

Silenced Freedom

Racism in 2025

They call me “born free,” say I missed the fight,
Say after '94, the world turned bright.
But freedom on paper is not the same,
When poverty and landlessness still remain.

In 2025, racism hides in disguise,
In the jokes, in the stares, in the subtle lies.
It tells me equity is somehow unfair,
That asking for justice takes more than my share.

They paint the nation as rainbow and whole,
But silence the youth, try to cage the soul.
As if being born free erased the pain,
As if we can't see the same old chain.

One day I saw a little girl stare,
At her tight afro curls, tugging her hair.
She whispered she wished it looked like mine,
Not knowing my crown was a store-bought design.

Her voice revealed a deeper wound,
A seed of doubt planted too soon.
Racism in 2025 does not always shout,
It whispers within us, it turns us inside out.

It teaches us lighter is closer to right,
That our natural beauty should stay out of sight.
It hides in the mirrors where we question our skin,
It steals from the soul before it begins.

This is the struggle our youth must face,
The chains of the mind we have to replace.
Racism today is a mask on the shelf,
Sometimes it looks like hating ourselves.

Still, I rise with my crown, my voice, my sight,
Knowing pro-Black has never meant anti-white.

Author's Explanation: "Silenced Freedom"

Greetings, my name is **Bonolo Onthatile Oprah Thulo** and this poem, *Silenced Freedom*, is inspired by one of the set topics of the year from the writing competition: **Racism in 2025**. The theme struck me as profoundly urgent, because racism in our era rarely arrives in obvious brutality. It arrives disguised, subtle, poisonous in its quietness, yet it still corrodes the dignity of those who live through it.

My inspiration began in 2023, when I was in Grade 9. During a lesson on the Soweto Uprising, my teacher, who is white, declared that young people in South Africa could no longer claim to experience racism, since we now live in **Ntate Nelson's dream of a rainbow nation**. His words carried the weight of erasure, as if our voices, our struggles, and our lived realities could be dismissed by an idealised vision. That moment revealed to me how racism in 2025 often operates not through visible chains and open wounds, but through silencing, denial, and the illusion that injustice has already disappeared.

Yes, South Africa has advanced since 1994. But progress without equity, progress without truth, progress without listening to the voices of the youth is a fragile and incomplete progress.

This is why I included the stanza about the young girl with **tight afro curls**. When she confessed that she wished her hair looked like mine, not knowing that I was wearing artificial hair, her words pierced me. It was not only about her but about a larger wound in Black identity. For generations, we have been conditioned to believe that our natural crowns are unruly, unworthy, too wild, too difficult. That moment showed me that racism in 2025 does not always shout in the streets. It often whispers in our mirrors. It invades our consciousness. It convinces us to doubt our worth before the world even speaks.

Her longing echoed the questions I sometimes ask myself. Why must I wonder if Black is beautiful. Why must I fight twice as hard to feel equal. Why must my very existence be placed on trial in the year 2025. These questions are not simply personal. They are ancestral, generational, and political. They expose how the battlefield of racism has shifted from the outside world into the intimate space of identity, self-love, and dignity.

This is why I wrote *Silenced Freedom*. It is my answer to a society that confuses silence with freedom. I speak because my generation must speak. We are not

voiceless. We are the chorus that refuses to be muted. We are the living proof that the dream of equality is not finished. It must be carried, defended, and spoken into existence.