

It seems to be the nature of humans to live in societies. Books, document the history of our societies and civilization. Fiction, provides a window into the hopes, dreams and fantasies of our civilization. While most of us are able to adapt to the rules of our respective societies, there are those amongst us who, no matter what price they have to pay for their actions, use the medium of writing to give voice to their protest of the rules, restrictions or repression of their respective societies. Whether it is for political or social reasons, most societies impose some form of censorship on written material, thereby altering our available fund of knowledge and impacting our ability to understand both our history and current events. "The history of persecuted writers is as long as the history of literature itself. And the efforts to censor, starve, regulate, and annihilate us are clear signs that something important has taken place. Cultural and political forces can sweep clean all but the "safe," all but state-approved art" (Morrison 2, *Burn This Book*).

In the United States, parents, educators and librarians who profess that they wish to protect the psyches of the children in their charge, persist in the notion of removing books from classrooms and libraries. Exactly what is censorship? It is difficult to find a solid definition. Censorship seems to be a fluid concept that melds itself to the needs of the society wishing to impose restriction on those who would speak out. "Censorship is suppression of speech or other communication which may be considered objectionable, harmful, sensitive, or inconvenient to the general body of people as determined by a government, media outlet, or other controlling body" (Wikipedia Web). Censorship can also be regarded as, "the control of the information and ideas circulated within a society" (Global Internet Literary Campaign Web). I choose to consider censorship from the point of view that material is prohibited because an author is saying something that someone doesn't want to hear; doesn't want to hear it because it is frightening, intimidating or embarrassing. When considering the suppression of writing material it is important to keep in mind, not only the roots and rationales for the suppression; is the action is taken by a totalitarian society that seeks to silence any form of dissent, or by a parent wishing to protect their child from disturbing information? It is also sometimes important to consider whether the offense is given by the manner in which the offensive material is stated. Does the nature and style of the language used changes the impact of the distasteful material? I contend that the act of censorship, the withholding of ideas, concepts and words, makes prisoners of us all. It limits our freedom of self-expression and freedom of choice and stifles our intellect. In this paper, I consider the words of authors who have been censored. Some who have been *de facto* prisoners; their works altered or forbidden, exiled and expelled from their native countries, and some who, in fact, have been physically incarcerated.

Nawal El Saadawai is an author who not only has been censored; she was terminated from jobs and imprisoned for daring to publicly voice her disagreement with the government of Egypt (Emory Web). In *God Dies by the Nile*, El Saadawai contrasts a profound religious belief against the reality of daily existence in a poor, rural Egyptian village. The progress of the story lets allows us to share El Saadawai's disillusion and disappointment in a government and a religion that both fail to protect its citizens and worshippers from exploitation, including rape, murder and false imprisonment. At one point in the story, El Saadawai does let the reader see her belief in the potential unifying force of Islam, "She was no longer afraid and her eyes ceased to search among the crowds for Zenaib. For all the faces she saw were like Zeinaib's, and all the voices she heard reminded her of Zenaib's voice. Even the words, the way they pronounced them, their very intonation, the lifting of hands to the heavens, the single unchanging cry, 'O God, come to our rescue, O God' changed out in one voice, made her feel that all of these people were Zeinab" (El Saadawai 112). She is almost ecstatic in her expression of religious union with the others. Later, she has becomes disillusioned, "These people are unbelievers, Fatheya. They don't have faith in God nor do they worry their heads about what will happen either in this world, or in the next. In their hearts, they don't fear God. What they really fear is the Mayor. He holds their daily bread in his hands and if he wants, he can deprive them of it. If he gets angry their debts double, and the government keeps sending them one summons after the other. 'Either pay or you land will be confiscated.' You do not know the Mayor, Fatheya. He's a dangerous man, and fears no one, not even Allah. He can do injustice to people and put them in gaol when they done nothing to merit it. He can even murder innocent people" (El Saadawai 134).

The story in *God Dies by the Nile* is related from by an omniscient narrator, but from multiple points of view, evoking the traditional Arabic pass-the-ball story-telling style. The language is simple and straight-forward; El Saadawai uses color to create vivid descriptions. The manner in which she describes the landscape is reverent and sensual at the same

time, “She advanced between the two stretches of green and brown with the same swinging movement starting from the hips and thighs. Overhead, the black night withdrew gradually as the crimson hue of dawn spread out, then, after a while, changed to a glaring, orange light. Suddenly, over the edge of the earth a point of sun shone out, grew slowly to become a disc of fire, then climbed up into the sky” (El Saadawai 2). In this beautiful passage, El Saadawai is sharing her love of the physical beauty of the countryside. She leaves the reader with the sense that although she has criticized both Egypt and Islam, the beautiful dawning of a new day is a metaphor for the potential of the future. It is too bad that the government of Egypt could not see the love in her words and consider her work as a constructive tool.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Survival in Auschwitz: If This is a Man, and This Blinding Absence of Light are all chronicles of surviving prison and prison camps under the worst possible and most tortuous physical imprisonment imaginable – men who were imprisoned for no fault greater than the religion they were born into and/or for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Both *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Surviving Auschwitz: If This is a Man* are autobiographical; *This Blinding Absence of Light* is specifically different from the other two books in that although Ben Jelloun did personally experience some of the harsher aspects of the political regime in Morocco, he did not personally experience the imprisonment described in the story. The book is based on an interview that he had with the survivor of the imprisonment. Thus, while Salim’s survival is credited to a transcendent religious experience, one cannot be sure if this truly was the case. The reader cannot know if it was retrospective wishful thinking on the part of the survivor or if the experience was projected by the author, Ben Jelloun. There is no doubt in my mind that of the three books, the language in the translation of *This Blinding Absence of Light* is the most poetic.

Salim is a victim of circumstance, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Ben Jelloun has a powerful message about the horrors of torture. *This Blinding Absence of Light* was censored in Morocco for exposing the horrors that were endured by prisoners who were condemned, without trial, by King Hassan II and King Hassan II felt that Ben Jelloun should not have the right to judge the justice of the King. From the Hassan’s point of view, if you broke the law, you should be punished and the punishment must be dire and extreme so that your suffering will serve as an example to any others who would follow in your footsteps. It is probable that King Hassan would regard the censorship of Ben Jelloun as an absolute necessity for maintaining the integrity of his authority.

Ben Jelloun uses beautiful language to describe unimaginable horrors, but only as they are viewed from Salim’s point of view. The reader only knows and understands what Salim sees, thinks and hears for himself. Unlike Ben Jelloun’s *The Sand Child*, there is structure to this story; a beginning and an end with only one narrator. Salim describes the awful physical circumstances of his environment, the fact that he can never stand up straight, the absence of light and the horrific food. The only aspect of his life that Salim is able to control is his thoughts, which we hear as he struggles to stay alive and sane. The story incorporates the details of what the prisoners’ daily life was like, including the suffering and the deaths of the other prisoners. This departure of style from that used in *The Sand Child* was necessary because this story is based on a true event. Even though Ben Jelloun was not actually imprisoned in Tazmamart, he may have been sensitive and particularly sympathetic to this event because as a student, Ben Jelloun was punitively conscripted into the Moroccan army and suffered circumstances during that time that he has said were more like punishment than it was military service (Pen Web) (Taharbenjelloun.org Web).

