



AGAINST THE GROUP: *Satanic Verses* at the Jaipur Literary Festival

BY SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

Ten thousand people—a crowd, even by Indian standards—gathered at the Jaipur Literary Festival this past January. Speakers included Oprah Winfrey, David Davidar, Tom Stoppard, David Remnick, Deepak Chopra, Hanan Al-Shaikh, Mushirul Hasan, Ayesha Jalal and Kunal Basu, many of whom have controversial ideas.

Even my mum had traveled from Delhi to Jaipur for her very first litfest. Delhi's glitterati spilled over to nearby Jaipur hotels—no one expected trouble. However, the festival coincided with an election in which Muslim votes were crucial. And Salman Rushdie, author of 10 novels including *Midnight's Children* (Best of the Booker 2008), *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, and most recently *The Enchantress of Florence* was slated to attend.

Maulana Abul Qasim Nomani of Deoband Madrasa called for the Muslim community to oppose Salman Rushdie's participation. Rushdie was "persuaded" to cancel his trip to India when he was told that the Rajasthan state police had proof that assassins from

Mumbai were on their way to Jaipur. Later it emerged that the Mumbai assassins were fictional characters created by the police. But the damage was done. Rushdie cancelled. Still, four brave authors—Hari Kunzru, Amitava Kumar, Jeet Thayil and Ruchir Joshi—used their sessions to read from *The Satanic Verses*. They were informed they had broken Indian laws and should flee the country.

This wasn't Salman's first trip back to India since Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa nor was it his first death threat on Indian soil. In 2000 Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* won the Eurasian Commonwealth Prize for Best Book, and was in the running for the Commonwealth Prize along with J.M. Coetzee's

Disgrace, Lily Brett's *Too Many Men*, and my novel *What the Body Remembers*. The day of the prize announcement, an organizer called my room at the Claridges Hotel in Delhi. Would I be willing to sit next to Salman Rushdie at the gala dinner? "Of course," I said. "Are you sure?" he said. "Yes, of course." Later that day, I learned the organizer felt it necessary to ask because there had been a death threat if Salman was awarded the prize. After nearly being trampled by his paparazzi, I sat on Rushdie's right at dinner anyway. On his left sat the film critic Amita Malik, a Hindu woman who broke intermarriage taboos long ago by marrying a Muslim. We were great bodyguards—nothing happened. The Commonwealth Prize went to *Disgrace* that year.

Since 2000, Rushdie has attended many events in India, including the 2007 Jaipur Literary Festival, without incident or protest from Muslims. Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta is filming *Midnight's Children* in India, 31 years after it staked its claim to English as a global language, and nine years after it won the Booker of Bookers. Most Muslims in India are very proud of Rushdie. But in 2012, Rushdie's physical presence at the Jaipur Litfest was not to be. Instead, it was arranged that Rushdie would be part of the festival via telecast.

On Facebook, I entered into a long argument with a Hindu school friend in India who said that as a Muslim, Rushdie should have known his book *The Satanic Verses* would offend Muslims. "Words are guns and swords," my English Lit major friend said, "and we should use them judiciously." I said, "It's impossible to create that way. When you open the door to imagination, you accept what comes and stand behind your words/images. It's a huge investment of time and emotion to write a book. Just getting it down on paper is the achievement. And we don't know which words will be swords and which are guns and which will soothe those whose pain is reflected. Artists take risks—people could honour that, not revile it."

"But," said my friend, "you live outside India, you don't get it." Literature, she said, should not incite violence. She called the authors who read from *The Satanic Verses* "publicity seekers," just fanning the flames of violence. It sounded like a dispatch from the battlefield of domestic violence: don't provoke the abuser, and everything will be just fine. Another English Lit major told me the novel should have been "adapted" for India by excising the offending passages. A third school friend in India said the Indian state can make up imaginary assassins, but authors must not. Meanwhile, I was being told only Sikhs should criticize Sikhs and only Hindus can paint Hindu goddesses and only Muslims can criticize Muslims. I asked how Muslim would Rushdie have to be to criticize the Muslim religion? I was de-friended.

Debut author and fashion designer Wendell Rodricks circulated an essay saying Rushdie should have "done the decent thing and gone under cover. But no! He had to blabber on about how India is not a democracy and he fears for the future of India etc." (If Rodricks' fashion book is denounced by the Deobandis for showing too much flesh, he will probably beg for Rushdie's support.)

Five minutes before Rushdie's telecast, followers of Maulana Abul Qasim Nomani came onto the grounds and prepared to charge festival attendees. The state police said they could not guarantee safety. Festival sponsor Hotel Digger Palace could not permit loss of life, danger to festival goers, or damage to the property. The telecast was cancelled. When everyone had gone home, New Delhi TV's Barkha Dutt interviewed Salman and asked, "Who do you blame? Is it the Deobandis, is it the Government...?"

ANGER AND GRIEF IN THE READER OFTEN GIVES WAY TO QUESTIONING. THE WRITER'S ROLE IS TO FRAME THE AREA FOR QUESTIONING.

He wouldn't name a single entity, and certainly couldn't have named a person—communal politics offers the shelter of anonymity. The Maulana appeared victorious, though no one can say if his Muslim followers had gained anything.

"Somewhere deep in their bones," said Indian literary critic Nilanjana Roy, "the people who would rather shut down a festival or threaten people with death than listen to an author understand this: *The Satanic Verses* cannot be unwritten, and its ideas cannot be erased. The central fact of the *Verses* is not that it's blasphemous; it's that the book argues that religion may be no more than the creation of humans and may be questioned as such."

Her words chilled me. My novel-in-progress *The Selector of Souls* doesn't only argue that, it assumes that.

I didn't intend it. The novel just turned out that way. I have a chance to tone it down before publication.

But here's Rushdie on NDTV: "I have a very great reverence for the art of the novel, for the practice of literature. I think it's a great privilege to be a practitioner of the art ... Self-censorship is a lie to yourself. If you are seriously trying to create literary art and you decide to hold back, to censor yourself, then you're a fool to yourself and it would be better that you kept your mouth shut and did not speak. If you're going to speak, the only way you can speak is to speak your full mind, to offer your full vision to the world and hope that that finds favour with your readers. This is the gamble of literature, that I make the best work I can, the most truthful, the most representative, and I put it out there and say, 'What do you think?' I hope you think well of it, and if you don't, that's not great for me. That's the only way to make it, with the fullness of your personal vision. Self-censorship is the death of art. I would prefer never to write again than to do that."

No, I will not take my words back nor tone them down. Nothing will change unless we talk and write. Anger and grief in the reader often gives way to questioning. The writer's role is to frame the area for questioning.

What if the writers who read from *The Satanic Verses* had not been advised to leave India? What if their brave example had been followed by more attendees? What if everyone read aloud from *The Satanic Verses* that day? Could the state arrest every one? If these miracles happened, there would be a great sales spike for *The Satanic Verses*, but the very next day, writers would have to resume the war against censorship.

Shauna Singh Baldwin is the author of five books including the novels What the Body Remembers and The Tiger Claw. The Selector of Souls will be published by Knopf Canada in September 2012. More information at ShaunaSinghBaldwin.com.