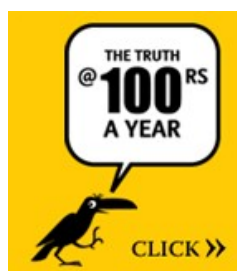


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THE HUB

'I've done a Kipling on the West!'

Talking to **Shoma Chaudhury** about his chilling new book, *Racists*, set in 1875, Kunal Basu says it's inhuman experiments still underlie modern society

Your books deal with such disparate themes. How does your writerly imagination work?

I romance the strange. Wanderlust, plain and simple, carries me through a novel. If I knew the world I was writing about intimately, it'd bore me to death. Contrary to popular wisdom — "write what you know" — I choose to fly the opposite way. And so, Canton, Samarkand, or a Victorian London appears on my pen — places I've never visited. It's the thrill of the romantic: what if I was there... watching the dark mud, the Bengal opium, being loaded on to ships in Calcutta port destined for the addict's pipe in China?

A story never starts for me in a predetermined way. I didn't tell myself I'd write a novel about the 19th century opium trade or miniature art in Mughal times, or European racial science. It starts with daydreaming. Bits of conversation, or an idle glance in a bookshop is enough to keep my mind spinning. I thought of The Opium Clerk while trekking in Thailand, The Miniaturist on millennium eve in London. A critic quizzed me the other day: "What is your literary inspiration?" I think I surprised her with my answer: dark alleys, teashops, waiting for a train on an empty platform.

You are different in that your Indianness doesn't seem intrinsically important to your writing — can you comment on that?

My writing doesn't smell of curry. I don't gravitate to the most accessible sensations of our culture. But this isn't conscious strategy. While I'm turned off by "export quality India" — the timeless texture of spices and mangoes, I'm drawn to a quintessential Indianness: a penchant for large and thundering stories that, unlike contemporary Western versions, serve more than amusing distractions. In each of my novels I've wandered off from India, but I've also tried hard to stay home to narrate this special kind of Indian story.

The Racists is a deeply disturbing book. What drew you to this idea?

I'm race blind. Born and bred in India, I don't have a racial antenna. And living in placid university towns like Oxford, I haven't felt the street heat of racism either. So my imagination truly caught me by surprise when I thought of this story. I honestly don't know where it came from, though I can now wear the dissector's hat and point to possible sources: my disgust with the culture of rivalry that is so pervasive; the parading of winners and losers; the notion of superiority/inferiority so ingrained in Western thought — from evolution to economics. The history of humanity is the history of bloodshed — wrote Freud. Yet the stupidity of it remains unabated. I must have gotten myself terribly worked up one afternoon to dream up this horrible plot!

Your book ends up talking more about the savagery of the scientists, than the savagery of the uncivilised. Was their cold-bloodedness an inevitability of the times?

Remember the 'Hottentot Venus'? The poor African woman kidnapped by Western slavers and brought to Europe as a curiosity? She was paraded like an animal, experimented upon by scientists, sliced up after death to unearth the "secret of the savage". These were times when the Empire and the slave trade were booming. The world was conceived in black and white, with scientists hell bent on proving the inferiority of all non-Europeans. It was the mandate of "truth" society needed to condone the savagery of Empire builders in order to profit from their wins. Every scientist in the 19th century was a racist in the belief that it was race alone that marked an individual's worth. So, to European scientists other races were objects of investigation, like rats in a laboratory, to be treated with dispassion.

Libraries are full of old racial science books. Nobody reads them anymore. They brim with prejudice. Reading them, I was

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tempted to slang back at the savage scientists. I could imagine them pouring over their "samples" and making notes, unmindful that a century later I'd creep up beside them and record their mischief!

Is your experiment rooted in historic facts?

