

# **IBBY WORLD CONGRESS 2008**

COPENHAGEN, DENMARK SEPT. 7 – 10

PLENARY SESSION 6

## **FREEDOM OF SPEECH VS. CULTURAL SENSITIVITY**

*BALANCING THE RIGHT TO CREATE FREELY VS. THE NEED OF  
PEOPLE TO BE RESPECTED*

BY

RUKHSANA KHAN

## **FREEDOM OF SPEECH VERSUS CULTURAL SENSITIVITY**

### ***Balancing the Right to Create Freely vs. the Need of People to be Respected***

By

Rukhsana Khan

*In the Quran (49:13) God says, “Oh mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other)...”*

Imagine how dull the world would be if we all looked the same, ate the same food and dressed the same way!

I believe that just as biodiversity allows species to take advantage of evolutionary niches, diversity of cultures explores all the societal permutations possible and helps mankind to progress.

Societies are in a constant state of flux. Members move between communities and with this comes the cross pollination of ideas. Over time cultural norms must change and adapt as a result of this.

All this cultural exchange is very healthy. It prevents stagnation. It challenges a culture's status quo and allows for the vetting of long held assumptions. Ultimately only the best and fittest concepts will survive to further contribute toward the progress of mankind.

Each culture represents an evolutionary pathway of human society and contains both positives and negatives. I believe this variety of cultures exists so that we can learn from each other. No single culture has all the answers.

But judging from the state of the world today many cultures seem to think they're perfect and need no vetting.

At this time in history we're in a big mess. Xenophobia is on the rise, cultural clashes are rampant and sometimes members of one community hide behind the principles of freedom of speech not to challenge other cultures in a legitimate exchange of ideas but simply to launch culturally insensitive attacks.

Instead of having a positive vetting effect, these culturally insensitive attacks instigate conflict which can often result in violence and death. These attacks must be exposed for what they are, but they should not necessarily be stifled. Instead the instigators should be encouraged to express their opinions in a less combative way, a way that can constructively challenge the other culture instead of just causing strife and unnecessary conflict.

Issues of freedom of speech and cultural sensitivity are really symptomatic of a larger problem, and that is the issue of integration and assimilation.

When I first arrived in Canada, it was 1965 and it was automatically assumed that immigrants would assimilate. There was no choice in the matter. The message was, "Shut up and be grateful for being allowed into this western country club and the way you show that gratitude is by adopting our values. It'll take a generation or two, but if you behave yourself and keep your nose clean, maybe your kids will grow up to be prosperous. And if you don't like it, go back to where you came from."

Of course this was never stated out right, but everywhere it was implied.

We immigrants were grateful and we worked hard to capture as much of the dream as we could.

My father was a tool and die maker. At one point he took a job for \$2.35 per hour because he refused to go on welfare. At the end of the month, after paying the bills, we had \$5 a week with which to buy food. Most of the time we ate dill weed and potatoes because it was cheap and filling.

At his workplace they wouldn't call my father by name, they called him black bastard. And he put up with it because he had a wife and four kids to feed.

My father was not alone. In many countries, immigrants make tremendous sacrifices and tolerate all kinds of insults for the sake of dependent family members.

By the late '60's the civil rights movement began in America. We saw people of colour demanding full equality, no longer settling for the back of the bus, no longer apologizing for being dark in skin tone.

Liberal ideologies were popular. Hippy songs with themes of peace and justice played on the radio. And like Martin Luther King Junior, immigrants too had a dream.

The Canadian government adopted many of the principles of the civil rights movement wholeheartedly and even went a step further. Canada wouldn't be a melting pot, we'd be a salad, where everyone maintains their individual characteristics and flavours but still is part of the whole.

Nobody had to assimilate if they didn't want to, and as long as they followed the laws and paid their taxes they were free to live as they pleased.

In large cities in Canada diversity is the norm and the government has funded many arts and cultural initiatives.

In the schools the official policy is multiculturalism. Teachers stock books that validate the cultural heritage of all students and often expand their knowledge to include cultures that are not necessarily present in the classroom.

Through these kinds of initiatives the Canadian government has created cross-cultural education, awareness and appreciation and encouraged immigrants to be secure in their culture.

It sounds idealistic doesn't it?

But actually I do think it works quite well.

