

## Cultured Woman

2024 Scholastic Writing Awards Gold Medal

I. Cultured Woman,  
don't compromise me.

Don't d i s t o r t the lines of my body  
image and the S<sub>H</sub> A<sub>P</sub> E of my womanhood through time  
lost with the rise of my curves—golden  
discoloration like a kiss to the little girl  
and her Sangli sun, evanescing.

Don't s e x u a l i z e the unfurling indentations  
where my hip bones kiss the creases  
of my thighs thickening, my flesh  
raw against the fragile pink string, knotted like a bow,  
matted like my doll, ~~the American Girl~~  
long-closeted and *gori*, scratchy and suffocating at my throat.

Back against free-falling air, I lie on the tip of

A T H R E S H O L D

but I smile  
scarlet, jewel orbs/colored lens and foundation/hyperpigmentation until I  
am one of the Heathers at school, my face painted opaque—but teal,  
and tangerine, and emerald and gold, and pink—my magenta pink!—like Holi powder,  
proud holy power when I brave myself to look at my body, translucent  
like ashen/exploding, brown/rainbow skin—  
but now I smile pearly white—I smile only for Instagram.

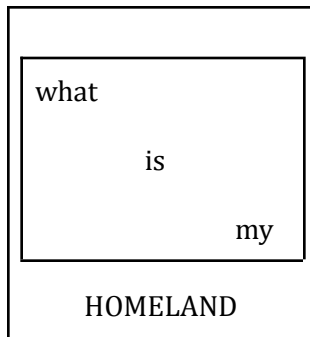
II. Silhouetted *rani*,  
don't appropriate me.

Don't sit still, cross-legged in *pathshala*  
while I curl up in my body—  
a vessel for the *Gyan* I have guiltily  
lost, the

*G* lying  
*Y* confining  
*A* distressing  
*N*

in my mind, extending and stretching my tongue to accent  
the vowels of Namō Arihantanam  
because I am desperate to go home, to let the sutras cleanse me  
like they did as a child, spilling like karma  
against pressed palms and their acrylic nails.

Don't intoxicate me with your Gujarati—and its enticing lack,  
stuttering from your lips like a spicy wine you sip for the first time. You visit India  
like a tourist and caption it your



I still eat with my fingers and flex them to *alapadma*. Letters still form my thoughts  
in couplets of looping English calligraphy. When I go to college, may I leave this shame—  
this reckoning champagne bottle disparaging the valuable—  
behind at home? I pop the lid and lick my lips to the grotesque fizz  
like ignorance, but good Jains do not drink (at least, until America).  
Please, don't intoxicate me—I'm terrified of you.  
I'm only fifteen.

III. A-B-C-D<sup>1</sup>,  
don't grow up without me.

Don't steal my youth,

M

Y

Y

O

spent in the little things

U

dancing on carpeted floors to Taylor Swift lyrics/college applications/

T

the heartache of stupidity/writing for Aai in her hospital bed/

H

and the giddy loss of a good story. Don't capture my youth

through a cracked iPhone lens

leave these moments storage-free, with laughter evident in my voice

as if I'll recite this pain one day, like a memory.

So let me collapse on Mumma's lap,

face up to the fan, spinning

and spinning like a clock.

I am blind to every second passing finally

O

P

to this threshold.

E

The sunsets crawls along, tinting us golden

N

beneath my eyelids closed, through the blinds

half-open on my bedroom window. I smile. So let me panic!

for my future in peace. And let me scream!

like a crazed child, because that is all I am for now,

a child.

Don't spend long waiting

for me,

Cultured Woman.

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<sup>1</sup> American Born Confused Desi: commonly-used slang term for Indian-Americans