all given space by the writer. As the novel comes to an end we come to realize that the commentary or the non-fictional part of the novel exceeds the fictional part with which the writer wants to convey the impossibilities of writing fiction, or more precisely, a love story in Iran. Throughout the novel the narrator juxtaposes the real Iran with the fictional one and through his own discussions and commentaries holds the narrative together and tries to "assault or transcend the laws of fiction" (Scholes 107) which forms an important component in metafictional works. In this regard Waugh writes:

... the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction.' (6)

And in the novel *CILS* we find, this formal tension, present at regular intervals between the creation of fiction and the criticism of that fiction both at the same level.

Mandanipour, in a manner similar to Italo Calvino, is throughout the narrative preparing the reader not only to read the selected novel in a particular way or "how to read Iran" (Messud), but preparing him/her, in general, to read certain texts in a particular fashion thus critiquing the nature of reading literature itself.

"Censorship", as a critic puts it, "has been as much a part of Iran's literary history as betrayed love, bewitched lovers, and broken love affairs" (Milani 325). Hence, writing a love story in Iran can itself be termed as an act of defying the age old tradition of censorship. Michael Levine's view about censorship in which he states that censorship acts as "an impediment whose very resistance makes another, more equivocal and double-edged style of writing possible"ⁱⁱⁱ seems an exact proposition which Mandanipour is trying to depict through his novel. "So throughout the book", writes James Wood, "whenever the story of Dara and Sara becomes unacceptably political or erotic, offending sentences are crossed out not blotted out ... but struck through with a horizontal line, so that the reader can examine what might constitute a literary offense in Iran" (Wood). Mandanipour's experimentation with the linguistic domain of novel therefore showcases his own vulnerability of being a writer belonging to that part of the world where the private world and the public domain slip over each other.

The metafictional highpoint in the novel comes when the character Dara fervently accuses the writer Mandanipour of his representation in order to pass his novel from the clutches of censorship. Mandanipour writes the scene in an eloquent fashion:

Dara grabs my throat. He shoves me back and slams me against the wall of his room . . . In my face he shouts:

“You shouldn't have written me like this. You shouldn't have written me as browbeaten and pathetic. You wrote me as an earthworm. You wrote me so that no matter what they do to me, all I can do is squirm and bear the pain. You wrote me like this to pass your story through censorship. I don't want to be written as an earthworm that even when they cut it in two turns into two earthworms. You are my murderer too for having written me as so utterly miserable. All the torment and misery there is you have written for me. You are no different than the torturer who would flog me so that I would concede there is a God. I want to write my own murder.” From the pressure of Dara's powerful grip my air passage is constricted. Yet I struggle to say:

“Dara, this is just a story.” (*CILS*229)

This act on the part of the writer to tell his character that this is just a story is perhaps another trick of the writer Mandanipour, which he had earlier confessed to use, in order to write his novel in such a manner that it “survives the blade of censorship” (*CILS*9).

In the novel *CILS*, Mandanipour thus takes up the task to narrate not only the story which he wants to convey but also the left-over tale which is often “surgically remove[d]” (*CILS*48) by the censors. In this way, Mandanipour's boy-meets-girl story who love each other dearly caught in an environment where it is almost impossible to display ones romantic feelings for someone, seems at times an age old clichéd story. But, what brings charm and grace to the novel is the form of the story together with the way it is told. The continuous authorial intrusions within the narrative of the novel and the existence of certain characters' consciousness being characters in a censored novel make the novel a metafictional tour de force. The narrator's constant commentary and explanations on the love story, he is trying to write, together with the facts and necessary information about Iran in general and his vocation of being a writer in Iran within the space of the novel make it a composite site where both the modes of writing, of fact and fiction are present at one and the same plane. The narrator constantly juggles these modes so as to inform the reader, the western one perhaps, preconceived by the narrator as too naive, who does not know much about the cultural, social and literary underpinnings of Iran, its rich literary and cultural landscape, is at regular intervals invoked and answered in a somewhat sarcastic manner. This direct address to the reader and the constant interruptions to the official love story is seen by the narrator as necessary interruptions without which the story won't be easy to comprehend. As the narrator writes:

I don't like to constantly interrupt my story's progress to offer explanations. But it seems I have no choice. Some things and certain actions in Iran are so strange and outlandish that without explaining them it is impossible for an Iranian story to be well understood by non-Iranians. (*CILS*183)

