

BATMAN

Harper's

10th
ANNIVERSARY

DELENG/2014/59909
OCTOBER 2018, ₹200

INDIA

THE
Katrina
YOU
DON'T
KNOW
BY KABIR KHAN

JOY OF
FLOWERS

2018's
BEST SCENTS

MONEY CAN BUY
YOU HAPPINESS
THE
ULTIMATE
SHOPPING
LIST

RETURN TO
READING

FATIMA
BHUTTO
&
SOHAILA
ABDULALI

THE
NEW
LUXURY

MINIMAL, MEANINGFUL, MADE TO ORDER



On Abdulali: Jacket, ₹24,500, and pants, ₹10,500. Eka. Jewellery and shoes, her own. Photograph by Colston Julian.



FASHION EDITOR: SMRIDHI SIBAL. HAIR & MAKEUP: ZEESHAN SHAMJI

TALKING ABOUT WRITING ABOUT RAPE

ESSAY

In a Bazaar exclusive, Sohaila Abdulali brings a spirit of optimism to a heinous crime

JUST FOR THIS LOVELY MOMENT, I'm living the dream. I spent some months writing a book, had a grand time doing it, and it's poised to come out all over the world. It might sell; it might not. The dreamy part was working on it, talking to incredible people, typing madly while ignoring the reality that my table is too high and my chair too low and it hurts to sit here and why don't I get a real desk...

I'm proud of my book. But I'm not proud of the small part of me that cringes when people ask what I'm working on. This is how it goes:

I meet someone at a dinner party. We do the obligatory nice-to-meet-you-what's-your-connection-with-the-host-what-do-you-do. And of course they ask.

"Are you working on anything now? A book? That's great, what's it about?"

"It's about rape."

Proud. I'm proud. It's a tremendous topic. So why do I have to school my face to be calm, why do I have to stop myself from saying something defensive, like, "I know, it's not exactly a jolly topic"? Why do I want to apologise for bringing ugliness into the conversation?

I'm not a tortured writer. I genuinely love the act of doing it and I felt mighty pleased with myself while I was working on the book. And one of the main points I make over and over again when I write about what we talk about when we talk about rape is that it shouldn't be a stigmatised topic, and the world would be a better place if we talked more about it. But I still want to get right up in the face of whoever asks me that casual question at parties. I still want to say, "It's in the first person, and yes, I was raped, but really, I'm having a good life, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry to make you uncomfortable."

Even worse—and now you know that I'm not the cool person I'd like to be—I want to say, "I'm not your typical rape victim."

I don't say it, but it's tempting. And that just proves that I'm as much of a jerk as many of the people I slam in the book. What is it about rape, and other things, that makes us say, "But I'm not the typical victim!" It's a creepy way of distancing yourself, and subtly denigrating victims. Like saying, "He's so full of life—how could he get cancer?" Like saying that the 'typical victim' is somehow a lesser being, and I'm a shining exception. I detest that impulse, but there's no denying I have it.

Party conversation is complicated, no matter what the topic, because one has to be able to keep up the façade of depth while actually remaining as shallow as possible. And one must not confuse or rattle. It's best to keep it either very simple ("I grow tomatoes") or completely obtuse ("I'm a consultant"). Nobody wants to think too hard or have a nuanced reaction; you're standing between them and the open bar.

When people ask my husband what he does and he replies, "I make neon," there's a similar pause. He reports that a certain glazed look comes into people's eyes because they have absolutely no idea what he means. In my case, it's not confusion I see as much as a wave of embarrassment, awkwardness, fear of what to ask, and sometimes fleeting pain, in someone's face. That flash of pain always saddens me. I'm sorry, I want to say, this is a party, I don't want to remind you of whatever I've made you think about right now.

Perhaps, rather than the sexist assumptions in "I'm not the typical victim," I'm actually grappling with the cognitive dissonance of being a mostly optimistic person and writing about one of the worst things that human beings do to each other. This is what made writing the book so satisfying and challenging—how to deploy my most cunning writing tools to convey the horror and magnitude of this crime, and somehow incorporate an upbeat vibe? I hope I've done it. I hope I've come to terms with the truth: There is no cognitive dissonance—the world is horrible and yet we can sing and dance and be content. It's a big crazy mixture. That is why my book's index includes entries for gang-rape, dentistry, Trollope, orgasms, murder, and music. That is why it talks about rape kits as well as dancing cranes.

Jack Kerouac once wrote, "It ain't whatcha write, it's the way atcha write it." That's all very well for him, writing about road trips. When you write about rape, it's also partly whatcha write.

It's rather complicated to get into with a stranger at a party. I understand that. But I abhor the bit of myself that gets instantly defensive, that wishes I had written a book about gardening instead, or football, or the history of video games. I also know that if I still have that traitorous little feeling tucked inside me, the book I wrote is exactly the one I was meant to write. ■

Sohaila Abdulali's book What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape (Penguin Random House) is out this month.