“We have all a genuine fear of violence erupting in a most savage and uncontrollable way”: an interview with Adil Jussawalla

Laetitia Zecchini interviews Adil Jussawalla

This interview was conducted over several days in February 2018 at Adil Jussawalla’s flat in Cuffe Parade, Bombay. Adil Jussawalla talks about the Bombay PEN Center under Nissim Ezekiel’s leadership; about his own relationship with the PEN All-India Center and with Nissim Ezekiel; about the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* and Ezekiel’s controversial support of the ban; about the Cultural Cold War, the ideological and cultural factions in the Bombay of the 60s and 70s and its publishing scene; about the Indian Congress for Cultural Freedom (ICCF), *The Indian PEN*, *Quest*, *Playboy* and the “corner-lending libraries” of the city; about the particular status and position of Indian poetry / literature in English; the specific predicaments in which free speech, writers and writers’ organisations find themselves in India; the power(lessness) of words and writers’ organizations…

*Photo of Adil Jussawalla, Cuffe Parade, 2011*

LZ Perhaps we could start by PEN and by Nissim? What do you remember of the PEN in the 70s and 80s, and how did you start getting involved with the Center?
AJ I was never really involved with PEN, except in the ways that I do get involved, by thrusting some advice on Nissim, unwanted advice perhaps, or suggesting some things. But I felt that Nissim was open to suggestions. I must have been visiting Nissim there, in his PEN office, even before the 70s. Quite frankly I must say that I went to the PEN office because of Nissim, to be able to have a conversation with him for a brief while. There were one or two things I suggested which he did take up. When Farrukh Dhondy was in town, in the early 70s, I got PEN to host an informal talk by him: “Why I write”. I was organizing the “Dangerous Animals” series of readings at St Xavier’s roughly at the same time. I also invited Nissim to St Xaviers’, but he suspected my motives, because I was in the same department as Eunice (de Souza), and he said no. By then I was putting forward certain political views which may not have been to his liking, and he knew that I was friendly with Eunice, that it was through Eunice that I got that job at Xavier’s. I guess he just felt it may have been a bit of a set-up, and he wasn’t really going to risk that. Fair enough.

LZ You have recently acknowledged that you came alive to modern poetry in 1955, after reading Nissim’s poems in The Illustrated Weekly...

AJ Yes, I must have read these poems in 1955, the year I was on an extended stay in Cathedral School, which I would really have wanted to leave at the time. I read a poem by Nissim called “Midmonsoon Madness”, which ends something like “I would like to smash it all up and start again”. It’s a poem about domesticity. It’s probably something that a 15 year old might have felt in the circumstances I was in. So, that spoke to me. But I didn’t seek him out or try to meet him then.

LZ Incidentally, how did The Illustrated Weekly come your way? Very easily because it was a journal everyone read?

AJ Yes, everybody was reading it. It was a standard fare in the family, more than any other weeklies. Perhaps later, issues of Span used to come regularly…

LZ Apart from visiting Nissim’s office at Theosophy, did you go regularly to the PEN events? Were you a member?

AJ I did not go to their events much. That’s why I can say that I was never really involved with PEN. But yes, I became a PEN member. Or rather they made me a member! And at one point, probably after Missing Person, I became a life-member. They never asked me for money. If they had programs, I would turn up - or not, and so did so many others. I don’t know what their funds were, how they survived. And I am afraid this tradition has continued down the line!

LZ What do you think were the successes of the PEN Center in Bombay? When we first discussed PEN and the project together, 3 or 4 years ago, you said that at least Nissim (and before him Sophia Wadia) had managed to publish The Indian PEN regularly when so many other journals or little mags folded up one after the other.

1 The exact lines are as follows: «I listen to my own madness / saying: smash it up and start again. / I sense the breathing / of my wife and children, / adding to the chill. »
AJ Yes, I think that’s indeed one of the achievements of PEN at that time. And I am not saying there weren’t interesting programs. There were! You had visiting authors who were hosted at the PEN. And sometimes, there were constructed readings, that means that someone would put a reading on a specific theme together. Those were interesting. But I wasn’t a regular there, in fact to the surprise of Gieve (Patel), when a program around the four Clearing House books was organized at PEN, I wasn’t part of the audience. It’s as if, having been with Clearing House all that time, and getting the books out, I just didn’t feel I wanted more of it. It may seem petty, but that’s what I felt.

LZ So the fact that you weren’t involved with the PEN didn’t have anything to do with the PEN as such or with its ideological leanings?

AJ No, no. I didn’t really keep away, but let’s say that I wasn’t at the PEN events as often as Nissim perhaps might have liked me to be, not for any political reasons, but I have never particularly enjoyed being a listener or a participant at poetry readings.

LZ You say that you did not like the readings, but at the same time you organized the ‘Dangerous Animals’ series at St Xaviers’ in the 70s didn’t you? And later, in the 90s, there was ‘Loquations’ as well, right?