In addition to a traditional flow of time, there is also a high level of tension in the story. The reader wonders what continued miseries will be heaped on these poor men, who will be the next to die and who will live. At one point there is chaos in the dramatic structure; the reader may believe that Salim will not survive. Just when it reaches the point where you feel he is going to give up, changes occur: one prisoner leaves, possibly achieving freedom; one of the guards, previously so cruel, brings drugs and vitamins to the prisoners. These events foreshadow the continuation of life.

The story is about survival through religious transcendence. There are a number of references to the black stone in this book, but I particularly like the passage: “The black stone, the heart of the universe, the memory of grace, the splendor of faith, and complete unselfishness: such were the signs that guided me. I should add the intermittent presence of my guardian angels, of Tebebt, and—alas—of the screech owl as well, our announcer of imminent misfortune” (Ben Jelloun 156-157). The black stone is in the Kaaba, a cube shaped building in Mecca, a place that all devout followers of Islam make at least one pilgrimage to in their lifetime. Imagining, dreaming about the black stone provides a physical symbol, a focus for Salim’s religious meditation (Wikipedia Web). It is a frequent occurrence that people who are suffering intense physical or mental anguish will have what might be considered an “out-of-body” experience, and for Salim, it is the hope generated by his faith, that permits mental and emotional separation from his horrific circumstances and keeps him alive. In addition to the black stone as a focal point, Salim has guides; the bird Tebebt and screech owl are the yin and yang of life and death. Tebebt symbolizes life, joy, music and light; all aspects of hope. The screech owl is the augury and manifestation of death (Squido Web). It is his memory of grace, his faith, his unselfishness and his ability to keep these ideals in his mind that allows Salim to retain his humanity.

In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn used a clean, linear style to follow a prisoner through the events of one day in his life. Solzhenitsyn conveys the absolute hopelessness of the camp life, “But nobody’d ever been let out of this camp yet” (Solzhenitsyn 7), and yet Ivan Denisovich continues in his struggle to survive, “You might well ask why a prisoner worked so hard for ten years in a camp...That’s why they’d dreamed up these gangs...In the camps they had these gangs to make sure the prisoners keep each other on their toes...either you all got something extra or you all starved” (Solzhenitsyn 66,67). The reader must consider whether this story is merely a chronicle of life in the camps of the Gulag, or if it is a commentary on daily life under socialism in the Soviet Union. The corruption of the leaders, the squealers, work gangs, and the communal sharing of clothing, food and any useful materials that come to hand, all evoke the hardship of life in the USSR during Stalin’s leadership.

Solzhenitsyn was not punished in the USSR for the writing and the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. At that time the Soviet government, then under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, was actively engaged in what was called de-Stalinization. The book served the government’s purpose in promoting propaganda to discredit the policies and actions that occurred during the leadership of Joseph Stalin. However, the book shocked the world. Solzhenitsyn’s later works that were considered to be anti-Soviet; he was ostracized and eventually stripped of his Soviet citizenship and expelled from the USSR (Wikipedia Web).

Survival in Auschwitz is a chronicle of the horror and physical deprivation of life in the concentration camps; the story of a man’s struggle to remember that he is human and to retain his will to live. Survival was paramount to Levi, even if at times it meant sacrificing his dignity and, at times, even his very humanity.

Primo Levi’s story of his imprisonment in Auschwitz engenders an extraordinary feeling of despair, “we learned that on the following day the Jews would be leaving: all the Jews, without exception...Our destination? Nobody knew...For every person missing at the roll-call, ten would be shot. Only a minority of ingenuous and deluded souls continued to hope...we knew what departure meant” (Levi 8). *Survival in Auschwitz* is narrated in a strictly linear fashion, beginning with Levi’s capture and ending with the liberation of Auschwitz by the Russians. There are few metaphors. Levi recounts what he observed and understood in simple, unadorned language; it is the clarity and starkness of the language that allows the reader to clearly consider the depths of despair that encompassed every waking moment of life in Auschwitz. In spite of the simplicity of language, there is suspense and there are many dramatic moments; every day of survival was a victory that should have been celebrated. Unfortunately, every day of survival also meant that on the following day, more misery would have to be endured. And so, while we can rejoice at each affliction that Levi overcomes, if we are empathetic, we are immediately plunged back into terror and despair when we realize that every obstacle, every abuse endured was followed by many more torments. “there is a vast category of prisoners not initially favored by fate, who fight merely with their own strength to survive. One has to fight against the current; to battle every day and every hour against exhaustion, hunger, cold and the resulting inertia; to resist enemies and have no pity for rivals; to sharpen one’s wits, build up one’s patience, strengthen one’s will-power. Or else, to throttle all dignity and kill all conscience, to climb down into the arena as a beast against other beasts, to let one’s self be guided by those unsuspected subterranean forces which sustain families and individuals in cruel times. Many were the ways devised and put into effect by us in order not to die, as many as there are different human characters. All implied a weakening struggle of one against all, and a by no means small sum of aberrations and compromises. Survival without renunciation of any part of one’s own moral world apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune was conceded only to a very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints” (Levi 65). In this passage, Levi provides an intellectual window into some aspects of the prisoners’ mental state. The word choices are interesting. He speaks of fighting, doing battle, resistance, sharpening, strengthening, throttling dignity and killing all conscience. These are all action words. There are two metaphors: fighting against the current, an apt metaphor since it implies that you are trying to keep from drowning and “to climb down into the arena as a beast against other beasts” (Levi 65) it is not surprising that he compares the men to beasts, as the conditions which they lived in were bestial. Combining this with, “to let oneself be guided by those unsuspected subterranean forces which sustain families and individuals in cruel times” (Levi 65) is particularly provocative. He is saying that we have innate natural survival instincts and that we draw upon previously unknown personal strength, when we need to. The action words at the beginning of this passage are balanced by more passive language in the latter part: sustain, weakening struggle and survival, indicating that some will be strong, some will just survive and some will not survive.

Survival in Auschwitz: If This Is A Man is aptly named. I do not think that Levi would agree with Gao Xingjian’s belief that you cannot kill human dignity. Unlike Xingjian, who was able to flee communist China, Levi did not have the option to leave the concentration camp. Like *This Blinding Absence of Light*, this story is a catalogue of the horrors that despots inflicted on men who simply had the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The torments were deliberately designed to push men (and women) to the edge of their endurance and test their will to live, sometimes pushing them beyond any sense of humanity or dignity. Levi provides detailed descriptions of the lack and the condition of the clothing, shoes, food and the beds in the concentration camps; the filth and the smells that they were aware of, even though they

could no longer smell themselves, because for some of the men, there was still a shred of their humanity and dignity remaining. When they were finally liberated, Levi looked to his humanity, but rather than celebrating, he continues in his accounting, by letting the reader know which members of his small remaining group survived; the potential for despair and horror is endless. He is telling the reader that he still lives from one day to the next, waiting to see what the next day will bring for him to endure; he will never, never forget what he lived through.

Detractors will say that there is no merit in reading *Survival in Auschwitz*, nothing like this will ever happen again. They will tell you that this is merely the empty bleating of sheep-like Jews who allowed themselves to be led to slaughter. They may even tell you that the Holocaust is a myth perpetuated by Jews who want to take over the Middle East. It is interesting to see this specifically addressed in *The German Mujahid*, "Have people in Ain Deb even heard of the Nazi extermination of the Jews? Or are they completely ignorant, like I was, knowing only whatever the man sees fit to tell them?...I'm guessing that the Algerian government doesn't teach this stuff in schools, the kids might get upset, they might feel sorry for the Jews, they might start to realize some other truths. I'm guessing they teach kids to hate the Jews, to keep their minds closed" (Sansal 172). By forbidding publication of *The German Mujahid*, the Algerian government made intellectual prisoners of its citizenry; limiting their knowledge and understanding of historical events.

