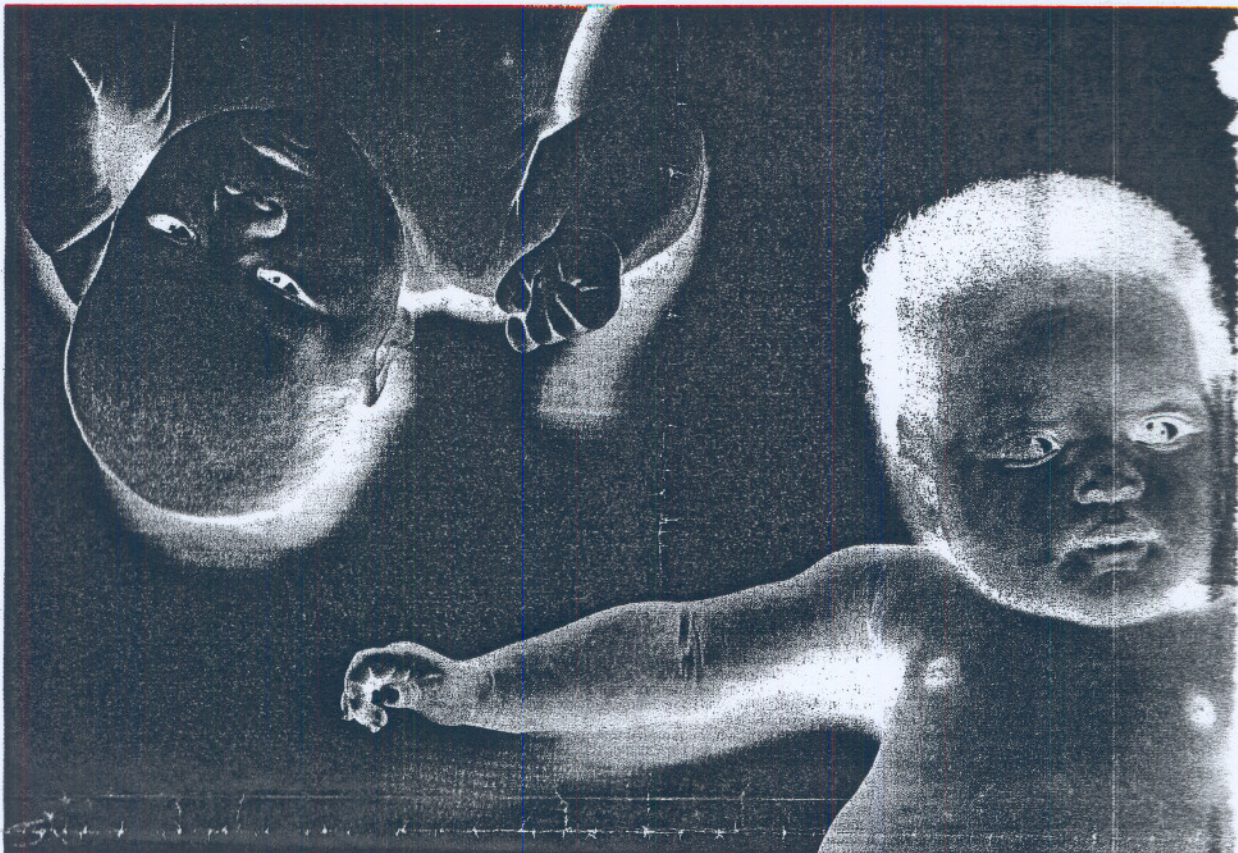


SEVEN DAYS SOCIETY



Kunal Basu's novel tells the story of two infants, one black, one white, who are left on a deserted island to grow up without the racist influences of society

RACE: NO BLACK AND WHITE ANSWERS



Is any race genetically superior to others? Novelist Kunal Basu explores the charged history of racial science, and uncovers an obsession going back to Egyptian times

IMAGINE a barren island. A pair of infants, one black, one white, are being raised here, as the subjects of a scientific experiment. Exposed to the dangers all around them, they are tended only by a young nurse whose muteness renders her incapable of influencing them in any way, for good or for bad. Held hostage in their wild laboratory for a whole decade, they will grow up without speech, without civilisation, without punishment or play. In this primitive environment, the children will develop as their primitive natures dictate.

The question is: what will be left when the experiment is over? Which child will be master, and which the slave? Will science, finally, discover the secret of biology and reveal the divine plan regarding human variation? Conjured up for my novel, *Racists*, this imaginary experiment allows me to tell the tale of racial science, a science born amidst the fertile currents of human biology during

the period of the Enlightenment when nature came increasingly to be viewed as the arbiter of human worth, and the word "race" – descended from an Arabic "ra", a Hebrew "rosh", or a French "razza" – entered both popular and scientific vocabulary in a big way. Set in the mid 19th century, around the time when Darwin's *Origin Of Species* was published, my novel pits the children in

a gladiatorial contest to pose the questions: how far are we prepared to go with our natural curiosity about human difference, and why, despite repeated failures, have we persisted in sorting humans into types?

Unsavoury as it may sound, the idea of conducting scientific tests to judge the intrinsic worth of the races and rank them accordingly has been around for more than two centuries. The success of the Victorian Empire, a flourishing slave trade and the birth of the new science of biology in the late 18th and early 19th centuries led to a diversion from the generally accepted Biblical unity of humankind towards what were construed as the "hard facts" of anatomy. From the amateur science of "wild men" – the descriptions of "savages" that came back in the colourful reports of imperial adventurers – was born racial science with its own language, concepts, methods, and most significantly, the authority to assign entire



Photograph: Rex

sociobiology, population genetics, evolution and ecology. Fed by the intellectual tradition of extracting patterns from nature's variety and discovering laws for such, it has kept alive the enterprise of scientific racism. Despite the announced end of slavery and Empire - the context of domination that spurred racial science - and our new context of coexistence, old questions have remained with us: why is black skin black? Failure to transcend our common everyday perception has left us searching for answers that no longer matter, that should never have mattered.

