

Dr Aneez Esmail

Manchester University professor gets ...

Up close & personal

By **THEAN LEE CHENG**
leecheng@thestar.com.my

WITH all that private education, wealth and everything else wrapped in neat little packages, can it be that medical practitioner and former student activist Professor Dr Aneez Esmail has crossed swords with racism?

Well, yes. You can be a Muslim, financially comfortable and intelligent, and yet face the ugliness of racism. It is not what you are, but who the other is. And it is not if racism exists, because it does, in the most developed of countries and in the remotest of villages.

In a recent public forum, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of Ethnic Studies invited Dr Aneez from the University of Manchester, Britain, to speak on *Race Relations: The British Experience*.

Much of what he shared are from his personal encounters. An associate vice-president (equality & diversity) and a professor of general practice, he is an academician, researcher, doctor and public speaker. More than that, he is a product of his past with an eye on his children's future.

Therefore, he has set himself the task of weeding out the roots of racial discrimination simply by sharing his aspirations and experiences.

Admitting he knows little of the Malaysian situation, he nevertheless says relations in this country are constrained by the emphasis on race.

"People are more than just race. Stop looking at yourself as a Malay, a Chinese or an Indian. You are either a rich Malay or a poor Malay. And a poor Malay is fairly similar with a poor Chinese and a poor Indian. If there is a greater recognition of that, perhaps some of the problems may be dealt with," he argues.

The doctor's first encounter with racism was in his own country, Uganda, the birthplace of his father. Of Indian origin and the eldest of three sons, Dr Aneez was born in Kenya, in keeping with the Indian tradition that the mother returns to her homeland to give birth to the first child.

The family was expelled from Uganda under president Idi Amin's regime in the 1970s. Asians were resented in the country because they held disproportionate economic power and were mostly of the professional class. The family landed in Britain with just two suitcases.

Learning to live life

Dr Aneez speaks of the fallout from the episode and his subsequent experiences in Britain with practised ease and candour. In 1968, before the family were forced out of Africa, he had left Uganda at the age of 11 to study at England's Rugby School, a public school spoken in the same breath as Eton.

His mother and two brothers, joined him in 1972. His father had earlier died, at 38, from a heart attack.

The school gave him a scholarship and he was able to continue his education. His mother bought a house with the money from her late husband's insurance policy and worked part-time as a typist.

Says Dr Aneez, "There is a saying in Gujarati; Money is like mud, it can wash off easily. It is scary but that's the reality. My mother was trying to teach us not to make



Prof Dr Aneez Esmail

Born: 1957, Kenya

Personal: Married to Ariana, who is Greek. They have two boys, 19 and 15, and a girl 10

Career: Doctor, research, academician and public speaker

Favourite food: Thai

Favourite place: Greece

Noteworthy: Nominated for an Order of the British Empire award which he declined

Hobby: My family

Values: Racism and discrimination are the things that hold people back. Everyone should be able to achieve their potential irrespective of their background.

Inspiration: I want to give others the opportunities I had and make things change for the better. That is why I am excited about research and teaching, both help to bring people up. I believe education is important.

money the central thing in life, and not to be driven by the desire to make money."

When Britain had slid into deep economic trouble after World War II, it opened its doors to immigrants to provide services and build houses in the war-ravaged country. With that came insecurities.

Boarding houses put up signs that read, "No Indians, no Asians, no dogs." Dr Aneez recalls newspaper advertisements in the late 1960s that declared, "Only British, a.k.a. white doctors, need apply."

"They were uncertain how to interact with people from another culture, and this was exploited by political parties." He found himself avoiding certain streets and football grounds where hooliganism and attacks on

ethnic minorities were rife.

When fighting for equal fees for foreign and local students, he discovered the racism faced by ethnic minority students, who comprised about 5% of the medical students. "That period was important because I learned to live life. You have to interact with society and work with people," he says.

The passage of the Race Relations Act 1976 was important because after that, the anti-ethnic minorities signs came down. But it was not enough.

"When you apply for medical school, you have more chances of getting in if you are white. When you look for a job or seek a consultant position, you are more likely to have a favourable answer if you are white. If someone files a complaint against you, it is more likely that it will be scratched off if you are white," says Dr Aneez.

"This is institutionalised racism. The second issue is racial equality."

The correct affirmative action

Using gender equality as an analogy, he highlights the situation of women lecturers.

"The University of Manchester has many women lecturers, but there are only about 20% women professors. In medicine, it is even less. The number of lecturers of ethnic minorities is less than 10%, and for professors, less than 2%," he points out.

"The numbers are important if we are to do anything. Who gets recruited? Who gets into training courses and why?"

"There are more women lecturers than men, so why are there so few women professors? The frequent answer is, they don't apply for these positions." This applies to Asians as well.

Dr Aneez argues that the Race Relations Act has not solved the issue of racism because like most legislation, it tends to focus on processes and not outcomes. Quotas and affirmative action tend to produce better outcomes, he says.

"Barack Obama's daughters don't need affirmative action. They will never have a problem getting where they want to be. But many poor African Americans will continue to need affirmative action. It will also benefit poor white Americans," he adds.

"This leads us to race-based and class-based affirmative action. One of the problems with Malaysia is that the race debate is too much constrained by a singular identity. Maybe what is needed is class-based, not race-based, affirmative action. I don't believe there is a special race, but I do believe you are unique."

When he completed his medical training, it struck him that many of his ethnic minority friends tend to leave Britain upon qualifying. "They felt they would never realise their potential if they were to remain, because of racism," he explains.

Two years later, he approached a consultant in a small town on his selection process. The answer shook him. His journey into research and subsequent work on racism had begun. He went into general practice and later spent another five years studying public health management.

He was again at a crossroads when he got married and moved to London, where their first child was born. It was an exciting period for the young family. They relocated when his wife was offered a job in Manchester.

Dr Aneez was unsure what he wanted to do. While he enjoyed seeing patients and doing research, he wondered if he wanted to remain an academician. A friend asked him, "Will the decision you make open or close doors? Make choices which give you an opportunities. Think broadly and think long-term."

Says Dr Aneez, "I would probably earn less in public health as an academician than someone who went into private practice, but I would lose a lot. I am one of those who want to change things."

A problematic world

When he won a scholarship to study in the US for a year, a new chapter began. His wife, Ariana, left her position as an IT specialist to look after the family full-time.

"It was a transformation for all of us. It taught me the importance of the family unit. When we returned to Britain, she did not want to go back to work and we had another child. If she had known how difficult it is to resume her career, she would have given that decision a second thought," he says.

"I realised the sacrifice a woman has to make because child rearing tends to fall on the women. And I also realised the success of my career was due to my wife's support and sacrifices.

"It is an issue now for us because she would love to work again now that our youngest is 10. The most discredited group are women with children because it is nigh impossible to get back to a successful career."

The University of Manchester encourages job sharing and tries to help women to return to work. You cannot put women scientists on the scrap heap, says Dr Aneez.

Although the family can afford private education for the children, they go to state school, which is free.

"We want them to mix with children from rich and poor families. The rich go to private schools, and the middle class and poor to state schools. The outcome: the rich will only have rich friends," he explains.

"Education is not just about getting good grades and we want our children to learn that this is a problematic world we live in."

On the University of Manchester, he says, "The university is not just about research and teaching. Like companies, universities have a social responsibility as well.

"In life, there is the need to motivate, encourage and supervise, and your effectiveness depends on your people skills. We are all dependent on people, of all races and creed."