No. The experiment of my novel — studying a pair of black and white children on a deserted laboratory — never happened. But scientists came mighty close. Herodotus wrote about the Egyptian Emperor Psammetichus who raised infants as feral to observe which language they'd speak in "naturally". There were comparable experiments in Germany in the 13th century. And countless "tests" were conducted comparing races by measuring skulls, examining limbs, analysing blood, etc. The temptation was always there to pit two living samples drawn from two races against each other to see which would be master. I have simply converted this historic curiosity into fiction.

Though set in 1855, your book feels very contemporary.

I hope it does. After all, theories about human difference have changed over time but the curiosity to solve the puzzle has remained intact. Craniology — the method described in my novel — was replaced by intelligence tests, and then genetics. Scientists are still fascinated by old "problems": why is black skin black? Re-emergence of racial prejudice in the West in the wake of immigration has strengthened their hand. "Respectable" university professors are once again touting their favourite racial theories, such as Edinburgh's Chris Brand who vouches for innate differences among the races in terms of their iq; genetic researchers are claiming that they've cracked the code by studying a batch of black and white zebra fishes. More ominously, the "racial question" is reappearing in public speech, journalistic harangues, and in the body of real-politics as cars burn and riots erupt in Birmingham and Paris, New Orleans and Sydney. The future is looking increasingly bright — for racists.

The more I immersed myself in the novel, the central thrust of it seemed all too contemporary: pitting one group against another: races, genders, religions: you name it, and seeking the mandate of "truth" through science to justify barbarism.

Can Bush's war of good on evil be placed on the same underlying continuum as the Racists? Are Muslims the new Blacks?

It is easier to wage war by declaring the other side as somehow innately inferior. Take the campaign against Japanese Americans during World War II, for example, branding the "enemy at home" to be culturally and politically malevolent. I've heard commentators on cnn declare that death of a loved one was different in Iraq compared to the US; somehow less tragic as people were used to tragedy in that part of the world. So culture, like race, becomes a marker for human difference. It's like saying Arabs don't suffer pain as much as non-Arabs because of the peculiarities of their culture — a thought eerily reminiscent of European race science. Categorisation is convenient, it provides licence to kill.

What contemporary things about England, America and India disturb you most?

The sheer robustness of prejudice. After slavery and the Holocaust, and countless genocides, how easy it still is to whip up hysteria. The "meaning making" of difference between groups goes on without any pretence of shame: be it Muslim bashing among the god-forsaken Hindutva-wallahs, Arabo-phobic Southern Baptists, or the arch sophisticated British rising in defence of their Iraq policy. Saddening too that the intelligentsia, particularly in the West, have chosen a low profile wishing the plague would simply go away.

It's odd, the end you chose for the white girl and the black boy...what did you intend?

I must be careful not to give the ending away! It had to be historically justifiable, even though this fictitious experiment never happened. I couldn't for example show that "they lived happily ever after". No society would have permitted that. So, I had to take creative license in devising the fate of the two children, relying on nothing but my own sensibilities to select which one of them would end up where.

How's the book done in England and the US? Is there a resistance to an Indian writing about dark white subjects?

It's not out in America yet. In the UK, there were 14 reviews in just two weeks. That's remarkable for a non-home author (read: non UK author), my agent tells me. The novel has evinced strong reactions. Those who love it, love it to death. Those who don't, usually whip out my first two novels to knock me on the head. What is a good novelist like you, who've regaled us with tales of India, doing in our ugly backyard? Why write about race? Isn't it passé? Isn't it divisive? Are you a troublemaker? But I'm not too terribly upset. After all, I couldn't have written a novel about race, called it Racists, and not incurred any controversy, could I? Given the denial over race that permeates even the liberal tiers of British society — with slavery and the opium trade regularly missing the school history books — it isn't surprising that I'd be at the receiving end of a few stinging rebuttals. As a friend remarked: you can't expect praise from those you criticise!

More fundamentally perhaps, the British are used to their marauding authors writing about others (Maugham, Green, etc), not an outsider holding the mirror back. After all, Racists is the first Victorian novel written by a person of colour. I've done a sort of Kipling in reverse. No, let me take that back! Nobody, not even the British, deserve a Kipling!

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