

THE SATURDAY PAPER

PROFILE

In 2012, a prominently reported rape and murder of an Indian student revived interest in Sohaila Abdulali's 33-year-old account of surviving her own attack. Since then the author has used her new platform to encourage unflinching debate about violence against women. "When I started writing this book, nobody was talking about rape. And even in that short time, people are now starting to want to speak about their experiences and understand them. That people want to understand and talk about it – makes me feel hopeful. There's a lot in the world to feel hopeless about too, but there's still hope." By *Marieke Hardy*.

Sohaila Abdulali on survival



Sohaila Abdulali

CREDIT: TOM UNGER



In a warm, cosy apartment in Delhi in January of this year, a group of about 20 people – mostly women, mostly Indian – gather on floor cushions and teetering wooden stools to listen to Sohaila Abdulali talk about rape.

The evening begins with Abdulali reading passages from her new book, apparently choosing at random which she might share – “Oh, I can’t be bothered with that one right now, we’ll probably chat about it later...” – and moves, rather rapidly, into a brisk, no-nonsense description of her own horrific assault.

In 1980, aged 17, Abdulali was raped by four men as she was hiking with a male companion in Mumbai. The men committed repeated acts of sexual violence on her. They also tried to strangle her. Abdulali reached into the reserves of her subconscious in her attempt to survive the attack, babbling incoherently about whatever came into her head.

“I told them they were my brothers, my family, that we were connected. I didn’t know what was coming out of my mouth really, I was just saying anything. They didn’t like hearing that very much, but eventually they let us go.”

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THE SAME SIDE.”

The room is still as Abdulali speaks. At times, she recalls the events as casually as one might describe a long-ago soiree or random benign encounter – without emotion, without any snag of grief in her throat, simply stating the facts as they had occurred. She jokes about the brutal physical injuries she sustained in the attack and having to arrive at her American college weeks afterwards “still wearing bandages”. I inadvertently lean into the person next to me for comfort – a colleague of whom I am fond but don’t know well. I need to feel someone else bearing witness. It seems staggering, almost fraudulent, somehow, that a human being could survive something so appalling and go on to chat about it with no apparent lingering pain.

During the salon’s question and answer session, the audience seems to fixate on this too, asking in myriad ways what Abdulali’s secret is, in order for her to carry on so blatantly and boldly living free. How does she not see herself as a victim? Is it the unwavering devotion of her father, whose immediate pledge of support after the attack was highly unconventional in a society that at that time almost universally blamed rape on women? Is it that she never once shied away from using the word “rape” at any point, always boldly claiming ownership of her experience? What clever trickery lives within her and where, how, can someone else attain it?

When I raise this in our conversation a month later, Abdulali says, “I found that very strange. They kept coming back to it, over and over – ‘What makes you so special? What was it you did to be okay?’ – when the book explicitly states that there’s nothing special about rape, that it can happen to anybody, there’s nothing special about me. Rape is a terrible, life-shattering event, yes. But it doesn’t have to define you forever. I left that room feeling a little bit like a Martian.”

The book is *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape*, a collection of survivor stories, reflections on global sexual politics and the unwaveringly unique voice of Abdulali herself – conversational, curious and often wryly funny. For a book that delves into the broken legal system, problematic elements of the Hollywood-focused #MeToo movement and India’s own struggle with the fallout of the 2012 gang rape and murder of physiotherapy student Jyoti Singh, it’s a surprisingly accessible read. I describe it that way to Abdulali, expecting a scoff – she doesn’t mind a well-placed scoff – but she responds eagerly. “Yes, it is accessible. I wanted to write how I talked; it’s not meant to be an academic book. Some people have said it’s maybe too chatty, but that’s exactly what I wanted it to be.”

Doing things exactly how she wants to has been a hallmark of Abdulali’s life and work. At age 21, three years after her rape, she wrote a defiant piece for Indian women’s magazine *Manushi*, having sought no counselling or therapy to process the experience. “I didn’t even think of talking about it, nobody told me to, because I was Indian. I was open about it, I was in bandages, people asked me what happened and I told them I had been raped. That was it. I never went to therapy. I understand that it works for some people but I never needed to go.” The article, titled “I Fought for My Life ... and Won”, not only described the assault in excruciating detail but included a large, close-up photograph of Abdulali herself. In a time where women in India would often choose to commit suicide rather than live with the shame brought upon their families through being raped, the *Manushi* piece was a giant “fuck you”, both to her attackers – who were never found or charged – and to a pervasive view that women who were raped should be quiet and disappear.

After graduating from Brandeis University in Massachusetts with a bachelor’s degree in economics and sociology, Abdulali threw herself into a successful and diverse career – writing two novels, receiving grants to research and produce children’s books on women’s health in India, penning columns. Life, as she tells it, carried on relatively normally. And though the horror of her trauma would occasionally flash into her mind like a jagged piece of glass – she experienced flashbacks when her mouth was forced open in the dentist’s chair; she took years to feel comfortable wearing scarves – Abdulali’s career achievements were for the most part unrelated to what had happened to her in 1980, and she was just fine about that.

