**Decolonise, not Diversify**

<http://mediadiversified.org/2015/12/30/is-diversity-is-only-for-white-people/>

by [Kavita Bhanot](http://mediadiversified.org/category/kavita-bhanot/)

Since the recent failure of World Book Night to include any writers of colour in its 2015 list, there has been a fresh bout of conversation about the need for more ‘diversity’ in the literature that is published and awarded in Britain, as well as amongst those working in publishing.

Alongside a series of Guardian articles, there has been a call for contributions to Nikesh Shukla’s crowd-funded anthology on race and immigration (in itself a great idea); writers of colour have been invited to come forward, to contact Shukla. #diversedecember, a twitter initiative set up by bloggers Naomi Frisby and Dan Lipscombe, has been encouraging people to ‘read with diversity’ and share the ‘diverse’ books that they are reading. Many organisations and individuals, readers and writers, are joining in to help bring more ‘diversity’ to publishing.

To whom is all this directed? Who should read more ‘diverse’ literature? For whom is literature written by minority writers ‘diverse’? For whom are minority writers ‘diverse’? Can I describe myself as ‘diverse’ – do I exist in that space called ‘diversity’?

The concept of diversity only exists if there is an assumed neutral point from which ‘others’ are ‘diverse.’ Putting aside for now the straight, male, middle-classness of that ‘neutral’ space, its dominant aspect is whiteness. Constructed by a white establishment, the idea of ‘diversity’ is neo-liberal speak. It is the new corporatized version of multiculturalism. It is about management, efficiency, box-ticking. As writers of colour, we parrot this idea back, reminding white institutions that they need to increase their diversity; appealing to them to let us in, to give some of us a seat at the table too. To help convince them, institutions are reminded that ‘diversity’ is actually good for them too, that it will help them to make more money. Danuta Keane writes, in the ‘[Writing the Future’](https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/resources/view/writing-the-future) report on the need for improved cultural/ethnic diversity in literature: ‘this isn’t about making the industry feel good. Monocultures are bad for business….within 20 years the UK BAME population will be 25%. If books don’t reflect that, they will become increasingly irrelevant and unprofitable.’ Similarly, Shukla writes in a Guardian article: ‘I wouldn’t be wasting my time if I didn’t feel there was a potential financial reward for investing in BAME writers.’ Meanwhile, a tweet on #diversedecember tells us, through a posted article, that ‘just being around people of different ethnicities may literally make you smarter.’

Although the lack of interest in our work on the part of white publishers is a very real problem, when we respond to and celebrate ‘diversity’, we don’t deeply challenge a white system. We only appeal to it, try to fit ourselves into it, make ourselves attractive to it to, trying to sell our ‘diversity’. We go to workshops that tell us how, as BAME writers, we can brand ourselves better, package ourselves, make ourselves more marketable; to get funding, to find a publisher, to sell books. And in this way, we define ourselves through this system, softening ourselves, performing our identities and ethnicities for it. Perhaps there’s little choice when you’re entering the mainstream space as an isolated individual, as a writer or an editor; it’s the only way to get in and survive. We don’t talk about racism, just ‘lack of diversity’. As Ellen Berry says in the recent article, ‘[Diversity is for white people](http://www.salon.com/2015/10/26/diversity_is_for_white_people_the_big_lie_behind_a_well_intended_word/): The big lie behind a well-intended word’, ‘Diversity is how we talk about race when we can’t talk about race. It has become a stand-in when open discussion of race is too controversial or — let’s be frank — when white people find the topic of race uncomfortable. Diversity seems polite, positive, hopeful.’

