

The Jhalak Prize

Sunny Singh

In 2016, I started what is putatively a literary prize. It had been in the making for over five years as I observed British literary prize shortlists, publishers, literary festivals, bookshops, and book review pages exclude writers of colour. Even the *Writing the Future* report (Spread The Word, 2015) did not shake this book world, which in large parts blamed a 'lack of literary merit' for these exclusions. In this moment of frustration, despair and pure rage, the Jhalak Prize was born. On the press release, the prize was described as seeking to identify and celebrate the best of literature by writers of colour in the UK. But that is not all the Jhalak Prize is, can be or was intended to become.

By refusing to limit itself by genre, its longlists are a glowing neon sign to prizes that honour debuts, fiction, poetry, children, young adult and non-fiction, demanding that fellow prizes which focus on specific genres or areas must justify their normalised, unquestioning all-white lists. By insisting on a panel of judges who are practising writers of colour, drawn from varied backgrounds, expertise and career trajectories, the Jhalak Prize refuses to accept all-white prize juries as

a norm. Jhalak Prize juries not only highlight writers with ample, if not overwhelming, expertise but also give young, upcoming writers a collegiate, nurturing opportunity to be part of the mysterious judging process. We reach out to literary festivals and bookshops to offer appearance opportunities to our longlisted writers as individuals or as part of a panel, with one of the prize judges chairing the event. The website is being developed into an ever-growing database of accomplished writers so that no literary organisation or event can ever excuse our exclusion by declaring they can't find us or, worse, that we don't exist. We have more plans in the pipelines, although given that the prize is administered entirely by volunteers, these may take longer to come to fruition than if we had greater resources.

This steady if seemingly slow growth is also deliberate because the Jhalak Prize is not simply a literary prize. Our winners are not 'solitary heroes' of literature, which is why we celebrate not only the winner and the shortlist but our entire longlist as well as the judges. Because we are, to reference Toni Morrison, building a "heroic writers' movement: assertive, militant, pugnacious." Because beyond the long and shortlists and annual winners, the Jhalak Prize is disruption, defiance, challenge, subversion. It is an initiative to decolonise our literatures, imaginations, cultures, and even ourselves.

But no decolonisation is possible without identifying, examining, challenging, and dismantling what Kerry Young has termed 'the hegemony of everyday racism'. While lived racism is all-pervasive in our public, professional and social lives, the

white supremacist superstructure explicitly and quantifiably impacts on every aspect of the lives of people of colour including, but not limited to, wages and career progression, housing and education opportunities, and differentiated access to healthcare. However, the concept of the hegemony of everyday racism goes beyond public, quantifiable, lived experiences of white supremacy and extends to our private lives, including our emotional, psychic and sexual needs and desires, our creativity and creation, and our imagined and imaginary lives and ambitions. And while the phrase, 'internalised racism' may be able to hold some of the horrors of living under such comprehensive hegemony, it does not fully describe the intricate, cellular ways we are continually damaged by simply existing in a white supremacy.

After all, how do we imagine ourselves (and each other) when we are rarely to be found in stories? A 2018 report by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) noted that even though 30 per cent of students in schools in England and Wales are children of colour, only four per cent of children's books feature them, and worse, less than one per cent feature them as protagonists. The picture isn't much better in books for adults. In the three years since its inception, the submissions to the Jhalak Prize have not exceeded 150 books. This is across all genres including self-published books, even though, according to a 2014 International Publishers' Report, the UK 'publishes two dozen new titles every hour.'

This erasure is extremely damaging as stories help us identify and recognise fellow humans and shared humanity. To tell a story is to birth ourselves. To hear another's story is to recognise their similarity to ourselves. So, not knowing or learning stories about a large part of our society means not recognising fellow citizens and humans. But it is even more harmful to be one of those who are not granted space for our stories and by extension, our right to exist, not only as full humans, but, at times, at all.

The questions arising from such erasure do not cease. How do we imagine and aspire when we are erased from stories? How do we love or value ourselves when we are not only absent from stories but, when present, represented as clichés, stereotypes, less than full human beings, with story lines that are limited in scope and restricted in ideas of what we are allowed to be? How do we consider ourselves desirable when stories give us only tragedies, where we are fetishized, exoticised and then quickly disposed of from the narrative? How do we dream, desire, imagine our lives when we can't find people like us even in those intensely private moments of reading words on a page?

It is in these private spaces, these intimate moments of sharing stories that the extent of our continued colonisation becomes obvious. Any sense of self, any ability to love ourselves and each other, any imagining of ourselves as whole, nourished, nurturing and capable of flourishing, not only now but into the future, can only happen in defiance of and by challenging the on-going, all-encompassing, continual hegemony of everyday racism.

