

rhetoric. Political consciousness then is obviously not enough to safeguard a whole human being.

Each and everyone of us is capable of making a mistake, but as Walter Rodney said *"Once may be considered an incident, twice a coincidence but thrice is a definite tendency."*

My brothers and sisters, I am sorry there are more questions than answers. I am, however, confident that among us here today there are more than enough suggestions to begin to address the issues raised. I hope that I have given you all sufficient food for thought and that you will generate workshops, discussions and writings around these issues.

In the meantime, may I proffer some solutions: Children have a right to be protected and that protection should appropriately come from adults. Parenting is a lifetime commitment and a responsibility which cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be taken on by one person. It is both an individual and collective responsibility.

How can we ensure our children's safety? We need to LISTEN to our children and show them that we VALUE the contribution they have to make. We need to respect the fact that they are our future. We need to appreciate them for what and who they are as well as who and what they may become. We must love them unconditionally in their success and in their failures. We must teach them how to make decisions. We must work to make their childhoods happy. We must guide them and set realistic boundaries. We must always expect the best of them. We should be prepared to learn from them. We must understand that play, and our part in it as responsible adults, is an integral part of any child development.

We should allow them to express their feelings in a safe, caring environment so that they do not have to turn away from their cultural traditions to find expression.

Lastly, and most importantly, a clear thinking adult who is open to reason; who is prepared to ask for help; who is prepared to admit their own failings and respond to changes is the most beneficial support and teacher any African child may have.

In conclusion I want to say in all humility that your presence here shows me that there is a way forward.

## The Asian Women Writers' Collective

# At The End Of A Greenhouse Summer

Every Wednesday in a small reading room in the Women's Centre at Holborn we meet—a core group of some 8-10 Asian women. Today there is a new person in our midst but our animated talk hushes as one member picks up a carefully word-processed sheet of A4. "You know I'm hopeless at reading..." But as she starts, the words begin to fill up all our uncertainties...

### COLD, WET MINORITY

now  
recently  
a kind pale soul said to me  
'don't be silly  
Black people aren't a minority in the world'  
true  
I thought  
but then again each day  
I step onto my cold england doorstep  
my eyes don't stretch wide enough to  
take in  
all those  
warm masses  
curving darkly  
round the globe.

still  
I got mildly cheerful  
when racist ideologies got a little confused  
at the end of a greenhouse summer  
shouting at dark-haired white people in the street  
'Oi, you, why don't you go back where you belong!'

This sharing of our writing and the ensuing critical feedback is one facet of the Asian Women Writers Collective, a London-based group of women who meet weekly to discuss creative work. Parallel to this are other activities of the Collective such as skill-sharing workshops for members, on anything from comedy writing to projecting your voice for public readings, and the constant schedule of readings and workshops in the local community. In recent months we have also made new links with communities outside London—in Manchester, Tameside and Brighton.

The Asian Women Writers Collective was started in 1984 as the Asian Women Writers Workshop, mainly due to the efforts of one member, Ravi Randhawa, who had managed to get the support of Black Ink publishers and some funding from the GLC (Greater London Council). Since its inception, the membership has grown and we now have some 20-30 members. The Collective receives financial support from Greater London Arts and Lambeth Council. .

In 1988, the *Women's Press* published *'Right of Way'*, an anthology of short stories and poems by the Collective. When we set out to get an anthology of our work published, most of us had never been published before. Even fewer of us had set aside time to devote exclusively to writing, so we were only able to write in what we believed to be inspired bursts of energy. Therefore, an anthology seemed to be well suited to us and it also seemed the best way to represent all the talent in the workshop.

The Collective was the first of its kind for Asian women writers in Britain, and was meant to draw out any isolated women who wanted to write but needed a supportive environment to achieve this. The need for this kind of group was poignantly expressed in one of our early meetings when a younger woman, confronted an older woman who had just finished reading a moving story with the question, "Where were you when I was growing up?" Did it take that long for 'immigrants' to feel settled and strong enough to want to express, re-order and interpret their reality for themselves and society at large? We were also working in a vacuum; there seemed to be no precedents to which we could refer. A few Asian women had been published, but not enough to set up parameters which we could break or work within. Organising as a group gave us visibility, credibility and access to institutions, publishers and other groups in the community. The workshop gave us the confidence to approach publishers, which as individuals we might never have done. It answered the vital question that haunted all of us: is my writing of any interest or use to anyone else?

In its short history, many women came and went but now a core group of around ten women appears to have crystallised. We also have a few members from outside London who regularly send in their work. We have tried not to make the stability of our core group seem intimidating for new members and constantly invite new people to join us.

Most of us have found the workshop process useful. It is a stimulus to write when all other methods of self-discipline have failed. You know that, within a few weeks, the other members will be looking askance at

you if you have not brought any writings to the workshop. It must be said that many of us are in full-time employment and almost all of us have families to contend with, which means that time devoted to writing has to be negotiated. As this is not a paying proposition, our bargaining power is considerably weakened.