For the purposes of this paper, I consider censorship and repression because of politics, political systems and religion together, as a form of imprisonment. All manners of government create situations where one group or individual attempts or succeeds in making rules, whether it is based on the desire for individual gain, such as the securing of personal power or wealth, or whether it is based on a sincere desire to create an environment designed to serve the common good. Examples of literary prisoners of political situations include the characters in *Wild Thorns*, *Martyrs' Crossing*, *One Man's Bible*, and *The German Mujahid*.

In *Wild Thorns*, Khalifeh comments on the futility of political systems and the similarity of totalitarian regimes, "History repeats itself, adopting fine, resounding names – democracy, socialism, the proletariat. Then someone like Stalin raises his sickle and harvests millions of necks, while the masses go on screaming and whistling for the lord of might and power, singing the praises of Moscow and communist China" (Khalifeh 138). In *The German Mujahid*, Sansal takes consideration of totalitarian regimes to another level, not only by comparing the Islamic extremists, the Jihadists, to the Nazis, but also by juxtaposing their manner of oppression, "That's their strategy: block the escape routes, make lots of noise, keep people poor – that way they're one step closer to paradise. They treat people like sheep...we believed the Fuhrer's spiel" (Sansal 72).

Both *Wild Thorns* and *Martyrs' Crossing* address issues relating to the Palestinian and Israeli conflict. Both stories address prejudice and discrimination based on nationality and both stories humanize the terrorist. The most provocative aspect of *Wild Thorns* is the revelation that, not only are men jailed without trial or the opportunity for redress, but that the homes of suspected terrorists are razed to the ground by the Israelis. *Wild Thorns* provides a first-hand picture for readers of some of the struggles that average Palestinians have to endure in the course of day-to-day survival. *Martyrs' Crossing* is not about average people, but it has a great deal to say about political opportunism on both sides of the conflict. I suspect that both Khalifeh and Wilentz wonder how anyone can ever hope to achieve an end to the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians if all of the parties concerned do not take the time to understand both the people who are affected by the terrible hardships caused by the endless fighting, as well as trying to stop the politicians and war mongers from heartlessly manipulating people and situations to suit their political and military agendas.

The theme of being imprisoned, both physically and metaphorically runs throughout *Wild Thorns*. Adil is imprisoned by the requirements of maintaining his family in their home and paying for his father's kidney machine. However, Adil is a man who does not dwell on his personal hardship, even as he considers his personal problems, he still ponders the fate of Palestine, "My father has such a grip on life, as the past always has on the present, an unshakeable grip, impossible to cast off, like a prison record or the grip of a virus clinging to a healthy cell. The very sap of my body, he thought, is threatened by my father's illness" (Khalifeh 51). This short passage contains multiple metaphors: the future versus the past; the impact his father's health (the past) has on Adil's life (the future), represents the manner in which the Israeli occupation of Palestine degrades the fiscal and emotional health of Palestine. The metaphor of prison versus freedom is mixed with disease or illness versus health. This creates the implication that the past not only imprisons the future, it threatens the future with infection and disease. This passage is highly charged; the poetic rhythm of the language intensifies the emotional pitch through the repetition of the word grip, along with the use of "the very sap of my body," meaning the essence of his physical body, but also implying his emotional well being.

And while the teenager, Basil believes that he has become a man through his brief imprisonment, Zuhdi reflects on the futility of his situation, "Shlomo wasn't all bad. He was just a human being, like you and me. But he was also an ass, just like the thousands of Shlomos before him. I'm an ass too. Two asses fighting over a bundle of clover... And what did we gain from it all? He's in the hospital and I'm in prison" (Khalifeh 139). Again Khalifeh has provided a complex metaphor. Shlomo represents Israel, Zuhdi represents Palestine; they are two asses fighting over a bundle of clover,

representing the land. This passage also reflects the most important theme of the book, and that is that everyone involved in the conflict is human, and should be considered as such. This is seen when Usama waffles when he considers the possible impact of the bombing he is supposed to execute, he waffles, "So what if Adil died? Or ten like him?" (Khalifeh 86). Khalifeh is showing the reader that the terrorist has doubts and weaknesses. Usama is just a man; unhappy, dissatisfied and angry. Adil deals with desperation and despair in almost every waking moment of his life and yet, even though he is a Palestinian, he is a good man. He conceals his family's terrible financial losses from them while he toils as an ordinary worker to keep his father alive. He helps others who need assistance in coping with medical issues and tragedy. In spite of his suffering, like Um Sabir, his humanity is touched by the grief of an Israeli woman who witnesses the murder of her husband. He takes pity on the woman and her child and tries to help them.

Everything about this book seems to me to be about politics. While the characters are touching, each of them is a superficial representation of someone in an ugly political situation. The essential conflict, personified by Usama and Adil, is the question of whether to be a terrorist and fight, or be a worker and survive. Sahar Khalifeh has gone to great pains to make sure that the reader is aware that although Usama is an idealist, he has not been living in Palestine; he has not had to cope with the complexities of having gainful employment to provide food and clothing. He passes judgment as an outsider and he isn't always sure what he truly believes. Khalifeh humanizes the terrorist; even a terrorist wonders if what he is doing is right, even a terrorist considers the impact of his actions on people that he knows and cares about. Usama and Adil both believe that idealism and materialism are incompatible. The reader is asked to consider the ideal that Adil holds to, not only to support his family financially, but to try and protect them emotionally. Is Adil's willingness to work in the system collusion, collaboration, is he giving his complicit agreement to the occupation? Adil's ideal is that he has responsibilities to others. Usama sees a principle that needs to be upheld, Adil sees individual people who need his help and support. "They'd always agreed on one point: the value of the individual existed only thorough the group.... the difference between them lay in that fact that each believed he was in accord with the group" (Khalifeh 87). Khalifeh addresses the question of what makes Usama and Adil different men and the how and why of what actions they believe they can and can't take to resolve their issues. Although I have greater empathy for Adil, perhaps in the end, it is Usama who is right; if you cannot win, perhaps it is best to go out in a blaze of glory.

Both *Wild Thorns* and *Martyrs' Crossing* have linear narratives with an omniscient narrator who relates events as they occur, as well as providing analysis of the thoughts and motivations of the characters. Plot, character and political message, rather than poetry of language is the main thrust of both novels.

Like *Wild Thorns*, *Martyrs' Crossing* deals with issues of prejudice and discrimination based on nationality. Amy Wilentz uses the novel as a tool to draw attention to the individual suffering that is caused by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, showing the reader that this is an environment where everyone suffers. Wilentz' opinions are reflected in a piece that she wrote for *The Nation*, "decisions of culture [in the Arab world] are based on exchanges of power and influence" (Wilentz Web). And while the situation in Palestine was awful for Adil in *Wild Thorns*, it was deadly for Ibrahim, the child who died in *Martyrs' Crossing*. However devastating it is to consider the death of a toddler, perhaps it is even more disturbing to consider the opportunists who jumped on Ibrahim's death to make political hay of a terrible event.

