WRITERS MOSAIC

Angela Saini

In Conversation with Colin Grant

Angela Saini (AS): The thing about science, though, is that it has this illusion of objectivity. We in the public imagine it to be objective, that we [laughs] are being handed truths by these researchers, and it's not really like that. And that's really what my work focuses on, is when it comes to understanding who we are, how much is that hampered by the fact that the people telling us what and who we are, are affected by their politics?

Colin Grant (CG): This is *WritersMosaic* in Conversation, and I'm Colin Grant.

I'm pleased today to be speaking with Angela Saini, an award-winning British science journalist and broadcaster. She presents science programmes on the BBC. In fact, I've produced Angela on some of those programmes in the past. Angela's writing has appeared in *The New*

Scientist, *The Sunday Times*, *National Geographic*, and *Wired*. Her latest book, *Superior: The Return of Race Science*, was a finalist for the LA Times Book Prize and named a Book of the Year by numerous newspapers. And we're talking today via the wonders of modern technology on an online platform. I'm in Brighton, my home. Whereabouts are you, Angela?

AS: I'm in Muswell Hill in North London.

CG: And you can't escape the slow, sad sound of traffic wherever you are in London. So we can hear the dribblings of the people going to work and rushing through London in the background there, but we can hear you now very clearly, actually. Can I begin, Angela, by asking you about the shift from being a student and a person with a degree to becoming a journalist, a science journalist. How and why did you make that jump?

AS: Oh, it's a strange story. So I went to university with every intention of becoming an engineer. You know, that was my career plan. But partly because of where I grew up. So I grew up in quite a racist bit of Southeast London. You know, the BNP, you may remember, the BNP bookshop, which used to be the kind of *de facto* headquarters of the British National Party, was in the same town as my school. And there used to be fascist marches, there were anti-fascist marches as well. It was a—in the 80s and

90s—it was a very tense time. There were a number of racist murders, not least the Stephen Lawrence murder, which was not far from where I lived, and I was around the same age as him. So that affected me. And when I went to university, I got involved in student politics, as so many people do. I became one of the chairs of the Anti-Racism Committee on the Student Union. And that's how I got into writing. And it just, like I write about in my essays for *WritersMosaic*, it's just this heady feeling of power to know that people are finally seeing the world from your perspective, that people that wouldn't normally know what has gone on in your life can suddenly see it. And that had a profound effect on me. And that's why I thought, I will give journalism a go [laughs] if it doesn't work out, I'll become an engineer.

CG: And were there any writers that inspired you? Were there people that acted as models for you when you began to write?

AS: Well, to be honest, I was, like I said, I was very political at the time. So it was people like Orwell, it was the revolutionary left-wing thinkers I was reading. I even interned at New Internationalist. I read the 'New Statesman'. I read *The Nation*. I was, you know—Naomi Klein, all those kind of early 90s left-wing thinkers were the ones that I was inspired by. But it was when I graduated, I went to India for a while to work for a

left-wing current affairs magazine there called *Frontline*, which is published by *The Hindu*, which itself is the main left-leaning newspaper in India. And the journalists there just shaped my life entirely. They are very brave. They work under threat of intimidation and violence every single day. They cover some of the most important stories that nobody else would. And that investigative, interrogative, brave kind of journalism is what I've always aspired to. I don't think I've ever had to do anything as hard as they have done, but they were my role models.

CG: And I wonder whether you were also inspired by some of the people you met to change the narrative around India, as far as it is thought of internationally. I remember when, I'm a bit older than you, Angela, but I remember reading VS Naipaul when I was in my twenties. India, a wounded civilization. India, an era of darkness. And I was rather depressed by those books, and they put me off going to India. I didn't want to go. [AS laughs] He'd been there for me. But then Naipaul got a bit cheerier, a bit sunnier [AS laughs again] with his third book, which was called India, a million mutinies now. And I wondered whether with *Geek Nation*, you were also challenging the perception of India.

AS: I was trying to, but I didn't want to gloss over the problem. I mean, this is the issue with anyone who writes about India, is that it's such a big

place and everything that goes on in the rest of the world coexists in India simultaneously. There is both extreme poverty and illiteracy and social problems and social deprivation and enormous wealth and progress and entrepreneurship and exciting stuff happening. And what I tried to do in 'Geek Nation' was—in a way that I could, explain how this country, which is so vibrant in so many ways—and also, I think what sometimes gets overlooked is its age, its cultural age. When you live in a country like the UK, the cultural age of this country, you can't imagine more than 2000 years back. In India, people are living with cultural ideas to this day and traditions, which go back at least three millennia before [laughs]. And that permeates everything. And I think it's also important to weave that in somehow.

