

# DESI GIRL Speaking

A. S. HUSSAIN

HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS

**This book contains discussions of mental health that some readers may find triggering, including: depression, suicide and self-harm. Turn to page 385 for a list of helpful resources.**

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*Dedicated to my parents, Ammu and Abbu, who gifted  
me with dreams and the tools to achieve them.*

*And to my brother, Nahian, who held my hand  
through the entire journey.*



Dear Reader,

To say that I am unbelievably honoured that you have picked up this book is an understatement.

When I was a teenager, Tweety's story is the one I needed to read. It would have given me so much comfort as I silently cried myself to sleep, not understanding what was happening to me. I lived one life in front of those around me and one behind the closed doors of my bedroom. I knew, like many Desi teenagers, that you didn't talk about mental health. There was too much at stake if you did. Opening up about how I was feeling was hard enough as a hormonal teenager, but it felt even more difficult being South Asian.

Until I had to face it head on. I was fortunate that my family supported me every step of the way, learning with me as we navigated uncharted waters.

Not everybody has this luxury.

Mental health issues in the South Asian community, as you will hear from both Tweety and Desi Girl, aren't something that's often spoken about. Even with strides made towards more openness when it comes to speaking about mental

health in society at large, and with more tools than ever to access mental health care, the traditional cultural values, beliefs and expectations of many South Asians mean that mental health struggles can still be seen as a sign of weakness or even failure. And it is this attitude that leads some South Asians to a reluctance to open up and seek help for their struggles or to even understand conceptually what mental health actually means.

I wrote this book because a conversation needs to be had, both within the community and between the community and service providers. Issues around the preconceived notions many South Asians have around mental health are deep-rooted and not something that will be easily fixed but I am hoping that Tweety's story can be an eye-opener and a way in which we can begin to tackle the stigma and encourage open conversations about mental health in minority cultures.

It's important to note that this book is not speaking for everyone within the Desi community but rather reflective of *an* experience. The characters you meet in this novel have vastly different experiences from each other, as will the South Asian people you meet outside these pages.

*Desi Girl Speaking* is a novel I have worked on for years and I hope that you will find strength and comfort in Tweety's story the way I wished I could have when I was fifteen and struggling. It is a

story not only of struggling but also of resilience, of family and friendships, and of the power of finding your voice.

And to all of you that are hurting silently: it gets better, I promise.

Love,

*Ashussain.*





1

I can't feel my legs.

I've been running for the past hour with one goal in mind: escape. The problem is, I don't know where I'm running to. I've gone so far that I no longer recognise which suburb of Bristol I'm in. Am I even *in* Bristol any more?

Endless fields of wind-flattened grass surround me, not a soul in sight. It should probably terrify me that I'm out here alone, in an unknown place. But for the first time this week I feel like I can finally breathe. My feet hit the gravel in sync with the beat of the music pounding in my ears. Until I get distracted by a fly that flies far too close to me and trip over myself.

I yell as I fall onto the cold, damp gravel. My shoulder takes the worst of the impact in my split-second instinct to avoid twisting my ankle. I pause my music and sit up, my shoulder flaring with pain as I do, and inspect my feet and legs. They look okay. Nothing seems to be jutting out

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and there's no blood seeping through my leggings. I rotate my ankle and breathe out in relief.

That could have ended badly. Especially if it had been icy. Fortunately the British winter hasn't set in yet, despite it being late October. Madame would have a field day with me if I turned up to practice tomorrow injured. A twisted ankle would be career-pausing if not career-ending. Which *cannot* happen. Not with Madame's impending announcement of who's landed the principal dancer role.

And if all goes right, it's my name she'll say.

*Tweety Amin – principal dancer.*

The words echo in my head now that music isn't beating into my eardrums. If I get that role, it will change everything for me.

Madame has been hyping up the role of principal dancer ever since she started working on the choreography for the upcoming Pohela Boishakh, the festival to mark the new year of the Bangla calendar in April. Pohela Boishakh tends to be a big event anyway, especially in Bristol, as Bangladeshis from across the South West come to partake in the celebrations. But this year the Bristol Desi Association has received a grant from the Arts Council, which means they can fund the festival in ways they haven't been able to before. Elevate it to a level that they're billing as the Desi equivalent of Glastonbury or Love Saves the Day.

