

January 11, 2019

Gloria,

When I was younger, I always tried to explain my background. “India is made up of many different groups of people. My mom is Rajput, and she speaks Hindi. My dad is Telugu, and he speaks Telugu. But both grew up in a different state and also speak Kannada. I know all three languages.” I don’t know why I lied each time. I suppose it was the Indian pride my parents instilled in me growing up, teaching me that it was my duty to teach *gore log* about the complexity of India and its languages—*yeh hamaara zimedaari hai*. But I don’t know these languages. Sometimes, I wistfully think I learned them during my childhood. I suppose it’s true. My mother and her family spoke Hindi to me; my father’s family spoke Telugu; both sides mixed in Kannada. The years of my life that I don’t remember—the ones that seep slowly into my fingers and legs, pulling them in directions that my conscious mind cannot comprehend—are filled with those languages. But by the time I started to talk, my family stopped speaking to me in different tongues. The languages were a form of endearment, but once I was old enough to understand, they needed a neutral language: English. English is safe, welcomed, accepted. Those other languages—now clunky, foreign, uncomfortable in my mouth—are dangerous markers. Their choice was a matter of survival in the unforgiving racist world of the Midwest. What else can I do than pretend *kya mein Angrazi hai*? Isn’t this what you talked about in your essay “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria? Didn’t your teacher hit you for speaking Spanish at recess? Wasn’t your mother “mortified that you spoke English like a Mexican”? Didn’t they strip you of your accent? How can my languages exist in a world like this?

I don’t know how to identify myself. I use American as a way to assert my presence in this country; I cannot tell you how many times someone has asked me, “No, where are you really from?” I wield this label as a form of political resistance, insurrection, and everything in

between. When I say I am American, it is a statement, not a belief. It is almost automatic these days. However, a quiet second later, I am nauseated and guilty. My body rejects my own lies, and I have never felt ok afterwards. Each time I say I'm Indian, or Telugu, or Rajput, or not American, my heart rate slows to a steady zero, too afraid to beat loudly because they might hear my lies. I have always lived in this confused state. I used to watch Hindi movies with my family. Like you, I was home, yet alone in these moments. Included, yet isolated. Never fully here, never there. I didn't need the subtitles—I knew enough to understand what was happening—but I could never understand the gravity of their words. I knew that he *isko pyar kartha*, but I never understood the depth of his love—*rooh ne chhoo li jism ki khushboo*.

You say that language is your cultural identifier; being Chicano refers to “a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness.” But I have fractions of languages that have no such “synergy.” I do not feel the degrees of Indianness or Angloness; I do not feel anything—“sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one.” But being Indian isn't even one identity; it is hundreds, and I am two types, no three types, but I cannot tell which part controls which decision and which background steers which action.

I see myself in you. No. That's not right. I want to *be* you. I want to be a master of languages, controller of tongues, unhindered by myself and others. But I cannot bring myself to speak in Hindi to my family because I am ashamed. I defiantly pronounce certain words with an Indian accent in class, but I feel their eyes on me—I lose touch with people around me, focusing only on the dull hum of the silence surrounding my words, the creaking furnace in the back-left corner, the uncomfortable way my tongue rests against the roof of my mouth. I am lost in conversations about American culture: curfew, dinner parties, meatloaf. I reject all languages, all cultures, all identities. I don't know who to be and how to be it. Although you haven't shown me the

steps to fix it, you have shown me that I can figure it out. Maybe, one day, I will find that haven of philosophy that my body does not reject. Maybe, one day, like you, I will find my tongue.

Regards,

Tejal Pendekanti