AJ Ok, I’ll amend that. I think I always wanted to present poetry in an interactive way. I never really liked lecturing about poetry… Now the arguments or discussions I had with Nissim about politics, where very different points of view emerged, were very private ones in his office. Nothing was stated publically.

LZ How would you describe these very different points of view?

AJ Having become a somewhat serious student of Marxism and Marxist literary criticism in the early 70s in Bombay, I would put it to Nissim that there is such a literature that is being promoted by the ruling class, that does not disturb the ruling class, and hence given the anti-imperialist feelings that were running high in India, not just from the Left, but which involved the American presence (the American Center was directly opposite the PEN office), I felt that there were other kinds of literatures to be considered. And perhaps talked about. Obviously that wouldn’t have been a problem for Nissim … But let’s say that I was hoping to have a dialogue with him where I could point to some of the merits of Marxist criticism as opposed to the liberal criticism which he represented. He didn’t have much time for that. For example, he didn’t think that there was an ideology behind the American authors he liked. He thought that there was no intention on their part other than just writing well. He didn’t think they represented anything that could be read as anti-socialist.

You know, it’s hard to recollect the objections of a youngish man that I was at that time, because the issues have become so much more complex. But I think it would have been beneficial for all of us if there had been a discussion on, say, Soviet Literature, and I am not just talking about the dissidents, but what may have been attempted there shortly after the 1917 Revolution … It’s after all the kind of thing we are discussing today, when I point to the Soviet influence in the arts
of Bombay. You see the idealization of certain figures in the architecture of this city itself, which have come from there. Even this painting of Sudhir Patwardhan’s (pointing to a painting above) owes something, rather obviously, to Latin American painters, Diego Rivera and so on and their idealization of the peasant and the worker. They are all inspirations that came from Soviet Art. Shortly after Independence, maybe even before, certainly the Indian peasant and worker did appear in idealized forms in the bas relief of architecture and even in some paintings. It would have been good, perhaps, if we could have discussed these things, put them in a historical context from time to time at PEN.

LZ And this did not happen?

AJ No. Nissim was polite about it all, but he was occasionally impatient saying “why are you coming to me with these ideas” and so forth.

LZ Your introduction to Marxist theory or education in Marxism was made here in Bombay, through PROYOM? Not in London?

AJ Yes, it was through PROYOM [Progressive Youth Movement]². I started attending its study classes in Bombay.

I never try to define myself in political terms and perhaps it’s futile to do so, but I guess I belong to the Left Liberal category in Britain, with perhaps a fascination for revolutionary politics, street protests, etc. I think even without basically understanding Marxism when I was in England, people like Marcuse, Raymond Williams, etc. they all struck the right notes for me. I didn’t much care if they were revisionist Marxists or whatever. And then there was also Tariq Ali on the scene. And all that was fascinating and emotionally stimulating. But as a system of thought and a system of enquiry, it only began after my time with PROYOM. I would not call myself a Marxist critic, I never have been. It’s just that Marxist critics showed me a way of looking at literature which I wasn’t used to. And I found it liberating.

I think I got introduced to Georg Lukacs through Vivan Sundaram, whom I knew in London and we corresponded quite a lot at the time when I was back in Bombay, especially about possible paintings for the cover for New Writing in India. Vivan erupts into my life after decades sometimes, most recently when he wanted me to write something about our time in London! It’s obvious that he is a much more committed Marxist than I am, but yes, I think it was really PROYOM that got me thinking of other ways of looking at literature. These ideas haven’t quite left me. I am still anxious to find a Marxist interpretation of art and its production… I have

---

² For more on these questions, and on the Emergency see «Perhaps I’m happier being on the sidelines: An interview with Adil Jussawalla», A. Nerlekar & L. Zecchini, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, Vol 53 :1-2, 2017 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17449855.2017.1295826. In the 70s, «there was ferment among college students, including those at St. Xavier’s. The college magazine The Xavierite didn’t flinch from discussing burning social issues. … The main aim of PROYOM was to “educate” students into seeing that the Indian educational system, from primary school to university, needed to change. Hence its study classes and its journal Lalkaar which dealt with student issues -- medium of instruction, syllabi, hostel accommodation, etc. One of its slogans was STUDY TO STRUGGLE, STRUGGLE TO CHANGE! »
Lenin’s writings on literature, on women, etc. All that was something that seemed particularly relevant to me given the ghastly inequalities and contradictions in this country.

LZ I was reading Nissim’s essay on the problems of modern Indian culture where he writes that writing from / in a country where poverty is so overwhelming represents one of the most important problems facing modern Indian culture, Indian writers, Indian artists. And he talks very concretely about funding and about state support of the arts and literature. Basically, how do you cope with the indecency of the situation, i.e. for instance with the government giving grants worth thousands of rupees to a drama group and then walking in the street with hundreds of pavement dwellers trying to survive.