And then – after the senseless death of Singh in 2012 and Indian women taking to the streets bristling with collective fury – someone unearthed the original *Manushi* piece and Abdulali’s rape story suddenly went viral, 33 years after it was first published. The press came calling. Friends and family previously in the dark

were suddenly and shockingly made aware of the assault. *The New York Times* asked her to write an op-ed.

She writes of that piece: “[The *Times*] hadn’t told me the title. I didn’t want to know; I had to know. My brother called at 6am: ‘It’s here!’ ‘Oh, my God. What’s the title? Is it, ‘Vagina Vagina Vagina Vagina Vagina?’”

The humorous elements of... *When We Talk About Rape* are also somewhat challenging at first read – who writes a funny book about rape? – but it’s a deliberate and considered choice by Abdulali.

“I was very worried about being seen as glib, as making light of rape. There was another book by a rape survivor that came out some years ago and it was jokes from start to finish. People were very critical of it. I didn’t want to have that experience. I wanted to show that if I chose to use humour I could, but it didn’t mean I thought rape was no big deal.”

Even still, it’s possible to sense Abdulali’s hesitation on the page – to ensure that she’s not offending any survivors with her lightheartedness, there are four carefully placed chapters that anchor the reader in the stark reality of those grappling with the emotional tumult of rape (“A brief pause for horror”, “A brief pause for confusion”, “A brief pause for ennui” and “A brief pause for terror”). The book also draws on her experience, in the years following her rape, when she worked as a counsellor at a rape crisis centre in Boston. “I just turned up, so young and without any experience, and then suddenly I was running the whole centre. I’m still not sure why they hired me,” she says. In her interrogation of the topic via the lens of her own experience and decades of talking to survivors, Abdulali manages to gently balance her irreverence with compassion.

When I ask about humour in this context – whether, as is often furiously argued about in stand-up comedy circles, it is ever okay to tell a joke about rape – Abdulali is reliably straightforward.

“I think anybody can joke about rape, or death, but it has to be a good joke. Rape itself is never funny, but rape jokes can be funny.”

Another high-profile survivor of rape drawing on their own experience is Australian feminist and author Germaine Greer, whose book *On Rape* caused an unsurprisingly big stir when released in September of last year. In it, Greer called for a “rethinking” of rape, and told a British festival audience: “Most rape is just lazy, just careless, insensitive.” When Abdulali found herself on a panel with the formidable Professor Greer at Jaipur Literature Festival, the two discovered a great deal of common ground.

“Germaine and I disagree on many things but fundamentally we are saying the same thing and we are on the same side. We’re saying, ‘Rape is bad and the system is broken.’ And on that panel, I kept steering it back to our commonality – because what would that have looked like, the two women with books on rape attacking each other – some sort of feminist cage fight...”

Abdulali so enjoyed the session she leant across to Greer at its conclusion and chummily murmured, “You and me, babe”, not realising that the microphones were still switched on and everyone in the audience was privy to the moment of camaraderie between the pair.

Near the end of our conversation I note how easily and often we have together used the word “rape”. Even writing and reading it so many times in this profile (the final tally is 40, if you are curious) has an odd effect, a tiny slap of horror one experiences tentatively wielding such power in text, and endless internal fretting. (When should I write “assault” instead? Or “attack”, perhaps? Is overuse of the word “rape” destructive and triggering?) It’s a word Abdulali has firmly made her own, though she agrees there are dangers in overuse.

“Rape should be a jarring word. It should shock. I don’t mean to use it so much that it loses meaning. But if we don’t take away the secrecy, the shame of the word, rapists will just keep raping, because nobody is talking about it,” she says. “At the same time, you don’t want to normalise it. There should never be such a thing as ‘just’ rape.”

Trauma recovery is a complex and challenging path and a different experience for everyone. By placing herself not only as the hero and protagonist of her rape but as a tireless advocate for others still stumbling their way through the commonplace barbarism of healing from sexual assault, Abdulali has made herself

visible. That visibility permits her to give a voice to those unable to access her “secret”, to hear and hold the vivid pain of the thousands of women she meets wanting to be seen and believed. In her 40 years processing, investigating, questioning and challenging the status quo on rape and sexual assault, Abdulali has borne witness to some of the worst, most debased elements of human nature. It must be difficult for her to retain optimism when faced with story after story of violated trust, broken promises and damaged bodies. Does she find it difficult to retain that very endearing sense of humour – her ability to make jokes about the world?

“I feel both hopeless and hopeful,” she says. “When I started writing this book, nobody was talking about rape. And even in that short time, people are now starting to want to speak about their experiences and understand them. When I was in India, you know, somebody’s housekeeper would come up to me and say, ‘I know you were raped, now here is what happened to me’, and you couldn’t have imagined that years ago. So that sense – that people want to understand and talk about it – makes me feel hopeful. I’m excited by that. There’s a lot in the world to feel hopeless about too, but there’s still hope.”

National Sexual Assault and Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service 1800 737 732

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Marieke Hardy

is a writer, producer and theatre maker,
and the artistic director of the
Melbourne Writers Festival.