All to say: I *have* to be named as principal dancer.

If I'm not, I'm not sure what I'll do. Even without the arts grant, this is what I've been working towards since I was a little girl and joined the troupe in the first place.

Being named principal dancer isn't a want, it's a *need*.  
A desperate one.

I'm so desperate for it that lately I've felt consumed by an emptiness that refuses to release its grip on me, shrouding me in a denser cloud of darkness each day that the announcement gets closer.

So I run, hoping that if I can pound my feet hard enough into the pavement that I can, just for a little while, ignore the weight in my chest that refuses to budge.

I don't even like running. In fact, I *despise* it with a burning passion. But right now I have to keep moving, because if I stop, for even a moment, I'll be reminded of just how much I need tomorrow to go in my favour.

I wipe away the sweat at the base of my neck with the hem of my shirt, press 'play' on my watch and push myself off the ground. And even though my lungs are burning, I accelerate, hoping that if I can make my heart beat a little faster, it'll fill up the hollow space in my chest.

## 2

The next morning my thighs are radiating with pain. I pushed myself too far yesterday. But it's a dance day, so I need to power through.

When I catch sight of the time on my phone, 8:32 a.m., I don't even pretend that I need five more minutes in bed. I've been awake for most of the night, unable to stop thinking about the announcement that is now only a few hours away.

I sit up and throw off the covers, though the cold air makes the hairs on my legs stand up. I slide into my slippers and pluck my dressing gown off the pile of discarded clothes on the floor before attempting to wake myself up by splashing an obscene amount of water on my face.

At this point, it's second nature to wake up early before dance and immediately exchange my pyjamas for trackies and a loose T-shirt. I sweep my hair into an unruly bun as I cue the music in my wireless earbuds, to spend any

free second I have perfecting my steps in the makeshift dance studio I call my bedroom, trying to get ahead of the game by practising one of the sequences of the routine Madame will have me perform if I'm cast in the dance as the soloist.

*When* I'm cast as the soloist. I face myself in the mirror and lose myself in the routine, unaware of time or space. Although the auditions for Pohela Boishakh have already taken place, I keep coming back to the routine as if manifesting my role in it. I've been on stage since I was eleven and have always loved it. There's nothing quite as magical as performing in front of an audience, getting transported to a new realm through the wordless story of choreography.

But right now something feels off. My footwork feels out of sync with the music, like it's lagging a fraction, even though the beat of the tabla would suggest otherwise. My fingers tingle with a burning unease when they would normally spark with excitement.

*It's just the anticipation getting to me. That's all.*

At least that's what I tell myself as I make the same mistake over and over again, my body betraying me when it should be functioning like a well-oiled machine.

'Tweety?' Ammu calls my name, standing just outside my door, her face looking as nervous as I feel about what today will bring.

I glance at the clock on my wall, not at all surprised that hours have passed in the blink of an eye.

'Tweety?' Ammu calls my name again as I exhale

heavily, my heart slowing down now that I've stopped moving. 'Are you ready to go?'

*No. Don't go. You don't want to find out what happens if you don't get the role.*

'I'm ready.'

We don't normally have practice on a Sunday, but today's session has been called specifically for the big announcement.

When we get out of the car and into the studio, the clatter of Ammu's high heels is far too thunderous, giving me an instant headache. I can only shake it when she slips them off to enter the dance hall, in obedience with Madame's number-one rule of no shoes. I slip my own off, along with my socks, the cold sending a shudder through my body.

'Tweety!' Priya calls from across the room, inviting me to come sit with her and Noely before Madame arrives and shifts the earth on its axis. I give Ammu a quick peck on the cheek and walk over to join my best friend, trying not to let the desperation show on my face.

'What took you so long? I thought something seriously bad had happened for you to be cutting it this fine.' Priya ties her hair up in a ponytail, leaving no strands untucked, which makes her look like an egg. 'How are you feeling?'

Like I want to vomit. Like I want to curl up in bed and never leave. Like I want to hit the 'pause' button just so I don't have to find out whether or not my dreams will come true. But I don't say any of that. Instead, I just say, 'Fine.'