It's not perfect. There are still two tiers of society. There's mainstream society and then there are pockets of ethnic communities. Many immigrants develop a split personality complete with dual identities. They dress and talk one way when they're in the public and another way when they're among their own people.

When I was growing up, one of my teachers once told me that no matter how hard any immigrant community tries, in three generations they lose all semblance of their cultures and are completely assimilated.

It made me angry when he said that. As if it was inevitable and only logical that I, just like everyone else, would eventually succumb and abandon my faith and culture in light of the far more progressive Western culture.

This was the popular wisdom then, but it hasn't exactly played out that way.

Some immigrants do abandon their faith and culture, but others cling all the tighter to it.

Of course this is not just a Muslim phenomenon.

Almost every major city in Europe and North America has a Chinatown.

In some areas of America the Hispanic population has created a sort of parallel society complete with store signs in Spanish, entirely independent of the patronage of the dominant culture.

How alarming it must be for people in the dominant culture, who have been living in the country for umpteen generations, to see these cultural enclaves emerging and the character of their country changing.

And because of this there are campaigns in parts of America to enforce English as the official language so no one can conduct business in any other language.

In Switzerland there is a movement to ban the building of minarets. Minarets are such an outward symbol of Islam. People are concerned that having minarets pop up all over the alpine slopes will ruin the look of the country.

In France they have prohibited the wearing of head scarves and other religious insignia in public schools.

These attitudes are a reaction to the immigrants who don't assimilate. Immigrants who manage to get by in their adopted countries while still dressing, worshipping and acting like they did 'back home'.

It would be easy to label these actions as simple bigotry and racism. But I think there's more to it than that.

If a country is like a house, immigrants would be like house guests. When the immigrants first arrive, the local population tends to be neutral and continue their own lives as usual, but eventually the house guests wear out their welcome. The differences

become blatant. These immigrants are backwards and will never be like us. They're still cooking their smelly foods, speaking their loud languages, and don't clean up after themselves. The tranquility of the home land has been destroyed.

And these immigrants are breeding, a lot, and inviting more of their family members to join them in this land of plenty.

But unlike house guests, immigrants contribute taxes and revenue to their new country. It doesn't matter though because many of the local population start to feel nostalgic. It's not like it was before.

It's quite understandable that these feelings of resentment would arise.

But what emotion is really at the root of this resentment. Could it be fear?

Not just fear of the unknown, but fear of being overwhelmed?

And it's not like the local population can express this in a blunt way because then they'd appear racist and bigoted, so instead these fears manifest themselves in other ways, especially as a determination to dominate the immigrants and establish their cultural rules as the norm.

Ultimately this is a power struggle.

But you have to ask yourself who really has the power here?

Most immigrants come to Western countries because they live in despotic regimes where there is little opportunity to advance oneself. They come for the sake of their children, to give them the opportunities that are not available in their own countries. These are pressure-cooker societies ruled by iron-fisted dictators who are often, ironically, propped up by the West.

When Muslims come to the West they often feel powerless and marginalized, but at least, they are free of tyranny. In most western countries no one is following them around after Friday prayers and monitoring them just because they wear a beard or pray five times a day—although after 9/11 that's not as true as it once was.

When Muslims see the permissiveness of Western societies it makes many of them cling all the harder to their faith. And they cling to their communities, because they too are afraid. Afraid of being overwhelmed.

Freedom of speech is one of the most brilliant institutions in the West. It has been singularly responsible for shaking off the yoke of oppressive religious dogma and opening up thought and discovery. Freedom of speech is absolutely essential to the cross-pollination of cultural ideas.

But some in the west use freedom of speech to make their immigrant populations feel less welcome by insulting what they value most.

One of the most famous examples of this is of course the Danish cartoon incident which began in 2005 when Jyllands Posten published twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

If Muhammad (peace be upon him) were alive today, there would be no question that the cartoons would be considered libelous and not protected by freedom of speech. But since he is dead they are allowed. This seems like an arbitrary limitation to me. Why can't libel extend to protect the reputation of all people? Even those who are dead? Isn't that the time a person's reputation is the most vulnerable because they aren't here to defend themselves?

Others might argue that the cartoons are a legitimate form of Juvenalian satire.



