

**Sarita Malik. *Representing Black Britain. A History of Black and Asian Images on British Television.* London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2002.**

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1 Sarita Malik's *Representing Black Britain* is an important contribution to SAGE's series *Culture, Representation and Identities*<sup>1</sup> which is dedicated to a particular understanding of 'cultural studies' as an inherently interdisciplinary project critically concerned with the analysis of cultural meaning. *Representing Black Britain* focuses on the medium of British television as the site where primarily White cultural meanings are produced and circulated. Drawing on Stuart Hall's notion of a 'racialized regime of representation'<sup>2</sup> Malik not only aims at exploring key ways in which racial identities are constructed within British television representation, but also attempts to identify processes of organizing, producing, and communicating such representations of racial identities through the medium of television.

2 Throughout this study, traditional British television broadcasting is considered as the primary site where the British nation is imagined and imagines itself. As the process of 'televisionization' is concerned with the mobilization of ideologically (and culturally) charged symbols and signs, television in itself is to be perceived as part of a 'machinery of representation' in Britain. Thus, Malik is principally interested in

those ideologies that underpin how racial identities are constructed within television representation by arguing that aspects of process and power play an integral part in how meaning, difference, identity and subjectivity are formed to produce a 'racialized regime of representation' (p. 26).

Inasmuch as the meanings of 'race' are always changing and never fixed, and 'culture' itself is in a perpetual flux, Malik faces the difficulty of identifying a simple progress model in representations of 'Blackness' on British television. As an impact of a contemporary 'cultural shift', the term 'culture' is to be read as extended to a much wider, more inclusive range of institutions and practices, including those labelled 'political' and 'economic'. This also applies to the case of a former overtly racist culture. As a consequence, one cannot talk about a television society that is more or less racist now compared to then. Rather, "we are experiencing different approaches, languages and ideologies around race" (p. 174), yet ones

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<sup>1</sup> As Malik puts it "'Black' is used as a collective political working term to refer to those of African, Caribbean and South Asian descent [...]", p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Stuart. (ed.) 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 245.

that are still dictated by "neoliberal ideologies". Following Hall, Malik claims that 'liberalism' provides the ground for struggles over cultural and ideological meanings. It can be shared by "apparently disparate thinkers: racists, anti-racists, conservatives, assimilationists, social pluralists and so on" (p. 174). Therefore the liberal consensus is said to be the linchpin of 'inferential racism', or 'institutional racism', keeping established racisms in process. Even the liberal concept of 'multiculturalism' does not remain unaffected by the effects of institutional racism:

But behind this panorama of ever more normalized multiculturalism lies a cycle of racial codes, preferred readings, blocked access, and a profoundly uneven multiculturalism, laced with a liberal claim to 'show it like it is'. The incontestability has intensified over the years, making new racist meanings increasingly difficult to pin down, as television confronts us with progressively more coded and yet seemingly neutral patterns of raced representation. (p. 174)

3 In addition to this critical reading of liberalism, the author then goes on to propose a model of 'social Whiteness' which has to be understood as a hegemonic racialized structure sustaining itself "through the medium's iterative discourses of family, nation and citizenship" (p. 179). According to Malik, the discourse of Whiteness hegemonizes itself "by assuming the racial (White) homogeneity of the British television nation" (p. 179), and by projecting 'difference' onto non-White / Black communities. Whereas Black people have been racialized in representation, White people do not seem to be represented in terms of 'race'. Whilst 'the Black presence' on British television is shown to cause 'race relations' such as racial political correctness, race riots, racist attitudes, or racial sensitivity, Whiteness is to be found *everywhere* and does not require to be 'marked'. Yet at the same time, it is presumed to be nowhere in particular, since it continuously sets itself up as the regulating prescriptive norm. Inasmuch as this "cultural territory of Whiteness" is said to maintain itself through this universalization and naturalization, it

processes Others' 'racial difference' through assorted cultural and ideological practices such as spectacle, objectification, desire, envy, fantasy, exclusion, nostalgia and selection. (p. 181)

4 In terms of the history of British television, the concept of 'social Whiteness' and its practices of representing 'Blackness' have manifested themselves within three chronological phases: 1. the formative years of television (up to the 1970s) that are characterized by a double marginalization of the 'problematic' Black subject - as the victim of racism on the one hand, and as the victim of alienation within the race-related narrative on the other hand; 2. the challenge of 'social Whiteness' within the framework of the emerging forces of 'multiculturalism' during the 1970s and 1980s (institutionalization of the Black voice); and 3.

the recent unsettling of 'social Whiteness' and signs of confident Black-British ethnicities playing out their influence on the nation, as well as "the resurgence of new forms of nationalist discourse which call upon the 'authenticity' of Britain as an 'essentially' White nation" (p. 182).

