

INTERVIEW

‘Books must make you see things differently. Sometimes that includes the idea of what or how a book should be.’

Sunandini Banerjee, editor and artist at Seagull Books, discusses the art of book cover design.



The first consideration is: What kind of book is it? Picture book? Novel? Literary fiction or pulp fiction? If it's nonfiction, then what kind? For the general reader? Or for the academic market?

One always, always begins from the content, and with it, the segment of the market it's meant for. That helps determine shape, page length, and most importantly, price.

Then begins the creative process. What kind of cover? What kind of paper? How wide are the margins? What kind of page ornamentation, if any? Which typeface? How elaborate the space between the lines, or not?

There have often been times when we have thrown caution to the winds and been so moved by the content that a most wondrous book has emerged that perhaps makes no economic sense but that remains on the shelves as a radical re-imagining of both that content and of publishing itself.

**Tell us the story behind Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Upright Revolution*, a recent work of yours.**

*The Upright Revolution* is a wonderful fable written by one of the world's greatest living writers about how human beings gradually stopped crawling on all fours, and the limbs stopped competing with each other for primacy and chose to listen to the head instead.

When I illustrated the fable, I chose to focus first on the emotions felt by the various body parts as they jostled for supremacy, I chose to focus on the glorious abundance of animal and bird and fish life that there is, and towards the end, when the human body is finally upright and manages to work and starts to build the world, I chose to interpret that through images of women working, women toiling, women in sports and science... I chose to focus on female labour that, in truth, in both visible and mainly invisible ways, has been making the world go round. Not only the extraordinary women, but the 'ordinary' ones too.

**Read the full interview on *The Daily Star's* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages.**

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ANANTA YUSUF

**You have studied literature. Why and how did you get into illustration and book design? Tell us about your creative journey.**

I am indeed an English Literature student from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. While I was studying for my final Master's examinations, I happened to be informed of a vacancy at Seagull Books—an editorial assistant was wanted. When I applied, and then joined Seagull Books in 2000, I brought along with me an entire lifetime of reading, as well as my literature degree, but absolutely no training in any kind of graphic design.

My first few years at Seagull Books were spent doing an assortment of editorial tasks on a vast variety of books—cultural studies titles, playscripts, translations from Bangla into English, issues of the *Seagull Theatre*

*Quarterly*, books on cinema and performance studies. The covers, until then, used to be designed by our publisher, Naveen Kishore, also a self-taught designer. Naveen had to travel quite a bit, and once, as he was leaving the office, I asked with what I now put down to the recklessness of youth: "Can I design a cover?" And Naveen, with the infinite wisdom and patience of seniority, and with no insecurities whatsoever, replied: "Sure. Why not?"

You see, alongside my love for words, I had a deep, deep love for images. For colour and shape and size and form. For straight lines and curves. Sadly, my love for images, for text and image together—that had no outlet. Until I landed at Seagull Books, a publishing house that never tells its editors: 'You must only edit because that's your job. You can't design.'

**What is your philosophy behind book designing—fiction or nonfiction?**

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Race and unease in Mohsin Hamid's 'The Last White Man'

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Reading through Mohsin Hamid's latest novel, *The Last White Man* (Penguin, 2022), I am instantly reminded of an almost forgotten novel by the Nigerian writer A. Igoni Barrett, called *Blackass* (Chatto Windus, 2015). The story revolves around a Black man who wakes up one day to realise he has turned white. In Hamid's novel, the opposite happens: it is set in a small, white-majority town where the inhabitants are slowly turning brown. At the time, Igoni Barrett's novel felt like an interesting, Kafkaesque way to respond to the politics of the time. Now in the hands of Mohsin Hamid, it feels a little late, a little stale.

Mohsin Hamid arrived in the literary scene at the start of the new millennium, promising to be Pakistan's homegrown successor to the mordant wit and casual brilliance of Hanif Kureishi and perhaps to the great Upamanyu Chatterjee. In this regard, his debut, and still his best novel, *Moth Smoke* (Picador, 2000), is a fine story of infidelities, crime, and loss, centering around the character of Darashikoh Shezad, a banker and former college-boxer with anger issues.

In *The Last White Man*, Hamid uses an anodyne, clinical voice to set an atmosphere of unease. The unease of a white society panicking within, as a wave of darkness intrudes their skin, turning them impure, perhaps wild. The imagery of small town racism should, in theory, serve as a great setting for Hamid's Kafkaesque turn, who could have used this to knot down a comedy that pierces through racism in a sort of "South-Asian immigrant" version of Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) way.



But Hamid's novel is none of that. Its main characters, Anders and his girlfriend, Oona, are mere vehicles used to document the reactions of this small town coming to terms with their predicament. That they—the former whites—are so uncomfortable is proof that persons of colour have been part of their existence.

But Hamid makes little, if any, mention of them. Other than a cleaner at Anders' workplace, who is given perhaps a page or two of thought, I do not remember any other person who had been originally non-white. The absence of how they have reacted to this phenomena is surely a missed opportunity.

