

Taking up space

Faryal Velmi

The Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have shaken the world to its very core, further deepening and exposing the fault lines of inequality that mark our lives.

In these times, writers who ask difficult questions, who challenge the status quo are more important than ever.

I aspire to be such a writer. To bear witness. 'Standing in the way of control' as the song by Beth Ditto and the Gossip puts it.

I aspire to challenge and provoke. But also to celebrate the resilience of the human spirit. To celebrate solidarity and community that, despite new zoonotic viruses and racist cops, refuse to be crushed.

Struggle creates space.

Film and TV are immensely powerful media that influence and shape our culture, and even to a certain extent our identities.

How we see the world. How the world sees us. How we see ourselves, even. Life and art inextricably linked. Imitating and informing each other.

So, living in an institutionally racist society – despite what Government-funded spin tells you – is there any wonder that there is a dearth, a serious lack of representation of people of colour, of our stories, of our lives, of our names on the credit rolls

The Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd created another historic milestone in the ongoing, movement for racial justice and equality.

It has had seismic reverberations in the film and TV industry too, both in the US and here in the UK.

In the US, an open letter written by the Black Film Collective and signed by over 125 black and brown independent producers and allies threw down the gauntlet to Hollywood.

It said (and I quote):

'A direct line can be drawn from the stories and voices that Hollywood silences, to the discrimination and biases that are pervasive in the entertainment industry and larger society.'

Unquote.

That same week, more than 5,000 Black and Brown British Independent producers, writers and directors along with other supporters sent the same open letter, with some regional tweaks to the UK film and TV industry.

I'm going to read a demand that featured in both the US and the UK letters.

I quote:

1. Banish 'Your Weak Excuses'

Banish 'it's too small' from your lexicon. It is insulting to our stories, our history, our impact on world culture, and our worth. Our stories are referred to as 'too small' because they do not centre around white characters or a small subset of actors whom you deem valuable; they are not always written by the same white writers that you deem to be 'safe'. Banish 'we already have a diverse project on our slate'. There is room for more than one. You make countless projects with similar themes and storylines with white creatives.

This demand was prefaced by the observation that, 'This moment in history presents an opportunity for you to be a positive partner for change', and by a statement of purpose: 'Our aim is that this letter produces strategic commitments from you to reshape our industry into one whose words are supported by action.' To leave no room for doubt, it further stated that 'While messages condemning racism and advocating for solidarity on social media may inspire hope, the UK Industry must put its money and practices where its mouth is.'

Unquote.

The letters made me punch the air.

I really recommend everyone to read them in full. They spell out in honest terms what the problems and challenges are for people of colour working in the film and TV industry. But also, crucially, what the solutions are.

What was written in the letters also got me thinking of our histories in the UK. If you're of British South Asian, Black or Chinese heritage, seeing the pasts of your respective communities here in the British Isles, up on the television screen is rare. Up on the big screen even rarer.

Why isn't there a film or TV series about Jayaben Desai and the Asian women of the 1976-8 Grunwick strike – a turning point in the British labour movement?

Or of the Southall riots of 1979, when local Asian youth fought back against fascists marching through their area?

Or of William Cuffay, the Black man, a leader of the Chartist movement that campaigned for democratic and political rights for working people in the 1830s and 40s?

Or the Indian suffragettes who joined the fight for British suffrage alongside the Pankhursts.

What about the thriving Chinese community of Limehouse in the 1880s?

There is no doubt in my mind that these stories have already been pitched, and indeed scripts written, and they've never made it to screen.

But the times they are a-changing. Or, rather, they are being forced to change.

It's plain to see that the uprisings and protest movements coming out on to the streets are creating space both in front of and behind the camera.

In some cases, in surprising ways.

My mum is a big fan of period dramas, particularly Jane Austen adaptations, and I grew up watching them on TV. The VHS recording of *Pride and Prejudice* is still floating around mum's house, and she refuses to get rid of it. They were always 100% white of course and just accepted as such.

So, the re-imagining these types of dramas with people of colour has been a revelation.