5 Therefore, the overall aim of Malik's study is not merely to identify overtly racist discourses on British television, but, above all, to lay bare the self-maintaining and racializing processes of 'social Whiteness', even within the ideological paradigm of 'liberalism'. Malik's thorough analysis of programme materials and forms covers a wide range of television genres such as documentary, news, comedy, light entertainment, sport, television drama, and film.<sup>3</sup> Separate discussions of the respective genres in terms of a socio-historical overview of Black on-screen presence on the one hand, and in terms of a close analysis of strategies of representation with regard to particular formats on the other hand, constitute the main body of this critical history of the representation of Black and Asian images on British television.

6 Malik opens her close analysis of programme materials with the so-called 'truth genres' such as documentary and news. These work through codes of verisimilitude, realism and impartiality in order to represent 'Blackness' as a 'social problem' which needs to be 'solved'. Particularly in the news genre, the race riot becomes the main signifier of a 'social crisis' connected with 'Blackness', for it represents 'trouble' caused by the 'presence of Blackness'. Reports on race riots on different channels are shown to exhibit the same formulaic structure (images of chaotic riots, police efforts to manage the chaos, an emotive case study of an injured White policeman, the views of politicians, and finally the 'troubled past' of the riot area). As Malik puts it, there seems to be a "universal consensus about what news is and how it should be presented" (p.88).

7 In the 'body genres' such as comedy, light entertainment (including youth culture) and sport, the representational focus is turned to the 'performing body of the Black man'. Since comedy raises the question of whether the audience laughs with or at the performing comedian, especially the Black entertainer becomes the focal point of ambivalence:

the innermost workings of the comedy text when it touches on aspects of racial difference, is dependent [...] on a cultural politics of representation centred on ambivalence (p. 91).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly ambivalent is the treatment of the Black male body within the genre of television

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<sup>3</sup> The genres are almost entirely based on Britain's five major terrestrial, networked channels BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5.

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Malik mentions the exceptional comedy series "Goodness Gracious Me" (BBC2, 1998-2001) as a good example of how to challenge racial stereotypes.

sports that binds nation and race together. Television sports is particularly discriminatory in its system of marking difference when it touches upon 'race': "Black people are deemed Other, alien, different; on other occasions, they are embraced as British" (p. 124). The Black performer/athlete connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (e.g. Black iconically powerful 'trophy-men'), but is rarely allowed to look, for instance in the function of a professional commentator. With regard to the genre of light entertainment which include 'the lived cultures' such as pop culture, Black youth culture (e.g. rap, hip-hop), or hybrid fusion culture (e.g. drum 'n' bass, house), Malik finds that they "largely maintain themselves on their own terms by remaining external to the formal [television] culture" (p. 121). The young culturally active produce and organize cultural practices themselves rather than wait to be 'represented'.

8 Whilst the 'truth genres' and the 'body genres' depend on representing and reproducing a pre-given 'reality', the 'mind genres', such as television drama and film, only have "a set of choices to make about whom, how and what to represent" (p. 135). With respect to drama, Malik - with a few exceptions - criticizes token inclusion or absence of Black characters in British soap operas, crime series, or social drama. The increasing success of Black-British filmmaking in the 1990s, due to important shifts in the institutional context of British broadcasting (e.g. Channel 4 funding), gave way to an attempt at representing Black characters more "accurately." As the author suggests, Black-British films visually work through official race narratives, challenging Black stereotypes, and thus they allow more than one way of representing 'Asianness', 'Blackness', or 'Britishness'.

9 As Stuart Hall puts it in his foreword to Sarita Malik's challenging study, the combination of concrete analysis and historical survey within each chapter enables the author to handle the mass of material circumspectively and, finally, to produce a coherent critical history. While chapter 1 and the final chapter 10 provide the theoretical framework for this book, the detailed genre-based case-studies of particular programmes (chapters 2-9) are not merely used to back up the theoretical framework, but are also situated in Britain's socio-historical context. The purpose of the study is not to propose a unitary concept of 'the accurate representation of Blackness'. It rather critically posits the counter-concept of 'social Whiteness' which provides the territory where overt and institutional racism are tolerated.

10 At times Malik runs the risk of going too far in her explorations of institutional racism: whereas there seems to be no doubt about the existence of a 'raced' language of sports coverage, it nevertheless remains questionable if the comment "Tyson's moment of

savagery"<sup>5</sup>, following the Holyfield ear-biting incident in 1997, refers to Tyson's 'raced status'. The comment primarily seems to refer to the act of 'ear-biting', and a White 'ear-biter' is likely to be commented on in the same way. Another weakness of Malik's study is that she almost exclusively focuses on how male 'Blackness' is constructed and produced in the discourse of 'social Whiteness'. The treatment of Black feminist and feminist issues could have widened the theoretical scope of the book in order to shed light on the interconnections between 'race', 'gender', and 'sexuality'. However, in any case this remarkably thorough study can be strongly recommended to every student and academic in cultural studies, postcolonial studies, media studies, and gender studies.

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<sup>5</sup> ITN *New at One*, ITV, tx: 9.7.197; (p. 127, 134); my emphasis.