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Saturday 15 August 2020

**The Legacy of Slavery and Modern Multicultural Britain  
Discussed at the Edinburgh International Book Festival**

In a conversation ranging from the recent toppling of the statue of slaver Edward Colston in Bristol via systemic racism within science to what it means to be British, journalist Anita Sethi was joined by Britain's first black female Professor of History Olivette Otele and science journalist Angela Saini in an online event at the Edinburgh International Book Festival today.

Starting with the recent demonstrations in Bristol, Professor Otele commented that the debate had been going on for a long time, when suddenly young people decided to stop having a debate and to take action adding "It took everyone by surprise and we're still trying to make sense of it." Angela Saini agreed there had been a very long movement of decolonisation of museums and galleries especially on the scientific side, but admitted to being shocked and surprised by "where before there was only willingness to debate, now it seems everybody is quite happy to take down statues and take down plaques while even six months ago they were not interested - so it's quite remarkable."

Otele added "It's not just one narrative people are fighting over. It's not just about statues, it's not just about the role of those men in our history and how we tell that story It's also about the legacy of what these men did that still has an impact on our present, so there are multiple fights going on."

Saini continued "In narratives of power, it's about who controls the narratives. With Black Lives Matter at the moment we're seeing narratives being put in the hands of those who have not had those narratives before. Historically those narratives have been in hands of slave owners, colonialists, imperialists and scientific racists."

The discussion moved onto the legacy of slavery and colonialism and the authors agreed that many situations in the present day were a direct consequence of inequalities that were born out of the past and

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that slavery had put in place layers of racism and inequalities. Describing herself as a science critic, Angela Saini posited that at the birth of modern western science narratives centred around creating racial categories, and hierarchies of those categories. These scientific arguments were used to justify the ideas of slavery and colonialism.

She argued that this was still the case today - many mainstream scientists still believe this, still think about grouping populations by race. There are still groups using 19<sup>th</sup> century arguments about the superiority of white Europeans and using this theory to explain the trajectory of world events, which is an ‘astonishing whitewashing of history’ adding “This remains a very compelling argument for a large segment of society. But history shows us that countries, continents can rise and fall. These themes, this European superiority, this is not the end point. It’s perceived as the end point but it’s not.”

Moving on to what it means to be British, and how this is still wrapped up in ethnic ideas, Saini said “If you’re really British then you’re white - everyone else is slightly hyphenated.” She talked about being a second-generation immigrant to the UK, and how her son will feel more rooted in Britain than she felt. “They will be demanding things that my parents’ generation didn’t demand. For them it was about fitting in, being quiet, getting on with it, not making a fuss, and being grateful. Being grateful that this country allowed you to live there. Of course, for those of us born here we don’t feel the need to be grateful. We want to feel that this country is not just tolerant of us, but fully embracing of us. That’s the direction we’re moving in now.”

The Edinburgh International Book Festival continues until Monday 31 August with events streaming online, for free, every day. Full details of the programme can be found at [edbookfest.co.uk](http://edbookfest.co.uk)

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