Although in *Martyrs' Crossing* all of the central characters are victims, prisoners of their circumstances, only Marina's husband, Hassan Hajimi, is in fact a prisoner in a jail. While Hajimi is physically present in the in the story only briefly, his imprisonment is pivotal to the entire plot of the book. It is because Hajimi's imprisonment that Marina is denied access at the border crossing, resulting in the death of her child, thus rendering both Marina and Ibrahim prisoners of Hassan's fate. Marina's father, George is a prisoner of his memories and Ari, the Israeli soldier is a prisoner by virtue of the fact that right or wrong, he must represent the military and support military policy.

Wilentz exposes the callousness of political profiteers in both the Israeli and the Palestinian camps. The Palestinian, Ahmed, sees Ibrahim as a pawn to be used to obtain a momentary advantage in negotiations that never end, never accomplish anything. Ahmed's only true gain will be aggrandizing his personal status in the political arena. The Israeli, Yizhar, is willing to bend any truth to suit his agenda. "The correctness of an action lay in its outcome" (Wilentz 68). Neither man considers the morality of what he is doing. We want to believe that military and political officials fight for what they believe is right and for what they believe is best for the well being of all. It is challenging to cast doubt on these ideals and it is not easy to accept that these two military officials, both central to the story, not only are villains, they are truly evil.

Both *Wild Thorns* and *Martyrs' Crossing* are didactic. Both stories ask us to question what we think we know and how we think. "They looked as if they were people just like his own family. But they weren't. They were Palestinians" (Wilentz 46). In *Martyrs' Crossing*, George, Marina and Ari are the defenders of the moral high ground, but there is no comfort or joy for any of them. The reader is asked to consider the question of what we really know— when something terrible happens—how do we know who truly is at fault? Perhaps it is not always possible to know how or why something occurred and whether or not it could have been prevented. But most important of all, it is necessary to question the

information that is given out, the motivation for releasing or withholding information, who benefits from these actions and why. This book was censored in Israel because it questions both the integrity and validity of the Israeli border patrols, thus rendering Israeli readers to be intellectual prisoners, limiting their thought process in evaluating an integral and controversial political issue.

“She wanted to be lifted away from here by angels, plucked up into the empty sky. Failing angels, she would accept any transportation—no matter how mean, no matter how low. The crowd was squeezing the breath out of her, and Ibrahim’s hand kept almost slipping away. Marina picked him up so that she wouldn’t lose hold of him. He turned and twisted irritably in her arms. There was too much old sweat here, there were too many bodies close to hers, and the whole thing make her feel like retching, like running. Too many people were breathing down her neck, and whose breath was it? No one who knew her, no one she wanted to know. Strangers, foreigners, was how she thought of them, really, even though they were her own people, standing packed around her. Finally, she was sharing their predicament. She had always thought she wanted to” (Wilentz 1). *Martyrs’ Crossing* depends on the narrative to establish the characters and their motivations. Reflecting her background as a journalist, Wilentz describes events with the voice of a detached observer. The novelist Wilentz relates her characters’ thoughts and feelings, with emotion, but without passing judgment.

The passage above is the opening of the book. It immediately captured and held my attention. “To be lifted away from here by angels” (Wilentz 1), indicates more than a desire to get away, it reflects a profound sense of longing. With brief, pithy sentences, in this order, the author allows me to learn that Marina is very unhappy, physically uncomfortable, she loves her son and is worried about becoming separated from him in the crowd; and, most importantly, that something is not right with the child’s health. She is desperate enough to hope for angels to help her. Marina feels that she doesn’t belong; that she is somehow better than the people around her and above all, that she has gotten into something that she hadn’t bargained for. The sensory descriptions –dirt, noise, bad smells, the feeling of being crowded, hemmed in by people – enhance the reader’s feeling of empathy. This passage sets the stage for the story in terms of both physical place and Marina’s state of mind as well as her role in the story. Marina is an outsider who thought she wanted to belong, but realizes that she doesn’t. She feels degraded by the situation she finds herself in and wants to be apart from it, and, in realizing that she believes herself to be better than those who surround her, Marina has also taken on guilt. This opening sets the pace for the book, although the characters do spend time in introspective reflection, there is a constant, quick pace to the plot. While Wilentz does not spend large amounts of time on physical description, she manages, with very few words, to convey a feeling for the physical and emotional environment. While reading this book, I felt like I was watching a movie.

The story is written with an omniscient narrator. Marina is the pivotal character; all of the other characters and their actions revolve around the impact that she has on their universe. The narrator conveys each character’s contribution to the story in the voice of that individual, allowing the reader to look at the situation from the point of view of all of those who are involved. There is a host of characters, each personifying some aspect of the social and political parts that make up the ugly whole of the situation. There is balance, counterparts on both sides of the issue: the political opportunists in both Palestine and Israel; the terrorist fighting an enemy he claims to understand but does not know personally and the soldier who makes life-and-death decisions for people he does not know or understand. It is this balance in the story, this showing of both sides of the issue that is the point of this book; everyone has a point of view, none of them is wholly right and all seem to operate at the other’s expense.

Soul Mountain is a novel, written from the point of view of one man in an autobiographical style. It is the story of one man’s survival in China during the Cultural Revolution. The story has two separate linear flows. Xingjian begins with his past and introduces himself to the reader through the vehicle a family photograph. Using the photograph as a tool, the author provides the reader with a great deal of information about himself. The second chapter moves to the present and in that moment, the central character is having what appears to be a casual sexual encounter. From there, he moves forward in two separate story lines, alternatively recounting the past, in China, and moving forward in the central character’s present life, including the changes in the relationship with the woman that he is having sex with at the beginning of the book. Interspersed between these chapters are short chapters that are philosophical statements. The passage below is taken from one of the philosophical sections; the central character is recounting to himself the conversation he wishes he had been able to have with Chairman Mao before Mao died. While not essential to the plot, this passage is essential to the book because it exemplifies the Xingjian’s feelings about his struggle to survive the Cultural Revolution and his feelings concerning freedom. While never actually imprisoned physically, there is absolutely no doubt that Xingjian felt constrained, repressed and imprisoned by the intellectual, social and sexual restrictions of the regime in communist China during the Cultural Revolution. There are a number of significant themes in, *Soul Mountain* including the central character’s relations and relationships with women, his feelings about his father, his feelings about China, the history he recounts about surviving the Cultural Revolution and what he believes constitutes freedom.

Note that I refer to the central character, rather than an individual with a name. Using pronouns rather than names is one of Xingjian's particular stylistic hallmarks. Although he sometimes refers to his characters by name, Xingjian does not consider people as individuals. He considers them as "he" or "she." This is particularly interesting to me because in spite of the fact that there are a great many sexual encounters in this story, the central character of the book never appears to have a fulfilling relationship with any of the women he has sex with. It is also possible to consider that, particularly since he was educated under the communist regime in China, Xingjian did not consider actual individuals to be of importance for who they are as opposed to what they symbolize. I think this represents a contradiction of his protest of the removal or even eradication of the individual in favor of the masses in China. It is also interesting to note that although Xingjian's sensory descriptions mostly relate to fear, lust and even hunger, and although these descriptions are striking and believable, he spends little time on what he smells and hears, or in describing the appearance of his beloved Chinese countryside.

