



Damon and Debbie: An effort to quash the black stereotype

Black Brookside

This month the tv soap *Brookside* leaves its host city Liverpool in a three-part spin-off series, *Damon and Debbie*, following the capers of Damon - unemployed, charming and fuelled with determination - and his 'schoolgirl' girlfriend, Debbie. The mini-series, written by *Brookside's* most eminent writer, Frank Cottrell Boyce, visits three locations: York, Bradford and Morecombe, and, as a result of his enthusiasm for Bradford, the series introduces Asian characters to the *Brookside* plot for the first time in five years.

Brookside and *EastEnders*, Britain's most successful recruits to the ranks of soap opera, attribute their popularity to their apparent 'realism'. In contrast to the escapist tendencies of American soap, they seek to reflect the state of the nation with their familiar settings and characters who are representative of a type.

Yet this claim fails when one considers their poor representation of blacks who are never allowed the equivalent scope or importance of their white counterparts. Indeed, even 'realistic' British soap does not wash away the media's archetypal images of violent, uneducated, rebellious or discontented ethnic groups living in Britain.

But *EastEnders's* irksome stereotypes are perhaps less irksome when compared with *Brookside*, who have yet to fully acknowledge the multi-ethnic nature of contemporary Britain. Their policy that blacks will only be cast when they are the best actors to audition, prevents *Brookside's* team of 12 writers from creating any race-related storylines.

As Frank Cottrell Boyce himself asserts: 'The institution has not addressed itself to racism. It has not thought about either positive discrimination or what we do if we cast a black in a negative role.'

Damon and Debbie, to be screened from November 4, gave Cottrell Boyce the freedom to break the Channel 4 code of conduct, and write specifically for non-white characters. The series' three Asians are Apala, Patrick and Zoe, and as a white writer writing ethnic parts, Cottrell Boyce is as worthy of acclaim, as he is susceptible to criticism. It is a flaw of many British writers that they present Asians in one of five stock roles: the doctor, lawyer, restaurateur, shopkeeper or machinist. But, with daring ingenuity, Cottrell Boyce aims to shatter the stereotype: 'Whether Apala is like an Asian Bradford girl doesn't count for me. What does, is that she's unlike the

Asian stereotypes of *EastEnders*. Apala is only Asian because of other things in her life.'

Until more blacks are seen within the mainstream media, the small existing group shoulder a tremendous responsibility as they represent Britain's black minority. However, this charge should be shared with the writers, for it is they who create the message - the actors are merely their instruments.

Seeta Indrani plays Apala in *Damon and Debbie*, a character seduced by the illusions of romance that are offered by her Mills and Boon paperbacks. Out of the mini-series' cast of 12, only three are Asian, but more would have been cast had they auditioned.

First and foremost, Indrani regards herself as an actress irrespective of her race: 'I've been quite lucky in that I've not been pigeon-holed as an Asian actress. I've also played Spanish and West Indian parts and worked with the RSC. I'm not with the *Tandoori Nights / My Beautiful Launderette* Asian acting clique. I go as an actress.'

Nevertheless, as Seeta Indrani arrives for each audition, casting directors will see her primarily as black. As a black actress, she faces fewer chances and must overcome this by presenting more skills. But sometimes, even this principle falls short: 'I once passed an audition, but was then rejected because they decided not to cast an Asian after all'.

It is an irrefutable fact that there is an inadequate number of credible parts created for blacks. Frank Cottrell Boyce's *Damon and Debbie* is unusual in its effort to quash the black stereotype. Meanwhile, a predominantly white media is deceiving the nation with its misguided conception of blacks. Eventually it will have to acknowledge the fact that blacks have been assimilated into many aspects of British life, their roles changed and that blacks do exist outside Bradford and Birmingham in real life. •

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