But I think it is hard to effectively satirize an unknown entity. How can the audience judge what is exaggeration if they are largely ignorant of the subject matter of the satire? Without any kind of balanced information on Muhammad (peace be upon him) the audience the cartoons are intended for, really can't get any kind of point the cartoons are trying to convey. And rather than being Juvenalian the cartoons come across as juvenile. The kind of sketch a kid would draw of a hated teacher.

Jyllands Posten successfully hid behind the concept of freedom of speech to launch these culturally insensitive attacks.

The creators of the cartoons stumbled, by trial and error, on the one thing that all Muslims, irregardless of their ethnicity or degree of religious observance, can be offended by.

When people are marginalized, when they don't have the means to express their frustration and their pain, when they already live under enormous pressure doing menial jobs that barely pay their expenses and when they endure insult and injury while doing so—perhaps seeing their beloved Prophet (peace be upon him) attacked through fiction is enough to make them snap. They wonder, what did he ever do to deserve such things said about him?

They think, isn't it enough that Muslims put up with being vilified as a community? Isn't it enough that they endure attacks from the news media, the movies, from Bugs Bunny and Popeye cartoons, and are the target of the most hideous insults from the lips of Evangelical preachers?

All these they can tolerate, but fictionalized attacks on their Prophet (peace be upon him)—the one whose name can't be uttered without invoking the blessings of God upon him, the one who is dearer to them than their own selves—it is too much.

Perhaps they feel they have nothing to lose.

They already have the reputation of being violent lunatics they might as well live up to it. And so they go nuts. They don't just gnash their teeth. They don't just boycott Danish products. They don't even just burn Danish flags. They riot in the streets, they kill, and torch Danish embassies, and in doing so they violate the very precepts of the faith they claim to hold so dear.

And of course, in the entire process Muslims, are accused of being culturally sensitive and insecure.

And there is truth to that charge.

When it comes to our Prophet (peace be upon him) we Muslims are extremely sensitive. We can't help it. It's a visceral reaction. That will never change.

From the very beginning early Muslims were forbidden to make pictures of the Prophet (peace be upon him) for two reasons. Firstly it was feared that some Muslims, out of ignorance, would start worshipping him instead of God and secondly these likenesses could be used by his enemies to ridicule him. This is why there are no pictures of Muhammad (peace be upon him).

This is also why even if the depictions in the cartoons were more respectful, they would still grieve and offend Muslims. But of course, just because they're offended, doesn't mean Muslims should riot and kill and burn down Danish embassies.

Unfortunately Muslim outrage is further undermined by the fact that when it comes to being culturally insensitive, Muslim societies really are no better. Soon after the Danish cartoon incident, Ahmadinajad sponsored a holocaust cartoon contest. And in many newspapers across the Arab world, cartoons, that are every bit as culturally insensitive, are published routinely.

In both cases, Jyllands-Posten and Arab newspapers would argue they have the right to publish culturally insensitive cartoons.

And it's true, they do have the right to do this, but does that make it right?

So what's the solution to this clash of cultures? How do we solve this confrontation of values? How do we reconcile freedom of speech with cultural sensitivity?

One option is that we could extend the definition of libel. Not just for the sake of Muhammad (peace be upon him) but to protect the reputation of any one living or dead. That would mean no more ad hominem attacks on Moses or Jesus (peace be upon them) either. Think of it, no more pictures of Jesus (peace be upon him) dipped in urine. Would that be such a loss?

Another option is that we could use existing censorship committees to assess satirical art to see if it is indeed a culturally insensitive attack. The committee would examine if there is any sort of balance within the public domain or even general knowledge of what is being lampooned so it could qualify as genuine satire. But that sounds rather cumbersome.

Another option that seems to be the current status quo is to ignore the seething resentment of the disenfranchised and marginalized, clamp down on immigrant

communities, racially profile and monitor society more closely for any reprisal attacks. In doing so, we would basically adopt the pressure-cooker style policies of the countries these people ran away from. More and more that seems to be happening in the west.

Too bad we can't use the classroom model.

If this were a classroom, the teacher would simply say, "Jyllands-Posten and Mustafa! Both of you stop it right now. Jyllands-Posten, stop drawing those silly pictures and, you, Mustafa! Stop saying you'll blow yourself up, or so help me I'll put you both in time out and you'll miss your snack of milk and cookies."

Then when both boys had settled down, the teacher would take them on her lap, kiss their foreheads, tell them to look each other in the eye and say they were sorry. And when they had done so she'd leave them with this advice, "Now boys, it's not only what you say, it's how you say it. Jyllands, you can find a better way to express yourself without resorting to insults, and Mustafa, you can find a better way to tell Jyllands how you feel without blowing yourself up."

