

2017 YALSA Morris Award Finalist Speech- Sonia Patel

Indian girl trekking this lyrical mountain  
I be in effect when my rhymes be flowin' like a fountain.  
I'm the verbal architect leading this rhyme expedition.  
Startin' a new female tradition.  
And what I be sayin' got you weighin'  
and considerin' alternate views, conveyin'  
my message while slayin' your close-minded prayin'.  
Usin' my mind to define my own shine.  
Blowin' up your unkind words—landmine.

Rani is not your typical American girl next door protagonist. In fact she's not your typical Indian American girl next door protagonist. Yes she's the daughter of immigrant parents. Her parents had an arranged marriage and they want her to marry an Indian boy they select. She does well academically. But that's about the extent of what might be expected of her and her situation as a first generation Indian American protagonist.

Rani offers something new in terms of diverse young adult protagonists. Something I've come to think of as diversity within diversity, particularly among Indian American YA characters.

Rani's diversity within diversity starts with where she lives—the remote, tiny Hawaiian island of Moloka'i that is often at the forefront of Native Hawaiian cultural and political activism. Also there are no other Indians residing on the island and thus Rani and her parents are disconnected from the Gujarati Indian immigrant culture that used to surround them when they lived on the east coast. In addition Rani struggles with what I think she'd call brown guilt for living a somewhat economically privileged life made possible by the money her family makes selling Native Hawaiian residents the Western things she feels contributes to the destruction and oppression of their local culture.

Then there's hip hop culture—rap, fashion, dance, DJing, and graffiti. Hip hop was born in the same decade and state as Rani. Turns out that rap becomes her form of therapy from her family's problems. Problems that include witnessing her parents' frequent fights and being sexually abused by her father for years. As is often the case with trauma, the chronicity resulted in damage to the way her brain developed. Her neurons became hardwired to make her think, feel, and act in negative ways. Furthermore she unconsciously learned to recreate abusive relationships with men and steer clear of relationships with women. For these reasons, Rani is chronologically and intellectually sixteen but her emotions, identity development, and interpersonal relationships skills are delayed. She's been conditioned to see other people in her life only in how they make her feel. And it was my aim in writing Rani's character to show how a teen with these issues one dimensionally sees and interacts with people and her world.

I can sum it up by stating that Rani doesn't have the luxury to struggle solely with usual teen angst issues because she's been her father's object her entire life within a complex cultural milieu. Before she can even get to coping with “normal” teen development she has to become “woke,” as today's youth say, to the nuances of the dysfunctional role she's played in her family. Only then can she begin to separate from it.

Unfortunately, the topic of misogyny and sexual violence is always timely. And given the current political climate it's as pressing today as ever. When verbal, physical and sexual control and violence damages a child's or teen's self-worth and brain development, the youth usually can't just stand up and say, “This is wrong. Stop hurting me. You're thwarting my

development.” It doesn’t work like that. And if the family, surrounding culture, or peer group remains silent and complicit, the damage is reinforced.

Rani opens our eyes to the intricacies of the long term effects of sexual abuse on youth and I’m certain many youth who’ve suffered such trauma can relate to her. But it’s not only sexually abused youth who’ll be able to relate to Rani. Rani’s negative view of herself and the way she interacts and relates to people represent an entire section of the teen world that is underrepresented in YA fiction. I should know. As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I talk to them in my office all the time. Teen girls and boys who think, feel, and act very much like Rani. Teens who’ve been through many different types of negative experiences, whether individual, familial, peer, or societal, that shape their brains in different ways but manifest in similar negative thoughts, feeling, displays of frequent impulsive, self-destructive behaviors, and inability to sustain long term healthy relationships with others.

But thanks to you, the 2017 Young Adult Library Services Association Morris Award Committee, Rani’s voice, a voice that throws down the verbal gauntlet of diversity in diversity and resonates with a marginalized YA readership gets a chance to shine. In choosing *Rani Patel In Full Effect*, you’ve helped push the YA literary world to a new frontier of progressive realism. And on behalf of the often discounted youth I treat, I thank you. I’ll leave you with part of a slam poem Rani wrote about her relationship with her mother.

Until Mom see me. First time in all my seventeen years  
she reaches out—emotionally.  
Quells my fears, wipes my tears.  
Says, betta, widows in India are forced to shave their heads.  
Society views them akin to being dead.  
Forced tonsure,  
prostitution and oppression they endure.  
Made to fast,  
seen as social outcasts, the lowest caste.  
A state of social death forever.  
But, betta, you have a choice.  
You can get through this pain,  
you can grow your hair again—  
thick, strong.  
With it, my sense of self grows—I belong.  
My perception of choice.  
The strength of my voice.  
Knowledge of my good fortune  
to save myself  
and show my future daughter  
how men control women—  
through mental slaughter,  
infuse her with the views  
to escape all kinds of abuse  
so maybe she can choose  
positive self care and  
long hair.