AJ Strange that you mention this, because even recently I was reading an interview with Jahanta Mahapatra. And he says that he goes out in the street and sees a man who is begging for a bowl of rice. And he says, what should I do? Should I go back home and just write a poem, which no one will read? What do I do? And yes, you see, I think this is our problem. That’s also something that I feel a lot. And I think there are a great many writers who do as well, in whatever language. So let’s forget this whole thing about the special place that English has here! You have to see that some of the anguishes are very much in common. How do people deal with these contradictions? How do you remain sane and carry on?

LZ Going back to Nissim, you never talked with him about the Congress for Cultural Freedom or about the CIA funding of Quest? He never brought all this up?

AJ You see, the evidence was flimsy. I had certainly heard those rumours about the Indian Congress for Cultural Freedom. And remember the persons involved like Minoo Masani were ex-socialists who had become very much pro-free enterprise. But I never felt that PEN was in any way ever associated with the CIA.

LZ I am not saying that it was, at least not directly

AJ Let’s again face it. You see PEN was seen as a harmless literary club. Not only in Bombay India, but I think in London too. It was just one of those clubs, at least until the 80s, when, as the present director of PEN International suggests, Pinter and others finally directly intervened in Turkey.

LZ Would you say that it was also seen as a fairly highbrow club?

AJ I wouldn’t call it highbrow, no. There is one thing I have to say, even if I did not go to PEN very often, I enjoyed it there, and I have a certain loyalty to my fellow-beings who write in English and write in a certain way. As is continued now, and it happened recently at the Kala Ghoda Festival, our style of reading and the content in our poetry is at a very different emotional register from the way poetry in the languages is declaimed or recited. It is not a situation which encourages “wah!” “wah!”, or a repetition of lines. And also what was objected in our readings, by members of the audience, was the old question: “where is the soul of your poetry?”

3 Nissim Ezekiel, « Some Problems of Modern Indian Culture » 8th Tagore Memorial Lecture, 1980
LZ Sorry, Adil are you talking about the PEN audience specifically, or the audience for poetry events in general?

AJ PEN, yes… The question was generally put by an elderly person. I think the question was answered as politely as possible, I mean of course we didn’t turn on him viciously. I don’t know if you’ve read my article, “This Poetry Reading is Haunted”, I never re-published it because I find it a bit, what’s the word, perhaps not subtle enough… Generally when a person goes to a poetry reading in India, at least up to the 90s, he expects the kind of presentation he would get at a mahfil. People would expect rhetoric, something louder, because that is the “tradition” in the languages.

My somewhat sarcastic take on that is that if I go to a performance of a play by a Bengali troupe which is known to perform things melodramatically – I would go to it expecting melodrama. So if you go to a reading of poets writing in English, don’t expect something else! There are so many kinds of readings…

LZ Concerning this image of the harmless “club”. I was thinking of an editorial written in the 70s by Nissim in The Indian PEN where he writes: “an association of writers which is merely a club cannot be much of an inspiration… Though non-political, the PEN is not without commitments … This journal ought to move forward from being a chronicle of events with minimum literary contents, to becoming … a platform for the vehicle of a variety of critical attitudes and values.” And I think Nissim really tried to turn PEN into something else, didn’t he? His commitment to constructing a cultural and critical scene is, I feel, unparalleled.

AJ That was certainly his intention. I hadn’t heard those lines before, but that’s what he expected. There is one thing that Nissim was committed to, and that was good writing, and that meant getting rid of all the oriental, romantic flourishes of some of the Indian poetry in English at that time.

LZ Not just Indian poetry in English! I sometimes find it difficult to reconcile Sophia Wadia with Nissim Ezekiel, and make sense of their long association. Sophia Wadia often uses out-dated, orientalist, Victorian and theosophist vocabulary, expressions like offering literature “at the altar of the motherland”, things like that. And all that background was very much part of The Indian PEN at the beginning...

AJ Exactly! Nissim was very much against all that! While he could not have carried on without the practical support of the Theosophists, he had in his diplomatic way to resist any pressures or any ideas which may have come from that area. I could see him doing that. Rameshchandra Sirkar who was in charge of the Theosophy section was a very fine man and a very good speaker. He wasn’t pompous at all. But his talk still had the kind of pieties that we associate with Indian ideas about literature.

LZ Yes and I was struck by the fact that in the 40s and 50s you have many editorials and articles in

---

4 The Literary Gentleman, January 1996 : « We listen to Nissim Ezekiel read Hymns in Darkness but we hear Tukaram’s abhangs. Thye come in our way ... If I go to see Shombu Mitra’s Oedipus, do I expect him to sound like Donald Duck ? Much, though not all contemporary Indian poetry, is declaimed. Much, though not all contemporary Indian poetry in English, is read »
The Indian PEN displaying a form of moralistic attitude towards literature, and discriminating between good or bad, decent or indecent, “pure” or obscene writing.

AJ Yes, Nissim had his own quirky distance from all that. He obviously knew what talking or writing about sex meant for instance! Not Sophia Wadia. But this was again among a certain Patrician class of women in post-Independence India, that includes somebody like Hilla Vakeel. She gave me her book called The Good Citizen for schools, and it’s full of moral platitudes. See, you have to understand that this is partly the environment we grew up in. Victorian and Edwardian morality mixed up with theosophist ideas, and always something very high minded!

