

SAUMYA SHARMA

WW4- REVIEW ESSAY

ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART

For Propublica, Narratively

Publishing Purpose Only

NOW PLAYING



**The Soundtrack of My Single Story
ft. Chim XXX**

It's actually Chimamanda and she would probably (most certainly) dislike the fact that I butchered her name, the same way I feel when I'm called Saa-miya, or Saa-mya or Saa-mayah followed by a "Oh, I'm sorry I am butchering your name" to which I always wonder, why didn't you just ask me to begin with?

The same way you and your friends butcher every Asian, French or Arabic name, and then waive it off with a casual nonchalant -

So What Bro? x2

Much like Ms. Adichie, I grew up loving the idea of cycling over hillocks, picnics in fields, fleshing out my characters in hues of golden and pink, with mutual disinterest in the weather and a conflict of interest between her ginger beer and my butter beer, both of which I later realised, tasted awful.

And how you loved the idea of a short skirt and called it 'form' because the girls in Malory Towers told you to do it.

Guys it's trendy x2

"One must admire the imagination of John Locke. But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West. A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet, Rudyard Kipling, are "half devil, half child."

I believed that girls of my colour and with my looks would never make for a good story. The mere thought of asking my mother to make a picnic basket or hosting a secret society was unimaginable. I did not know that people like me could exist in literature.

How did you feel, shaming your classmate for choosing Sudha Murthy¹ over Roald Dahl, claiming he wasn't worldly enough?

What a peasant x2

"I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music. What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning, pity."

If I had a penny for every time some one assumed I am the newly hired cleaning lady,

¹ Indian Children's Author

an immigrant, a grocery store attendant, I would have many pennies which, with the running assumption would mean no splurge only saving.

Don't you call the Gujuratis, the Jews of India?²

*Chindi x2³
(Problematic x4)*

Oh, the bemusement I feel when somebody hands me ignorant compliments or comments on the struggle of pursuing a masters in English or moving to an *English* speaking country.

You get 'pleasantly' surprised every time the house help's child speaks to you in English..

I question this same ignorance every time somebody asks me if I speak 'Indian', a non existent language comprising 23 languages and over 19,500 dialects. I ignore the same ignorance when somebody refers to any song, with over 8 instruments and a familiar beat as bollywood, often accompanied by a bobbing head nod.

Specifically remember you laughing and joking about all south Indian languages sounding the same. Specifically remember you attributing every unsuccessful action movie to its 'over-south Indian-ness'.

Yana Rascale, Mind it! x2

"The year I turned eight we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. All I had heard about them is how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them."

The pity I notice, every time somebody discuss the state of 'poverty' in India, where people have no food to eat, no clean water to drink and no clear happiness index.

Yet you stand back and let your family members treat your help like second rate citizens, seated on the floor in the corner of the kitchen, given food in a plate and bowl set aside for them. 'you don't know their hygiene conditions, Saumya'.

Aisa hi hota hai⁴ x2

² Gujarat is a state in India with a lot of wealthy residents.

³ Penny-pincher

⁴ It is the way it is.

I feel outraged as I reflect on the 200 years of colonialism and slavery, where Indian women were fit enough to breastfeed young English fledglings but the same Indian woman's child was not fit enough to be treated like a human being, bought and used as the rulers saw fit.

And where does your outrage go when you see children on the streets, knowing they are victims of child trafficking rings? Where common households employ children instead of reporting such practices? Do you gracefully accept a child from a scheduled caste or scheduled tribe getting preference over your blue-blooded lineage? Where does your outrage disappear when your fellow 'upper caste' families still use words like 'untouchable'?

Dalit⁵ x2

"In the U.S. whenever Africa came up people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity. And in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country. The most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in "India, Africa and other countries."

I fail to understand the role of accent and physical features beyond it's geographical identity. These well meaning, yet pointed generalisations/differences have made me consciously identify as an Indian and not Asian.