"although it was possible to kill a person, no matter how frail the person was, that person's human dignity could not be killed. A person is human because this bit of self-respect is indestructible. When a person's life is like an insect's, is the person aware that an insect also possesses its own insect dignity? Before an insect is trampled or squashed to death, it will pretend to be dead, struggle, or try to run away in order to save itself, but its insect dignity can't be trampled to death. People have been killed off like the grass under the blade, but does the grass under the blade seek to be forgiven? People are clearly inferior to grass. What he wanted to prove was that, as well as life, people have human dignity. If preserving one's human dignity is impossible, and one isn't killed and doesn't commit suicide, then if one does not want to die the only option is to flee. Dignity is an awareness of existence, and it is in this that the power of the frail individual lies. Once one's awareness of existence is extinguished, the apparition of existence, too is extinguished" (Xingjian 405). Xingjian uses a beautiful and poetic metaphor to illustrate his struggle against oppression. It is particularly noteworthy that even though Xingjian was speaking in the first person prior to this passage, he reverts to using a pronoun to describe himself. He never says, "me" or "I." He only says, "a person." This statement, "A person is human because this bit of self-respect is indestructible" (Xingjian 405) is key to understanding the motivation of the central character throughout the entire book. For him, self-respect is as essential as breathing is to living and surviving, or conversely, surviving without self-respect would not be living. The agricultural metaphor, the grass, is interesting. Grass has no feeling, but it dies standing up and with dignity and the grass is does not regard the blade, it is merely struck down. I am not sure I completely understand the meaning of this metaphor. I am interested to contrast the grass metaphor with Xingjian's willingness to see fleeing as a way of preserving dignity. I see this as a contradiction and wonder if it is an expression of guilt over his having fled China. I also wonder if the word "apparition" in the last sentence is mistranslated. I think it would make more sense if it read, "Once one's awareness of existence is extinguished, the manifestation of existence, too is extinguished."

Lady Chatterley's Lover, *Cane*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Sand Child*, *Cane* and *The Satanic Verses* are stories of cultural, class and racial conflict. The characters in these books are all imprisoned by restrictions of the cultures that they live in. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, because of social class; *Cane* because of race; *The Bluest Eye*, because of social class and race and; *The Satanic Verses* because of social class, ethnic background and religion.

In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Constance Chatterley and her lover, Oliver Mellors, are both victims and prisoners of the social class to which each belongs. In Great Britain, this book would be offensive because it violates the social norms of etiquette and class restriction. A member of the landed class was not supposed to have sex with the hired help. In the United States, the book was banned due to its violation of obscenity statutes. This material certainly has been discussed at great length, both since the original publication of the book in Great Britain and its banning in the United States.

Lady Chatterley's Lover provides a very dramatic illustration of the difference of perception, the impact of the manner in which "offensive" material is stated. The difference is easy to see when you read, "'Th'art good cunt, though, aren't ter? Best bit o'cunt left on earth. When ter likes! When tha'rt willin,!' 'What is cunt? she said. 'An'doesn't ter know? Cunt! It's thee down thee; an' what I get when I'm i'side thee; it's a' as it is, all on't.' 'All on't,' she teased. 'Cunt! It's like fuck then.'" (Lawrence 189) as opposed to "there awoke in her strange thrills rippling inside her. Rippling, rippling, rippling, like a flapping overlapping of soft flames, soft as feathers, running to point of brilliance, exquisite, exquisite and melting her all molten inside. It was like bells rippling up and up to a culmination" (Lawrence 141). The first passage, although intended as being flattering to Constance, seems crude. The scatological language detracts from the romance of the moment. However, the second passage is deeply poetic. Here, Lawrence incorporates alliteration, anaphora, onomatopoeia, and repetition, along with metaphor to create a beautifully poetic passage to describe an orgasm.

Jean Toomer, as an individual, was very much a prisoner of his race and social background. A very light-skinned African-American, from an upper middle-class family, Toomer had great difficulty finding his place in the world. *Cane* is Toomer's journey to understand and come to terms with his African American roots. *Cane* reflects many of aspects of African-American life, including illustrating how African-Americans have been rendered economic and emotional prisoners

in the United State through lack of education, economic suppression and terrorism. *Cane* is written in a mixture of prose and poetry, with very lyrical language, sometimes realistic and sometimes phantasmical. Toomer has been lauded as a genius of the Harlem Renaissance, so why is it that a parent might not want their child to read this book? Perhaps, if a child or a teenager with no understanding of historical context is reading this book, it could be disturbing and or misleading. Frankly, I think that without historical context, this book could easily be misunderstood by many adults.

Consider that in Toomer's time, just as it is in today, use of the n-word was pervasive in some aspects of American culture. Use of this word is extremely frequent in this book. In spite of any level of acceptance, in any American milieu, the word is, at best, distressing to many people and potentially downright disturbing when it is used so often. It is also possible to consider that the fantasy aspects of this work might be seen as glamorizing promiscuity. At the beginning of the book, Toomer pictures black people as simple, sexual people. While he is making a point in his narrative, it is still disturbing to consider a child being exposed to stories where men find a child to be sexually desirable and people have adulterous sex. There is no moral agenda, no judgment of behavior or values. At the end of the book, Toomer's stories reflect more highly educated men (but not women), but the men Toomer describes at this point are weak, vacillating, fearful and lacking in any qualities that a child can look up to. The stories reflect Toomer's ambivalence about his own racially mixed heritage, and since it is very common for African Americans have a mixed background, this is a disturbing example for a young black child who might still be struggling to formulate a positive self-image or a child of other race who needs to learn understanding and empathy for different types of peoples. Although this is a very short book, the author's point is complex and subtle, and is not really revealed until the end of the book. It is possible to consider that casual use of the n-word, the frequent characterization of women as being self-centered and not very bright and the derogatory descriptions of black people might easily be misunderstood and be harmful to an impressionistic reader.

"Ralph Kabnis, propped in his bed, tries to read. To read himself to sleep. An oil lamp on a chair near his elbow burns unsteadily. The cabin room is spaced fantastically about it. Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black with sooty saw teeth. Ceiling, patterned by the fringed globe of the lamp. The walls, unpainted, are seasoned rosin yellow. And cracks between the boards are black. These cracks are the lips the night winds use for whispering. Night winds in Georgia are vagrant poets, whispering. Kabnis, against his will, lets his book slip down, and listens to them. The warm whiteness of his bed, the lamp-light, does not protect him from the weird chill of their song:

White-man's land.
Nigger sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground" (Toomer 81)

Toomer eschews formal structure, favoring a modernist, evolutionary mix of fantasy, poetry and fragments of poetry mixed with prose to create a counterpoint-like rhythm. As the stories and poems progress, the complexity of the characters and plots progress as well, eventually resolving to be Kabnis, whose thoughts we share in this passage. Kabnis is Toomer; a misplaced northerner, living in the south, trying to understand a culture that he has no prior knowledge of or experience with. Sensitive, delicate and fearful, he is a light-skinned African-American man, trying, probably without success, to come to terms with his who he is and where he comes from.

In this passage, the reader is immediately made aware of a man who must be troubled, because he can't sleep. We deduce that, like Toomer, Kabnis is an educated man, because he is trying to read himself to sleep. We can also surmise that he is in reduced circumstances because he has no electricity and is in an unpainted room with cracks in the floor. He is an imaginative and sensitive man, hearing sad and threatening poetry in the wind.

But the euphonic, naturalistic descriptions do much more than just set the stage for this, the final story in *Cane*. Toomer uses alliteration and abbreviated poetic sentences to create rhythm; color to imply beauty and dignity, "Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black with sooty saw teeth. Ceiling patterned by the fringed globe of the lamp" (Toomer 81). He personifies the floor to create a sense of foreboding, "these cracks are the lips the night wind use for whispering" (Toomer 81), at once rendering a drafty room both poetic and threatening; Ralph Kabnis is not protected by the warmth or light of the fire and lamp from the voices that intrude on his thoughts. Toomer returns to alliteration again when he speaks of the "warm whiteness" (Toomer 81)" and the "lamplight" (Toomer 81), providing a sharp contrast and enhancing the feeling of menace with "the weird chill of their song" (Toomer 81), a contradiction of all the previous images of warmth and security and foreshadowing future negative events. The poetic voice in this passage begs for the reader to read it out loud. Although it does not appear in this passage, another metaphor that Toomer uses frequently to represent the rural south is the smell of pine, needles, trees and lumber.

