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Multi-culti on TV

Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television
By Sarita Malik
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The issue of media representations of marginalised groups has been at the forefront of struggles over social and political space, particularly in the context of western societies. Thus the working class, feminist, Black and gay movements have critiqued the mainstream media for its reproduction of the dominant relations of power and its reinforcement of stereotypes of those at the social margins. They have advocated greater media access and space for alternative voices. At the core of some of the critiques of media representations is an assumption that media artefacts can and should be radically represented as a quasi-given reality. This approach sets up categories, such as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’, portrayals, undertakes content analysis to determine the cultural studies and post-structuralist work, would attempt to understand how the systems of representation within the media construct reality and seek to frame the audience’s understanding of the world. They would place these representations within the context of the structures and codes of media institutions, on the one hand, and the cultural practices of diverse audiences, on the other.

Regrettably, Britain maps the contours of a ‘racialised regime of representation’ on British television, according to its intricate present. It situates these changing modes of representation, and the institutional and political frameworks and policies that inform them within the broader political, social and cultural history of race relationships and struggles. Thus, the book interweaves three strands: firstly, a historical understanding of the

The book points out that racist ideology is premised on the act of ‘forgetting’ Britain’s colonial past and regarding ‘race’ as a problem which arrived along with the non-White immigrants. The problem is seen not in terms of unequal race relations of power but as one of immigration (‘too many Blacks’), of law and order (‘Black crime’, ‘mugging’) and of disadvantaged and insular Black communities in a permanent state of crisis. The British media in general and television in particular played a crucial role in legitimising, circulating and amplifying these notions of crisis, of ‘Blacks-as-trouble’.

The solution to these problems was seen initially as assimilation of Blacks into the mainstream and later, as multiculturalism — a ‘sugar façade to a very discriminatory reality’.

relative frequency of these categories and then compares this with ‘reality’, to conclude whether the portrayals are distorted or ‘real’. Using ‘Newer approaches’ to the study of media and society, language are premised on an understanding that reality is always refracted through the various systems of meaning within which the producers and audiences are situated. Hence, appealing to an objective reality as a measure of the authenticity of a media representation is theoretically untenable. Such approaches, based on sociopolitical space of Black Britain; secondly, an analysis of how various genres of television texts have represented ‘Blackness’ and Black people (which include those of African, Caribbean and Asian descent); and thirdly, a discussion of the changing institutional framework of television and broadcasting policy.

A key insight of the book is its understanding of racism as not limited to the world-view and practices of the Right-wing White supremacy groups, but as a more normalised set of contemporary, video, Denzel Washington, were both honoured in one fell swoop at this year’s Oscars. If anything, the Hood films certainly do work: in terms of production quality, directorial style, they have already succeeded, in ways that earnest, well-meaning cinema hasn’t.

Yet, one remains uncomfortable about them. As with Spike Lee. Do the Right Thing, his highly controversial film set in a working class neighbourhood in Queens, abounds with Black male violence, the very sorts of representation that leads Right-wing ideologues to conclude that they were right. Denzel argues that Spike Lee, while undoubtedly a gifted filmmaker with a keen eye for nuance, is decidedly less political, less militant, and less activist than he could be. In his criticism, Denzel notes that his films are ‘open-ended’, and rigidly support a masculinist, heterosexist identity politics. Spike Lee has often been criticised for being too quintessential buppie (Black yuppy), who, while emphasising his traditional notions of
practices and discourses that underpins the liberal consensus of a democratic welfare state. Thus, the author critically interrogates British television’s ethos and mandate of ‘public service,’ in terms of “how it generates and carries meanings about nationhood, community and society and the ways in which it marks, excludes and adds to aspects of identity and difference within the construction of the imagined community of the nation.” The book points out that racist ideas are premised on the act of forgetting Britain’s colonial past and regarding ‘race’ as a problem that arrived along with the non-White immigrants. The problem is seen not in terms of unequal race relations of power but as one of immigration (‘too many Blacks’), of law and order (‘Black crime’, ‘mugging’) and of disadvantaged and insular Black communities in a permanent state of crisis. The British media in general and television in particular played a crucial role in legitimising, circulating and amplifying these notions of crisis, of ‘Blacks-as-trouble’. The solution to these problems was seen initially as assimilation of Blacks into the mainstream and later, as multiculturalism (“a sugary facade to a very discriminatory reality.”) The first chapter of the book concludes that Britian’s contradictions and dilemmas are informed by an “omnipotent rationalisation of thought and debate,” involving a range of diverse issues and sites such as immigration, citizenship, society, pluralism and diversity. These struggles point to the insight that the very project of British nationhood was perhaps premised on the existence of ‘excluded Others’. The emergence of self-confident, hybrid, hyphenated, diasporic Black identities and cultural praxis in recent times has been the outcome of a range of struggles at various levels, from grassroots political struggles to intellectual discourse to alternative media practice. This has also resulted in a more nuanced awareness of racism in the media and more explicit anti-racist media strategies, which have secured greater access, visibility and participation of Blacks in media mainstreams, local government and administration.

