Amrit Wilson interviewed by Samenua Sesher
Respect Due, Museum of Colour

00.01

Introduction Music
'Intro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00:08

Samenua Sesher
You're listening to Respect Due.

00.16

Introduction music
'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00.22

Samenua Sesher
For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with

portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. The Museum of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves.

Just a quick warning for listeners that this interview contains references to sexual assault.

I'm Samenua Sesher, director of the Museum of Colour, and this is the voice of Amrit Wilson, the renowned writer and activist.

01:26

Amrit Wilson
I grew up in India, and I did my first degree there as well, so I went to college there. I was very much influenced by my mother particularly, who was quite a remarkably strong but also very perceptive and sensitive woman. She taught me to listen to people and to feel what they felt, to empathise, and to do that with a very wide range of people, even people I didn't agree with, you know. And the other thing she taught me - or she gave to me - was a real love of literature. She would read to me both in Bangla, which is our language, and also in English, showing me the beauty of words and language.

02:21

Samenua Sesher
Amrit was a founding member of the UK’s first Asian feminist collective, Awaz.

Awaz campaigned against the infamous ‘virginity tests’ performed by immigration officials on women arriving at Heathrow Airport on marriage visas. They also supported South Asian women's workplace struggles and founded the first refuge for Asian women. Amrit was also a member of OWAAD, the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent. She is the author of four books, including *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*, which was awarded the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize in 1978.

03:01

Amrit Wilson
I actually came to activism comparatively late. I was involved in Indian students’ groups, but you know, nothing very much about Britain. And then, when I decided to stay here, and particularly when I had my daughter - when I had my first child - I realised what it was like, you know, living in this country, actually living here… and the scale of racism was very intense, you know, from being threatened on the street to not being given proper care in terms of health and other things. So, that was certainly something that made me very conscious that it was not really possible for me to live in this country without doing something about it. And also in that phase, I met people who lived here, you know, rather than only students. And this was like a real… it was a real milestone in my life, because I realised that I could… I could be an activist, I could work with people in this country, which seemed almost impossible when I first came here because I hadn't met people like me, I'd only met like students… other science students and science was mainly populated by white men. So, you

know, to meet the community to be part of it, to feel with it, made a huge difference.

04:34

Music
'Elision' by Soweto Kinch

Samenua Sesher
Amrit started her career as a freelance journalist, working within the community, sharing their stories and experiences.

04:42

Amrit Wilson
There was that whole period before Awaz, which in a way also informed my book. Because when I started working, you know, being involved with various communities… in those days, community work - well, it still is highly political - but it was perhaps even more so at the time, because people did it because they had to, they didn't do it because they had funds, you know, there was no funding system. And so, I was involved in writing their stories, trying to publicise the injustices, and also trying to be part of organisations.

05:17

Samenua Sesher

What was it like for you, being a young journalist at the time that you went into journalism? I mean, it's a very male arena… more so then! What was it like for you?

05:31

Amrit Wilson

I suppose for them I was such an oddity, because I was very strong in what I said. I mean, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to get my stuff published and, you know, I went all out for that, because I felt that people's lives were at stake – I was writing about real people and I wanted that out, I wanted that to be known. So, they used to regard me as perhaps eccentric… I don't know. I didn't care to be honest. (laughs)

6.09

Samenua Sesher

You didn’t care, you got published! You got your work out there.

6.11

Amrit Wilson
Yeah, but it was… it used to be a huge struggle. I mean, I used to go and, you know, have major conflicts with them. And I'd often go and just sit there until they gave me their attention and accepted what I was doing. You know, I had… it was difficult, it wasn't at all easy. This

one place, they used to regard me - or called me in fact - the ‘ghetto journalist’.

6.37

Samenua Sesher
Ooh, the ‘ghetto journalist’. Wow.

6.39

Amrit Wilson
So yeah, it was tough.

06:43

Samenua Sesher
It was tough, okay. So talk to me a little bit about what it was like setting up Awaz.

06:49

Amrit Wilson
Well, there were about four or five key women who were involved. Most of them were very young - they were younger than I was. But there were two who were older, slightly older. One of them was a community worker herself. You know, she could tell us about the kind of state policies… the way in which racism is inbuilt into the system, and not only racism, but also misogyny, and the particular racisms which we face as Black women or Asian women. So, she was very

important in that sense. But equally important were the young women who were growing up in this country and facing both patriarchy as well as racism - having huge problems at places of work which were quite low-paid. And remember, this was the first generation which was growing up in this country for Asians, certainly. So, this combination of these young women and the slightly older women was very powerful. And we started off educating ourselves politically, and also being active in a whole variety of different struggles.

08:09

Samenua Sesher
What do you think of as one of your major achievements with Awaz? Something that you felt you did that you're really proud of with the organisation?

