

**‘And the rest of you are normal?’: A writer’s journey
with inclusive action**

Mahsuda Snaith

If you’ve ever been made to feel like the odd one out, you’ll recognise the following sequence: a distinct sinking feeling, a quick mental noodling as you try and comprehend what just happened, rewinding the scene in your head, playing it back in slow motion before burying your uncomfortable emotions deep down.

That was me, a couple of years back, preparing to go on stage for a writers’ panel. I’d been chatting with the other authors in the green room when the interviewer came in and introduced herself. Smiles all round, a lovely affair. She turned to ask me how to pronounce my first name. I told her. She paused, looked me up and down, then turned to the other two, white panellists before saying, ‘And the rest of you are normal?’

Sinking feeling. Quick mental noodling. Burying of emotions.

It all happened so quickly it was hard to pinpoint what stung the most. The fact another author had a surname equally unusual as my first name. The up and down look that made me feel the size of a pea. The implication that there was such a thing as ‘normal’ and that I was definitely not it.

I’ve never been ‘normal’. A shy kid, part of the only South Asian household on a predominantly white council estate, as well as being a bookworm who wanted to work in the arts, I was probably predestined to be anything but. I wrote in secret,

scribbling away in exercise books on the floor of my bedroom as my family watched gameshows downstairs. I had a love for writing and the hubris of a child who was yet to hear tales of agents informing writers that they already had a writer of colour on their list so couldn't take on any more, or requesting they change their novel to be about a woman in a headscarf because the author was a woman in a headscarf, or even to hear a stranger 'other' me in relation to my white peers. My thought process as a child was simple and wildly innocent; if anybody loved writing as much as I did, they could be a writer.

As I grew older and examined the bestseller lists and prize winners of the time (as well as the untouchable 'classics'), I realised the large majority of those writers were not writers of colour, or from council estates, or even from comprehensive school educations. When I did find novels from Asian writers, they were usually set in countries I'd never visited or ran along themes of arranged marriages, terrorism and chapattis, none of which I had experience of (we ate rice in our house). I began to realise that this wasn't because Asian writers weren't writing about other subjects, but that mainstream publishers had little interest in other subjects – something that was true for writers from other underrepresented backgrounds. There was a ghettoising of Brown and Black literature; if you didn't write about the stereotypes, your chances of publication were slim.

But my inner child kept telling me I could be a writer. I submitted to everything: short story competitions, writing development opportunities, submitting novels to agents way before I was ready to submit anything to agents. With grants, I scraped my way financially through university and eventually become a primary school supply teacher, booking off days so I could write. I couldn't afford an MA in creative writing so created my own course of study, taking out craft books from the library, reading internet articles, author interviews and prize-winning stories in an effort to strengthen my skills.

Like many writers, I had my rejections. Unlike many writers, my rejections sometimes verged on the bizarre. One agent told me that my depiction of a

Bangladeshi character was incorrect because, although she was white herself, she represented a South Asian writer (which somehow gave her a greater expertise in the area than I had).

As time went on, stories about class prejudice and gender bias in publishing only emphasised the feeling that I didn't belong. As more of my friends got dependable, non-arts jobs, I began to feel like a fool for thinking I could do anything different.

But alongside the rejections, there were gains: publications in *The Asian Writer*, a competition shortlisting for *Words of Colour*. I hit a particular turning point after joining Inscribe, a development programme for writers of colour. It was here I met other writers from the diaspora with similar experiences of the industry. Writing is a lonely profession and even more so if you come from an underrepresented group, so this experience with other writers not only empowered me but helped me realise I was not alone.

Through the support of Inscribe, I attended affordable writing workshops and received a free manuscript assessment of my novel-in-progress from writer Leone Ross. The feedback was both encouraging and constructive and gave me faith that my atypical novel about a British-Bangladeshi girl growing up on a council estate and suffering from chronic pain was something I should persevere with. I redrafted the novel and kept on applying.

And then came the wins. The SI Leeds Literary Prize is an award for unpublished women of colour specifically set up to address our underrepresentation in publishing. Being shortlisted for the prize alongside a remarkable cohort gave me the proof I needed that I was on the right path. On the night of the awards, I sat in the audience with my heart pounding. When the Readers' Choice Award, then the third and second-prize-winners were announced, I felt my body relax; I obviously hadn't won anything so could enjoy the rest of the evening. Then my name was announced. My novel, that didn't fall into any cultural stereotype, had been declared the winner of a prize. With that prize came £2,000, a free place on an

Arvon writer's retreat, a free manuscript assessment from The Literary Consultancy as well as a beautifully hand-carved award that still stands on my mantelpiece. To my astonishment, a week later I won the highly competitive Bristol Short Story Prize. This prize, like the SI Leeds Literary Prize, is judged anonymously, a great practice for eliminating unconscious bias.

