



Kenan Malik

To name the unnameable

Salman Rushdie had to back out of attending the 2012 Jaipur Literature Festival because of an assassination threat against him. The lack of support for Rushdie shows that the defence of free speech is no longer seen as an irrevocable duty, writes Kenan Malik.

"A poet's work. To name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep." So says the irreverent, satirical poet Baal in *The Satanic Verses*. What the storm over Salman Rushdie's [non-appearance at the Jaipur Literature Festival](#) reveals is that too few people these days think like Baal.

Rushdie was due to have attended the festival — which is quickly becoming one of the most important global literary events — to give a talk on *Midnight's Children*, the film of which is released later this year, and to take part in a discussion on the history of English in India. Rushdie has visited India many times over the past decade and has attended the festival before. This time Muslim activists issued threats. Instead of standing up the bullies, both local and state governments caved in, both exerting pressure on the festival organizers to keep Rushdie away. "I am sure the organizers will respect the sentiments of the local people", said Ashok Gehlot, the chief minister of Rajasthan, whose capital is Jaipur.



In the end Rushdie cancelled his trip having, he said, received information about a plot to assassinate him, a plot that now appears [may have been invented by the Rajasthan police](#) to "persuade" Rushdie not to come. In response, the novelist Hari Kunzru and the writer and poet Amitava Kumar, both speakers at the festival, publicly read passages from *The Satanic Verses*. Later, two other speakers, Jeet Thayil and Rushir Joshi, did so too. The novel

is still banned in India, having been placed on a proscribed list in 1988 by the then-premier Rajiv Gandhi, who, facing a crucial election, crumbled under Islamist pressure. The festival organizers distanced themselves from what they called Kunzru and Kumar's "unnecessary provocation", and put pressure on other speakers not to follow suit. "Any action by any delegate or anyone else involved with the festival that in any manner falls foul of the law will not be tolerated and all necessary, consequential action will be taken", threatened a subsequent press release.

While many have shown support for Rushdie, others have also sprung to the defence of the festival organizers. "I'm not sure this Rushdie intervention was wise or effective", tweeted *Guardian* books editor Claire Armistead about Kunzru and Kumar's decision to read from *The Satanic Verses*. But if it is not the role of literary festivals to stand up for writers, and to defend their right to speak, especially in these circumstances, it is difficult to know what is. The festival's decision not just to distance itself from Kunzru and Kumar but to threaten others who might be thinking of following suit was nothing less than cowardly.

Contrast the pusillanimity of the Jaipur festival organizers with the response of writers, publishers, editors, translators and booksellers faced with Ayotalloh Khomeini's fatwa in 1989. Salman Rushdie was forced into hiding for almost a decade. Translators and publishers were assaulted and even murdered. In July 1991, Hitoshi Igarashi, a Japanese professor of literature and translator of *The Satanic Verses*, was knifed to death on the campus of Tsukuba University. That same month another translator of Rushdie's novel, the Italian Ettore Capriolo, was beaten up and stabbed in his Milan apartment. In October 1993 William Nygaard, the Norwegian publisher of *The Satanic Verses*, was shot three times and left for dead outside his home in Oslo. Bookshops were firebombed for stocking the novel. Yet Rushdie never wavered in his refusal to withdraw the novel and Penguin never wavered in its commitment to Rushdie.

Penguin's CEO at the time was Peter Mayer, and he talked publicly about those events for the first time in an interview he gave for my book *From Fatwa to Jihad*. Mayer himself was subject to a vicious campaign of hatred and intimidation. "I had letters delivered to me written in blood", he remembered. "I had telephone calls in the middle of the night, saying not just that they would kill me but that they take my daughter and smash her head against a concrete wall. Vile stuff." Yet neither Mayer nor Penguin countenanced backing down. "I told the [Penguin] board, 'You have to take the long view. Any climbdown now will only encourage future terrorist attacks by individuals or groups offended for whatever reason by other books that we or any publisher might publish. If we capitulate, there will be no publishing as we know it.'" Mayer and his colleagues recognized that "what we did now affected much more than simply the fate of this one book. How we responded to the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* would affect the future of free inquiry, without which there would be no publishing as we knew it, but also, by extension, no civil society as we knew it. We all came to agree that all we could do, as individuals or as a company, was to uphold the principles that underlay our profession and which, since the invention of movable type, have brought it respect. We were publishers. I thought that meant something. We all did."

Nygaard, too, was resolute in his refusal to give way. He spent weeks in hospital, followed by months of rehabilitation. It was two years before he could fully use his arms and legs again. "Journalists kept asking me, 'Will you

stop publishing *The Satanic Verses*?", he told me in an interview. "I said, 'Absolutely not.'"

Mayer and Nygaard belonged to a world in which the defence of free speech was seen as an irrevocable duty. The organizers of the Jaipur festival belong to a different world, one in which the idea that a poet's work is "To name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep" is seen not as self-evident but as shockingly offensive. Over the past two decades, the very landscape of free speech and censorship has been transformed, as has the meaning of literature. The response of the Jaipur organizers gave expression to this transformation.



"Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties", wrote John Milton in *Areopagitica*, his famous 1644 "speech for the liberty of unlicenc'd printing", adding that "He who destroys a good book destroys reason itself". For the next three centuries all progressive political strands were wedded to the principle of free speech as the necessary condition for social and political advance.

Of course, the liberal defence of free speech was shot through with hypocrisy. Milton himself opposed the extension of free speech to Catholics on the grounds that the Catholic Church was undeserving of freedom and liberty. John Locke, too, fêted as the founder of the liberal tradition of tolerance, held deeply bigoted views about Catholics. A whole host of harms — from the incitement to hatred to threats to national security, from the promotion of blasphemy to the spread of slander — have been cited as reasons to curtail speech. Yet, however hypocritical liberal arguments may sometimes have seemed, and notwithstanding the fact that most free speech advocates accepted that the line had to be drawn somewhere, there was nevertheless an acknowledgement that speech was an inherent good, the fullest extension of which was a necessary condition for the elucidation of truth, the expression of moral autonomy, the maintenance of social progress and the development of other liberties. Restrictions on free speech were seen as the exception rather than as the norm. Radicals recognized that the way to challenge the hypocrisy was not by restricting free speech further but by extending it to all.

It is this idea of speech as intrinsically good that has been transformed. Today, free speech is as likely to be seen as a threat to liberty as its shield. By its very nature, many argue, speech damages basic freedoms. It is not intrinsically a good but inherently a problem because speech inevitably offends and harms. Speech, therefore, has to be restrained, not in exceptional circumstances, but all the time and everywhere, especially in diverse societies with a variety of deeply held views and beliefs. Censorship (and self-censorship) has to become

the norm. "Self-censorship", as the Muslim philosopher and spokesman for the Bradford Council of Mosques Shabbir Akhtar put it at the height of the Rushdie affair, "is a meaningful demand in a world of varied and passionately held convictions. What Rushdie publishes about Islam is not just his business. It is everyone's — not least every Muslim's — business."

Increasingly politicians and policy makers, publishers and festival organizers, liberals and conservatives, in the East and in the West, have come to agree. Whatever may be right in principle, many now argue, in practice one must appease religious and cultural sensibilities because such sensibilities are so deeply felt. We live in a world, so the argument runs, in which there are deep-seated conflicts between cultures embodying different values. For such diverse societies to function and to be fair, we need to show respect for other peoples, cultures, and viewpoints. Social justice requires not just that individuals are treated as political equals, but also that their cultural beliefs are given equal recognition and respect. The avoidance of cultural pain has, therefore, come to be regarded as more important than the abstract right to freedom of expression. As the British sociologist Tariq Modood has put it, "If people are to occupy the same political space without conflict, they mutually have to limit the extent to which they subject each others' fundamental beliefs to criticism." What the anti-Baals of today most fear is starting arguments. What they most want is for the world to go to sleep.

The consequence of all this has been the creation not of a less conflicted world, but of one that is more sectarian, fragmented and tribal. As the novelist Monica Ali has put it, "If you set up a marketplace of outrage you have to expect everyone to enter it. Everyone now wants to say, 'My feelings are more hurt than yours'." The more that policy makers give licence for people to be offended, the more that people will seize the opportunity to feel offended. It leads to the encouragement of interest groups and the growth of sectarian conflict.

Nowhere is this trend clearer than in India. There is a long history, reaching back into the Raj, of applying heavy handed censorship supposedly to ease fraught relationships between different communities. It is a process that in recent decades has greatly intensified. Hand in hand with more oppressive censorship has come, however, not a more peaceful society, but one in which the sense of a common nation has increasingly broken down into sectarian rivalries, as every group demands its right not to be offended. The original confrontation over *The Satanic Verses* was a classic example of how in encouraging groups to feel offended, one simply intensifies sectarian conflict. The latest row is another step down that road.

It is not just Muslims that are adept at playing the offence card. Hindus have done it perhaps even more assiduously, as have many other groups. Nor is it just an issue for India. Exactly the same trends [can be seen in Britain](#), and other Western nations.

The "never give offence" brigade imagines that a more plural society requires a greater imposition of censorship. In fact it is precisely because we *do* live in a plural society that we need the fullest extension possible of free speech. In a homogenous society in which everyone thought in exactly the same way then the giving of offence would be nothing more than gratuitous. But in the real world where societies are plural, then it is both inevitable and important that people offend the sensibilities of others. Inevitable, because where different beliefs are deeply held, clashes are unavoidable. And we should deal with

those clashes rather than suppress them. Important because any kind of social change or social progress means offending some deeply held sensibilities. The right to "subject each others' fundamental beliefs to criticism" is the bedrock of an open, diverse society. Or, as Rushdie put it in his essay *In Good Faith*, human beings "understand themselves and shape their futures by arguing and challenging and questioning and saying the unsayable; not by bowing the knee whether to gods or to men."

Shabbir Akhtar was right: what Salman Rushdie says *is* everybody's business. It is everybody's business to ensure that no one is deprived of their right to say what they wish, even if it is deemed by some to be offensive. If we want the pleasures of pluralism, we have to accept the pain of being offended. Not least at a literary festival.

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