Priya rolls her eyes. 'You're going to get the role. Stop stressing.'

'You don't know that,' I snap, unable to keep the anxiety out of my voice.

'I do. You're the best dancer here.'

'And it would be wild if Madame can't see that. Not that she won't. But you know, it would be.' Noely, another dancer in the troupe, and one of my close friends, sounds certain.

I don't bother arguing with them. As much as I know that they're right, I can't afford to get arrogant. That's how dreams become crushed.

And if the mere anticipation of finding out whether I got the role is making me feel this bad, I can't even imagine what it will be like if I don't get it.

'Afternoon, ladies.' Madame's voice bounces off the walls, creating an endless loop of her words. Madame, despite her short stature, is a force of nature who manages to capture our attention the minute she walks into the studio with just a clap of her hands. Her hair is wild and untamed, strands of grey peeking through the forest of raven black, and dotting her face are numerous beauty spots – the most prominent right above her lip. From what Ammu has told me about the meaning of moles and their locations, I know that it symbolises ambition. And Madame, with all her accolades from her successful career with the Desi Nach Troupe, is the embodiment of ambition.

'I know you've all been waiting so I won't drag it out any further.' Madame leans against the table that sits at the

front of the room. 'As you know, being named principal dancer is no small feat. Especially this year. You will have the opportunity not only to represent the Bristol Desi Association but also to dance in front of scouts from the Desi Nach Troupe.'

Priya and I turn to each other while gasps ripple across the room.

*The Desi Nach Troupe? OMG!* she mouths to me.

The Desi Nach Troupe is not only Madame's old troupe but also one of the UK's leading Bollywood dance troupes. When Madame was with them, she travelled all over the world, dancing at all types of festivals and events, meeting celebrities whose presence I can only imagine being in.

'That's right,' Madame says, a hint of a smile on her face. 'With the arts grant this year, along with the scouts coming, there's a lot at stake for our principal dancer. They'll have the eyes of a lot of important people on them. I hope they're ready for the challenge.'

I gulp as Madame's eyes land on me, but I'm unable to read the meaning in them.

She stands up and clears her throat. 'So without further ado, our principal dancer for the upcoming Pohela Boishakh is . . .'

The room falls silent, not even a breath can be heard, but the inside of my skull is unbearably loud as my brain chants my own name over and over. Even though I am firmly against hoping for things because all it does is breed disappointment, I hope with everything in me that Madame will say my name. Because if she does, maybe



then the storm that has been brewing in my chest for the past few weeks will finally disappear.

Priya holds my hand, pressing it with all her strength, ignoring how sweaty it's gotten.

'... Tweety Amin!' Madame finally declares. 'Congratulations, Tweety!'

My mind goes blank as Madame rattles off the remaining positions, Priya and Noely's names both in there somewhere, but I couldn't say where in the line-up because there are only two words echoing throughout my head.

*Principal dancer.*

When Madame has finished, allowing us a five-minute break to digest the information before we begin practice, Priya throws her arms around me, hugging me so tight I almost can't breathe.

'I knew you would get it!' she squeals, making my eardrums ache with her high pitch. 'This is all you've ever wanted!'

This *is* all I've ever wanted. I remember falling in love with dance after watching a home movie of my grandmother and grandfather dancing at their wedding, the crowd surrounding them looking on in awe, feeling their joy not only through the way they looked at each other but the way they moved. And I experienced that same feeling when I attended my first ever dance class. Even though Madame scared me with just how loudly she could tell you off, and I knew everybody was watching me, ready to dissect each step, I couldn't help but fall in love with dancing as I made my way through one routine

after the other, my body speaking a language I hadn't even realised it knew.

After that, dance turned into something I did not just for joy but as a way to understand the world around me.

But as people come up to congratulate me, I don't feel joy. At the prospect of standing in front of a large crowd with all my dreams within reach, I only feel a hollow space in my chest where my heart should be bursting with excitement.

I've been given the one opportunity I've wanted since I first fell in love with dance, but I feel absolutely nothing. All weekend I have waited for this moment, for those exact words to leave Madame's mouth, so that I could shake off this weight in my chest which I thought was just nerves. But if anything, it's gotten suddenly heavier.