Such an indecent curiosity, of course, spurs on the attention-seekers: "race realists" such as former Edinburgh University psychologist Chris Brand touting the "g factor" that supposedly demonstrates substantial genetic difference among the races in terms

'Nazi eugenics turns out to be an intellectual strain that developed over two centuries'

of their IQ; proponents of the Bell curve who claim the same thing only using a different set of measures; gene mapping champions; and plain loonies masquerading as scientists who believe the Saxons surpass all other races by their superior reproductive strategies. Just last month, a team of scientists studying zebra fish in America discovered that a tiny change in a key gene helps to explain why people of European descent have lighter skin than those from Africa, claiming they've solved one of "biology's enduring mysteries". Enduring mystery or enduring folly?

Thankfully, scientific tests of racial superiority never took the form of my novel's imagined experiment. Even by past standards, such a planned neglect of the human subjects would most likely have been considered abhorrent and unethical. Yet, scientists have flirted dangerously with the idea of a "pure" test, pitting two types (races, language groups, genders) of humans in a contest. Herodotus wrote about the Egyptian emperor Psammetichus, who wished to discover which race was older than the other, the Egyptians or the Phrygians. He ordered two infants to be raised as feral, with a herdsman spying on them to determine which language they'd utter naturally. Two years later, the herdsman found the children wandering around with the word "becos" on their lips - "becos" is bread in the Phrygian tongue. In consideration of the experiment's findings, the Egyptians conceded the greater antiquity of their rivals.

Likewise, in the 13th century, Frederick II, emperor of Germany, attempted to discover the "language of God" by raising children in the wild and waiting to hear them speak. The subjects of his experiment never spoke a known tongue and died in childhood.

populations to fixed types: Hottentots, Celts, Mongols, Aryans and so on. It is surprising how, after 200 years, the words still resonate in common speech even though their genesis has long been forgotten.

Even more surprising is the way that today's racial prejudice echoes faithfully the respected theories of racial science: polygenism ("we are utterly unlike them") and monogenism ("we and they are of the same kind, but we are better"). Unfortunately, despite the novelty of Darwin's evolutionary thought, it turned out to be quite compatible with the notion of racial hierarchy and malleable, sadly, to the perversion of social Darwinism. Nazi eugenics, then - which is generally made out to be an aberration - turns out, instead, to be an intellectual strain that had gathered steam over two centuries.

While old racial science based on anatomy, morphology, typology and hierarchy is now dead, new varieties live on in the guise of

the scientists than their subjects, more about the patrons and bystanders than about the races themselves. As with unsolvable

mysteries, it would have lent another angle but failed to round the circle.

So why write a novel about an inhumane experiment that never happened? First, a confession: as an author and academic, I have been fortunate in escaping the street heat of racism, the more nuanced variety falling to evoke a lasting angst or the urge to "get even" with my pen. Racists wasn't written out of an urge to present a counter-argument, or indeed to offer a new perspective into the anthropology of racial inquiry, I am and have always been race blind. And I wished to write a novel not about racism per se, nor slavery, nor empire, but the nature of human curiosity that re-enacts itself with regard to what is viewed as a "pressing problem" - that of human variation. A problem whose attempted solution has gotten us into more serious problems. From Holocaust to successive genocides, it has delivered far less than promised, yet left our curiosity intact. The more I researched the subject, the more I had to resist the temptation to sling back at the race scientists, given their extreme views and the hurtful references to the savages and heathens to whose lot I surely belong. Yet, I wasn't prepared to discard it all simply as "pseudo science", and draw relief from today's "good science", which might very well turn out to be tomorrow's absurdity. Rather, it lent perspective to the core that I had been grappling with, to the challenge we all face: to transcend our perceptions.

In the backdrop of all this was the year of race: Birmingham, New Orleans, Paris, Sydney. Watching cars burn on television, I was reminded of my experiment's subjects, the infants carousing on the deserted island - without race or hate.

Kunal Basu teaches at Oxford University. His new novel, Racists, is published by Weidenfeld & Nicholson, £12.99

BIRTH OF EUGENICS

CHARLES Davenport introduced eugenics experiments to the US at the turn of the 20th century with his Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island. Subjects were interviewed, tested and had their medical records analysed to identify their weaknesses. It was believed that the human race could be improved by breeding best with best and eliminating those deemed unfit, leading to immigration restrictions, marriage controls to prevent racial mixing and coerced or forced sterilisation of the physically or mentally disabled. Eugenics became so popularised that many states held Fitter Families contests; medals and certificates were awarded for not having any physical, mental or social difficulties and therefore being genetically superior.

In the mid-1930s many studies were bracketed useless because the data was more anecdotal than scientific and personality or behavioural traits could not be easily defined. By then, of course, Hitler had already studied eugenics and some of its teachings would form the basis of Nazi ideology and practice, such as the ban on inter-racial marriage, forced sterilisation and ultimately euthanasia and genocide.

The 1990s brought a new focus to eugenics. The Bell Curve by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray rehashed the old eugenics argument that the unintelligent, criminal underclass was out-reproducing the smaller elite, while Chris Brand's The G Factor suggested certain ethnic groups had a lower IQ than whites.

Today, some scientists use the term "new eugenics" or "techno-eugenics" to cover human cloning, genetic engineering and the potential to create designer babies.


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