You also fail to understand the gravity of the pointed stigma around India's North-Eastern states, who often have to deliberately showcase their nationalism and as of today, 'no I am not responsible for coronavirus' for they have Chinese facial features and are routinely referred to, usually disparagingly as

Chinkis⁶ x2

I constantly watch videos on Instagram and critically condemn all the Karens of North America, who constantly slut shame women for being dressed in a certain manner and what their outfit implies but also look at teen moms on Dr. Phil and talk to my friends about how sex education works in the American schools.

Closer home, you are a constant target for many Indian aunties who often call you a woman of loose morals, and yet you pass it off as a strongly woven part of your culture. The word sex is taboo until marriage, and the consequences of the hierarchy finding out; harsh. Is it the deep conditioning that links your sexual status to your family's dignity? Or is it your father telling you that positive change in a men's personality is decades away so the only option is to be demure and protect yourself?

⁵ Untouchable

⁶ Racial Slur for people with asian features

Log Kya Kahenge?⁷ x2

When “black and brown” is used as an incantation, it is not surprising that I am attracted to the idea that I, too, am among the wretched of the earth. We fight a similar battle against racial discrimination, and in camaraderie is our Victory. Asians, we love seeing black excellence, Barack (Obama), Michelle (Obama), Jay Z, Beyonce...how could we be afraid, we love black America..

But when a black man walks into your living room and god forbid wants to date you or marry you, your parents turn ballistic. A white man is more than welcome!

Colonial Hangover x2

I always wondered why property websites in the UK show a chart of the racial diversity in every neighbourhood. Upon arriving in the UK, the first question a landlord asked me was if I was comfortable living in a predominantly White neighbourhood, for people of colour had faced micro-aggressions in the past. I didn't understand the word “micro-aggressions” then. I only knew the anger I felt, which I now know masked my hurt. I didn't expect most White kids to understand the insidious nature of racism, but I did expect it out of my friends who chilled with me and ate the Indian food I cooked.

Very tough, but privilege in India made you completely oblivious to the Indian landlords (in some cases, the same Gujuratis) routinely discriminating even against fellow Indians who happen to be from the “wrong” part of India, speak the “wrong” language, belong to the “wrong” religion or caste, etc. For somebody of African ancestry, you face a double whammy in a culture that hates dark skin.

Indian Hypocrisy x2

“The ‘American dream tax’ is this concept Hasan Minhaj came up with where, he noticed that his dad, when he'd see either micro-aggressions or full-on aggression happening in America, he'd sort of considers that the cost of entry. “So you're going to endure racism or bigotry or micro-aggressions, and if it doesn't kill you, then it's worth it.”

Deeply inspired by the American Dream tax, your Prime Minister has upped the game by turning these micro aggression's into active hate against Muslims and other minorities, conveniently ignoring the pathological bigotry instilled in them, asking them to showcase proof of citizenship and ancestry, essentially make India a land of jarring incongruities.

⁷ What will people say?

*Hindutva Raj*⁸ x2

I often critique the beauty standards in the West for not being inclusive of people with colour. It is an olympic task to find a foundation in my shade. The shade 'nude' is my biggest nightmare because the shades of nude I find in many brands is not the Nude for me. I follow and support beauty influencers like Dipa Khosla and Neelam Gill who are active source of commentary for Indian girls and beauty in the West.

The fact that you had to move out of the country to be deeply comfortable with your skin colour should be testament to the the environment the Indian society created for people with dark coloured skin. Your grandmother feels disappointed at your mere birth if you don't pop out, the colour of milk. She cleans your face with many Indian remedies, so you can somehow become snow-white. If someone is dark-skinned in your family, you clown them. Your Bollywood film stars do skin whitening commercials with brands like 'fair and lovely' so you don't look black...