'All right, bacchara,' Madame calls, 'time to get back to work! I know you are all excited to get going with the routine now that the positions have been filled, and you got a taste of what story each individual character tells when we began auditioning, but we must go back to the basics if we are to create something extraordinary. The plan now is to vary our practices, with weekday practices focusing on learning from dances we have performed already, while weekends will be devoted to the performance at Pohela Boishakh. Remember, we only have until April.'

Some of the girls groan in annoyance. In the weeks prior to the audition, Madame had taught us all the basics of the dance choreography along with small sections of the individual roles. Although it is always challenging to learn

a new set of steps, especially as most years we just do the same old routine, the look of wonder on our faces when we first saw Madame's new routine was unlike anything else. Doing something new was *exciting*, but now it sounded as if we'd be back to going over old dances.

I guess we had to up our game to justify the Arts Council grant.

'Now come on!'

We line up as our mothers take their seats on the chairs arranged beneath the windows, ready to watch. Madame's always been adamant that our mothers be there, because if we can't dance in front of them, how can we hope to do so in front of an actual audience?

Today we're practising the segment we all performed during our auditions, but even so, I'm stumbling through my moves, unable to hit the right beat or move as fluidly as I usually do.

'I've already got the role, so I don't need to keep trying,' I joke when Noely pulls me up on my lack of coordination, trying to keep a brave face despite the growing pit in my stomach. Before Madame's announcement I would have chalked it up to nerves, but now, faced with the good news, I see that it's anything but. I realise that the worry I was feeling before – what I thought was nervous hope for the role I *know* was choreographed for me – was actually dread. Dread that I would *get* the role. Dread that, if it all went my way, the aching pain in my chest would still be there. Dread that it would confirm that something is terribly wrong with me.

Because as much as I would like to attribute the darkness clouding my mind to anticipation, I have a sneaking suspicion that it's not. That I've simply been ignoring the fact that it started weeks before Madame even announced that one of us would be selected as the principal dancer.

And, if I don't do something about it, it could cause me to lose dance altogether.

When class comes to an end, some of the aunties come up to me, cupping my cheeks in adoration as they tell me how proud they are of me. I smile and say thank you, like I know I should, laughing when they comment that the fame has already gone to my head after watching me trip over my own feet for the past hour, and trying not to let them feel the seismic shift inside me.

# THE DANCIN' DOLLS

Today 16:34

Noely

Congrats again Tweety!!! Super  
deserved my butterfly 🦋

Priya

THERE WAS NO DOUBT  
YOU'D GET IT XXXX

Srabani

Ye congrats tweety

But don't forget:

The principal dancer is only  
as good as her troupe 😏

Labani

True that

And dont forget madame does  
want bani to help choreograph xx

Thats just as important as tweetys role

Annona

That's HUGE for madame

(congrats Tweety tho, big up for scoring the principal dancer role)

Srabani

Her head's already big as it is

Did nobody else see her miss nearly every step at practice or was that just me?

Tweety

No need to be jealous Srabani

Don't worry, your spot as my backup will never be taken away from you

xxx

Priya

Dkfnvkajdnfgk.d,fgn k

TWEETY

Noely



Srabani

Backup my ASS

YOU'RE MY BACKUP

Tweety

Okay sweetie

You tell yourself that

Srabani

Hope you break both legs

Tweety

Thank you for the luck x

Priya

YOU DON'T NEED LUCK TWEET

YOU ARE GOING TO KICK ASS, OKAY?

Madame picked you cause  
you're awesooooome

Srabani

Enough about tweety

Anyone know where they're  
getting their jewellery from?

With desi nach troupe coming I need  
to have my outfit sorted asap

Labani

I can ask my mum to take us to london  
and check the shops there

Annona

That would be sweet

Labani

Just me and srabani

Sorry car is smol

Priya

We need to wait and see  
what Tweety will wear

We can't outshine her

She is the PRINCIPAL DANCER after all



Noely

Tweety, any ideas?

Tweety

tbc

Labani

How r u not already thinking abt it??!?!?

Tweety

~\\_(\ツ)\\_/~

Srabani

