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ZULAIKHA AND HAIR POLITICS

Writer Zulaikha Patel shot to fame when she led a protest at Pretoria Girls High over the school's racist policy of requiring Black students to straighten their hair.



Nokuthula Mazibuko Msimang

On 26 August 2016, Zulaikha Patel was only 13 when she courageously challenged uniformed private security officers to arrest her and about twelve fellow protesters. With her forearms crossed above her head and her hands in tight fists, she calmly dared the officers. Patel stood her ground when the officers tried to intimidate her back to class, and end the protest. It was clear that she was not going to back down from confronting her high school's racist hair policies.

Her school, Pretoria Girls High, was forcing Black learners to straighten their hair as a ploy to aggressively force them into white standards of "neatness" and "acceptable hair standards". Someone recorded that pivotal moment, and the school was catapulted into the public eye by media all over the world. In a democratic South Africa, this became a stark reminder that the mentality and wounds of

apartheid cannot be glibly wished away. Major news networks covered the story of how teachers at the school were forcing Black girls to chemically damage their naturally curly hair.

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In a continent where the vast majority of people have curly hair, for the school to blatantly violate the scholars' human rights through apartheid era hair policies was unbelievable. Racist laws might have fallen in 1994, but their ghosts were alive and well, causing havoc on young minds and lives in many schools.

It was incredible to see Patel and fellow demonstrators expose and confront the bigoted rules that made their learning miserable. They were determined to force their school do the right thing, and stop their archaic, harmful ways and treat them with the kindness, respect and basic humanity that everyone deserves and that the constitution mandates. It was Black girl magic in brilliant action.

Confident, unapologetic, fearless and world-changing. During our interview, Patel reveals that the teenagers planned the silent protest for months in advance, weighing the pros and cons, and making sure that teachers and parents did not discover and foil their plans. They had suffered long enough at the hands of prejudiced adults who did not understand their privileged role as mentors and protectors in a school environment. Patel was unwavering in challenging the lie that South Africans had been telling themselves since the dawn of democracy in 1994; that "the country is a rainbow nation united in diversity". The school yard protest exposed the lies and shame. The truth of our intolerance and disunity was laid bare for the world to see.

At 18, Patel has completed high school and is studying Political Science at university. Her dream, inspired by Nelson Mandela's lawyer, Advocate George Bizos, is to pursue a career in human rights law and eventually attain an LLB degree. Patel's fortitude to affirm her humanity and her blackness is reflected in her choice of career and the publication of her first children's book, *My Coily Crownly Hair*. Published early in 2021, the book is already a best seller. It is a celebration of Patel's younger self through telling the story of Lisakhanya, a young girl with a brilliant crownly afro. Lisakhanya marvels at the bouncy, artsy and just fantastic ways her hair can be styled. The illustrations are as joyful as the story and capture the author's intention to create images that show black children who are talented and precious. The book cherishes black hair that "grows up towards the sun like a summer sunflower". Lisakhanya goes on an Africa Day museum trip, with her granny and cousins, in her wonderfully and freshly styled hair. She is filled with pride seeing Africa's majestic civilisations.

The book is obviously inspired by her own involvement in the politics of hair and identity over the years. Patel remembers vividly the events that led to the protest.

The daily aggressions that terrorised her and other black learners. For years, white teachers taunted black girls about how untidy and "exotic" their hair was.

One morning, Patel was called into an office by four white adults, who questioned her about why she was not straightening her "unruly, untidy hair". This interrogation bizarrely deteriorated into the head of department (HOD) grabbing a pencil and putting it through Patel's hair to demonstrate how "kroes" and "kaffir-like" her hair was. In a free South Africa an adult conducted a pencil test on a defenceless child. The pencil test was one of the many odd ways apartheid law makers and enforcers used to determine whether a person was categorised Black, Coloured, White or Indian. The texture of one's hair was a ticket to resources. The straighter a person's hair was, the better their employment, housing, healthcare and education prospects. If the pencil could not quickly and easily go through one's hair, they were classified black and barred from a good life.

Patel had heard about the barbaric classification methods like the pencil test, and was horrified and "found it insane that in a democratic country" she underwent something like that. She had left schools before for refusing to comply with their bigoted hair rules, and had suffered detention at Pretoria Girls for refusing to straighten her hair. But the moment, in the HOD's office, the vicious and vile pencil test, brought clarity and a resolve that the school had crossed a line, and she was going to fight back. Patel was clear that she was going to stand up to the adults entrusted with caring for and nurturing her, but were intent on harming her and other black learners.





During the interview she explains that: “At the time what moved me was the fact that there was this deep sense of determination. We said there is no turning back and we need to shape a much more inclusive future. We also had to fight for ourselves, for our being, for our existence. We were fighting a war for our identity and our very existence”. Raised in a family of freedom fighters, Patel knew not to tolerate bullying of any kind and was single-minded in ensuring that her teachers no longer continued their problematic and unconstitutional behaviour freely.

The demonstration at Pretoria Girls lay the foundation for the battle still raging in schools today. The battle to keep Black learners safe from racist teachers. Although the specific code insisting on black hair being straightened was amended, it seems the culture of othering Black learners has not shifted significantly, as more recent protests at schools indicate. Sadly, no one was fired at Pretoria Girls and abusive teachers continue to teach in schools all over South Africa.

In May 2021, Cornwall High College, a prestigious school in Irene, Tshwane, was in the news because of the school's treatment of Black students. Singo Ravele, who is a pupil at the school informed a press conference attended by Gauteng MEC for Education, Panyaza Lesufi, that being at the school is nightmarish because of the myriad micro aggressions suffered by Black students daily. Ravele said she suffered abuse at the hands of a teacher when she was only in grade four and was instructed to straighten her hair because her African hair was “untidy”. That encounter made her feel as though there was something wrong with how her natural hair looked. Ravele, like Patel, and her comrades staged a tearful protest with fellow students saying they could not breathe in their school's racist environment.

Patel says she is saddened that it seems not much has changed since she protested in 2016. She says seeing the Cornwall High College protest felt as though she was back at her high school, a victim of abuse yet again. Patel is appalled that for Ravele school is in a place of terror rather than a place where dreams and lives are shaped and encouraged. Patel has no illusions about the road the country still has to travel towards true freedom and human rights. As an adult, it is a road she is gearing up for and one she will no doubt master.

Patel continues to inspire and mentor young people through organisations such as the Charlotte Manye-Maxeke Institute and the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, giving talks at schools and encouraging students to be confident and unapologetic about their African heritage. She plans to continue writing children's books and imaging worlds that are freer

and more just.

Her joyful book is an exciting beginning and a perfect affirmation of being an African child. The book achieves Patel's aim to pay homage to and to record that moment in history when she stood for her constitutional right to breathe freely and to live fully her African identity.



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