

## ROMANCE » DATING THE ETHNIC MAN

## Sex and the multiracial city

Call him the cross-cultural love guru: Faizal Sahukhan says there's a blueprint for East-meets-West success. Others aren't so sure

BY WENCY LEUNG VANCOUVER

Imagine you are a Caucasian woman, Faizal Sahukhan instructed his class at North Vancouver's Capilano University.

"Say you're dating an ethnic man and he keeps saying 'I love you, I love you,'" he said.

How, he asked, can you tell whether the man truly loves you or is dating you to fulfill a personal need, such as improving his status among family and friends?

"Personally, I wouldn't want to be a trophy hanging on his arm," one student answered.

"I don't know many Caucasian women who'd want to be flaunted," another said.

The half-dozen students, women of various ethnic backgrounds, were there to learn about the nuances of interracial dating from Dr. Sahukhan, a registered counsellor and clinical sexologist.

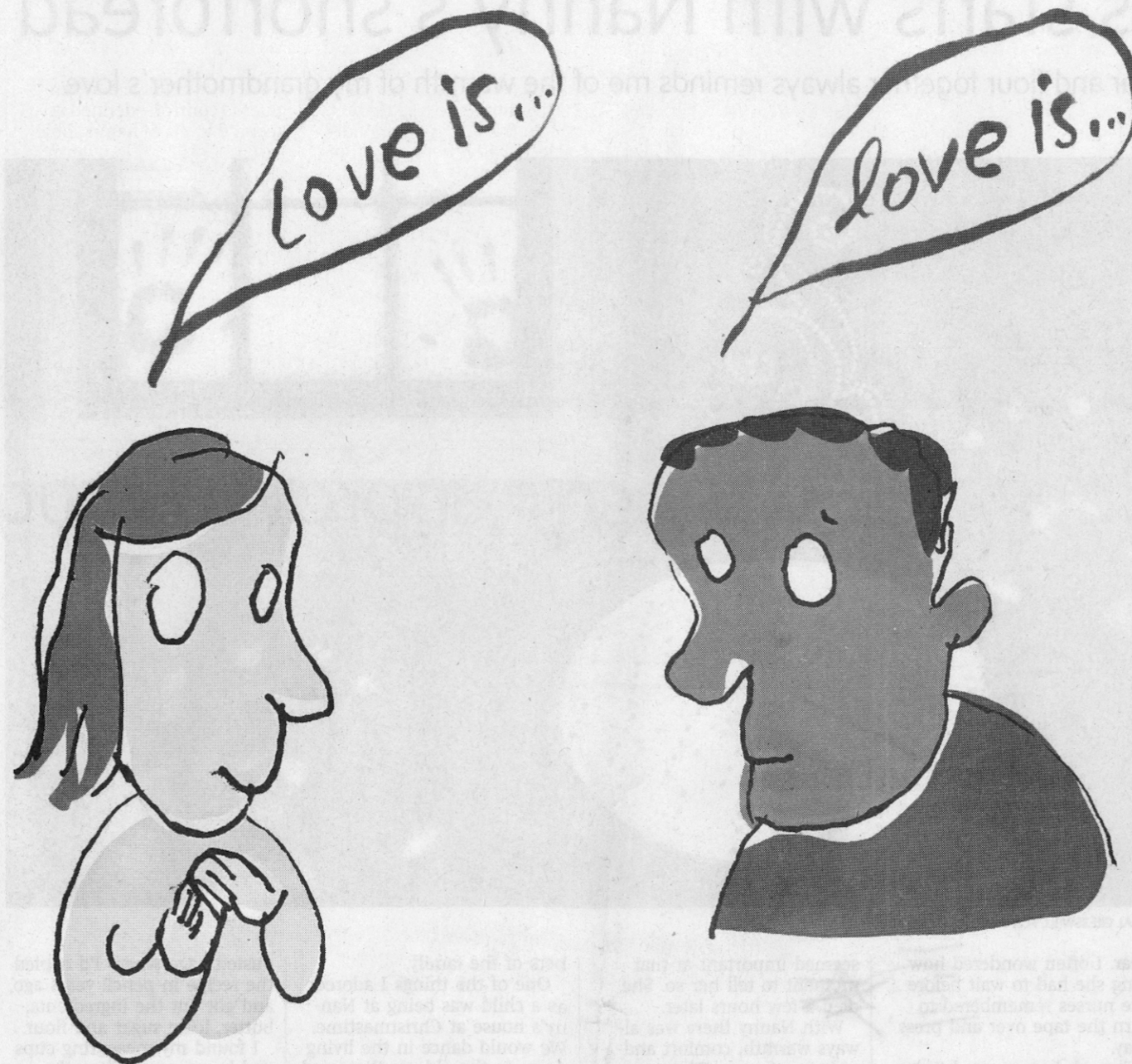
"Romantically, ethnic people are very different," he said, adding that concepts of love and intimacy are far from universal.