Going back to Nissim now, there is one thing that I want to say, and I don’t mind saying it publically, because one day I will bring this up with Arvind. In one of his articles, Arvind says that Nissim was the enemy, and that a hundred years should have separated Nissim and Arun …

LZ Yes, but I think he is now clearly revising that earlier statement.

AJ You see, Arun and Nissim were exactly on the same page on one basic issue, and that was the use of the English language. That was what united them, and that was after all what made Nissim publish Arun in English. If you see Poetry India during the time of Nissim’s editorship, he did publish surrealists and others. So, I think Arvind got carried away a bit there. He imagined a hostility to, let’s say surrealist writing, which wasn’t really there at a particular time. Now it is true that as time went on, Nissim did become more cautious, and more weary, and more conservative. He didn’t really take to Midnight’s Children for instance, and to that kind of writing (but neither did Dom, for entirely different reasons!) And that had nothing to do with issues of blasphemy, but on how a language was being used. I think Nissim in his later years was shy of exuberance and prodigality.

Also, apart from knowledge being one of the values he emphasized, he knew that was useless without self-knowledge. He was constantly aware of himself as an outsider who at the same time was committed against the odds to building up exactly what you said, to build up a viable literary and critical culture.

LZ Sorry for switching from PEN to Quest, Adil. But I wanted to know what you thought of a statement made by a historian called Eric Pullin who worked on the ICCF. In a recent article on Quest, he argues that “Quest appeared to have more popularity among writers than among readers”, and he says that it failed in having a lasting influence on intellectuals. Now I am not sure I agree with that diagnosis, and I wondered what you thought. Margery Sabin also says that the “cold war framework” “fatally contaminates” a project of internal criticism such as Quest’s. Once again, I am not so sure …

AJ Yes, I agree with you, though I can’t give you many concrete positive examples as to what it did achieve. Now once again, just like PEN, though I got my issues of Quest regularly, even before it became New Quest, I myself read it very selectively. I suppose partly because I wasn’t

---

much interested in some of the issues it dealt with. I looked forward to its poetry page, to the short stories that it published, and when Dilip began to write his column there, I certainly looked forward to that. But unlike Dilip for instance, I never myself found A. B. Shah particularly impressive. I felt that in his own way he was a propagandist for “radical humanism”, moving like Nissim from the Left to this “radical humanism” attitude. It seemed a bit woolly.

These are pompous words, “my circle”, etc., but the people I used to meet in the 70s, students, some in the political field or cultural field, others, they would never speak about Quest, nor were they subscribers. Sometimes I used to tell these people, later on, when I was at Debonair, “you guys don’t read Quest, you don’t read Debonair, so am I a freak?” Now the effect of Debonair was often publicized, but what effect Quest had, I don’t know, and I suspect that effect itself was not much publicized. The people who were followers of Quest didn’t really go out and propagate their belief in the journal. It just used to be one of those journals that arrived from time to time.

**LZ** You just talked about students or people in the political and cultural field, but what about your fellow writers? I mean was the journal read amongst you?

**AJ** I don’t think so. Though the poems and stories I did treasure and cut out even. I remember reading a story by the Anglo-Burmese author Kewlian Sio and it was a wonderful story. I don’t know who the editor was, then. But they did publish good things. You also had a very good book review section for instance. Meenakshi Mukherjee wrote for it, etc.

**LZ** Yes, it’s funny because Quest has both very dull and somewhat un-edited essays at least in terms of length, but it had extraordinary pieces as well. At one point it actually seems that everybody got published in Quest! I mean the first issue has Kolatkar and M. F. Husain, and in the following years, you, Eunice de Souza, A. K. Ramanujan, Homi Bhabha, Agha Shahid Ali, etc.

**AJ** Yes I think what happened is that the 50s corresponded to a time of euphoria and challenges for the newly independent nation. All these things happened because things were open and people didn’t think of the political or ideological orientations necessarily. But that gradually gave way because I think other magazines came up that perhaps were more brash, like Z. Readers expected more “glitter” than it got from Quest.

**LZ** When we talked about the *Satanic Verses* controversy together, you mentioned that Nissim may have got influenced by people from PROYOM. But on paper at least, I can’t really see the link between PROYOM and PEN. So what’s the story behind the story?

**AJ** Firstly I don’t think that Nissim ever much bothered with the political orientation of the people who came to him and talked to him. I don’t think that was of any paramount concern. He just found a kindred spirit in the couple of people who visited him and were upset by Salman’s supposed blasphemy. Earlier I referred to Nissim’s increasing caution, and by the time this whole *Satanic Verses* thing burst upon us, he did feel that literature that disturbed the peace or threatened to disturb it was not to be encouraged. You must remember that Bombay in the 70s was filled with street protests. The trade unions were strong, some of the protests turned violent, and I don’t think anyone, and certainly not Nissim, could escape that feeling of violence.
It’s quite possible that the experience of the 70s must have affected him. He was really a person who believed in non-violence, and in fact took a position on *The Satanic Verses* which Gandhi and Gandhians might have taken as well. I think we all have a genuine fear of violence erupting in a most savage and uncontrollable way, which happens from time to time. Which is why even when the Supreme Court lifts a ban on a book, shopkeepers don’t want to keep it, like James Laine’s biography of Shivaji.

