

Why it is important to let Black writers write what they want, especially how they want to write it.

Anjum Malik

I am a multilingual scriptwriter and poet. I am also a lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University in Creative Writing and I am the founder of Hidden Stories CIC.

I was born in Saudi Arabia, I have lived in Pakistan and currently I live in Manchester, England. I began my schooling in Pakistan and completed it in England. At school, in both countries, my favourite subjects were art and drama. I didn't realise it at the time, but I was also very keen on creative writing, especially drama and poetry. In Pakistan, my parents had a private tutor come and teach me Urdu language, literature and poetry every day after school for two hours. I would be waiting at the gate for Masterji to arrive. During the lesson, I would hang on his every word learning about Urdu. My favourite part of learning about Urdu was that you could create new words using what was already there, for example instead of saying 'the voice of love', you can say 'voice e love' or instead of saying 'the music of the heart', 'music e heart'. This is what makes Urdu poetry so special for me, an amazing language to have had the privilege to have been taught. As a creative person, it adds to the methods I have available to me to express myself.

I arrived in England at the age of 12, fluent in Urdu, Arabic and English, all three were my first languages. I wrote a diary every day. The entries, I discovered much later in life, were poems and stories.

We as a family settled in Bradford, Yorkshire. I went to Rhodesway Grammar school. There were only a few Asian students back then, none spoke English and they mostly spent time sitting at the back of the class,

not learning much. I sat at the back with them but was the only Asian student who joined in with the class, and this is where it all began.

Why you should let Black Writers write what they want to write and how they want to write.

My English teacher, Mrs White rejected my very first poem for my portfolio. I don't have that poem or even remember what it was about. I had written it in both Urdu and English. Mrs White's reason to not accept my poem was that all poems had to rhyme. I argued my case there and then during the lesson. I mentioned poems I knew, and what I had learned from Masterji about poetry. The poems would have been mainly Urdu poems I knew. I explained why poems can be poems without rhyming but instead of listening to me or even talking to me, Mrs White told me I was trouble and to leave the classroom and stand outside in the corridor until she told me otherwise. I was dismayed, confused, not sure why I was being punished. I was not allowed back into the lesson that day.

At home, I didn't tell my parents anything about it. They were working hard to look after us in this new country we were making our home. I did my bit by cooking, cleaning and looking after my younger siblings with them. I knew my parents were proud of me as a daughter and had high hopes of what I was going to be doing at school in the way of studies and ambition -a doctor, a judge – like all Asian parents, there were no half measures in their dreams and hopes for me and all their children. How could I tell them that at school I was being called trouble by my English teacher?

I returned to my English class with more examples of unrhyming poetry for Mrs White. I meant well and that I was keen to learn and share but that only made things worse. I spent almost all of my English lessons standing outside the class in the corridor from then on. I must admit I started being

argumentative and difficult, I wanted to be heard but no one was listening.

I can only guess why Mrs White did not understand where I was coming from. Was it because she was rigidly following what was in the school curriculum or was it because she was monocultural and monolingual, with a limited idea of what made a poem or even a poet? It may be difficult when you don't even realise what you are doing, like Mrs White, but it can have a detrimental effect on the student. I may have stopped writing poetry altogether if I had not had Masterji and my parents believe in me, together with my four wonderful years in Pakistan where it was okay to be multilingual, different and challenging. It was seen as a positive, more as the norm.

I work in schools as a visiting writer now. Sadly, I am told of similar incidents by Asian and Black students. They confide in me when their teachers are not around, saying how they have enjoyed being allowed to express language on their own terms and understanding. I have also seen schools and teachers improve tremendously in working with multilingual students over the years. However, I would not say that the problems of ignorance and racism I faced at school have disappeared altogether.

As well as working as a poet and scriptwriter, I now deliver creative writing workshops and training programmes, such as Mother Tongue Other Tongue, for teachers, education, arts and literature organisations. I use Mrs White as an example. What would have happened if she had let me explain, show her what I was talking about? She may have learnt and opened a whole lot of other possibilities in what makes a poem. Not forgetting that each literary culture brings with it their own world, methods, storytelling and poetry writing/sharing traditions. I ask participants to trust the person in the class whose language they don't understand, especially when they are writing in it. Make them an expert, no matter what age, and let them take you where you would not be able to go without them. This is important because if you don't know a language, that's fine, the person in front of

you does and is keen to tell you about it. There's nothing more flattering to a child or a person than to share who they are and where they come from, and what makes their language so special to them. For instance, why does Urdu have more words about the moon and love than, say, English? A language and its words tell us about the world it comes from and what is important to the people of that language.

The same applies in creative writing for writers who are multicultural, multilingual and multidisciplined in their creativity. These artists see, experience and feel the world on so many levels, occupying their own unique point of view. If we let them take us with them in the way they want to, we have so much to experience and learn which we would otherwise miss out on.

My journey to becoming a writer was accidental. My intention was to be a printmaker. At school, where I was spending a lot of time standing in corridors, one day I decided to sneak off and into the art room of one of my favourite teacher's, Mr. Green. When he kept finding me hiding there doing art, he asked me what was going on. Instead of dropping me in it, he gave me my own desk to work on and said I could go there whenever I wanted and that he would not tell anyone if I didn't want him to. He encouraged me with my drawing and started my love for printmaking in all its forms: lino, batik, block, fabric. He helped me decide what I wanted to do after school; I wanted to go to art school. He set up a meeting with some of the staff from the Bradford Art School, and I was told they had a new course starting which included visual arts, drama, acting and writing. I applied, got an interview and was offered a place.