I'm thinking of Chris Van Dusen, Shonda Rhymes and Netflix's *Bridgerton* with Regé-Jean Page as the Duke of Hastings which I enjoyed, along with millions of others, during lockdown. No doubt part of the appeal of the show was its diverse casting.

There is also Eve Hedderwick Turner and Fable Picture's Channel 5 show that has cast Jodie Turner-Smith as a black Anne Boleyn. A bold and striking choice, and it has had some backlash... but why the hell not?

Of course, part of the satisfaction of seeing black and brown faces in these historical period dramas is saying, 'we've always been here!'.

OK, perhaps not as English dukes or queens.

So, back to the point I made previously, that working-class histories of people of colour also need to be told.

That's why Steven McQueen's five *Small Axe* films are seminal, each of them a powerful evocation and celebration of working-class British Caribbean history.

My favourite of the five films was *Mangrove*. It told the story of how the Mangrove restaurant became a community hub for West London's British Caribbean community, frequented by British Black Panthers such as Altheia Jones-LeCointe and activists such as Darcus Howe.

A space to meet and come together and counter the pernicious racism of London's streets in the aftermath of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech.

As a result, the Mangrove was targeted and constantly raided by racist police. A peaceful march was subjected to violent policing, but it was the black activists who found themselves on trial at the Old Bailey.

Darcus Howe and Altheia Jones-LeCointe defended themselves; all nine defendants were acquitted of the main charge of incitement to riot. The case was a historic landmark as the first judicial acknowledgement of 'evidence of racial hatred' in the Metropolitan police force.

This was not just the history of the British Caribbean people but is actually part of the history of Britain itself. A national history that quite rightly took up its place on prime-time BBC television.

Darcus Howe and Altheia Jones-LeCointe are such amazing figures that the mind boggles how they have never had their stories dramatised before. Each of them deserves their own biopic. I hope their stories make their way

into classrooms soon, too. And that the misogynistic Henry-the-bloody-Eighth makes way for them!

It's important to note that the *Small Axe* films were many years in the making. And that it took the clout and influence of an Oscar-winning film maker and artist to push them over the line and bring them to our TV screens. All power to him for doing so.

We also see space opening up for more contemporary stories in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The BBC's latest slate of projects is surely testimony to this. New projects include Theresa Ikoko's adaptation of Nikki May's soon-to-be-published debut novel *Wahala*. Theresa has called the new show an 'amazing celebration of Nigerian British culture'. And I can't wait.

Her brilliant film *Rocks* made with Fable Pictures, co-written with Claire Wilson and directed by Sarah Gavron, filled the screen with the faces of black and brown teenagers. It was full of the joys and pain of female friendship and so very London.

It really got me thinking about the quote that I have framed in my living room: 'Write your own story'.

As a dyslexic, queer British Pakistani Muslim mother living through a pandemic in Tory Brexit Britain, I feel I've got a lot of stories to tell.

I'm lucky enough to say that I have actually written a queer British Pakistani Muslim woman character on prime-time TV – on the Channel 4 show produced by The Forge, *Ackley Bridge*.

It was a great experience, but I definitely did feel the burden of representation. When we do finally get the chance to tell our stories, there is a ton of pressure to get it 'right'. Whatever that means.

For so long the representation of Muslim woman on TV and film has focused on the oppressed honour killing, or forced marriage victim, or jihadi bride.

Ackley Bridge was part of the shift away from that – and there continue to be films and TV shows that are wrestling free from that straitjacket, that are showing intersectionality and nuance in their representations of Muslim women.

My good friend Aleem Khan's beautiful film *After Love* about a white Muslim convert is one such film.

Nida Manzoor's amazing Working Title/Channel 4 show *We Are Lady Parts* is another. It has blown up TV screens with its story of four different British Muslim women punks who define for themselves what those identities mean.

It's filled me with pure joy and hope for what's possible.

Faryal Velmi

Faryal is a screenwriter based in London. Having spent a decade running the Disability rights charity Transport for All based in Brixton – her work is inspired by campaigns for social justice and the multi-cultural tapestry of city life. Faryal's credits include writing on the Channel 4 drama *Ackley Bridge* and she is currently developing a number of TV and film projects.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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