I am not attributing any lungi of cowardice (as some of us, including myself, sometimes wear!) on Nissim’s part, I don’t know what I would do facing a mob, but certainly all his ideas of freedom of speech went overboard when he actually supported the ban. Unfortunately that one action has led to exaggerated stories about him asking for a *morcha* (street protest) against the book! Of course Nissim never did that.

**LZ** Do you think he realized at the time how much this one public stance\(^6\) discredited him or, at least seemed to go against everything that he had been fighting for?

**AJ** No, I don’t think he did. I think he just shut all the windows. Two things, firstly on the question of how he got influenced by these people I have in mind. There was a public meeting which was held to discuss the ban, and I was on the panel with Alyque Padamsee and with Soli Sorabjee who was a much respected lawyer, and we all had our turn to speak. Someone in the audience asked why Nissim took such a stance, and I said that he was wrongly influenced. And the two people whom I recognized as once being part of PROYOM got up and left the hall. It doesn’t really surprise me that the Left would be very happy to ban the book.

**LZ** Why?

**AJ** One reason is that, you know, you hurt the feelings of a community which is victimized or under threat. That must have been the reason that the ex-PROYOM people who remained I suppose CPML (Communist Party Marxist/Leninist), they felt that look, consider the Muslims. How can a man write like that against the Prophet? The Left in India is forever caught up in this dilemma…

**LZ** Oh, the Left everywhere! In France, the Left is totally divided on this issue, and this vicious division was highlighted after Charlie Hebdo for instance. It’s very interesting to see this debate played out in different contexts.

**AJ** Yes, they don’t know what attitude to take about religion. When it suits them, they say that religion is very important to the masses…

\(^6\) Nissim Ezekiel and six other writers published a letter in *The Indian Post* in support of the ban which concluded with the following words: « We, the undersigned, are all non-Muslims. We are, therefore, obviously not subscribers to the Islamic faith. We believe that any critique of that faith has to be restrained, reasoned and full of the spirit of respecting diverse cultures and faiths. India’s unity and harmony demands it. It is for such harmony and unity that we demand that the ban on this book be not lifted. »
But I think what distressed and disturbed Nissim’s friends and others is that they felt that at least he should have come out and said that this is his personal opinion and does not reflect the views of PEN. Otherwise, he should have stepped down from PEN. And he didn’t. But you see, such is the climate here, Laetitia, that his sacrifice if he had stepped down from PEN would have meant nothing. Because whoever would have taken his place would have believed in the same thing.

**LZ Are you sure? Why?**

**AJ** Because I think that is what we are! Once you are in that kind of position, which is the position of a spokesman, you prevaricate and you want to keep the status quo. See, why was that case not taken up in India? Why has there been no legal action? And why has there been no official lifting of a ban on any of the books which have been banned in India? Is that written in the constitution that once something is banned, the ban can’t be lifted? There is no judicial precedence. Or perhaps there is. Recently, Murugan’s book …

**LZ** I think it was the Madras High Court which ruled in favour of Murugan⁷. That’s actually such an interesting example. His Songs of a Coward is a wonderful collection. It’s also a very interesting case where you see one of the huge paradoxes of censorship being played out, right? Because far from silencing the writer, the intimidation and the attacks in fact led to more and more poems being written, and more national and international visibility for the writer and his poetry.

**AJ** Yes, it is a very interesting case. Then, there’s hope! And perhaps that means there is hope for PEN as well in India, right? With the PEN International Congress being held in Pune in September. Maybe suddenly it will reverse the way PEN has been going and seen here!

**LZ** In his book (Nissim Ezekiel, the Authorized Biography), Raj Rao writes that there was actually an All-India PEN Center resolution in support of the ban, so we are not just talking about Nissim’s personal position but of the official line of the PEN… Now I am a little confused, because everyone seems to disagree on that point.

**AJ** Well that’s what I got from his book as well! But I’ve always wondered how Nissim explained his position to PEN International.

**LZ** Nissim actually says something which is not quite right, to say the least, in his 1989 interview in Debonair. He says that PEN International has not commented on his stance. And that seems false, because we know from work in the PEN International archives⁸ that the English Center and International PEN stated their disapproval.