CG: But I was aware that when I worked at the BBC, that we were often thinking about technology in India, because I worked on a program called 'Click' in the science unit. And the idea that India could send satellites into space, India could have astronauts. That was a challenge to some people, I think because there was this negative domain assumption that India was a backward country.

AS: Yeah. And I remember when India's space program first started, there was a lot of derision. You know, here is a country to which we send aid.

What are they doing having satellites and having a space programme? What a waste of money. What they don't understand is that technology, even very high technology, benefits everyday people as well. That was one of the big messages of *Geek Nation*, is that it's not just about ploughs and farming technology. That's not the only thing that developing countries need. They need everything because they are not just following the same model of development as European nations in the 19th century. They are in the 21st century trying to keep up with everybody else. And in some ways now, in the last 20 years, they've leapfrogged.

CG: Yes.

AS: You know, if you look at China, China is now outstripping the rest of the world in terms of publications and the vibrancy and strength of its scientific establishment. India, sadly—and I think this is partly because of its change of government. It has a Hindu nationalist government in charge now, which in some cases is pro-science, but in some cases very anti-science. It's dragged behind a little bit. But at the time I was there, it was very exciting. There was so much happening in the IT industry and in space and in pharmaceuticals. I mean, India now is the vaccine supplier to the world.

CG: Have you made that journey yourself, Angela, from writing for journals and newspapers to writing books? It's quite a leap, isn't it? I remember when I started to write books and I sent in a chapter at the time to my editor. She would say, 'It's very, very good, Colin, but it's very condensed. You need to expand by three times'. And I wonder whether you had sort of similar constraints that you'd imposed upon yourself when you were a journalist that were no longer applying to being an author of books.

AS: For me, part of the reason that I wrote my first book was that I'd just got married and my husband had a secondment to India. I'd already lived there before and I thought, okay, what am I going to do while I'm there? [Laughs.] I'd left the BBC by this point and I was freelancing, but I thought, *I need a big project*. So I pitched this idea. It was good timing because the Indian publishing industry was booming at that point. All these international publishing houses had entered India and were trying to tap that market for obvious reasons. It's a huge market and there are very high rates of English literacy across India. And so I got there at the right time, but I did struggle because I was used to writing articles. And really that first book was more like a series of standalone articles than it was a coherent, long narrative. There was a thread going through it, but each of

the chapters really stood alone. And I think that's what a lot of journalists do, [laughs] when they start writing books.

CG: Absolutely. I did the same. Even when I wrote my memoirs, a series of short stories, really, true short stories. And how have you arrived at your subject, would you say? I mean, can you talk about the evolution of the subjects that you've chosen to write about and why we've reached this point at 'Superior'?

AS: Well, I guess, so before I went into science writing, I was just an everyday reporter. So I was covering politics and crime and all kinds of things and especially investigations. So one of the last things I did before I left the BBC was I did a big investigation into bogus universities. It took more than six months and there was a team of us. So I had a couple of producers. It was a huge effort. And what I learned in that process was really all the fine-grained things that you have to do when you're trying to uncover something that other people want to cover up. And that's the sensibility that I've tried to bring to science reporting. So rather than writing about new inventions, which is something I don't tend to do, or new research, a lot of my work is looking at science. It's a hugely important part of humanity. So important to our progress and development, but also important in shaping how we see ourselves and

understand ourselves. How is that affected by things like bias and fraud and ego and politics? How does all that shape what scientists are telling us? And you only have to scratch a little bit to realise that these problems affect science in the same way that they affect every other part of our lives.

The thing about science though, is that it has this illusion of objectivity. We in the public imagine it to be objective, that we are being handed truths by these researchers. And it's not really like that. And that's really what my work focuses on, is when it comes to understanding who we are, how much is that hampered by the fact that the people telling us what and who we are, are affected by their politics?

CG: Oh, that's very interesting, Angela. I was thinking of two points. I wanted, if you could riff on why you decided to leave the BBC and whether you feel freer to express yourself outside of the BBC, for one. Is that true or not?

AS: Yeah, I do. And I felt immediately freer when I left. For one thing, you're allowed to have an opinion once you leave, you're allowed to have politics, which makes a big difference. But also—so like I said, I was doing this investigation at BBC London. And I was young at the time, I was late

20s, but not without quite an established career. So I'd been an ITN trainee. I had worked in various countries, I'd done quite a lot of journalism. And this story was one that I brought to the newsroom, and I developed. And yet, when it was about to be filmed, the editor tried to get someone else to present it, a white man. Not that his whiteness or his maleness is a point—it was a very white male newsroom, so that may have been the first person he thought of. But I was so angry about this. And I threatened to leave. I said, 'if you do this, I will leave and I'll take my story with me'. And then they conceded and let me do it. But after that, I couldn't stay. You know, once that happened, however much they were sorry about it afterwards, and they were really kind, and offered to promote me and keep me in the organisation. I just couldn't stay after that. Because I just thought if I have to fight just to do my own journalism, to have the right to own my own ideas, then this is not the organisation for me.

