

Following is an open letter from Salman Rushdie to Taslima Nasrin, author of the novel *Lajja*, Rushdie organized an international protest on Ms. Nasrin's behalf by other prominent writers.

# SIMPLE TRUTHS AND APOSTLES OF DEATH

Salman Rushdie

I am sure you have become tired of being called "the female Salman Rushdie" - what a bizarre and comical creature that would be! - when all along you thought you were the female Taslima Nasrin. I am sorry my name has been hung around your neck, but please know that there are many people in many countries working to make sure that such sloganizing does not obscure your identity, the unique features of your situation and the importance of fighting to defend you and your rights against those who would cheerfully see you dead.

In reality it is our adversaries who seem to have things in common, who seem to believe in divine sanction for lynching and terrorism. So instead of turning you into a female me, the headline writers should be describing your opponents as "the Bangladeshi Iranians". How sad it must be to believe in a God of blood! What an Islam they have made, these apostles of death, and how important it is to have the courage to dissent from it!

Great writers have agreed to lend their weight to the campaign on your behalf: Czeslaw Milosz, Mario Vargas Llosa, Milan Kundera and more. When such campaigns were run on my behalf, I found them immensely cheering, and I know that they helped shape public opinion and government attitudes in many countries.

You have spoken out about the oppression of women under Islam, and what you said needed saying. In the West, there are too many eloquent apologists working to convince people of the fiction that women are not discriminated against in Muslim countries or that, if they are, it has nothing to do with the religion. The sexual mutilation of women, according to this argument, has no basis in Islam. This may be true in theory, but in many countries where this goes on, the mullahs wholeheartedly support it. And then there are the countless crimes of violence within the home, the inequalities of legal systems that value women's evidence below that of men, the driving of women out of the workplace in all countries where Islamists have come to, or even near to power.

You have spoken out about the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh after the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in India by Hindu extremists. Yet any fair-minded person would agree that a religious attack by Muslims on innocent Hindus is as bad as an attack by Hindus on innocent Muslims. Such simple fairness is the target of the bigots' rage, and it is that fairness which, in defending you, we seek to defend.

You are accused of having said that the Koran should be revised (though you have said that you were referring only to Islamic religious code). You may have seen that only last week the Turkish authorities have announced a project to revise these codes, so in that regard at least you are not alone. And even if you did say that the Koran should be revised to remove its ambiguities about the rights of women, and even if every Muslim man in the world were to disagree with you, it would remain a perfectly legitimate opinion, and no society which wishes to jail or hang you for expressing it can call itself free.

Simplicity is what fundamentalists always say they are after, but in fact they are obscurantists in all things. What is simple is to agree that if one may say "God exists" then another may also say "God does not exist", that if one may say "I loathe this book" then another may also say "but I like it very much". What is not at all simple is to be asked to believe that there is only one truth, one way of expressing that truth, and one punishment (death) for those who say this isn't so.

As you know, Taslima, Bengali culture-and I mean the culture of Bangladesh as well as Indian Bengal-has always prided itself on its openness, its freedom to think and argue, its lack of bigotry. It is a disgrace that your Government has chosen to side with the religious extremists against their own history, their own civilization, their own values. It is the treasure-house of the intelligence, the imagination and the word that your opponents are trying to loot.

I have seen and heard reports that you are all sorts of dreadful things-a difficult woman, an advocate (horror of horrors) of free love. Let me assure you that those of us who are working on your behalf are well aware that character assassination is normal in such situations, and must be discounted. And simplicity again has something valuable to say on this issue: even difficult advocates of free love must be allowed to stay alive, otherwise we would be left only with those who believe that love is something for which there must be a price-perhaps a terrible price-to pay.

Taslima, I know that there must be a storm inside you now. One minute you will feel weak and helpless, another strong and defiant. Now you will feel betrayed and alone, and now you will have the sense of standing for many who are standing silently with you. Perhaps in your darkest moments you will feel you did something wrong-that those demanding your death may have a point. This of all your goblins you must exorcise first. You have done nothing wrong. The wrong is committed by others against you. You have done nothing wrong, and I am sure that one day soon you will be free.