More than the prizes and the feedback, the awards gave me permission to call myself the thing I'd been too frightened to call myself before then, a writer.

Inclusive action was an incredible aid on my writer's journey but I realise not all writers are comfortable being singled out for their ethnicity (or any perceived 'difference' they have) and shy away from diversity initiatives and prizes for this reason. I myself wondered if being part of these schemes would categorise me as a 'BAME writer' and not a 'mainstream writer'. I felt particularly validated when I won the Bristol Short Story Prize because it is an international prize, open to everyone, but now I look back I realise that getting on the list of *any* literary prize is an incredible achievement. Creating prizes for writers of colour – or working class, disabled, LGBTQ+ and other underrepresented groups – gives a platform to artists who are in need of it most. I was once told by a frustrated writer of colour that we should be living in a meritocracy where the work you put in, not the colour of your skin, is what matters. As I told him, I would love to live in a meritocracy, but as long as racism, classism, homophobia and ableism still exist, we can't. We need processes, policies and initiatives to level a playing field that is riddled with unconscious bias and systemic racism. In the extremely risk-averse climate of today's publishing world, it's not easy for anyone to get published, but this doesn't lessen the added difficulty for a person of colour. As the saying goes, white privilege doesn't mean your life hasn't been hard, it means your skin colour isn't one of the things making it harder.

After my prize wins, I gained both agent interest and opportunities to be published by indie presses. With the backing of my newly acquired agent, I decided I would aim for mainstream publication. This wasn't out of snobbishness – I've seen indie

presses do the most incredible work – but out of a fear that, as a working-class writer of colour, I would be side-lined even further without mainstream backing. My agent secured me a two-book deal with Transworld, a division of Penguin Random House. I received reviews in the national press, my first novel being selected as a World Book Night book, my second novel being serialised on BBC Radio 4, as well as being approached by Audible and Quick Reads for short story commissions. This doesn't mean mainstream publication is a guarantee of success or that I don't still struggle as a writer to make a living from the thing I've loved doing since I was a child. The reasons why a novel does well or not are sometimes arbitrary, sometimes mysterious. The important thing, I believe, is for a writer to make decisions from a place that feels right to them. The rest is left up to the Book Gods.

After the publication of my second novel, I was given the opportunity to judge the First Novel category for the Costa Book Awards. Suddenly, I was on the other side. I remember having two piles of debut novels, some still in proof-copy stage, wobbling like Jenga towers in my study. I knew how hard it would have been for each author to get to that stage. Yet it was interesting to see in the selection – submitted by publishers – novels that ranged from mini-masterpieces to novels I could only presume were published because the author had a large social media following, or because they were already known and respected in the industry, or even because of the author having a peerage. These same authors, who were predominately white, had glowing reviews from well-known writers and mainstream press on their covers. This, I realised, could result in the making or breaking of a novel's success. I was left wondering how many books had fallen by the wayside because they hadn't received similar support.

My selection process for the award was simple: I chose books I found compelling, brilliantly written and utterly absorbing. I didn't choose books because writers had a similar background to me, but of the few books [] that were by writers of colour, I was able to see a side of the writing that might have been overlooked. The history behind them, or the way the author had subverted the form and added asides

about race that were subtle yet acutely accurate. Having a different set of experiences as a judge meant I had a better knowledge of writing that was about different experiences. My concept of 'everyday life' differed from that of the other judges yet was treated with the same respect. This is why having diversity on judging panels is vital.

Once, after talking about my writing journey during a school visit, a secondary school student approached me and said, 'I'm Bangladeshi! And I'm from a council estate! And I write too!' I saw the pride in her eyes, to realise she was not a fool, and felt her empowerment in realising she was not alone. This is the point of inclusive action, to *include* and redress the imbalance. The world is made richer by diverse writers, not only because their work reveals the great complexity and multiplicity of life, but because they also show us there are different ways to be. There is no such thing as 'normal', there are 'averages', and who the hell wants to be average? By having competitions and development programmes for underrepresented groups as well as diverse agents, editors and judging panels, we can create a publishing industry that more accurately reflects and reaches its readership. And, perhaps, through making lasting change, we will learn that none of us are normal, and that this is something to be celebrated.

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A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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