CG: Can we turn to *Superior: the Return of Race Science*? And before we sort of dive into it, I think you recorded the audio book, didn't you? Why did you decide to record the audio book for this book, but not for the other books? Is there something special about this book?

AS: There is something special about this book. It was, like I said, because of my experiences growing up and how I got into journalism, it was the book that I think I'd been waiting to write ever since I was little. And when I was writing it, I remember thinking, I actually don't care if anyone else reads this or not. I don't care if anyone likes it or not. I'm writing it for myself. It was a very cathartic experience. I'm sure you've had this yourself, writing your memoirs.

CG: Yes.

AS: And books are very personal to you. And even though it is a work of journalism, and I am very thorough in my work. It's not as though I don't care [laughs] whether other people read it or not. But for myself, it was right at the bottom of what I was thinking. I gained such clarity in the process of researching *Superior*, and it just felt like a weight had been lifted when I finished it. I thought, I don't have to kind of work through these things in my head anymore. I don't have to kind of constantly turn them over again and again and again, because I've done it now. I felt such peace with it. So it was a really important book to me.

CG: Well, it's a really important book to me as well. I reviewed it for the New Statesman and marvelled at it. So congratulations for that. I'm going

to quote one or two passages to help us get into the subject matter. So in the book, you say, ‘Charles Darwin saw gradations between the highest men of the highest races and the lowest savages’. You go on to talk about Henry Huxley, who was Darwin's ‘bulldog’. In an 1865 essay on emancipation, he argued, ‘the highest places in the hierarchy of civilization will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins’. So the first question is, can you help us by an understanding of: what is race science?

AS: So some people refer to it as pseudoscience, but it's only in hindsight that we've realised that it's pseudoscience. At the time, it was just the way that people thought about human difference. I've been reading this wonderful book by Olivette Otele, *African Europeans*. She is a professor of history, and she looks at how this idea of blackness emerged. So as salient as skin colour may feel to us in the 21st century, it hasn't had that same salience through history. That's not to say that people didn't recognise human difference. It's just that skin colour was not necessarily the axis by which they recognised it. They recognised different things, sometimes through religion, sometimes through physical appearance or other things. And she looks at how blackness emerged as being tied to the idea of slavery, or to inferiority, even before the Enlightenment.

So by the time you get to the Enlightenment in Europe, naturalists and scientists are asking themselves, can we categorise humans in the same way that we categorise the natural world? And if we can, what would those categories look like? And they really struggled over this for a long time. But what they landed on were divisions based on skin colour. And that became what we now know as race science. It became the categories that we still use now.

What I try and do in *Superior* is look at the history of that and how arbitrary that classification was, but also the ways in which scientists, as well as everyday people, kept pumping meaning into these categories, even though they didn't exist in the first place. So many wonderful race scholars have written about this. Karen and Barbara Fields have written about this idea of racecraft, that it's like witchcraft, it's a myth made real, and then we somehow live with it. And that's what I was exploring. And also how that racecraft persists to this day, how we still jump into this idea that biological race is real.

CG: It's interesting, isn't it, how people might or might not succumb to having had the same cultural experience. Because I mean, I quoted Charles Darwin there, who's in your book, but a contemporary of his, Alfred Russell Wallace, thought otherwise. You quote him: 'Eugenics is the

meddlesome interference of an arrogant scientific priestcraft'. And those are strong words there. But there is a kind of arrogance, isn't there, behind science, which allows them to promote ideas which they feel strongly about. But what's curious is that there, even at the stage where Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace are formulating their notions of evolution, there's still a division, isn't there, between the enlightened people and the unenlightened.

AS: Yeah, there is. And even this idea of progress or modern and backward or modern and primitive, all of this is a construction if you think about it. There's a wonderful social anthropologist, Adam Cooper, who's written about the idea of the primitive. And what he essentially dissects is that it doesn't really exist. That itself is a product of this enlightenment idea of progress, that we are on some kind of track. And some cultures or civilizations are further down that track and others are just catching up or at the bottom. Or as Darwin believed in the 19th century, some at the bottom are doomed to die out in the same way that Neanderthals did. So these notions of who is better than others, these notions of inferiority and superiority are really key to understanding how race science developed.

CG: And I suppose the eugenicists got a bad name and their argument was lost and particularly seemed to be scurrilous and scandalous during the Second World War and the attack on Jewish people. And the second part of your title, the subtitle, is 'The Return of Race Science'. So did race science return after the Second World War?