And it’s just this non-threatening positivity, hopefulness and cheery celebration that we’ve seen in this new phase of ‘diversity in literature’ campaigning, co-curated by the Guardian, drawing on data and recommendations by the recent ‘Spread the Word’ report. ‘#diversedecember is a celebration of books by BAME writers. For December 2015, read with diversity and spread the joy of stories’ is the message on the twitter page for this worthy cause. ‘Diverse December lifts the Christmas spirits,’ writes Jackie Kay in the double-page article in Guardian Review, ‘[How do we stop UK publishing being so posh and white?](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/11/how-do-we-stop-uk-publishing-being-so-posh-white-male)’ Meanwhile, the extraordinary success of Nikesh Shukla’s crowd-funded anthology of essays about race and immigration has left him feeling ‘a mixture of relief and vindication that there is such a fierce appetite for BAME voices out there.’

Such diversity campaigns make it all look so easy. Through one concrete action, or perhaps a list of actions, everyone can help to sort out the problem. You can recommend your favourite ‘diverse’ book on #diversedecember. Feeling virtuous, you can read a ‘diverse’ book this month; a bit like medicine, reading a diverse book is good for you, it opens up your mind, teaches you about another culture/country. ‘Today, we’d really like to receive recommendations of books by Muslim authors, please!’ #diversedecember tweeted on the 9th December. ‘Also don’t neglect your genre fiction in #diversedecember – crime novels especially are an amazing way of reading about non-Western life,’ says one retweet.

Or you can contribute money to the proposed collection of essays on ‘race and immigration’ (avoiding the word ‘racism’). ‘I think this will be an important, timely read. Help fund The Good Immigrant (I’ve donated at link below)’ tweets JK Rowling. (How can race, racism or immigration be timely, you wonder, ‘flavour of the month’?)

Rowling, after a generous contribution, is now patron of Shukla’s anthology. Her name will grace the front cover of the book. Nobody questions the fact that a book on ‘race and immigration’ has also now become about Rowling as celebrity white saviour. ‘JK Rowling inspires surge to fund book on race and immigration in three days,’ the Guardian article, carrying her photograph, tells us. This is the same writer who was recently criticised in two excellent [letters](https://www.facebook.com/mia.return/posts/10156192243015385) by Mia Oudeh (a fan of the Harry Potter series), for signing the ‘Culture for Coexistence’ letter, supporting Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and opposition to the BDS movement. According to Rowling, ‘boycotts singling out Israel are divisive and discriminatory’.

Like accusations of reverse racism or casteism, there is not only naïvete, but also violence in erasing historical and continuing oppressions and power hierarchies, labelling the oppressed who seek to redress, ‘divisive’ and ‘discriminatory’. It is the same conciliatory, ahistorical approach that can ground these diversity in literature campaigns. There is a sense that everyone only needs to come together, make a bit of an effort with a few simple acts. Diversity is about forgetting the past, and celebrating a multi-coloured present. Diversity initiatives often involve a Benetton style ad of ‘diverse looking’ people’s faces, and we see such an image adorning the cover of the Guardian Review which contains the aforementioned article, ‘How do we stop UK publishing being so posh and white?’

In this article, various writers, publishers, organisers of festivals have listed the things that they have done or pledge to do to improve the situation. Jackie Kay tells us that Carol Ann Duffy has offered to give up her place on the list of books for World Book Night for a ‘diverse’ writer. Nick Barley, Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival pledges that he will, among other things, ‘buy another copy of The Fishermen by Chigozie Obioma and give it to someone as a Christmas present’; ‘try to persuade Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to visit the UK with a group of emerging African writers’; ‘invite Jackie Kay to talk to Syrian refugees in Scotland and share their stories at the book festival” and ‘ask Kamila Shamsie and Mohammed Hanif to recommend Pakistani writers not yet known here, and invite them to Edinburgh’. Meanwhile Simon Prosser of Hamish Hamilton writes in the same article, ‘luckily, there are partners we can work with. The Caine prize for African writing, the Muslim writers awards and the DSC prize for south Asian literature, for example, do a great job in showcasing diverse writers, as do magazines such as Wasafiri and SABLE LitMag’.