---

⁷ On the issue, see Githa Hariharan’s interview : « We are talking of more than writers rights, we are talking about letting people live », [https://writersandfreeexpression.com/2017/07/14/we-are-talking-of-more-than-writers-rights-we-are-talking-of-letting-people-live-an-interview-with-githa-hariharan/](https://writersandfreeexpression.com/2017/07/14/we-are-talking-of-more-than-writers-rights-we-are-talking-of-letting-people-live-an-interview-with-githa-hariharan/)

⁸ At the 1989 Congress the English Centre proposed a resolution condemning India’s stance on Rushdie, after the publication of anti-Rushdie material in Indian PEN’s newsletter (‘Minutes of the Meeting of the Assembly of Delegates of International P.E.N. held in Funchal, Madeira on Tuesday May 8th and Thursday May 10th 1990’ Group 3, Box 26, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas). See Katherine Cooper’s post on the archives here: [https://writersandfreeexpression.com/2017/09/06/un-covering-pens-archives-four-months-at-the-harry-ransom-center/](https://writersandfreeexpression.com/2017/09/06/un-covering-pens-archives-four-months-at-the-harry-ransom-center/) (A slight correction needs to be made here: Perhaps indeed Nissim Ezekiel had not officially heard from International PEN at the time of the interview which takes place the same year as the 1989 PEN Congress. At this point, but perhaps that’s a point that further work in the archives will clarify, it’s actually difficult to know)
AJ Yes, but it didn’t lead to an expulsion of PEN for example, just as the non-payment of fees has never led to anything more than dismay, and the Indian PEN has not been paying its fees for a very long time now! Why has India been treated in this special way? I actually did not know that it was PEN’s official line, until you mentioned it last time and I read Raj Rao’s biography again. But it ties up with a certain attitude towards literature, which got so far as unfortunately to be enshrined in an amendment of our constitution… That literature should not offend people’s sensibilities and should not offend friendly relations with foreign powers. Now if you are putting that in your constitution, then how can cases be fought in court to defend literature?

LZ What is particularly interesting about that case, is that you have someone who has almost always defended liberal values and free speech until the Satanic Verses. And you reminded me of Jeet Thayil’s article “Is it ever right to ban art?” which ends precisely on Nissim’s example: “He said that the publication of The Satanic Verses was an incendiary act in the Indian context, for it could lead to rioting and murder, and no book was worth that ». That’s really what our project is interested in: exploring how these very big international principles are translated in other contexts or come in conflict with other principles or ideals. And it’s not that easy to say, yes, of course “free speech” has to be defended!

AJ Yes, I agree. And I might even say that I sympathize with Nissim’s position or with the dilemma he was in. I would be in a similar dilemma. I do not believe in an absolute right to free speech which would never be relativized. This is a human thing. There are certain unwritten codes of behaviour in a society. See, I would not like to say that I am the kind of person who will tell a woman what to wear or not to wear. But I would say that there are certain occasions in this country that you do not dress as freely as you would like to. You are not going to change a mob which is almost bestial in its predatory prow… These are difficult subjects to talk about. You may believe in the absoluteness of free speech, but please also believe that not everyone around you believes that, or believes that you have the right to say what you are saying. Now, how do you negotiate that? I am almost making a case for statesmanship and diplomacy in politics. People talk of non-violence as though it is a real alternative to other kinds of politics, but what is statesmanship and diplomacy but non-violence? It is a non-violent way to try and resolve issues.

LZ Yes, you are right. That makes me think of an interesting correspondence between Einstein and Freud re-published in Quest in the late 50s, and Freud says that, well basically, peace can only be maintained because of the threat of total destruction… So it’s non-violence inspired by the terror of nuclear violence.

AJ I grant that. Still, within that framework, it is non-violent.

LZ Now on the Satanic Verses, you took a stance which was diametrically opposed to Nissim’s, didn’t you? In 1988 you wrote a letter to the Prime Minister signed by Mulk Raj Anand, Jeet Thayil, Arun Kolatkar, Gieve Patel and many others to protest against the ban, and in the following years you repeatedly raised the issue of the fatwa again and

9 « Religious censorship crushes creativity. So is it ever right to ban art? »
again in different articles and newspapers (“Salman and the Sea of Paper”, “Come back, Salman! Family Serious”, etc.) In that letter to the PM you point to the fact that the book is a fantasy, a fiction. How can fiction hurt? But you also reverse the argument “it is neither secular nor democratic to deny the bulk of the literate population the opportunity to read this book… The members of the community it is supposed to offend should surely have the right to read it or not”. How did Nissim respond to your letter?

AJ He never brought it up though I suspect he read what I had written. But I don’t think we ever really discussed the issue. Maybe intuitively I knew I wouldn’t be able to draw Nissim out on that. Actually there were 2 letters. The first one, in 1988, was drafted by Dom. I remember being in his flat at Sargent House, and he said “you got to get signatures”. So I did help get the signatures. The other one was in 1995, and it was addressed to the Prime Minister to put the case of Salman Rushdie on top of the agenda at the time of the Iranian Foreign Minister’s visit to India. And also, during all the tumult after the fatwa there was a group called the International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie, and they wanted letters from different parts of the world, and I think we wrote to them and sent all these signatures to them.