I must admit I did not tell my parents about this as they had been encouraging me to do science subjects. When I told them what I really wanted to do, and that I had been offered a place at the local art school, my

mother firmly refused. She was sure the place was full of junkies on drugs and alcohol; she was not going to allow her daughter to be in any place like that. She insisted I go to a university and get a degree, but I was not interested. My experience at school had involved not just Mrs White but my headteacher being racist towards me and other Asian students. I did not want any more of that. For the first time, my parents and I had reached a place where we could not agree or discuss the problem.

My father did his best by driving me to various universities and teaching colleges, taking me on walks to talk to me. I knew he was worried about me. I wanted to find something to do but I didn't know what I could do if not art or something creative. One day my father joked reading his paper, pointing out an advert to join the police. I was hooked on cop shows, Cagney and Lacy and The Professionals were my favourites. I popped into my local police station and applied. I didn't ask my parents, I told them I had joined the police.

The police had its own problems of racism and sexism. There were old, out of touch sergeants throwing their weight around when they didn't have a leg to stand on. My police bosses dealt with my complaints and did everything to encourage me to stay on, but after two years in the force, I had an urge to experience other worlds. I went onto do many different jobs, selling pensions and insurance, had my own photographic chemicals business. Through it all, in the evening during the week, and at weekends, I would be at a local art college printmaking, and at night I always wrote before sleeping. I wrote about my father: sadly, he passed away a year after I joined the police. I wrote about what I saw around me: the 'kitchen fire deaths', an open secret in the Asian community, where unwanted women conveniently catch fire and die. This was especially upsetting because I found the police were not investigating these incidents because of commu-

nity pressure they were afraid to tackle. Later, and now as a writer, I draw on all the different jobs I did. I am sure I was training and getting ready to be a writer and a creative person one day, which I am now.

Writing came as a career when I was living in Surrey and was asked to help the Asian Women's Writers' Collective in London with their business side, because I had the experience of running businesses. This was where I first shared what I had been writing in my notebooks at night before sleeping. It turned out I had been writing poems. I only realised that when I listened to the members of the group reading their poems and stories.

I began as a poet by sharing my poems at the collective and by doing public readings of my work. Every time I did a reading, I was offered more bookings, all with payment, a fee. That was probably because I insisted on it, coming from a business and commercial background.

Soon after I had begun as a poet and started writing more poems, both in English and Urdu, a visiting Indian woman writer at the Asian Women Writers' Collective told me that my Urdu poetry was too bold and not keeping in with the way traditional Urdu poetry should be written. My poem 'Pull Of Attraction' is a flirty, sexy poem. More importantly, to me, it is also a political poem. In the poem, the woman is in charge, she tells the person she is attracted to what she wants and how she wants it. In traditional Urdu poems, women are always waiting with their eyes lowered, veils covering them, for the man to make the first move. In my poem, the woman is totally in charge and proud and sassy about it. I ignored the advice and went onto make enough money from my poetry readings to enroll into a scriptwriting MA at Leeds Metropolitan University, a course on which I now teach.

Why you should let Black Writers write what they want to write and how they want to write.

Because you cannot stop a writer from writing what they want. As a Black and a multilingual writer, my personal story demonstrates that despite having the desire and ability to write, I was denied the opportunity repeatedly.

Because it takes us a long time to get to a point where we are given the recognition and sometimes it never comes, or the struggle becomes too much.

Because the people in charge are naïve, afraid, and simply there are not enough black, multilingual people in charge.

Because it is not important for the monolingual, monocultural person to understand, have translations, why, how, if you are asking the question:

Why should you let Black Writers write what they want to write and how they want to write?

That is exactly why, because if you are asking this question or do not understand the statement, you should not be making decisions about that writer's work; get someone in who would not ask this question.

Black writers come from multidimensional worlds and points of views by just being who they are. What makes a good writer is someone who sees the world in a different way. Imagine if Salman Rushdie and Haruki Murakami had not been allowed to write what they wanted and how. What would our literary world look like without these two writers' work?

When, as a young person, I discovered Salman Rushdie, I was blown away by the stories he wrote about the worlds I knew. His use of other languages within English, without any explanation, was exciting, so daring. His work gave me confidence about who I was. He was writing about people and worlds I recognized. This was exactly what I had been trying to explain to Mrs White. I devoured his books with relish, reading each one again and again.

The only thing more exciting than seeing yourself and your worlds in literature, is to find completely new worlds and people in literature and to be changed and charged by them and their stories.

Anjum Malik

Anjum Malik is a multilingual poet, scriptwriter, performer, filmmaker and a senior lecturer in creative writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. She writes drama regularly for BBC and independent companies. She is also a creative writing tutor for leading literary organisations in UK and overseas. Anjum is inspired by food, real stories and fiction for her writing. She also specialises in working with hard to reach, not normally seen groups and communities through her company 'Black Stories Matter CIC'. Over 80 of her scripts have been produced, transmitted or performed; her poetry is in numerous anthologies as well as her collection, *Before The Rains*. Anjum is a passionate promoter of her inherited lively poetry tradition of Mushairas together with the poetry she grew up with of *ghazals* and *shers*. She has been promoting the model of Mushairas (poetic symposiums) for over 20 years in the UK, with the Manchester Multi-Language Mushaira being the latest she has helped to set up. Her previous jobs include police officer, interpreter, salesperson, business owner and classical Indian Kathak dancer. She was born in Saudi Arabia of Pakistani heritage and has lived in Pakistan as well several cities in the UK. Agent: Georgina Ruffhead www.davidhigham.co.uk/filmclients/anjum-malik/

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

© Anjum Malik