Sigh.

If only it were that easy.

Since getting libel laws changed and satirical standards raised seems unlikely, there is one other thing we can do to effect change in this matter. And that is for each and every one of us to raise awareness when we return to our respective communities. I have talked about the past and the present, but that doesn't have to be the future.

Everyone in this congress is incredibly important and has a role to play either towards creating a more tolerant society or encouraging the opposite. Our very presence

here shows how seriously committed we are to excellence in children's literature. We are in effect its gatekeepers.

What I'd really like to do is explore the tendency of children's books to preach and try to convert.

We need to get away from this way of dealing with each other's culture.

This is a problem common to the most popular books about other cultures. They search for the mote in the other cultures' eyes instead of examining the beam in their own.

If it's a book about communist China, you can bet it's an oppressive tome whose basic allure to Western readers seems to lie in the ability of Westerners to feel smug and satisfied within themselves that their cultures are so much better.

Unfortunately, these are the books that attain international acclaim. These are books that in subtle and not so subtle ways denigrate another culture and focus on their weaknesses. Such novels are basically propaganda.

If you read a novel about Columbia you can bet the subject matter will be the drug trade. If it's a novel about Africa, it will often tackle AIDS or poverty. If it's about the Middle East it will be about violent conflicts like the Palestinian situation. Westerners do not want to read about the middle class and functioning people from ethnic minorities. It's almost as if these people do not exist.

The first instinct I, and other ethnic minority writers have, in dealing with these stereotypes is to counter this propaganda with our own. We want to write about 'normal' people from our cultures. We avoid all stereotypes, and instead focus on the positives that the West tends to ignore. And in doing so we are committing the very same 'crime'. We

are also writing propaganda, using literature to dispel stereotypes and further our own particular agendas.

No wonder so many kids are turned off by children's books. We treat children like ping pong balls, batting them this way and that with our political agendas.

Children are very astute. They can sniff propaganda a mile away. They're exposed to it on a daily basis. You'd think we would show them more respect and we would move beyond this!

And yet the intentions behind this kind of propaganda are good. Shouldn't the children be exposed to different cultures and all the problems in the world? Absolutely! But let's do it through legitimate story!

I have a confession to make. When I was a kid, and even now, I never read fiction to learn anything. I read a book to hear a story. Learning things is just a happy by-product.

There has to be a legitimate story you're trying to tell. The book has to be entertaining on some level. Behind the story, by all means, you can dispel stereotypes and enlighten, but such issues have to arise organically and not be superimposed as an author's agenda, no matter how well intentioned.

On a personal note, it grieves me that there are so many children's international bestsellers written by mainstream authors, about young Muslim heroines where the only solution the mainstream author could come up with is to have her dress up as a boy and run away.

What message do you think that sends to Muslim girls? In these novels, the fact they're Muslim is perceived to be the problem. Basically Islam is the conflict.

Dressing up as a boy and running away doesn't reflect Muslim reality. Frankly it's insulting.

Like I said, the first instinct for most ethnic authors is to ignore the stereotype and write about positive cultural situations.

To all the ethnic authors who are trying to get your work known internationally, I say this is not necessarily the right approach. Call me cynical but you will probably limit your audience. That's not what they want to read.

Instead you could take up such stereotypes as a challenge.

Elizabeth Laird did this quite effectively when she paired up with Sonya Nimr and wrote *A Little Piece of Ground*. The way Ms. Laird took Israeli punishments that many of us have heard about in the news, and made them hit home was remarkable. You could feel the children's claustrophobia while being confined to their homes. You could feel the frustration and rage of the refugees when they're confronting the Israeli tanks. And underneath it all, you could understand how these boys just wanted a pitch, a little piece of ground, to play soccer.

Walter Dean Myers also took on the challenge when he wrote his amazing book *Monster*. He tackled the black-teen-hoodlum-in-trouble-with-the-law stereotype and turned it on its head! After reading *Monster* I had hope that perhaps I could do this too.

For years I wanted to tackle the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim heroine but I couldn't find a legitimate story with which to do so.

