

Angela Saini

extract from a conversation with Colin Grant

CG: The moment that we're in feels as if it's an area that has been led to by the past, I suppose. I think there's a lot of scepticism, isn't there, amongst people of different colours, in this country and around the world, about things like the vaccines that have been developed for COVID? And I suppose, I would argue – and I wonder whether you would agree – that that scepticism is informed by the past... by some transgressions that have happened in the past.

AS: Yeah, I do think that cultural backdrop is there. There's no doubt the politics is in some people's minds. I struggle to believe that, for example, the degree of vaccine hesitancy among ethnic and minority groups in the UK, is necessarily all down to that. I think a lot of it is because of social media misinformation, especially these WhatsApp groups. So, I think that's an element of it as well. We are right to mistrust scientists to some degree; not that we shouldn't trust science, but scientists haven't always been ethical in the way that they've behaved. There have been huge, huge failures within science, especially when it comes to race and racism. But I think a lot of what we're seeing is also because in 2020, when the pandemic began, there were so many racial myths emerging, and scientists took part in that myth-making. So, you may remember in March/April when rates of virus, deaths and critical illness were very high among non-white

people in the UK – not least because the virus had hit London first and London is a minority-white British city – there were some scientists who began speculating... very prominent scientists and medical researchers who began speculating about whether this could be because we are genetically different; all of us who aren't white are so genetically different that we will suffer. We will succumb to this virus faster than anybody else. It was nonsense. It was completely not supported by any evidence and as we know now, the narrative has shifted, and we know that's not the case, thank goodness. I did a lot of work around this myself last year, to try and combat this pseudo-scientific idea; but we shouldn't be surprised then if in 2021, we have black and Asian patients asking, 'Well, is the vaccine safe for me if I am genetically more likely to catch the virus?' It wasn't just misinformation that led them there, it was actual scientists speculating about that last year. So, we can't fully blame them because scientists have played their part in that process.

CG: I'm wondering about how that has impacted on you entering into this debate... entering into these notions of race science. You talked in your essay about 'cancelling yourself' and withdrawing from social media. Can you talk a little bit about that? Was it so bad, that you needed to withdraw? And also, I wondered why [Richard] Dawkins had actually withdrawn his initial tweet?

AS: Bad is relative, isn't it? I think there's a lot of people who withstand far more abuse than I was getting and are okay with it or can manage it. Perhaps, I'm more thin-skinned than most. I'm quite sensitive, I think, and things stay with me. I think that's the problem. Even if... when *Superior* came out, it got a lot of really lovely reviews, including yours; and within scientific circles as well, it's been very popular, it's on lots of university

reading lists. And yet, when you're on social media, the thing that you remember is that white supremacist telling you that because you have dark brown skin, you are naturally less intelligent than him. You know, that is the thing that plays on you throughout the day, and I just thought, 'Why am I doing this to myself? Why am I allowing myself to have these thoughts in my head?' It's like inviting racists into your living room every single day to just sit there and shout at you. And I just thought, 'I don't need it. I really don't need it.' So, while social media does have its benefits, I can see the benefits for many people, but, for me, the costs just outweighed all of that. I felt much (you know, as I write in my essay), I feel much calmer, and happier and content since I left.

But with regards to your Dawkins question, I'll tell you what happened that day. So, Dawkins tweeted about my book; and the reason he read my book at all was because he had tweeted something about eugenics and people had told him, 'Read Angela's book'. And he did, to his credit; but he has a lot of racist followers on Twitter, which won't surprise you. And they were angered and appalled that he would like something that I had written. The abuse was just constant. I was used to blocking people. I wasn't used to: having blocked a hundred people having another hundred people to block immediately. And it just got too much, so I just quit that day. And Dawkins sent me an email... I was en route to Germany to visit my sister and when I got to Hamburg, he'd sent me an email through my agent to apologise and to say, 'Look, I've taken the tweet down to stop you from any further damage'. It's a private email, but essentially, he said, 'I don't understand why I have all these racist followers. Why are my followers like this? I don't understand why they're like this.' And we had a little exchange about it, and it was interesting because it did make me wonder whether people are quite themselves when they're online. I don't think they are.

CG: No, there's a departure, isn't there? I wonder. Well, Angela Saini, thanks very much for appearing on *Writers Mosaic* and for illuminating some of these domain assumptions that have embedded themselves in our countries over the decades, if not centuries. So, thanks again and good luck with your next book, Angela.

AS: Thanks so much Colin. It's been a pleasure.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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