The image in the poem at the end of this passage is disturbing. As you read the story of Kabnis, more stanzas, similar to this one in their sense of terrible sadness and despair, are interspersed in the prose. Because Toomer lived much of his life as white man, he viewed the world of southern blacks as an outsider. In spite of his privileged background, Toomer was intensely aware that he and other blacks live in a white man's land, separate and outside the world of whites. His view was that the poor black people in the south were repeating the same mistakes over and over; living in fear, retreating or escaping; singing, going to church, relying on religion for salvation, while their children came to terrible harm. In this poem, he expresses cause and effect; black people living in a white man's world were burned. While the references to the river and the camp grounds make it seem that Toomer is longing for peace and simplicity; I think that referring to black people seeking surcease from prejudice in the white man's religion is an ironic euphemism. The poem relies on the harshness of multiple consonants to emphasize the harshness of life. Using beautiful language to evoke intense emotional moments, Toomer shows the reader many of the ways in which African-Americans were (and sometime still are) held prisoner by our society.

As Toomer does in *Cane*, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison is addressing herself to the effect of racism rather than tackling it head-on. More contemporary than *Cane*, *The Bluest Eye* paints a disturbing and horrific view of the life of poor African-Americans. The characters in this book are prisoners of their race, their social class and their despair. Rage over powerlessness is a key theme for most of the characters in this book. The story is heartbreakingly sad, and it is possible to consider that a parent might not want their child to read a story that seems to be so without hope or redemption. When I finished the book, I found myself wondering about what Morrison might have been thinking when she wrote the book; I envisioned myself interviewing Toni Morrison and projected what I thought her answers might be:

Me: In a 1998 interview with Zia Jaffrey, you said, "I'm very much interested in how African-American literature is perceived in this country, and written about, and viewed." (Jaffrey Web) and yet, you seem to write novels that contain very controversial material about black people.

Morrison: I have to write what I see. I cannot change what I am writing to suit someone else's opinion of what is appropriate or what they think should or shouldn't be said, I have to speak with my own voice, particularly when it is with regard to black people and most particularly, regarding black women.

Me: Why couldn't you include a character in *The Bluest Eye* who is happy?

Morrison: This story takes place in a poor, industrial town. These black people are so poor, so desperate; there is almost no joy in their lives. The only beauty that the women see is when they work in the homes of white people. They bring this attitude home to their families – what is white is good, what is white is beautiful – what is black is poor and desperate and ugly.

Me: Why does Cholly have to rape Pecola, isn't their life awful enough without adding that level of horror to it? Why do Soaphead and Mr. Henry have to be child molesters?

Morrison: Cholly was so twisted up with anger and misery, so in need of gratification, that he wasn't responsible, or in control of himself when he raped Pecola. He didn't see her as his daughter, he saw beauty and he wanted to possess that beauty the only way he knew how, through sexual intercourse. I don't attempt to legitimize this as an act of love. It was provoked by a moment of sensual thought and he was too drunk to realize that he was not reliving an episode from his past. Because he is so damaged, Cholly cannot experience love or joy without hurting.

Soaphead and Mr. Henry are unhappy men who cannot function normally because they have been completely emasculated. They molest little girls because they recognize the beauty and innocence of childhood; they touch it in the only way they understand.

Me: One reviewer, Diane Johnson, believes that your, "largely white audience thrills voyeuristically the black magic...the papa committing incest...perhaps what is exciting about the violence and depravity ...is that they confirm white fears" (Taylor-Guthrie 57-58). Do you think that you are pandering to white people's lowest opinions of blacks?

Morrison: This reviewer is asking me to provide redeeming moral characteristics to characters who don't have those characteristics. Pecola does not live in world of happy endings. I do not represent all black people as being this way, there are redeeming characters in the story — Claudia and Freida—because they are children, the two sisters are not yet as scarred as the adults. Claudia and Freida see and experience without judgment because they only understand the world in terms of what they perceive. They perceive that there are rules about what is right and wrong, but they don't pretend to understand those rules. I bring to life what I visualize, based on people and events that I have experienced and observed.

"Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him to be the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power"

(Morrison 174). This passage is very dramatic, the short utterances, “Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty” (Morrison 174) and “Anger that he was powerless to help her” (Morrison 174) both frame the hyperbole of, “Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him to be the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment” (Morrison 174). The drama is increased through the use of the consonant-heavy metaphor, “rise up out of the pit of her blackness” (Morrison 174), then reverting to a short, clipped, but powerful and evocative utterance, “His outrage grew and felt like power” (Morrison 174). This short passage has a wonderful sense of rhythm, with staccato-like bursts that frame longer, more dramatic phrases. It is a wonderful example of Morrison’s sparse use of color to create an emotionally potent image, contrasting, “the pit of her blackness” (Morrison 174) with Pecola’s desire for blue eyes.

The Bluest Eye is banned not only because there is incest in the story, but also because the victim is impregnated and has a baby as the result of multiple incestuous acts. In our culture, incest is a forbidden word, a reality that is hidden behind closed doors, secret, something that no one wants to talk about. However, although it is the incest that is the most commonly discussed shocking aspect of the story, I think that *The Bluest Eye* is about poverty, despair and the absence of personal power. I found it interesting that although the book is banned because of incest, Morrison never specifically describes the act of rape in the book. I am intrigued by this bit of verbal delicacy in a work that relentlessly catalogues such unending misery.

Although much of the story is related by the child, Claudia, portions have an omniscient narrator. Morrison has received some criticism for this inconsistency. As the narrator, Claudia could not possibly have witnessed all that transpires, and if she had, as a young child she would be unlikely to have enough intellectual and emotional capacity to be able to describe the events so that the reader would understand them. The postmodern writing style allows the author to have more freedom in the narrative style, permitting the author to set the stage for a more complex crisis than a traditional first person or omniscient-other narrative would. Morrison’s writing is meticulous and clean, with short sentences that beautifully capture the essence of the characters and their surroundings. The sparseness of the language is evocative of the total absence of luxury in the lives of the characters. References to color are infrequent enough to be striking when they occur, creating strong visual images of what is being described. Although most of the book is written in present tense, Morrison does utilize past tense to differentiate memory of past events from the linear path of the plot. She plays with the readers. The introduction foreshadows tragedy; if flowers will not grow, then something must be terribly wrong. After reading this, you immediately notice that the chapter headings mimic the singsong way a child would read aloud from the *Dick and Jane* children’s primer, books that were only about white children, an ironic contrast, because the children in this story are not white, nor are they the well-off, contented children that used to be implied as normal or average. It is also worthwhile to note the sections of the book that follow the passing of the seasons. These awful tragedies encompass only one year in the life of these young girls.