We see here one of the problems with quick-fixes to the ‘diversity’ problem: they usually involve reaching out for the handful of well-known names, writers, organisations that immediately come to mind, promoting them or asking them for advice and recommendations (although there have been some new and lesser known writers recommended and highlighted on #diversedecember). Not to undermine the good work that some of these magazines and prizes do, but this approach ensures that literature remains in the same circles of power, within one class and caste. Such tokenism also means that it is often the writers of colour who are most visible, who work the hardest to turn themselves into shiny friendly packages, who are most acceptable and amenable, that are reached for. These includes international writers who are westernised, cosmopolitan, upper class and upper caste, or British writers whose ideologies and world views, articulated through their fiction and non-fiction, most resemble that of white Britain, right wing or left-liberal. My research, which has included close readings of contemporary published British Asian literature, has shown that the writers who overtly spout the kind of racism that it is no longer ‘politically correct’ for a white public figure to articulate, are often the most visible and celebrated. The racism in the books and articles by these writers is acceptable, since they are of South Asian origin, and it is invisible because it is normalised in British society. It is perhaps inevitable that writers who are a product of British society, education, literature, media, will internalise and reproduce white supremacy. The literature they write is directed towards white readers; it is about Britishness, about assimilation, about becoming a British citizen. Their representations of ‘difference’ often feed racism and stereotypes, with their focus primarily on the ‘reverse racism’ of their families and communities.

It is perhaps not an accident that these writers are so often given a voice and platform. Diversity boxes are ticked, without really shaking things up too much. Even within this double-page spread Guardian article, two or three of the writers, doing okay themselves, undermine the claimed intention of the piece by writing that they don’t really see that there is too much of a problem. Sarfraz Manzoor ‘would be wary of an excessive focus on race and religion’, while Akhil Sharma feels that he has actually “’benefited from being an ethnic writer … Because I am writing about things that are not well known, and I am writing about a community that people are curious about, I have received a great deal of attention … my complaining would feel churlish since I have benefited so much from being a minority’.

Who are the ‘people’ who are curious about the community that Sharma is writing about, allowing him to ‘benefit’ from his ethnicity? Certainly not the community he is writing about. It is clear in what Sharma says, who his work is directed towards, who he writes for. ‘People’ here equals white people. So much of our writing consciously or unconsciously reproduces this assumption, and subtly reveals internalised white supremacy. There was an uproar when Marlon James talked about the pressure on writers to pander to white women, but such pressures, on the part of agents and editors, are real. Although it is not necessarily a conscious, cynical pandering, we often unconsciously direct our work towards the white reader, privileging the white reader, since that is the normative perspective. We will continue to do this unless we consciously interrogate ourselves, unless we read each others work and our own critically, to ‘see’ white supremacy (along with upper class and caste, male, heterosexual supremacy) in what has come before and what continues to be produced. In order to write differently. This will certainly not happen in university creative writing courses, mentoring schemes, through mainstream editors or discussions at literature festivals, where white literature is held up as the ‘real’ literature that we all need to aspire towards.

Adopting a phrase that is being used by radical anti-racist campaigns and movements growing and connecting across the world today, as writers and editors we need to ‘decolonise, not diversify’, and that is what we need to demand of publishers, creative writing courses, and mentoring schemes too. Decolonisation does not airbrush colonial history, decolonisation takes continuing white supremacy head-on. And if publishers or organisers of literature festivals are not interested in literature that comes from this place, that doesn’t privilege the white reader, we need to use models such as Shukla’s crowd-funded book, to produce our own literature. We need to organise our own festivals. There are writers, publishers and organisations that have been and continue, despite all odds, doing this.

But to focus only on numbers, as the ‘Writing the Future’ report does, to talk only about the need for a greater ‘diversity’ of writers in terms of background, is a limited and misleading approach. The real problem is not simply a monoculture but a mono-ideology, a mono-perspective. I’m sorry to spoil the party, but this is not a problem that was going to be solved this December or even, now that #diversitydecember has become #ReadDiverse2016.

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