

Why Write?

Preti Taneja

Driving one day in 2021 a song comes on the radio a classic loved in the 90s and still now for the beat and the line and real bad girls are the silent type which makes me slide from the singer to think of a reader as a little brown daughter in the back of a car relating lyrics to my life so true I think so true what is your superpower small brown girl quiet spiky girl plump girl is it being underestimated is it taking the bits that resonate the real bad girls are the ones who stay quiet the ones reading undercover the ones dreaming to write noticing everything like the way uncle says girls should study while aunty serves dinner and does not eat till he's finished while the world says look down while also look around wide-eyed it seems and always smiling yes my innocence is a double dip delusion conjured up by brown brothers white girls white women white men waiting for gratitude I'll wait brown sisters don't wait for them to wait for you to say thank you please make space for you don't wait for them to promise you one day if you be good and wait your turn or bring you to the edge and

show you the view time to make your own brown sweet body sing for you with a fingertip pressing where it matters most on the keyboard I mean to make a voice that comes from the village well and if you don't know that story I'll tell it to you straight like Amrit Kaur Lohia in a spotlight on a stage or in bed in the dawn come close and I'll whisper it for you between your ears while you watch me sink one hand low on the tawa the other on the remote the other on the belly between sari blouse and petticoat the other on the cradle the other on the bandage where you cut yourself on your clique of one the other day one hand on the ring of keys at your belt can you see it on the screen while you watch *Little Women* the first version then the remake then the remake of the remake while you watch *Sex and the City* the series and the first film and the second film and the second series while you watch *Bride and Prejudice* and see the accolades that come to brown aunties who show themselves through the white lens while you watch *Harlem* the new series while you watch groups of women together in bars and never your sisters in the mirror and are not able to reach them there is someone in the way of that someone who knows the danger of you joining hands and lighting up each other in all your shades for the page and the wonder of your tongue that can slice a mango with a flick or lick out a Royal kulfi in winter just depends on the mood even though back in the day your aunty pinched your cheek pinched your side pinched her nose and said out loud it didn't matter if you were stupid

because you were sweet enough she said it when she thought you were sleeping you were reading the room and her cage knowing she was only made the keeper of the keys by design you know it in the way the blood comes out of you after singing in your ears a fever in the brain when you were five and nearly died when you perfected round roti when you first tasted chut-chup I mean the word love when you climbed a wave and said language is my country and mother is my tongue and my legs are like nothing on this earth there is no metaphor in nature or in food for what is between and inside me I mean my brain is on fire without religion but with faith in all I'm going to do and what I do and what I've seen and what I've done while all you thought is sweet and nice and quiet and good and almond eyes and pretty and softness in a smile what it takes isn't clothes or tattoos or a big wide mouth to make the kind of writing that folds in on itself prismatic in puns and songs that whisper and tissues of texts that shouts come from the silent hours of being told no or told to wait or told to pray or wear panties with lace on my knees when I want to and I pray my own way writing scripture with my palms around a pencil for a finger in unity not the norm as schooled under a cross on my knees yes but it's the way you read it that matters and all I can do is refrain as trained and these are some moves brown women are inducted to fight your sisters while they ask why write it is the form that desire takes it is the form of submission in the sense of the divine not to serve your brothers always

smiling or say you love your sisters as in the sense of being skilled in using your lips to service, as the performing arts but mean it not the set roles that wait for your fulfilment and if you refuse someone will push you back into them and throw away the key now enough getting you up to the point we are standing up facing each other even if brother you have a brown daughter I want to hear from your sister even if you have two brown daughters I want to hear from your cousins even if you only dream of brown daughters I want you to please introduce me to the brown woman you know is more talented than you that you would always give your shoulders to if not your whole head between the covers but did you ask first does she even want your head or your cover or to simply stand safe where she is and go where she wants at any time and as high as she likes and as wide and big breasted and long haired she knows what a smile is and saves it for herself while you say yes brown brothers make space make safe brown brothers I'll wait quiet brown sisters I say some of you are trafficked and some of you are sold and some of you are called refugee as a proper noun and some are called winners just because of the zeitgeist and one of you is Home Secretary murdering the rest and some teach school and more are nurses and cleaners and OK and some don't have money and too much sense and some have too much money and no sense they think their stories can be kept compressed in compacts of white powder that their stories are singular and this is the

trick our stories are never that solitary remember power is misplaced when it only serves its own power I'll ask them instead what they know as imperative inside them deeper than a dichotomy can ever go vehemence ferocity soaring are the struggles brown women undertake to find the key to the silent room which holds them the key to the room she can go back into when she wants to lock it to keep everyone out to keep to herself until she's ready the things brown women see no one sees us or the things we don't say we are trained not to say the things we don't say we scream instead inside we sing brown sisters *why write* who gives a – just write – love – don't wait.

Preti Taneja

Preti Taneja is a writer and activist. Her first novel, *We That Are Young* (Galley Beggar Press/Knopf), won the Desmond Elliott Prize for the UK's best debut of the year and was listed for international awards, including the Folio Prize, the Prix Jan Michalski, and the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize. It has been translated into several languages. Her latest book, *Aftermath* (And Other Stories), won the Gordon Burn Prize 2022. Taneja lectures in creative writing at Newcastle University and broadcasts on world literature and culture for the BBC.

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

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