

Reflections on publishing difficulties for writers of colour



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At the start of this year, much before the rage about Black Lives Matter erupted, I was having a quiet lunch in London with an editor from a powerful publishing house. She was telling me what sort of fiction about the Subcontinent finds favour in the West. 'I'm afraid no one is interested in humour from there,' she said. 'Our readers are interested in only one kind of novel from your part of the world – serious,

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weighty work, preferably about something dark, engaged with very deeply. They have no appetite for anything else.'

At first I was surprised by her comment and then outraged. But looking back, I am grateful to her for confirming something I had long suspected of an industry dominated by white decision makers. Writers of colour are not afforded the same creative latitude as their white counterparts. White authors can write about whatever they please because their experiences are considered universal. But ours are not. Our primary purpose is to educate white audiences. So after 9/11 it became the responsibility of brown authors from Muslim countries to churn out 'urgent' novels that enlightened white readers on the hows and whys of Islamism. Never mind that most of us, easy-going liberals ourselves, had no insight into extremism or any personal experience of it. It still fell to us by dint of our race or religion or culture or whatever to burrow into the hearts and minds of jihadists for the benefit of our white readers. White authors, by contrast, are not required to explain to the rest of the world the beliefs animating their culture's centuries old practice of white supremacy.



And if we were not going to engage with Islamism, then the least we could do was to shed light on subjects like female oppression, hunger, child labour, our dreadful slums and our corrupt and broken politics. Our tone had to be grave, our engagement profound and our purpose educational. We must not presume to do anything else. So not only are we discouraged from writing humour, but also science fiction, thrillers, fantasy, detective novels and horror. We can write romance and chick lit, but if we are black our books must have an element of race thrown in and if brown, then our work should explain our regressive culture and preferably feature a

young spunky girl who falls in love in with a white boy, breaks free of her overbearing parents and joins the white mainstream to live happily ever after.

I have nothing against novels by non-white writers about terrorism or forced marriages or female genital mutilation. I welcome any well written novel that expands my sympathies. But I would also like to read other things by non-white writers.

I understand that the publishing industry is just that – an industry that must turn a profit to survive. And the truth is that very few novels are profitable. It is therefore ►►



risky to take a punt on a non-white novelist holding forth on a subject about which the average reader simply does not care. But this makes two, to my mind, erroneous assumptions – that the average reader (according to publishers she is a white, middle class, middle aged woman) has limited horizons and is utterly resistant to new ideas. And second, that non-white people don't read.

Of course, there are high profile mould breaking novels such as *My Sister the Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite and

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The Windfall by Diksha Basu – satirical, edgy works by non-white writers that don't bother to explain the entire racial history and political structure of their society in order to tell their story. And to be honest, a British publisher also bought a social satire I authored set in Pakistan. But such examples are few and far between. For the most part when a 'different' book by a non-white author is published it is deemed so risky that it is apportioned a minuscule publicity budget, consigning it to obscurity from the outset. If it still manages to do well, it is snatched up and celebrated. But, as happens more often, the said book disappears without a trace, editors can tell their writers with infinite regret, 'you see our readers are just not receptive to books such as yours.'

In the wake of Black Lives Matter social attitudes appear to have shifted even in publishing. There is now a scramble to be seen as diverse. The current Booker Prize shortlist of six novels comprises no less than four by non-white authors. I'm glad for it. It is a long overdue correction. But it will remain an isolated gesture unless more work is done. To be truly inclusive British publishers must allow us, people of colour, the same freedoms that they do to white writers.