LZ Were you also the one behind the 1989 Debonair interview (titled “No society can afford to say: let us have freedom whatever the consequences”) which also re-published a very interesting earlier piece of Nissim on censorship?

AJ Yes, I think so. I asked Mukesh Vatsyayan to go ahead with the interview. He wanted to do it.

LZ Let me read a few lines from this earlier essay by Nissim because I find them splendid: “The idea of the writer as a nonconformist, a rebel, and even an enemy of society is virtually non-existent in India”. Now I am not so sure about that, but still …

“My aim … is to warn against the sentimental approach to this question which sees the writer as the aggrieved victim, generally heroic, of thought-control exercised by Society or the State… It is not true that we are being told ‘Don’t attack the Establishment’. What is more effectively at work, here, I believe, is the Censor in all of us: the Mediocre and the Platitudinous in all of us. … That is why the organisations of writers are necessary to make collective action quick, economical and effective. Writers must act as a pressure group in favour of freedom on the basis of agreement as to what freedom means. Since such agreement (on freedom) cannot be assumed or taken for granted, it becomes essential for writers to debate it among themselves, freely and frequently, not as an exercise in abstract thought, but as a method of understanding all those contemporary phenomena which concern the writer. I would like to make a plea here for a persistent debate of this kind, since it leads to clarity and alertness. It clears the ground for action against censorship in all its forms…”

That was really what Nissim’s project was about, right? Let’s forget about the idea of community, but at the very least the idea of creating a forum, a platform for debate, or critique, and for discussions, and ultimately a platform for activism

---

89 In August 1989, Debonair republished ‘Censorship and the Writer’ written by Ezekiel for Seminar’s special issue on Censorship in July 1963. It was followed by an interview with Mukesh Vatsyayana.
LZ Yes, absolutely. Though I too question Nissim’s idea that the writer as a rebel is foreign to India. Not at all. It’s full of dissenting spirits. But yes, I think the reason perhaps he put these views forward, it’s because these were the sorts of things that were on all our minds. It’s not just now. People who grew up in post-independence India have been faced with these bans (“don’t read this”, “don’t do this”, etc.) all the time. It was a culture of banning things, whether it was films, or writing, or even foreign-imported goods. This brings us back to the idea of the decadent foreign culture. Whatever was legitimate about those feelings at a certain time was stalked by some very woolly-minded ideas about the greatness of our civilization.

When Moraji Desai became Chief Minister of Bombay, then particularly there was this deep suspicion or ban of foreign goods, what continues to this day in one form or the other. Seeing forms of Western art, this could even be jazz, as decadent. So that the venues where such concerts are held are the first to be off limits, or they are in one way or the other destroyed. That’s increasingly obvious today, with the high entertainment taxes that cripple foreign shows, and the relatively recent closing of the open-air Rang Bhavan, a favourite venue for international jazz. Whenever there has been a surge of freedom, the powers see to it that it is cut off, or it is severely restricted. What I am saying is that one reason why Nissim felt so strongly about this, is that we had to face this culture of restrictions and bans all the time.

LZ Reading yesterday that 1989 Debonair interview with Nissim, he actually says exactly what you were suggesting when we last met. I think you are right, he was afraid. He writes that in India you live permanently in times of war, and violence can erupt anytime. He also says that not to support the ban would indicate indifference to the outraged feelings of Muslims... And I was thinking again about his positions on the Emergency, which were so different from the ones he took concerning Rushdie’s book. Now if we come back to the present situation, I was asking Aspi Mistry the other day if he saw any parallels between the Emergency and the present situation. And he said something which I found really interesting: « At least during the Emergency, things were clear, we knew what the Emergency stood for. Now there is no line defined. You can cross the line without knowing it. » Do you believe that also?

AJ Yes, that’s right. Absolutely. I believe that. That leads to further caution, further censorship, further self-censorship. It’s the ad hoc situation of so many things here. You don’t know why something should get so out of hand publicly, that it leads to the slaughter of innocent people. It’s endless.²¹

LZ So what’s the point of signing petitions, of writing these statements. In « Salman and the Sea of Paper », you write that in spite of the « sea of paper » that was produced in defense of Rushdie « all our good words have been unable to lift that sentence »²². And if we go back to PEN, that’s what the organization does, and knows how to do, publicize cases, write letters, etc... What’s the alternative?

AJ I think that I put this view forward as an existential dilemma. The next step doesn’t

---

²¹ Also see Githa Hariharan’s interview « We are talking of more than writers rights … »
²² An article published in India Today in February 1994.
²³ See Salil Tripathi’s interview on the different means by which PEN campaigns in defense of free speech and writers in prison: « From a very young age in fact I used to collect books that were banned »

necessarily mean to “shut up”. And the things that have made me shut up are not necessarily regressive government actions, and so on, but things that I can do nothing about but just speak about, like images of injustice. That’s all I can do. My words will have no immediate or even later effect on the farmer tackling drought for instance. I think all writers do come to a point when they feel that it’s best to shut up because what they are adding to a certain situation is just “words words words”, or perhaps they make themselves fall quiet. Perhaps they’ve been made to shut up as well. At the same time the question is what kind of words, in terms of poetry, of music, of painting. If there is some kind of magic in those words, then there’s also a revelation. And something new happens. So I would say we do what we have to do. There is no real rule about what we should do next.