The analysis of the premises of liberal racism is of special relevance to the British context, which has seen the emergence of discourses of nation and national identity that seek to either erase or stigmatise difference. These ways of seeing, which apparently were earlier confined to the Hindu Right, have become increasingly legitimised and have begun to occupy the space of liberal mainstream discourse. The creation of a ‘tolerant, modern Hindu self’ as opposed to ‘intolerant, reactionary, illiberal others’, defined in ethnic-religious terms, is a part of this transformation. As the book points out, it is crucial to understand the origin of specific stereotypes, at what historical junctures they emerge, whose interests they serve and how they are articulated in media representation.

The book critically traces the representation of Blacks in various genres of television programming. These include the television documentary and news, which have played a significant role in constructing the ‘reality’ of ‘Black-as-social problem’, masking the background assumptions of their (White) programme producers in an “aesthetic of truth” and a rhetoric of liberal, universal cosmopolitanism. For instance, the compulsions of ‘balance’ justified media coverage of the views of the extreme Right groups (represented by Enoch Powell among others), that then began to set the terms of the debate (e.g. seeing immigrants in terms of a logic of numbers). Moreover, television news in a form that purveys powerful images (race riots, muggings), sometimes in a sensationalist mode, without necessarily placing these in context; this made it possible for the news to play an agenda-setting role in coding the Black presence as crisis and threat. However, the 1970s and 80s did see the emergence of anti-racist interventions, access slots on television for alternative programming and the emergence of multicultural programming in the form of Channel Four. The book also examines recent developments in programming, shaped by the emergence of minority cultural politics, the trend towards commercialism and deregulation and technological developments such as satellite channels and new digital media forms. These have made for a greater focus on catering to the needs of culturally diverse audiences, they have not necessarily ensured greater diversity or better quality of media products and have led to a shrinking of the spaces for non-commercial alternative programming.

The book also examines the representations of Black people in genres such as comedy, light entertainment, television drama and sports. It explores how images such as the Black performer/athlete reproduced dominant racist mythologies and cultural practices of othering. The chapter on sports coverage raises the issue of the differential visibility/treatment of Blacks in ‘body’ genres (light entertainment, sports) in comparison with the ‘mind’ genres (documentary, news, drama). It looks at the construction of Black masculinities, wherein the Black body becomes an ambivalent site of fascination, desire and fear, an “object-to-be-looked-at”, that reinforces the stereotype of Blacks as ‘all brain and no brains’. Nothing demonstrates this ‘looked-at-ness’ better than the exchange between Linford Christie, the Olympic Gold medalist, and Jimmy Greaves, co-host of the talk-show Sport in Question. Greaves shamefully asked Christie, “Why do you wear shorts then, why don’t you wear something more suitable?” to which Christie replied, “I go out there and run, you should be watching my form when I’m running, the fact that I’m winning, not what’s in my shorts. “Well, well, a lot of women are fascinated by it for starters.” The chapter on Black-British film-making demonstrates how the space of film was used to put forward an alternative set of narratives that no longer took ‘whiteness’ as their point of departure and broke with the “authoritative cultural verisimilitude” of the mainstream racialised televised discourse. Films such as A Private Enterprise (Dir Peter K. Smith, 1974; co-written by Dilip Hiro), Dark Days and Light Nights (Dir Horace Ove, 1975), My Beautiful Laundrette (Dir. Stephen Frears, 1985), and short films by British Asian directors like Suri Krishnamma’s Mohommed’s Daughter (1986) and Gurinder Chadha’s early I’m British But... (1989) created this new language. However, the independent films were dependent to a greater or lesser extent on television and State funding and have been affected by the shrinking of institutional support in a market-driven media scenario.

One strength of this book, which could perhaps in some ways become a limitation, is its meticulous historical documentation and analysis of developments in television texts, genres, policies and institutions, in the British context. While this gives it a groundedness, it also tends to reduce its interest and relevance to a non-British/non-Western reader, for whom the cultural specifics are unfamiliar. This notwithstanding, the book remains a significant and timely contribution to the writings on race, media representation and Cultural Studies.

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