08:22

Amrit Wilson
I think, you know, there are two things which are very important. The first one was that we, at least for that period, stopped the virginity testing of Asian women. Virginity testing was an appalling practice, which, unfortunately, I think probably is happening today as well, when women are given sexual examinations as basically sexual harassment, to prove, as it were, that they are virgins, or they have been married and they've had sex and so on. If they said you were a virgin, then they would claim that you couldn't be somebody's wife. And if you're not a virgin, then you couldn't be their fiancée. And I, in fact, first came across it as a journalist because somebody rang me

and said - and people in the community knew me very well - they rang me and said that their cousin had just got married and come over to join her husband, and she was in a very bad way at Harmondsworth Detention Centre, which is near Heathrow. So, I went down there, and I met her and she told me what had happened. And she was so young, you know, just about 18 or 19 years old. And it was just so… I mean, she was in so much pain, mentally and physically, emotionally. So, I wasn't going to let that go. I said I would write about it, and I rang the Minister for Immigration, eventually got through and I asked him what this was, why was this happening? How ridiculous can this be! So, what they did in those days, if you rang somebody up and challenged them, then that particular case would be let through. But of course, there would be others. So, that was the beginning, I wrote about it, but then it carried on happening. So eventually, we had a demonstration and the Indian Workers Association, which in those days was a big organisation, they joined us. And then later we had a sit-in at Heathrow with our sisters from OWAAD, who were working with us at that point. And with these two big protests, they had to finally give in and say that they were not going to do it. So, that I think was quite a major… you know, we felt very good about it, very happy. The second thing was a big national demonstration against police brutality that we organised. And we did that, again, with the Indian Workers Association, and in those days, Brixton Black Women's group, you know. We had never done this kind of thing before, nor had Brixton Black Women's group, so we were, like, so excited to be in charge and actually doing this, you know, with thousands of people coming. It was very inspiring for us, really, to see that… to see a movement forming, as it were, you know, with us as part of it.

11:27

Samenua Sesher
Yeah, no, no, it's so important. And I was thinking about… because you mentioned this police brutality - and it would be good to think it was over, but we know that it isn't - and one of the things that seems to have come out of the recent Black Lives Matter movement was South Asian people committing to tackle anti-blackness specifically within their communities. But I'm really aware that in your work, you've always collaborated with other activists, with OWAAD, and you mentioned the Brixton Black Woman's group. Can you tell me from your perspective why it's so important that Black and Asian women come together to fight racism?

12:06

Amrit Wilson

I think if you think about racism, it comes out of a history. It comes out of a history of colonialism. And it's not only a history, it's something which is continuing, not just as colonialism but as imperialism. We see the countries of Africa, we see the countries of South Asia, all of them, in a sense, caught in this web of oppression and exploitation. So, you know, that's one reason that we have so much in common. I think the other reason is that, like it or not, both Asians and people of African origin face racism in this country. Now, there's been a lot of confusion, because on the one hand, you have the development of classes within our community. So, you have tremendously well-off Asian people, and also a few very well-off people

of African origin. You have the Kwasi Kwartengs of this world, you have the Priti Patels of this world. So, we have to acknowledge that there is class difference. But we're talking here about working-class people, and there have been huge attempts to divide us by the British state. The whole War on Terror has now turned into a really raging Islamophobia, and at the same time, anti-black racism is so powerful and so deep and goes everywhere. The problem we have now is before… Black Lives Matter is comparatively recent, and so they have work to do in terms of creating this consciousness of the need for unity. There's a lot of debate now on who is black and who's not. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not interested in labels. I think the main thing is that we work together and that we have solidarity, because we have a past which unites us, we have the present which unites us, and I think we do have a future which unites us.

14:12

Samenua Sesher
So beautifully put. So, in 1978, you wrote your first book, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*, which was published by Virago. Can you tell me a little bit about that book and your motivation for writing it? You've mentioned it already, but let's focus on it.

14:30

Amrit Wilson
Well, the book was really the work which I had been doing until then through my journalism and so on, plus a lot of extra interviews, which I did with Asian women. And the idea was that many women I met

had said that they hardly ever spoke about themselves, and that they wanted to, they wanted people to hear, but that often there are barriers to it. And so, I thought it'd be nice if they spoke out in this book, and that is one reason why it is called *Finding a Voice,* in the sense that they were speaking out for themselves.

15:11

Samenua Sesher
What were the main issues that came up when you were interviewing the women? And were there any commonalities that sort of ran through those interviews?

15:20

Amrit Wilson
Yes, there definitely were. And some of those things are still very important in Asian women's lives today, or, you know, black women's lives as well, I think. For example, the first chapter which I wrote was… I called it Isolation, but in fact, if you read it again now… I was reading it again recently, and I realised that a lot of it was about mental health, and what loneliness and racism does to people, and then what kind of treatment they are given. And also, there was a huge amount of racism within the mental health hierarchy; plus, there was the pressure, the terrible pressure, of living in a racist society where you could be attacked any night, you know, if you go out of your home. So, there was that and there were certainly commonalities in that. Then there was the issue of the family and how the Asian family responds to living in this society. How South Asian patriarchy is

remoulded, sometimes strengthened , by coming to Britain, and what that means - how a woman behaves, the way she dresses, who she sees, where she goes, is kept under strict control on many occasions; and, up to a point, that still occurs, although perhaps less so now. And then there was also - and these were common themes, you know - and then there was also the question of work, and the low-paid jobs which, at that time, Asian women did, and how they struggled against them. Now, while that's… you know, one may think the image of Asians now is that they are middle-class and well-off, but you only have to go to places like Leicester, where you will see the sweatshops - again the workers are all Asian, and most of them are women. So, you know, those issues were commonalities then, and they are also there today. Then there was the question of immigration, which was, you know, as I said before, it's an ongoing issue for us.

