



IDEAS

Where the Hatred Comes From

What I learned in the space between death threats and bodyguards

By Orhan Pamuk



Tyler Comrie / Atlantic; Getty

SEPTEMBER 9, 2022, 8:22 AM ET

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***About the author:** Orhan Pamuk, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature whose books have been translated into 64 languages, is the author of the forthcoming novel *Nights of**

Plague.

Updated at 10:36 a.m. ET on September 9, 2022.

When I told a few friends that I wanted to write a short piece about the assault on Salman Rushdie, they warned me to be careful—even though, for about 15 years, I have been protected by bodyguards assigned to me by the Turkish government. They are right to be concerned.

It has been depressing to see the way the attack has been received with some approval in Iran and other Muslim countries. Several people told the Associated Press they were pleased to hear that the Indian-born writer—whose 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*, they felt insulted the Islamic faith—had been hurt. Some worried about how it would affect Iran’s relationships with other countries. I would not want to make broad conclusions based on social-media comments, but a quick glance at various platforms in Turkey, where I live, shows that many people believe that freedom of expression must not be confused with the freedom to offend or insult. They seem to think that the author had it coming, and they would be glad to see him dead.

Those who have denounced the attack in printed newspapers—most of which are directly or indirectly controlled by the state—rarely do so in the name of free speech, claiming instead that it must have been a false-flag operation staged by the West, maybe by America itself, to put Muslim countries and Islam in a bad light. Even among the Turkish writers and intellectuals who I know value free speech, few have been eager to protest or even draw attention to the matter.

I’ve had many long conversations with writers who have received death threats, especially from “Islamists” or “Islamic extremists,” and with writers and journalists who—for various reasons—live under threat in Muslim countries such as Egypt and Turkey. The threats I face in Turkey are primarily not from Islamic extremists, but rather from nationalists who take issue with my comments on the Armenian genocide and think I am insulting Turkish history—though, in truth, these two groups are not

too distant from each other, and Turkey is currently governed by an Islamic-nationalist coalition.

Life under protective surveillance almost always feels like a suffocating ordeal. It means that one is never able to fully experience the pleasure of being forgotten. The number of my guards fluctuates over time, depending on where I am and what the political mood is. No matter how kind they are, or how hard they try to stay out of sight, this is not a pleasant experience. If bodyguards are to do their job properly, they cannot be invisible; on the contrary, they must make their presence felt and be seen to be protecting the author, to discourage would-be assailants. In these conditions, any writer may quickly become disconnected from the “normal” day-to-day life that is our most natural source of inspiration. There were times, at least before I was charged with insulting the government in the mid-2000s and faced a barrage of death threats, when I refused bodyguards so as not to inhibit the natural flow of my daily life. There were also moments when I could sense that my home and my office were being guarded by plainclothes policemen sent by the state, and although no one had asked for my permission, I did not object. Soon I had so many bodyguards assigned to me that it became difficult to sit in a café and write, or to take an aimless stroll around Istanbul.

It is, of course, reassuring to know that I am being protected, and there is comfort in being shielded from physical and verbal assaults. I am fully aware that I owe to my bodyguards my ability, while researching my novel *A Strangeness in My Mind*, to walk around at night taking photographs in distant, gloomy neighborhoods where I might have been in danger even if I were not known as a particularly outspoken writer.

The difficulties of living under state-ordained protective surveillance are compounded by such a multitude of bureaucratic rules and requirements that the act of protection becomes a duty and an inconvenience not just for the bodyguards but for the author they are guarding, too. Say I have a meeting to attend, or wish to visit a relative. If I feel that the route and modes of transport I plan to take to get there are safe enough, and would rather be alone, I have to sign an official form declaring that I do not want

to be accompanied by bodyguards. Arranging bodyguards for when I want to leave Istanbul and go to a different Turkish city requires a different set of forms.

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All of these bureaucratic hurdles and the constant presence of bodyguards become so irksome that the individual living under surveillance can no longer have a “private life,” and is always aware of being watched and monitored. At times I have wondered whether the main thing making certain writers a target is the very fact that they are being protected. Once you have been identified as a target, even people who have no connection to the matter will start to see you as such, and to look at you as if you were some strange, unfathomable creature.

Protection is an incessant reminder to the writer that they have become an object of loathing among certain nationalistic, political, and religious factions, and soon they begin to crave escape from that real or imagined hatred. I know from my own experience that after the most dangerous first few years, the writer under protection

wants to believe that “the worst is over”: Perhaps we don’t need bodyguards anymore, and we can return to the old, beautiful, “normal” life. Unfortunately, most of the time this is not a realistic decision. So the universities, foundations, and cities that invite a writer who is under threat to speak should automatically protect the safety of this writer—no matter what the writer may think or say about their own condition.

Living under protection has frequently prompted me to think of the people who make these threats. Did they really mean the death threats they uttered? Do they still stand behind their words, or have they forgotten about me by now? Is forgetting them in turn, or leaving their threats unanswered, really the best method of dealing with them? These are questions I have often asked myself and my loved ones.

Whenever a writer comes under physical attack, everyone starts talking about responding to words with words, to books with more books. But does this old adage make sense? Those who are pulling the trigger or wielding the knife tend to have read very few books in their life. Had they read more books, or been in the position to write one themselves, would they have turned to this kind of violence? Would they have been capable of it?

What we need to do is use our privilege of free speech to acknowledge the role of class and cultural differences in society—the sense of being second- or third-class citizens, of feeling invisible, unrepresented, unimportant, like one counts for nothing—which can drive people toward extremism. (Rushdie’s 24-year-old assailant worked as a clerk in a discount store.) I say this with a novelist’s awareness that trying to understand a person does not equate to forgiving them or excusing their heinous crimes.

Remembering the class-based cultural differences and nationalistic resentments that lie beneath these kinds of threats and attacks can only serve to strengthen our commitment to free speech. In many cases, these differences in class and social status have become taboo subjects that nobody wishes to hear or dares speak about. The news media, reluctant to appear to be somehow condoning violence, don’t dwell on the fact that the people who turn to it tend to be poor, uneducated, and desperate, and they are instead portrayed as if they were attacking literature itself and all the values it stands for. If we hope to see the principle of freedom of expression thrive in

society, the courage of writers like Salman Rushdie will not suffice; we must also be brave enough to think about the sources of the furious hatred they are subjected to.

This essay was translated by Ekin Oklap from Turkish.

This article originally misstated the year in which *The Satanic Verses* was published.