These necessary interruptions, other than offering explanations to the official story, fracture and dismantle the whole narrative flux of the story at almost every juncture. And at times, one is almost annoyed at these breaks and injunctions by the author but, may be, that is what Mandanipour wants to do: to annoy the reader with constant explanations and interruptions so as to give the reader a lesson in the workings of literary censorship or idea of a work that is constantly gagged and censored by the authorities due to various reasons. These interruptions together with the crossed out sentences at every page make the novel look like some kind of a rough draft of some work intended to be published at some point in time. At the very beginning of the novel, the author confesses that the crossed-out sentences “are [his] own doing” (*CILS*) and must not be, in any way, clubbed with some kind of “fanciful eccentricity” (*CILS*) to “postmodernism or Heideggerism” (*CILS* 15). This admission about the employment of a particular

technique should be taken as a sign, on the part of the author, not to read or to take this technique just as an innovation or a theoretical stunt but as a necessary and indispensable part of the novel. In fact, these self-reflexive references act as anchors to understand the various meanderings of the problematic of the narrative present in the novel which lends the novel a metafictional flavour.

Perhaps the high point in the novel regarding "literature of games" (Bruss 154) vis-à-vis censorship comes when the author clubs the great poet like Nizami as a victim of censorship who in order to evade the censors himself has described the lovemaking between Khosrow and Shirin, in his celebrated poem, in a soft romantic way. Mandanipour subverts the whole edifice of the traditional Iranian love poetry by bringing the element of censorship in it when he writes:

To tell you the truth, I . . . am shocked. I am thinking, What if King Khosrow's lovemaking with his bride Shirin was not as our great poet Nizami has described, ever so romantic, ever so soft, as soft as flower petals and stamens . . . I am shocked and terrified to think that Nizami too may have been afraid of censorship and has offered an account contrary to reality. (*CILS* 116)

Moreover, Censorship in the novel is not depicted always in the form of something done to someone in the old traditional "persecutor-victim model" (Holquist 16) but something which:

happens in more than just the process of writing; it happens every day in people's lives when they make choices against their hearts to pursue the life they are supposed to lead . . . Dara censors his desires for what he wants to do in life both because of his previous arrests and because he needs to support his family; or Sara seems to consider censoring her feelings for Dara in order to get the luxurious life she wishes for through the rich suitor, Sinbad. The novel encourages us to construe censorship broadly, not only as something enforced by government agencies and regulations; different forms of it can also be forced upon one by history, traditions, the general public's or one's family's beliefs and opinions; or they can simply be (un)conscious and/or self-imposed. (Namy)

It is this form of censorship which Mandanipour has in mind or what he himself, in the novel, calls a form of "sociocultural censorship" (48). This sociocultural censorship and similar repressive apparatus that Mandanipour has to deal with leads him to an unusual level of innovation as Michael Levine puts it more succinctly that, "censorship functions, on the one hand, as a debilitating impediment and, on the other, as an impetus to stylistic innovation."ⁱⁱⁱ It is the latter which is pursued actively by Mandanipour in the novel.

Through the artifice of certain tricks and manipulations the writer tries to tell his story so that it can pass the censorial gaze. It is the use of these tricks and various other manoeuvres which, as the novel progresses, lead to innovations in the novel's narration as. However, these innovations and experiments are not something limited to Mandanipour's novel but instead it permeates the whole literature, cinema and various other cultural activities in the post-revolutionary Iran.

Whereas in the West, metafiction may be a technique used to designate the exhaustion of the novel as a genre, which to some critics in turn designates the death of the novel, to point towards our life, history and society etc. as nothing but provisional artifacts and to draw attention to the heightened sense of self-consciousness that case, however, is totally inverted in Mandanipour's novel where it is used as a basic methodology to draw attention to the complex play of censorship. In this novel, metafiction is used and exploited as a necessary and inevitable form of narrating a story which deals absolutely with the themes of censorship itself. In a country like Iran, if a censoring body has a supreme right to comment/distort a literary work, in that case why can't an author possess the creative right to comment and explain the problems of writing fiction through the use of non-fiction within the very space of the novel? The metafictional endeavour of the novel thus not only comments on the fictionality of fiction but also to the metafictionality of literary censorship itself.

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End Note:

- i. Quoted in Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 13.2 (1993): 127-150. The interview can be retrieved here: <<http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/>>
- ii. Quoted in Gerhard Richter's review of Michael Levine's book *Writing through Repression: Literature, Censorship, Psychoanalysis*. p. 2.
- iii. Quoted in chapter "Censorship in Iran: Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*" in the book *Iranian and Diasporic Literature in the 21st Century: A Critical Study* by Daniel Grassian. p. 169. In this chapter Grassian tries to show how Mandanipour's narrative in the novel is a kind of double-edged style and the ways in which he executes it within the confines of censorship itself. Grassian's book is so far the first book in which an entire chapter is devoted to Mandanipour's novel.