17:41

Samenua Sesher
Did you imagine we would be grappling with so many of the same issues today? Because the truth is, Amrit, if you had asked me in the mid-nineties if we would be in this place in the next century - you know, sort of twenty years into the next century - I wouldn't have been able to see it, you know, that we are still dealing with racism, sexism, classism, in 2021. I'm really interested to hear your perspective on this, given that your book first written in 1978 was republished by Daraja Press in 2018. How do you feel about where we are now?

18:20

Amrit Wilson

Well, you know, when I wrote the book, I wasn't thinking about what happens in the future, I was so intensely locked in that particular period of time. But looking back now, I think what it shows us, more than anything else, is the way in which capitalism and the British state have developed, you know, because in the 1970s we see all these sort of elements of the authoritarian state being set up, you know. We see the anti-terrorism laws and that gets used against Irish people - which have now become, you know, draconian laws. We see the Immigration Acts being brought in - retrospectively, in some cases - in the seventies. We see the first detention centres, which I mentioned earlier, you know, now it's commonplace for people to be locked up like that, you know, and then, of course, police powers… police powers were increased, tremendously. Immigration officers could suddenly operate all over the country, and now this is so common as well. And, of course, even the police methods like kettling, for example - kettling was something was started in the late 70s. You know, I remember the Grunwick Strike where the protesters were all kettled and beaten up viciously, and things like the Sus law, which has lived on under another name. So, all these things were set in motion at that point. But I think there was a difference. I think the difference was that the British state did all this… operated this on its own, right? But now it's being done by big multinational companies, by corporations, which are not accountable to us. At least we could ask the government to be answerable to us, in theory. But here there's no accountability at all, you know. We have Serco running detention centres and involved in sexual violence against women. We have G4S, which was involved in killing someone… killing Jimmy Mubenga while deporting him. And

then these things did not happen in that way, because they were not run by big business.

20:42

Samenua Sesher
Why do you think it is that the lot of women - given feminism, given the push for women's rights - why do you think it is that women find themselves in the place that we do today?

20:56

Amrit Wilson
As I said, I think, you know, capitalism has developed in a way where they use everything. Everything becomes a commodity: whether it's our culture, whether it's our bodies, even our sexualities… you know, the sexualisation of women's bodies, for profit. There's nothing wrong with flaunting your sexuality, but what is wrong is when somebody makes money out of it, and it's not in your control. And we did not see that in this way before because the whole profit motive was not as rampant - it was there, of course – but it was not as rampant as it is now, because corporations did not have total control. Now they control the media, they control everything. And I think that's one of the reasons - and we as feminists, many of us have not looked at capitalism in that sense. Many feminists have simply looked at oppression by men. You know, don't think I don't acknowledge that, absolutely, but we also have to look at the framework within which it's happening, and I think that was not done enough. Plus, of course,

there were many divisions within the feminist movement, as I'm sure you all know.

22.13

Samenua Sesher
Absolutely. Thank you. So given all of this, do you see any signs of hope?

22.20

Amrit Wilson
I'm always hopeful, because how would one live otherwise? I'm also very hopeful of young people. I think they are very inspiring for me. Black Lives Matter… I think, you know, they have done something, not only what we did, but new things, you know. And I particularly like the way they linked up with what's happening in Nigeria, you know.

22.27

Samenua Sesher
Yes, yes.

22.49

Amrit Wilson
Because that's taking on board imperialism. So, I think yes, I'm very, very hopeful. I'm hopeful of organisations like Sisters Uncut. I'm hopeful for those who are fighting the fascist regime in India. So yes, I

am hopeful, but also, I think we need to be hopeful, you know. In a sense, you know, if we're activists, what else is there?

23.21

Samenua Sesher
Do you have any advice for young journalists now?

22.23

Amrit Wilson
I think keep at it, have faith in yourself, that's what has served me best, you know. And have faith in your story, what you're writing, I think that's the key point, because that pushes you forward - then you feel you have to do it, you have to get it in. And don't be cowed down by all kinds of weird things which are said by upper-class white men.

23.46

Credit Music - 'Outro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

23:52

Samenua Sesher
Amrit Wilson was nominated by the journalist Ruchira Sharma. Ruchira is the staff writer at The i. Her stories cover online culture, race and mental health, and her work has been featured in Vice, the Guardian, New Statesman and Broadly. Respect Due is presented by me,

Samenua Sesher, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at www.museumofcolour.org.uk. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. The music you have heard in this series is from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Thank you for listening.