**LZ** But when you say somewhat despairingly that it’s been ages since the All-India PEN Center has raised its voice to defend this or that writer...

**AJ** I don’t think there were no statements at all in the history of the PEN All-India Center. But the people in charge really felt that it’s not their business to talk about these issues. It’s not their business to, say, even take seriously what firebrands and rather volatile writers like KA Abbas would be saying in a paper like *Blitz*. But it’s no use just calling it a Communist rag. KA Abbas is emerging as an important cultural figure in independent India, just as Nissim is. Could there have been no dialogue between the two? One side saying ‘oh these are fanatics, these are leftists!’, and the other side … But, I mean, though a public dialogue with someone like KA Abbas was unthinkable, there could have been a lively interaction – and together they could have raised burning issues of censorship and protest. I think that was the kind of almost philosophical view that, maybe through Sophia Wadia, and not just because of Nissim’s temperament, the PEN adopted. So things are discussed in the most excellent way possible, and the idea of excellence is always there in much of Indian thought, but you are not supposed to think of how to translate those excellent ideas into action! Which is why we keep on babbling about new Indian PEN Centers. Excellent idea. But why is it taking so long?

**LZ** Now if we can go back to the cultural Cold War which, as you know, really interests me at the moment… In a previous conversation you mentioned in passing the fairs of Soviet books and Soviet culture, could you tell me a little more about those?

**AJ** Yes, these fairs happened in the 60s and 70s. By fairs I don’t mean anything very grand. Around Flora Fountain for instance, they would put up some tents and they would be displaying Soviet books. There was also the House of Soviet Culture on Peddar Road where they used to show films, and have cultural events, just like the Alliance Française. I was more interested in the books than in the events or the films. And all these books were available at People Books House near the Strand.

**LZ** You also mentioned the “corner-lending libraries” for foreign paperbacks in the 60s which had issues of *Playboy, The New Yorker,* etc.
AJ Like you have these semi-open spaces like the raddiwallas on groundfloors, so these were lending libraries where you place a one-time deposit, and then you could borrow whatever that deposit was worth, 2 or 3 books for the month. And these were very often the more popular kind of paperbacks, but not always. One of these kinds of lending libraries is “Smokers’ corner” which is past Strand and still exists today. Now you just get second-hand books at a discount; but it used to have mostly British, American and Indian paperbacks, and castaway journals, stacks of old issues of The New Yorker, National Geographic, etc. And I think they served a purpose in their neighbourhood, not only the one we normally associate with soft porn. Believe it or not, these libraries stocked good writing in paperback too - novels by Malamud, Bellow, Edna O’Brien and Doris Lessing. They were part of a culture. I do remember the one at the corner here, where I would get Playboy in the 70s. It wouldn’t sell openly but people who wanted to get Playboy knew where to get them.

LZ In an article I love « Boys and Girls in Purdah », you attack the purdah behind which some of your students live and read, and you write that art or literature that enters India thanks to the USIS or the British Council, is art « with its balls removed »14. What kind of literature were you thinking about?

AJ It’s a rather extreme and somewhat unfair statement considering that I benefited so much by borrowing books from these very libraries, the USIS, the British Council, later on Max Mueller. Perhaps I should have phrased it more carefully. What I meant is that the kind of authors that came our way through the USIS were generally safe authors. I am not saying they were mediocre, far from it. There were very fine authors who did come our way. But here I am writing as perhaps with the same kind of position that Jeet Thayil takes on his article on censorship. What I perhaps wanted to say, is where is the other art of those countries – rebel or off-beat art? I felt a little bit of twinge when I read that piece by Jeet when he said that with the kind of attitude that we have in India we will never have a William Burroughs or a Basquiat. Now do we need to? Even while we oppose a sort of cultural enslavement to western genres and developments, we feel we are not there unless we’ve mimicked them in some way… Rebels, yes, but mimic rebels? I wish Jeet had phrased that differently. We may have another form of dissent, I don’t know. Jeet is taking the position of people who later became his saints, like Souza. But we’ve had many censor-defying rebels here, not just some of the bhakti poets, but theatre people like Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir and Vijay Tendulkar, Marathi poet B.S. Mardhekar, Urdu writers of fiction like Qurratulain Hyder. And while not publicized internationally in the same way as Burroughs was, Anglophone poets Henry Derozio, Michael Madhudan Dutt and, closer to our time, playwrights Asif Currumbhoy and Partap Sharma had to face appalling threats or acts of censorship from their own people and from the State. And they continued to write.

While I grant his position that there is that sense of morality, which can be very stultifying, and we come back to the moral values that literature should inculcate at large in the Indian public.

14 Published in a student periodical called The Campus Times (1972)