Suggestions and criticism provide new perspectives, new directions for work which might have dried up in your mind. What critical standards we are, and should be, using are questions that have led to heated but unresolved debates. We tend to use personal statements to reduce the edge of criticism, so that a writer's work is not subjected to some implicit, universal, objective criteria; such as poetry having to have complex imagery. We have to ask who formulated these criteria, and are they relevant to us, as Asian women writing in a country where writers are recognised as great on the terms of white middle-class male critics. How do we evolve our own standards without falling into the trap of venerating every word written by Black women purely because their disadvantaged position has reduced them to a marginality?

Though we see ourselves as British-based Asian women, not all of us were bred and born here, and we brought with us different cultural and literary influences. This affected our critical responses. Some of us found it difficult to appreciate translations of Urdu or Bengali poetry. Anglicised responses to the style being flowery or sentimental demanded discussion and contextualisation. Short stories which were rooted in the literary traditions of the sub-continent were considered to have abrupt endings; further discussion revealed that the marked ambiguity of the endings was common to our literary traditions. Criticism of work seemed to be much easier on political grounds. Positions were clearly drawn and we were able to speak about the content; for example, this is classist, patronising, communalist, heterosexist, or whatever. But how did we respond to work where there were no political disagreements but where, for instance, a poem simply failed to move you? As a group, we are constantly struggling to define our literary criteria so that it does not merely reflect our own conditioned responses to 'good' and 'bad' styles of writing. This does not mean that there was always a consensus of political views. When we made the transition from a workshop to a collective, political arguments arose from the name we should give ourselves. Some of us suggested that we should call ourselves 'black' women to show our alignment with that part of the movement which believes that Asian and Afro-Caribbean women face a common oppression and that the way ahead is to fight together. Others felt that they had been squeezed out of Blackwomen's writing groups where the women



were predominantly Afro-Caribbean and the implicit attitude was that the term 'black' belonged to them. Yet others felt that there were cultural differences which would make it difficult to respond critically and knowledgeably to Afro-Caribbean writing and vice versa. There was also the feeling that there was no Asian women's forum and that in order to encourage young women writing for the first time to join, our composition should be reflected in our name. Consensus was reached when it was said that we should work closely with Blackwomen's groups and participate in all events for Blackwomen writers.

The second big debate was sparked off by the word 'women' in the name. Were we not feminists, should it not be Asian feminist writers? Many women felt that the word feminist had been sullied by the exclusiveness and racism of white middle-class women, therefore, was no longer a useful term for us. There were such differences in our understanding of feminism that in any case the term would have been completely meaningless as a way of selecting new women to become members of the workshop. Also, it would have meant overturning the original idea of the workshop, which pre-dated many of us: the forum should be available to all Asian women. That these issues were not resolved was frustrating but also led to interesting debates in which work was viewed in a political context and the relationship between writing and politics became clearer. The very fact that we needed to set up a group for a particular section of society was an enunciation of the political realities that normally excluded women like us. Consciousness developed through the workshop process of our need to write in a particular way, to take into account our own class position when writing, and to recognise the way in which this distorted our perceptions, and of our need for positive but realistic images of Asian women. A resolution was passed that we, as a group, were opposed to racist, communalist, classist and anti-lesbian attitudes and writings, so that there was some agreement, some given assumptions, upon which we could build further.

Unfortunately, working towards our first anthology and now our second, has taken up a lot of our energy though this has also provided us with an impetus to write. We have received so much new writing that we now have a 'readings' collection of work that has been approved for public readings. We also invite women writers to talk about their work and to run workshops for the collection, for example Sita Ramamurthy conducted a workshop on 'Performance Reading' and Afshan Malik on 'Comedy Writing'. Amongst ourselves we rotated the running of workshops where we set each other exercises. We found this very useful. It shattered all our romantic notions about writing only when inspired. It

showed us that if we worked at something, even when we were exhausted after our day's work, we could come up with a fairly readable piece. It also redefined writing so that we saw it as a craft, a tool which could be honed and perfected with effort; it chased away any elitist notions of being born with a talent. In a world where literary skills are limited, we were forced to recognise the privilege of our positions.

Most of our writing had been shared mainly by public readings, and this affected our style of writing. We felt that we had to be short, punchy, direct, rhetorical and dramatic. As our method of operation in the workshop was also reading our material aloud to each other and then discussing it, we never looked at our writing from the point of view of the written page, where it is possible to hold the attention of the reader with more complex structures. What was boring when read aloud for thirty minutes looked quite different when read privately. This became important when we launched the idea of an anthology: we had to see pieces not merely in terms of performance.

Since our first publication *Right of Way*, many more women have become involved in the Collective and, inevitably, the core group has changed accordingly. Our second anthology therefore aims to reflect many of the new perspectives and we are now liaising with publishers.

The past year has also seen a growth in our activities in the community mainly as a result of the Collective now having two part-time workers; one for administration and another for outreach. The Collective has held workshops in schools, community centres and colleges that have inspired both young and old to develop their writing. Sometimes our presence acts as a spring-board for smaller groups to be created. We have also gained more visibility by public performance readings particularly during the Feminist Book Fortnight and our annual readings event *Mehfil* continues to attract new audiences. But the precariousness of our funding situation is a problem that is looming over us as we, like many other Black groups, are having to face up to the huge cuts in arts funding by local authorities. The future we know is going to be different. But we aim for our strength, as Asian women, and as writers, never to be diminished.