



**Monday 31 July 2006**

**For immediate release**

## **THE BRICK LANE AFFAIR**

English PEN warns of dangers of community censorship

On Sunday afternoon a tiny number of protesters, all but outnumbered by media, followed Brick Lane's self-appointed leaders through the contested street in their protest against the filming there of Monica Ali's novel. But on the advice of the police, Ruby Films and their backers at Film Four had already decided to take their production elsewhere.

This sad case reveals that we have entered a no-man's land of censorship, where writers' freedoms are in the hands of unelected and unaccountable community 'representatives', sensitive to imagined insult. The smallest threat of minority action instills fear in the police and, in this instance, in production companies. The result is official complicity with local attempts at silencing writers, artists, filmmakers: in a word, censorship.

English PEN believes that community censorship unopposed by the state is effectively state censorship by proxy, and calls on the Government to offer its strongest support to writers and filmmakers.

The PEN Amendment to the Racial and Religious Hatred Act embodies a legal commitment to freedom of expression. We ask the Government to honour that commitment, rather than turning a blind eye to the abuse of a growing number of writers in the UK. The roll call of 'communities' calling for censorship or inflicting it has grown in these last years: Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, Yasmin Whittaker-Khan, Gary Mitchell, Salman Rushdie, Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee.

Without strong political leadership, Britain will become an increasingly hostile climate for writers, with far-reaching and damaging impact on our creative industries, and receding hopes of building a genuinely pluralist society.

**Lisa Appignanesi**, Chair of English PEN's Free Expression is No Offence Campaign, says: "This is a sorry precedent. We cannot allow small numbers of 'offended' traditionalists the power of censorship. Mr. Salique's campaign, the media and the police's willingness to accept him as a representative, are shaming to the proud history of Brick Lane, which has been home to generations of immigrants from many countries, amongst them some of Britain's leading writers and artists."

**pen** IS A BENIGN AND VITAL FORCE, DEDICATED TO THE FREE EXPRESSION AND EXCHANGE OF IDEAS, AMONG THE WORLD COMMUNITY OF WRITERS.

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P.E.N. was founded in 1921  
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# ENGLISH pen

**Hari Kunzru** says: "I think this is a sad story, which does credit to nobody involved, not the protestors who by taking to the streets are foolishly confirming the prejudices they fear others hold about them, nor the media, whose sensationalist and sloppy reporting have made a big issue out of a little one, nor the film company whose failure to defend their work in any meaningful way has given an easy victory to self-appointed censors."

**Salman Rushdie** says: "After the damp squib of the anti-Monica Ali protest in Whitechapel on Sunday (very few protestors, a number of them related to the publicity-hungry convenor, the egregious Mr Abdus Salique) it is clear that, as many of us suspected, there are no strong feelings in and around Brick Lane about the proposed film of Ms Ali's eponymous novel. All those who overreacted in this matter - the police, who warned the film company off; the film company itself, and Channel Four as well, who ran scared just because Mr Salique said "boo"; the news media, who treated a non-story as if it were big news, and made little attempt to establish the facts on the ground; and, of course, Miss Germaine Greer, the censor's friend - should now admit their mistakes, so that the film can be completed, and we can all move on."

## Notes for Editors:

1. English PEN is the founding centre of the world's largest writers' organisation, and the world's oldest human rights organisation, with 144 centres in 101 countries around the globe.
2. In 2006, English PEN successfully lobbied for an amendment to the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill – the 'PEN Amendment' – which enshrines the Government's commitment to freedom of expression.
3. Members of English PEN include Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Zadie Smith, Gillian Slovo, and more than 1,000 other writers and editors.

## Contact:

The English PEN offices on **020 7713 0023**

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