And then one day I read a report on Children in Crisis focusing on some orphanages in Afghanistan that I help to sponsor through the royalties of one of my books. This girl's story broke my heart. It was just a small paragraph buried in the

report. Her mother had died during the war, her father had remarried. The stepmother didn't want her, so the father took her to the marketplace and left her there. She ended up in the orphanage I sponsor.

At first I didn't want to write this story. It was too stereotypical. And yet stereotypes exist because they are common. In fact the same scenario was playing out within my own extended family in Canada. One of my relatives died of breast cancer. A year before she was diagnosed her husband ran off with another woman. Her kids are left with a dead-beat dad.

What would it feel like to be abandoned like that?

And so I decided to write the story. I resisted the urge to find out too much about the girl in the orphanage. I wanted to write this on my own terms.

The first thing I asked myself was where does this Afghan girl come from?

All the stories out of Afghanistan are from the perspective of the people of Kabul and yet the people from Kabul are not like the rest of the country. They are very westernized. The world is getting a skewed vision of Afghan culture. I know this because my sister in law's family is from Kabul and my son in law's family is from Kandahar.

So I decided that the girl in my story would be from Kandahar. And because all three of my daughters, despite being born and raised in Canada, decided to not only wear the head scarf but to also cover their faces like they do in Kandahar, I wanted to understand their decision better. So this girl would be from Kandahar and she would wear the burqa, and she wanted to keep on wearing it. I had to know why.



I began this novel for all the best reasons. Not to further any political agenda, but to find out what would happen to this poor girl.

What surprised me the most was that the burqa actually worked its way into the plot! That novel is coming out next spring and will be called *Wanting Mor*—M-O-R, that's the name of her mother.

When I began my book called *Muslim Child* I was determined to focus on story. Each story would illustrate a major aspect of Islam but all the stories would be populated by characters any child could relate to. And because I was dealing with Muslim culture, conflicts would arise from the application of the culture. Islam was not the problem. Applying it was.

I hate boring stories, I was determined to make sure there were none in this collection. The first story would have to be about prayer. Muslims have to pray five times a day, and before we pray we have to wash—a lot. Without this ablution our prayer is invalid. And if you fart or go to the bathroom, then you have to go back and wash again. So I wrote a story about a kid who wakes up before sunrise, for the first prayer of the day, and in the middle of the prayer, he's got a big problem. He's got to fart. But he doesn't want to wash up again so he just squeezes and hopes nothing slips out.

It's actually a story about spiritual awakening.

I knew the collection would be enlightening the reader about aspects of Muslim faith and culture but I would do so in an entertaining manner. I really do believe it doesn't hurt to poke a little fun at ourselves.

In my first novel, *Dahling if You Luv Me Would You Please Please Smile* I wanted to tackle themes of manipulation: the manipulation of society through fashion; the sexual manipulation of girls by boys and the way religion can be used to manipulate others.

When it comes to their cultures, there are some authors who feel very proprietorial. They feel that no one should write about another culture because of issues of voice appropriation. I think voice appropriation becomes a problem due to this superficial culturally insensitive treatment I have been referring to.

When I first started out writing I felt that way about mainstream writers dealing with Muslim stories too. I thought that mainstream writers couldn't get past their differences to really understand Muslim culture.

Then I read Frances Temple's *The Bedouin's Gazelle*.

It can be done.

*The Bedouin's Gazelle* is a meticulously researched book set several centuries ago in a Bedouin society in North Africa. Ms. Temple was able to penetrate the social construct and even portray the antagonist in a humane way. A remarkable achievement! It really can be done.

Ms. Temple was able to internalize the values of the society she was writing about in a completely convincing way, and more importantly, she was able to tell a good story while remaining true to the culture. I suspect that Ms. Temple was able to accomplish this through a kind of temporary suspension of her own identity in the process of writing the book.

Some might argue that all authors suspend their identities while writing a book, but when it comes to dealing with other cultures, it seems they do so with varying degrees of success.

A little advice for mainstream authors who feel compelled to write about other cultures, I would say, go right ahead, but remember this caveat. Do your research, and no matter how much you disagree with the customs and mores you encounter, accept them as part of their norm and try to understand. Then write your story within the parameters of that reality keeping in mind that no society constitutes a homogenous entity and there will always be individuals who buck the trend.