In *The Bluest Eye*, whiteness is the personification of beauty. Beauty represents hope, prosperity, joy and power. The characters that Morrison has drawn have no control over their lives, but they perceive white people as having everything that they don’t have, distilling that perception, for Pecola, down to having blue eyes. Pecola believes that seeing the world through the eyes of a white person will give her the power to feel better about herself. She is sure that others will love her if she looked less ugly, less black. Soaphead sees Pecola as an ugly little girl; she is defined as ugly not because her facial features are ugly, Morrison has already told us earlier in the story that the various parts of Pecola’s facial features are not unpleasing; it is her blackness, her dark skin that makes her ugly. Soaphead feels superior because he is light-skinned. This is an important and controversial aspect of the story that makes readers uncomfortable. I think it is brushed aside while people are paying attention to the easier to decry presence of incest. Issues of lightness and darkness of skin are pervasive in the African-American community. Just as we are not comfortable talking about incest, in our society, we are not comfortable discussing prejudice, particularly with regard to the complex prejudice between people of color regarding how light or dark each of them may be. Just as Ralph Kabnis in *Cane*, is a prisoner of his racial make-up, Pecola is a prisoner of her blackness. Soaphead views being black as a pit, a trap, something that he has climbed part of the way out of because he is part white, but Pecola is very black and has fallen into blackness, an oubliette from which she can never escape. Soaphead understands that Pecola believes that if she can view the world as white people do, through blue eyes, she will find happiness and love. And Soaphead believes it too. In this moment of empathy, Soaphead overcomes his rage with understanding, and because of this emotional leap, he believes he is empowered to help Pecola.

In *The Sand Child*, Ahmed truly is a prisoner of her sex, religion and culture. The concept behind *The Sand Child* is one that is potentially offensive to anyone of fundamentalist religious background, particularly if the religion promotes the belief that the roles of the sexes are god-given. The idea of raising a female child to be a male is one that is disturbing in almost any culture; it is contradictory to what many see as part of the balance of the world: good and bad, life and death and male and female. However, this mixing of sexual identity is not the only way in which Ben Jelloun might be seen as being blasphemous. The author makes a mockery of prayers, “I went to the mosque. I enjoyed being in that huge

building in which only men were admitted. I prayed all the time, often getting the words wrong...I got great pleasure out of undermining all that fervor, mistreating the sacred text" (Ben Jelloun 25). Presumably, an Islamic fundamentalist will agree that it is correct that Ahmed can't get the prayers right, he is a she and not capable of praying with men. Ahmed thinks in defiance of God's will, "in our house women are inferior to men it's not because God wishes it or because the prophets decided thus, but because the women accept this fate" (Ben Jelloun 46). If one continues to follow the Islamic fundamentalist line of thinking, a man or a woman cannot refuse his or her own fate. It is God who decides what will and what will not happen and it is God who has decided that women are inferior to men. If marriage is a union between men and women, then Ahmed's marriage is sickening sham. Even if the author did not defile all of Islam with his sacrilegious ideas, it is possible that even readers from more liberal cultures might consider the sexual acts referred to as disturbing: masturbation, lesbian sex with an old hag on back street. I have no doubt that an Islamic fundamentalist would be concerned that if a child or an adult woman were to read this material that he or she might be irrevocably corrupted.

The language of this novel is beautiful and poetic. "I hear the murmur of water; it may be a stream that has found its way into the pages of the book, skipping through the chapters. The water doesn't wash away all the sentences; is this because the ink resists, or because the water chooses its passages? How strange! I have often dreamed of a hand passing over the pages of an already written book, cleaning it inside, removing whatever was useless and pompous, hollow and superfluous" (Ben Jelloun 81). In this passage, Ben Jelloun utilizes postmodern writing technique to suggest a state of mind or being rather than explaining it in a linear narrative form. It is hard for me to know how it was in the original French, but in English, the sentences in this section do not have traditional structure. This passage is more like the verbal or mental expression of a thought than it is a paragraph. Combined with open-ended, suggestive imagery, Ben Jelloun's poetic style incorporates twists that depart from reality. Ben Jelloun uses surrealistically imagined narrators who weave a story full of ambiguity, describing circumstances that allow for multiple possibilities and forcing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

In the passage above, the narrator, or interlocutor, fantasizes. It is almost as if the story has become a geographic entity in his mind. The sensory effect is increased through the personification of water, he tells you that he hears "the murmur of the water" (Ben Jelloun 81), thus allowing the reader to share in the sensation of awareness of water. He tells you that a stream has found its way into the book, something that can only occur in metaphor and/or through our imaginations. By creating this mental image for the reader, the book or story has become a physical, living entity, like a forest or part of the forest. Physical entities can be changed by water and a physical entity is something that it can be touched and heard by the reader. I also think it is important to keep in mind that water is elemental; it cleanses and purifies. Continuing the personification, Ben Jelloun co-opts the reader's imagination into his world by endowing the water with both will and intellect. He also endows free will to the ink, imagining that ink can make a conscious effort to resist water.

This passage is comprised of different types of action and inaction and is a reflection of Ahmed's attempt to balance his male and female aspects. There is the passive, "I hear the murmur" (Ben Jelloun 81) and "I have often dreamt " (Ben Jelloun 81), the passive-aggressive, "it may be that a stream has found its way into the book" (Ben Jelloun 81) and the aggressive, "the ink resists " (Ben Jelloun 81) and "a hand passing over the pages of an already written book, cleaning it inside, removing whatever was useless and pompous, hollow and superfluous" (Ben Jelloun 81). On the other hand, the concept of a hand removing the text is empowering, almost in the manner that a magician waves his hand over a hat, the narrator wants to wave his hand over a book and make it what he wants it to be. Perhaps it is godlike: with a wash of water, with a wave of the hand, everything can be changed. The reader is presented with multiple narrators, each endorsing a different point of view, thus conferring the reader with the opportunity to create his or her own visualization as well as the chance to evoke multiple sets of conclusions. It is in this manner that Ben Jelloun succeeds in melding postmodernism with traditional Arab story telling.

I think that Ben Jelloun is mocking Ahmed. He has characterized Ahmed as pompous, domineering, cruel and narcissistic. As poetic as this section seems, the plot or plots of the book address important social issues of misogyny, physical brutality and sexual discrimination.

It is impossible to do justice to *The Satanic Verses* in a few paragraphs, particularly regarding the extensive list of groups who were offended by the book, so I will not attempt to do that. However, it is interesting that for a significant amount of time, the very fact that Rushdie created this book rendered him a prisoner. He needed physical protection because of the fatwa that had been declared against him for blasphemy.

My goal is to briefly discuss some of the characters who were prisoners in the book. There are so many levels of captivity in the multiple stories in the book. Gibreel Farishta is a prisoner of his obsession with sex and his inability to love. Alleluia Cone is a prisoner by virtue of how unhappy she is when she is not climbing mountains and she becomes a prisoner not only of her sexual obsession with Farishta, but her need to redeem herself by taking care of him when he decompensates. Bilal was a prisoner Behind the Curtain, unable to leave and required to perform sexually for the

prostitutes who became his wives. And the followers of Ayesha were imprisoned by her charisma, following her even if it means they lost their lives in the process.