Moreover, the writer really seems to be behind schedule on how far

we have come in our conversation regarding the internet. He begins one chapter talking of the subjectivity of truth online in the most basic sense and expects us to think it's interesting.

Even the voice he uses becomes cloying at one point. He overdoes it. As Anders offers to train the cleaning guy at work, the man replies, "...no, and then he added, less abruptly, and not with a smile, or not with a smile on his lips, although perhaps with one in his eyes, it was difficult to tell, honestly it could have been the opposite of a smile, and with that peculiar expression, the cleaning guy added, what I would like is a raise."

If a weak punchline as this needs such a convoluted and unappealing

sequence; perhaps it is not worth it.

Essentially, it is complacency that taints the novel. Otherwise, no editor would let a line like that stay. There comes a time in every successful, major writer's career when they must recognise the slump and, in my opinion, fall back on the beauty that made them who they are. They must go back to the comedy, the third world cynicism, the waggling of a satire amidst the threat of army boots, to rescue themselves from irrelevant writing. For Mohsin Hamid, I believe that time is now.

**Shahriar Shaams** has written & translated for SUSPECT, Adda, Six Seasons Review, Arts & Letters, and Jamini. Find him on twitter @shahriarshaams.

OPINION

Of diverse princesses and demigods: Is racebending in fantasy adaptations enough?

SHABABA IQBAL

With a flurry of new opportunities for artistes of colour, many are wondering if showcasing original roles for them is preferable to "racebending", or taking widely-accepted white roles and giving them to people of colour.

Disney will feature African-American actress and singer Halle Bailey as Ariel in their 2023 live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), which is loosely based on the Danish fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen.

That such a globally-recognised character with a rich legacy—long portrayed as a young white girl and, thanks to Disney's own iconography, often with bright red hair—will now be physically represented by a young Black woman with dreadlocks, is truly a big deal.

But on message boards and comment sections across the internet, people are debating whether a new, dark-skinned Ariel somehow negates or erases the classic 1989 version.

Meanwhile, African-American actress Leah Jeffries has been cast in Disney Plus's upcoming adaptation of the popular *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* novels (published from 2005 to 2009) as the demigoddess Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, the Greek goddess of battle, strategy, and wisdom. Fans have reacted poorly to the news, whereas Annabeth's skin colour has no bearing on her storyline.

For the longest time, we, as a society, have been deeply conditioned to view central, mythical characters from a default white lens because of the original lore or Hollywood itself. The reinterpretations of characters like Ariel and Annabeth provide opportunities to unlearn this bias. Fantasy, as a genre, pushes us to suspend our beliefs and what we know to be true, only to be enchanted by worlds filled with imagination and creativity.

On the flip side, these castings present a larger conversation about racebending in general, which—no matter how well-intentioned—



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

seems like a lazy way for Hollywood to earn diversity pats on the back, instead of pursuing the rich and untapped folklore and fairytales of non-white cultures across the globe or creating original stories with characters of colour.

Even when racebending is used for positive influence, it often ends up perpetuating racial stereotypes.

Back in 2009, Disney made waves when they revealed their first Black princess, Tiana, in *The Princess and the Frog*. The animated film is loosely inspired by American author ED Baker's 2002 novel, *The Frog Princess*, which in turn is a spoof on the German fairytale, *The Frog Prince* (1812).

But Tiana's storyline revolves around her financial struggles. She is a waitress and her mother cleans houses. When compared to other Disney princesses, Tiana is clearly characterised as the "Black servant", placing her and her mother within the same narrow scope of historical representations of Black womanhood. Some also criticised the film for depicting Tiana as a frog for the majority of its running time. For Disney, *The Princess and the Frog* was a chance to reform the way of portraying minorities, but they did not seize the opportunity.

That being said, in recent years, they have made noteworthy attempts at representation. Disney's *Moana* (2016) references Polynesian mythology and incorporates some well-known Polynesian stories. *Coco* (2017), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), and *Encanto* (2021) were inspired by Mexican, Southeast Asian, and Columbian cultures respectively.

It is impossible to consider representation in the fantasy genre without also examining superhero properties.

*Ms Marvel* (2022) is a watershed moment because it speaks directly to the people that it represents—not just South Asian, but also Muslim characters. Protagonist Kamala Khan's brother reciting the Ayatul Kursi, a verse from the Quran recited when needing protection or to ward off danger or evil, when his sister falls unconscious at the dinner table is meant to be humorous and witty, but only those who know the verse and understand how he has exaggerated the situation really get the full extent of the joke. As a South Asian and Muslim myself, I never experienced such relatability in western media in as authentic a way.

Hollywood remains far from reflecting the make-up of its audiences. Progress is underway, but some studios are still hiding behind the curtain of racebending as if it will solve all of the problems of race innate to cinema itself.

Nonetheless, all of it matters—Ariel and Annabeth being portrayed by young Black women—because what we read and watch feeds our imagination. It shows children of minorities everywhere that they are worth telling stories about, and they should dare to dream big about who they are and what they will become, no matter the colour of their skin.

**Shababa Iqbal** is a Journalism graduate from Independent University, Bangladesh, who likes Jane Austen's novels and Disney movies. Email: shababa@icloud.com.