In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Toni Morrison compares whiteness to a fishbowl, where the glass remains invisible while our attention is focussed on the sparkling fish, plants, decorations, debris and detritus and even the water bubbles. However, once we see the bowl, 'the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world', we cannot un-see it. For Morrison, it is also clear that the glass bowl is the world created by white writers for white readers. I would add that it has been built and is sustained and nurtured by a vast publishing apparatus including agents, editors, publishers, marketing and sales professionals, booksellers, critics, reviewers, literary festival organisers, and more. It is this superstructure (invisible to most of us except in the most incidental of ways) that manufactures the glass, fills up the water, selects and includes the plants and decoration and chooses the valuable goldfish who float beautifully in that bowl. With each successive and incremental choice, it replicates and renders invisible the oppressive processes and dynamics, not only for our lived realities but also for our stories and our imaginations. The design of the publishing apparatus leaves out most of our stories, lives and experiences while including, showcasing and valorising a limited number of us. This in turn ensures a tokenistic representation where people of colour become a kind of exotic fish – allowed in the same waters, but always in small, controlled numbers. In this bowl of whiteness, any presence of a writer of colour is disruptive per se, but even more so if that writer can find techniques that refuse and refute the 'taken-for-grantedness' of the white gaze. Beyond the writers themselves, however, we need to examine the impact of such hegemonic exclusions and to

really question how and why certain stories get to and through the publishing industry. How, and especially why, do some narratives make it through the long, narrow funnel formed of a tiny, privileged elite that determines which stories matter enough to warrant budgets, publicity, prize nominations, while the rest are sieved out? This can be supremely discomfiting because it means recognising (and acknowledging) that the industry finds methods to make some of us hyper-visible while rendering others of us invisible. Moreover, this requires us to recognise that these publishing choices not only decide our reading but also shape, prune and tame our imaginations to fit the invisible boundaries with least disruption to the exclusive ecosystem, leaving out all that is considered messy, uncontrolled, and un-aesthetic.

No surprise then that this pruning has little to do with the mythical 'literary merit' and more to do with what is seen to belong. What is seen as acceptable and valuable. And, therefore, what is seen as not, and must be excluded. Over an extended period of time, this superstructure ensures that not only do we end up consuming a limited range of stories but also that we find ourselves unable to see, hear or recognise the vast sea of stories beyond. We come to believe that only those stories in the tiny, hyper-visible bowl exist and matter. This limitation in turn impacts our ability to recognise, empathise and imagine ourselves and each other in ways denied in the narratives we are offered, and more importantly, rendered inaccessible to our own imaginations.

Furthermore, beyond the mechanics of these deliberate processes of exoticisation, fetishization and exclusion, we need to examine, as readers and writers, how this colonisation of our creative and narrative possibilities constrains us, and leads to a learned paucity of imagination about who we are - on physical, political, economic and social levels, now and in the future. This deliberately taught/learned paucity of imagination is at the very heart of oppression for the colonised where only the liberation of the mind and imagination can lead to political, social and economic independence.

While we may be comforted by soothing tales of unconscious bias, the sclerotic refusal of inclusion suggests that these are not bugs in the system but features, even part of the design in which our literary structures are heavily invested. This leads to questions for us as individuals: How does this learned paucity of imagination affect our own work as writers? And more disturbing, are we as writers working in this superstructure unwittingly, even unwillingly, reinforcing the structure and acceptance of the glass fishbowl that contains only what is considered to be the beautiful fish?

And here is a more pressing question: How can we make this invisible superstructure visible to all of us? As readers can we find writing that disrupts the seamless whiteness? As writers can we resist the pressure to produce what fits, enables and extends the hegemony of everyday racism? The truth is that decolonising our reading and writing in this environment requires something more than platitudes on diversity, or indeed programmes of inclusion. We require

initiatives that are not intended for the white gaze, that can resist the lure of whiteness and continue to centre a decolonising impulse to resist, challenge, defy and revolt.

In its small way, the Jhalak Prize is one such initiative. In celebrating the excellence of writers of colour, it hopes to help writers of colour not only to reach wider readerships but to encourage both writers and readers, not only of colour, to question how our psyches and our imaginations have been colonised. The prize celebrates writers who examine and challenge the hegemony of everyday racism and are diligent in representations of ourselves and our worlds. By recognising excellence of such writing across genres, the prize not only defies questionable ideas of literary merit but also demands that we centre narratives that pursue a liberatory mission to build 'an assertive, militant and pugnacious literary movement'.

Sunny Singh

Sunny Singh is a writer, academic and literary activist. She is the author of three critically acclaimed novels and two books of non-fiction. Her short stories, creative nonfiction and academic writing have been published across the world in key journals and anthologies. Singh teaches English Literature and Creative Writing at the London Metropolitan University and is a founder of the Jhalak Prize for Book of the Year by a Writer of Colour.

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

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