The best analogy I can think of is some advice I've heard given to science fiction and fantasy authors. If you were writing a science fiction or fantasy novel, once you'd established the logic of your magical world, you have to remain within the logic of that realm. Similarly, treat this culture you want to write about as you would a magical realm where the rules are fairly static.

But it should be noted, that in the case of Muslim stereotypes a lot of the worst behavior is not condoned in any way by the religion itself. It doesn't take much to refute the misogyny and oppression that are rampant in Muslim cultures. I know this because I'm reasonably familiar with the religious scriptures.

I suspect the same is true for many other cultures—that most of the worst customs are cultural aberrations and not necessarily condoned as a whole.

Reading Ms. Temple's book gave me the courage to write outside my cultural experience as well.

When my friend Elisa Carbone first approached me to collaborate on a story collection with another friend of ours, a Hindu author named Uma Krishnaswami, I thought the project had a lot of merit. We'd write a collection of five short stories about kids who, despite their religious differences were all friends, just like the three of us.

So we wrote three of the five stories, the ones about our respective religious celebrations, and shopped the project around to all our publishers but received no interest. I think it's because although the stories were legitimate and good, the project stunk of propaganda.

Finally, I suggested we go to one of my smaller Canadian publishers who relied on government grants. To make a long story short, the project was accepted under the condition that I write eighty percent, so I had to write the other two stories and the corresponding non-fiction pieces about the celebrations as well.

I wrote the Hanukkah story in the middle of Ramadan, while I was fasting. It was much easier than I thought it would be. I had done my research, it was not hard to put myself into the shoes of this boy going to visit his great-grandmother in a nursing home. For the Buddha's Birthday story I wanted to focus on the Buddhist concept of right livelihood and the way we, as a community, are economically intertwined. The Buddhist girl helps her father run a jewelry shop and sells what becomes a new family heirloom to the Jewish boy for his mother's birthday. And the one thing that connects them all is their love of basketball!

I write by instinct. And one of the things that alarmed Elisa and Uma was that the stories were showing different levels of maturity among this group of friends. I

convinced them it was a good thing. Children in any group naturally have different maturity levels and that was part of being tolerant too.

In the end, I was able to link all seven stories into a story arc and I'm really proud of the way it is both a project that enlightens children while also entertaining them. This collection is called *Many Windows* and is a testament to that verse of the Quran that I quoted at the beginning of this speech, that we exist as nations and tribes that we might know one another, not that we might despise one another.

These are some of the steps I have taken towards creating a more culturally aware and tolerant society. I'm particularly pleased that I wrote the Hanukkah story and the Buddha's birthday story in that collection. I wanted to remind Muslims that we are supposed to respect other religious traditions as well.

Finally, as professionals in the children's literature field, we must remember that we wield tremendous influence over the direction of our respective societies. We must not underestimate our capability for we can help set the tone of the future.

It is up to us to take up the challenge.

I have outlined what I am doing, but it is also up to you to help cultivate a vision of a global society where people are free to explore the diversity of cultural expression, where we can conduct dialogues that respectfully and intelligently challenge each other's cultural concepts, where we share the common goal of improving society as a whole and where warmongers cannot ply their agenda.

I have hope.

Together we can work towards creating a global atmosphere where people from each culture can feel secure in their own identity, as ingredients of a global salad.

Where people from each culture can learn from one another.

Where no one fears being overwhelmed.

And in the process, let's tell some darn good stories!

**Rukhsana Khan** is an award winning author and storyteller. She was born in Lahore, Pakistan and immigrated to Canada, with her family, at the age of three.

Rukhsana has a down-to-earth, humourous style of presentation. Some of her presentations tackle serious subject matter such as child refugees, but she does so with a light touch that engages listeners without trivializing the situation. With her years of storytelling experience and wide repertoire of stories, her presentations work well for various age groups and audience types.

She has presented at schools and communities all across Canada and in many parts of the U.S. She has also presented at the IBBY Congress in Capetown, the 2006 American Library Association conference in New Orleans, and was a featured artist at the 2007 Universal Forum of Cultures in Monterrey, Mexico.

Rukhsana began by writing for community magazines and went on to write songs and stories for the Adam's World children's videos. She currently has eight books published and others forthcoming.

Rukhsana is a member of SCBWI, The Writers Union of Canada, CANSCAIP, and the Storytelling School of Toronto. She tells tales of India, Persia, the Middle East, as well as her own stories. She has four children, and lives in Toronto with her husband and family.