The most obvious imprisonment was the arrest and abuse of Saladin Chamcha, "He no longer had any idea of how long they had been traveling in the Black Maria of his hard fall from grace, nor could he have hazarded a guess as to the proximity of the ultimate destination, even though the tinnitus in his ears was growing gradually louder, those phantasmal grandmother's footsteps, ellowen deeowen, London. The blows raining down on him now felt as soft as lover's caresses; the grotesque sight of his own metamorphosed body no longer appalled him; event he last pellets of goat-excrement failed to stir his much-abused stomach" (Rushdie 167). I love the way Rushdie twists language to suit himself. Being in the Black Maria, or what we would call a paddy wagon (one should pause to consider that paddy wagon is an offensive term, which makes the assumption that all police are or were Irish, paddys) is a metaphor for the manifestation of Chamcha's metamorphosis, thus Rushdie has created a metaphor within the metaphor. Not only is Chamcha turning into a goat, he has changed, from a highly respectable British citizen, into an illegal immigrant. The language that follows is so beautifully clear, "nor could he have hazarded a guess as to the proximity of the ultimate destination, even though the tinnitus in his ears was growing gradually louder, those phantasmal grandmother's footsteps" (Rushdie 67), then changing to what sounds like a child's chant, "ellowen deeowen, London" (Rushdie 67). For some reason, every time that I read that phrase, I think of *Peter Pan*. Rushdie then proceeds to compare being beaten to a lover's caress, moving forward in Chamcha's grotesque metamorphosis, when Chamcha becomes a prisoner of his appearance. As the story proceeds that we also come to understand that Chamcha is emotionally imprisoned by the hate he has harbored for his father, and that it is this hate, more than anything else, that has shaped Chamcha's life. His hate has directed his entire life's agenda; his choice of career, place of residence and his marriage.

In a later chapter, aptly called, "A City Visible But Unseen," Rushdie uses a speech by Jumpin Joshi to preach about an entire basketful of misdeeds and types of exploitation, "Objectively, he said, with a small self-deprecating smile, 'what has happened here? A: Wrongful arrest, intimidation, violence. Two: Illegal detention, unknown medical experimentation in hospital,' – murmurs of assent here, as memories of intra-vaginal inspections, Depo-Provera scandals, unauthorized post-partum sterilizations, and further back, the knowledge of Third World drug dumping arose in every person present to give substance to the speaker's insinuations, - because what you believe depends on what you've seen, - not only what is visible, but what you are prepared to look in the face, - and anyhow, something had to explain the horns and hoofs; in those policed medical wards, anything could happen – 'And thirdly,' Jumpy continued, 'psychological breakdown, loss of sense of self, inability to cope. We've seen it all before'" (Rushdie 261). In this ghetto of immigrants, the city within London, the visible but overlooked people are exploited and discriminated against. They remain prisoners of this situation in part because of their past, but more because this is what they expect to happen and in part because they have not fully assimilated to being in Great Britain.

It is interesting to contrast this book with Xingjian's comment about fleeing if you cannot find freedom. Rushdie's characters are flying hither and yon, traveling the world from Tibet and India to the US and Britain, in search of themselves, but it does not give them freedom.

I loved the language that Rushdie used to describe how Saladin finally comes to terms with his father, to pity him rather than hate him, "Saladin turned around to take in the melancholy sight of a father who had shriveled like an old apple, but who insisted nevertheless on wearing the expensive Italian suits of his opulently fleshy years. Not that he had lost both Popeye-forearms and Bluto-belly, he seemed to be roaming about inside his clothes like a man in search of something he had not quite managed to identify. He stood in the doorway looking at his son, his nose and lips curled, by the withering sorcery of the years, into a feeble simulacrum of his former ogre-face" (Rushdie 66), such a beautiful and poetic way to say that his father was a shadow of his former self. It is also very amusing that Rushdie mixes the reference to American cartoon characters with such fluid and mellifluous prose.

For me, the most surprising aspect of this complex, mystical and fantastical novel was the ending. In spite of all the politics, religion, sex and violence, the ending is simple and romantic. The hero finds true love. Saladin, who has completed his metamorphosis, symbolized by his return to the use of his original name, Salahuddin, gets the magic lamp and finds his true love, Zeenat Vakil, and is freed from his prison of anger.

In closing, I consider that I have only referred to *Wild Thorns* and *Martyrs' Crossing* as didactic, however I feel compelled to say that any work of art conveys some message. The books I have discussed here are all extraordinary works of art. Perhaps these books are particularly wondrous to me because the reader has the choice of hearing the message, or of simply enjoying the book for the beauty of the writing. Reading these books has given me the opportunity to consider the beauty of exposing an issue or a problem to scrutiny by telling a story and permitting the reader to take away as much or as little as they chose. And, it reinforces the notion that reading can be for more than entertainment or gaining knowledge; a book can be a metaphoric open page, the manner in which we read and consider what the author has written permits us add own thoughts to the those of author as we read his or her words.

Freedom of self-expression is essential for the growth society. Censorship and banning of books for social, political and religious reasons stifles both the intellect of the readers who are deprived of partaking of material and the spirit of the writers who are prevented from sharing what is in their minds.

Imprisonment, bondage, captivity because of politics, class, race, religion or nationality; whether it is physical or intellectual confinement, is emotionally stifling, even crippling. Writers, should not have to live in fear of being incarcerated, ostracized, exiled or otherwise punished for their speech, writing or thought – anything that is not accepted by the regime under which they are trying to survive. “Authoritarian regimes, dictators, despots are often, but not always, fools. But none is foolish enough to give perceptive, dissident writers free reign to publish their judgments...Writers – journalists, essayists, bloggers, poets, playwrights – can disturb the social oppression that functions like a coma on the population” (Morrison 1, *Burn This Book*). Writers, can create freedom with their words.

Bibliography

- Ben Jelloun, Tahar. *The Sand Child*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985. Print.
- Ben Jelloun, Tahar. *The Blinding Absence of Light*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- El Saadawai, *God Dies by the Nile*, London: Zed Books, 1974. Print.
- Emory, Web 11/27/2010 <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Saadawi.html>
- Global Internet Literary Campaign, Web 11/15/2010, <http://gilc.org/speech/osistudy/censorship/index.html>.
- Jaffrey, Zia. *Salon*. Web 09/27/10. http://www.salon.com/books/int/1998/02/cov_si_02int.html,
- Khalifeh, Sahar. *Wild Thorns*, Northampton: Interlink Books, 1985. Print.
- Levi, Primo, *Survival In Auschwitz: If This Is A Man*, New York: Orion Press. 1959. Print
- Lawrence, D.H., *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. New York: Random House, 1993. Print.
- McKay, Nellie Y. *Jean Toomer, Artist*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984. Print
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage International, 1970. Print
- Morrison, Toni (ed), *Burn This Book*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009. Print
- PEN. http://penatlas.org/online/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=17. Web 09/20/10.
- Rich, Motoko. *New York Times*. Web 09/29/10. <http://papercuts.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/a-fireside-chat-about-book-burning>
- Rushdie, Salman, *The Satanic Verses*. New York: Random House, 1988. Print.
- Sansal, Boulam, *The German Mujahid*. New York: Europa Editions, 2009. Print.
- Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, New York: Bantam Books, 1990, Print.
- Squidoo. <http://www.squidoo.com/divine-birds>. Web 09/20/10.
- TaharbenJelloun.org. <http://www.taharbenjelloun.org/accueil.php>. Web 09/20/10.
- Taylor-Guthrie, Danielle, Ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Oxford, MS: The University of Mississippi Press, 1994. Print.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York: Liveright, 1975. Print.
- Wikipedia, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandr_Solzhenitsyn), Web 12/06/2010
- Wikipedia, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Censorship>), Web 11/25/2010.
- Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaaba>. Web 09/20/2010.
- Wilentz, Amy. *The Nation*. Web 09/24/10. <http://www.thenation.com/authors/amy-wilentz?page=3>
- Wilentz, Amy. *Martyrs' Crossing*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2001. Print.