AS: Well, in some ways it never really went away. So these threads of thinking were always there. But what I try to show is that these ideas wax and wane, and often that depends on the politics of the time. So right now, we're seeing a huge resurgence in interest in scientific racism, people trying to revive these ideas, because we're also seeing out there in the world a rise of ethnic nationalism, the far right, white supremacy, religious nationalism all over the world. And a lot of these ideologies are very flimsy, you know [laughs]. They really don't have much basis to them. So they desperately want some kind of scientific support for the claims that they're making. It's very difficult to make the claim in the 21st century that white people are somehow inherently better than everybody else. So if they can find it in the literature, even if they have to go back into the 19th century, they will. And you see this happening online, even in some corners of academia.

CG: And it was very prevalent in the 60s, wasn't it? You mentioned this quarterly, *Mankind Quarterly*, which kind of looked for respectable scientists to shore up their rather racist ideas. Is that a fair assertion?

AS: Yeah, absolutely. This is a journal that was set up after the Second World War to essentially propagate the kind of scientific racism that mainstream journals tended not to publish anymore. And they managed to recruit some quite high profile scientists from parts of the world, especially psychologists. So psychology has always had an issue with this. Intelligence research in particular was born out of eugenics, and it kind of served the eugenics movement in some ways. Psychology even to this day, intelligence research, if you go online and you look at the big intelligence researchers, they are very controversial, very controversial. Some of them have been called racists. But certainly in the 60s, people like Arthur Jensen, who was a respected, in some circles, psychologist in the US, was claiming that black women should be sterilised, that these babies were inherently not worthy citizens. And of course, that again, sat in a political context of the civil rights movement. That was a reaction to the civil rights movement.

CG: Well, the moment we're in feels as if it's an era 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,

AS: Yes.

CG: By some transgressions that have happened in the past. I mean, you mentioned the 1995 scientists who tried to patent a virus-infected cell line for people belonging to a tribe in Papua New Guinea. They were trying to develop a treatment for leukaemia. And even if their intentions were good, there's the historical background or the historical baggage that accompanies that kind of interrogation that makes people today sceptical about whether there's good or bad intention.

AS: Yeah, I do think that cultural backdrop is there. There's no doubt that politics is in some people's mind. I struggle to believe that, for example, the degree of vaccine hesitancy among ethnic 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 for example, in my family, WhatsApp is huge in India, and it's a huge vector for misinformation. Diasporic groups will be part of these Indian WhatsApp

groups, and they'll be exposed to these myths. There's so many of them [laughs]. Just every day, there's a point at which even my husband's uncle, who's a doctor himself, was sharing vaccine misinformation on the same day that he got his vaccine [laughs]. When you pass things on from your family, they carry much more weight than what you read in the newspapers these days because there's so much mistrust about mainstream media. 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 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. 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 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 narratives have shifted, and we know that that's not the case, thank goodness. I did a lot of work around this myself last year to try and combat this pseudoscientific 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: And 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 the decision so, was it so bad that you needed to withdraw? And also, I wondered why Dawkins had actually withdrawn his initial tweet?

AS: Ah! Yeah. Well, it was, it— '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. And 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. 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, I think the cost just outweighed all of that. And I felt much, you know, as I write in my essay, I feel much calmer and happier and content since I left.

CG: Yeah. And I wonder whether you have more expansive thoughts. I was very intrigued by this notion that you began to think almost in soundbite terms, in terms of fitting your thoughts into the format of the platforms that are readily available to us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, even.

AS: Yeah, it's very odd. I kind of got into the habit of when I would see something on the news thinking, *oh, I should tweet about that*. And then I thought, *no, I actually don't have to*. And I don't have to think about what

I'm going to write. It's quite good [laughs]. And yeah, so I'm free from that now. You know, what I write in my essay is literally what I went through. It was like a psychological shift happened to me over the course of those months. Not that I was very prolific on Twitter to begin with, but just the act of being on that platform ever had influenced my psychology in the way that I was interpreting the world and what I was reading. And also what, you know, selectively what I was reading was shaped by it.

So now I read very differently. I actually read far more books now than I did before. So before I was reading kind of headlines and stuff, very quick things. Now I read very long magazine pieces and books. And although I do read the newspapers every day, I don't, you know, that's not the bulk of what I read. So it has changed in that sense.

But with regards to your Dawkins questions, [laughs] 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. And the abuse was just constant. I was used to blocking people. I wasn't used to having blocked 100 people, having another 100

people to block immediately. And it just got too much. So I just quit that day. And Dawkins sent me an email. I was on 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. You know, I don't want—it's a private email. But essentially, he said, 'I don't understand why I have all these racist followers; why my followers are 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 *WritersMosaic* and for illuminating some of these domain assumptions that have embedded themselves in our countries over the decades, if not centuries. So thank you. Thanks again. And good luck with your next book, Angela.

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

CG: I was talking to the author and science journalist, Angela Saini. To hear more writers, go to the website writersmosaic.org.uk

Angela Saini was in conversation with Colin Grant

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