Romantic relationships in the West are given priority over all other relationships, he said. In contrast, "ethnic" individuals – whom he defines as non-white, first-, second- or third-generation immigrants from an Eastern collectivistic culture, which includes Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern and African – tend to give family relationships precedence, he said. They would hide or even end a courtship with a Caucasian partner to please their parents.

As a specialist in cross-cultural relationships and an advice columnist for Canadian Immigrant magazine and CBC Radio International, Dr. Sahukhan has seen countless interracial couples unravel over cultural differences.

To address what he views as recurrent challenges, he has released a new book, titled *Dating the Ethnic Man: Strategies for Success*, geared toward Caucasian women.

As multicultural relationships become increasingly



In the West, romantic love takes precedence over family, counsellor Faizal Sahukhan says. But not in the East. CINDERS MCLEOD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

common, there's a growing demand for dating advice that specifically tackles cultural differences, said Dr. Sahukhan, who argues that interracial couples are more likely to break up than partners who share the same background.

Others balk at the idea of attributing relationship problems to differences in ethnicity.

"Why is there an automatic

assumption that being in an intimate relationship cross-culturally is fraught with problems?" said Sharon Ramsay, a registered marriage and family therapist in Mississauga, Ont.

Ms. Ramsay, who is of Caribbean descent, has been married for 17 years to a man of Finnish and Scottish heritage.

"[If we were] both blond-haired and blue-eyed, does that mean our marriage is go-

ing to last 60 years? No. Does it mean we won't face challenges? No."

Maria Root, a Seattle-based clinical psychologist, also believes that all couples struggle to decode courtship, expectations of marriage and definitions of family.

Dr. Root, who is an expert on multiracial families, said these issues tend to come up more clearly and sooner in cross-cul-

tural couples, but she was unaware of any research suggesting that interracial couples are more or less likely to break up.

Dr. Sahukhan said his conclusions are based on 13 years of clinical practice. As a second-generation immigrant of Fijian origin, he understands both Eastern and Western relationship dynamics, he said.

His book includes such chap-

ters as, "What does love mean to the ethnic man?" and "Mama's boy: The importance of a mother in the ethnic man's life."

Family expectations are often an issue, he said, with parents wanting their children to marry within the same culture. Premarital sex is also fraught, particularly for cultures that value virginity in a potential spouse.

His biggest tip for success?

"I say the highest probability to make a cross-cultural relationship succeed is to date either a banana, a coconut or an Oreo cookie" – terms, often viewed as pejorative, for those who have assimilated into the mainstream culture.

Dr. Sahukhan interprets the terms to mean people who respect their culture of origin but don't "succumb" to familial or cultural expectations.

While he acknowledges his work may be controversial, he argues it fosters cross-cultural understanding.

"I think it's so vital in our society," he said. "Once you can see the challenges, you can be more multicultural."

Psychology student Pia Edborg, 25, said she enrolled in Dr. Sahukhan's class, not because she wanted to date an ethnic man herself, but to further her studies.

What she's learned so far has given her insight into her own parents' relationship, she said, as her father is Danish and her mother Filipina. "It's definitely helped me understand my mom more."

And the class isn't only attracting those interested in interracial relationships.

Hilda, 24, who declined to give her last name, said she's been in two failed relationships with Chinese men. Even though she's of Chinese origin herself, she's no expert on Chinese men, she said, but would like to date someone of the same background.

"This class is focused on white women, but I think it can help me because we have the same target: the ethnic man," she said.

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