*Kallu*⁹ x2

Do I know where I am from?
 A question on repeat
 An answer that doesn't belong.
 Who a I?
 Big eyes, Wide lips, soft curls that fail to repeat.
 Without my skin colour, the answer seems incomplete.
 A scarf around my neck is Chic
 A scarf around my head makes me a freak
 I try not to believe the narrative of Borat
 Trust me, it's not the easiest when you move to a country
 In times, when everybody wants their country back.
 Distressed and in search of a universal truth,
 I seek comfort in what I know
 My motherland, the values of it's core
 But sadly what I know
 Will never help me grow.
 If it's not race, it's caste or creed.
 Years of subconscious indoctrination
 Fills me with overwhelming shame,
 Questioning my Authenticity.
 It started with comic rage
 Where Diwali was labelled a costume party,
 Concern bloomed
 Where White guilt resided, hail and hearty.

⁸ The rule of Hinduism and Hindus

⁹ Being called black or dark skinned

Shallow discourse made me say it;
'Check your Privilege'
Little did I check my own,
My oblivion was running its own pilgrimage.
I questioned the relevance of Susan Sontag,
With little to no knowledge of
Indian Writers I could use to brag.
Hence started the journey to being Woke
Aim of the game was to not confuse
Questioning with belittling
Belittling with Ignorance
And Ignorance with false action.
I associated colour with everything good but,
I now wonder, what if
The world was colour blind,
Black-as-brown
Brown-as-grey
Maybe JUST melanin wouldn't be
A cause of such massive disarray.
What if the scarf
was just a scarf, a piece of cloth
and not a cause for countries to part.
I couldn't take it anymore
So I turned to comedy,
Cutting but not crude
A far cry from the news channels,
People with spray tans discussing racial feud.
I don't know what I am waiting for..
With Humanity, maybe the millionth time is a charm,
A Goddess to keep me from harm?
How will things change?
I choose caution over a challenging game fair.
I accept it here and I accept it there.
It's time to address
Your home was partly built by you
the rest was us.
On a ground fertilised by bodies
White, Brown, Black..
Let their effort be more than paintings collecting dust.
I don't owe Politeness
I owe understanding
My quest to eliminate the single story,
Begins with Rebranding.

Follow what Najme says,
“Everybody’s afraid of everybody,
Hasan you have to be brave.
Your courage to do what’s right has to be greater
Than your fear of getting hurt.
So, Hasan, be brave.
Hasan, be brave.”

“Then one Saturday we went to Fido’s village to visit. And his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket, made of dyed raffia, that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something.”

Growing up and moving around, I have never identified with one physical place I could call home. So, I always thought of myself as an advocate of eliminating the single story, constantly furthering my knowledge and diversifying my perspective of different cultures. How could I not?

Maybe your guilt lies in your fear. Your fear of being stereotyped for your ‘Indian-ness’. Maybe your fear lies in the disapproval of your friends and family. Maybe, just maybe your fear lies in your own negligence. Do not confuse your biological familiarity with your culture for succumbing to racial stereotypes.

Unintended x2

“Every time I am home I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government. But also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it.”

I am surrounded with friends, colleagues and companions who face immense social resistance but continue to fight various forms of discrimination by illuminating stories that often go unheard.

What is your reason for speaking up here, and not in India? Is it the lack of privilege or the sudden acute awareness? Realisation is a must, but so is putting your realisation into action with the correct intention, Saumya.

“Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.”

My story of the West is not a single story. My story of India is not a single story either.

They are different versions of the same story. They maybe the story of the States or India but may not be the story of American or Indian struggles. 'So that is how to create a single story,

show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.'

"The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete."

It's unfair to a white person for feeling the White guilt by default. It's unfair to an Indian for being born as a Hindu Brahmin when he doesn't partake an any form of discrimination and still gets blamed for his caste.

All injustices are not the same. Everybody's suffering cannot be put in the same bowl. Having said that, your friend Laura is just Laura and not your white friend Laura because you haven't given her a single story, reduced her to a stereotype or weaponised the colour of your skin and neither has she.

Reparation x2

"Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."

However, we must not only seek diverse perspectives, we must also tell our own stories, ones that only we can tell about our own personal experiences.

Read. Listen. Absorb. Create your own compelling character Saumya. Keep adding to your story.

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