

Shai Hussain: “Characters don’t need to be defined by their colour, religion, sexuality or disability – good writing is about universal truths.”

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Writer of web series *Three Shades of Brown* delivers speech to the House of Lords and All Party Writers Group (APWG) on the subject of diversity in broadcasting.

Ok everybody go home now, I can’t follow that! That was amazing. I didn’t miss a day with the Queen. I missed a day writing scripts in my pyjamas with a bowl of coco pops...

Today we’re talking about diversity, so I am going to talk to you about the lack of opportunities for a heterosexual, 34-year-old, male, Mancunian, Muslim writer of a south-Asian origin with a bad knee. #Diverse.

We all know that there’s a problem with onscreen equality in terms of colour, age, gender, disability, sexuality and class. And the sad truth is that there always will be. As with anything in life, the results will never be perfect. But we can damn well do our best to achieve a balance.

In order to do that, we need to take an honest look at the level of diversity being commissioned ...and more importantly *not* commissioned. There’s an ongoing belief that stories about minorities just aren’t commercially viable. However the reason why they often seem to be a risk isn’t so much an issue with the topic matter as it is regarding how much they trust a diverse writer to handle the topic. Here are some of the best diverse British gems to come out in the last few years: Luther, The ‘A’ Word, Four Lions, Undercover, Indian Summers, Slumdog Millionaire.

All amazing, all diverse under represented worlds, all written by white men with a proven track record. The question is: should white men be exempt from writing diverse works? Obviously not. But are diverse writers getting an opportunity to prove their own track record?

Yes, a named writer will give a project more credibility. An experienced writer will gain the project more quality. But the diverse voice that has lived to tell the tale will give the stories strengths just as important – authenticity. People say that diverse writers aren’t commissioned because they just aren’t good enough. But if you aren’t commissioned, how are you ever going to be good enough?

When we talk about diversity, it’s really easy for us to glaze our eyes over because you expect kitchen sink dramas lamenting how poor and disadvantaged the lives of minorities are – but the truth is, those are the only stories that get commissioned. British Asian stories are often linked with terrorism, honour killings, topped off with a colourful wedding or a Holi party chucking colours at each other. Black British drama is most likely going to be set on a council estate, possibly with guns

and gangs. And worst of all, the disabled are rarely allowed to be seen as normal - with their disability often being the main focus of the story. These shows only reinforce stereotypes. We need to start pushing the envelope and explore different genres for more diverse people, outside of the kitchen sink. Characters don't need to be defined by their colour, religion, sexuality or disability – good writing is about universal truths.

So those were the problems with TV diversity. Now here's what we can ALL do: you don't have to be a woman to be a feminist. You don't need to be a minority to stand up for equal rights.

Number 1)

Quotas. As I said earlier, TV diversity will never be a perfectly even spread. Taking this very speech as an example, I'm pretty sure I've spoken more about BAME programming more than any other underrepresented community. But quotas are good. They work as shown by the immense progress American programming has made, where quotas are instilled in the law. But we won't be able to fix the inequalities of everything all at once. The disabled currently need more exposure than any, and from my knowledge, the only series that was predominantly an east Asian cast was a CBeebies series called Spirit Warriors – released in 2010. But at the same time we can't allow political correctness to go OTT where writing schemes guarantee one south Asian, one black writer, one east Asian, one bi, one transgender, someone from Scunthorpe, female – regardless of talent. But we can address the balances one at a time to make sure they are always kept at a level playing field.

Number 2)

Ensure that the gatekeepers are always fully conscious of the levels of diversity at play. Or even better – recruit people from diverse backgrounds to be those gatekeepers.

Number 3)

Ensure new diverse writers get their opportunity to have something made. Like many other diverse writers I flittered from one scheme to another but failed to have anything made for terrestrial TV. More and more of us are being forced to create our own niche on YouTube. But the majority of us – maybe we have families to take care of, are working class – the majority of us don't have the time or money to be able to do that.

Yes diverse projects can be financially risky – but you know what's more of a risk? Everyone turning to Netflix. More and more people are tuning out of terrestrial TV as they feel that it no longer speaks to them. I confess, I'm one of them. Give me Daredevil over Downton any day. Whole swathes tuning out could really dent the British economy – and how's that for a financial risk?

Like its recent stand in politics, Britain can be the diverse change it wants to see in the world. The talent is out there, it's just a matter of giving that talent the opportunity to shine. Especially if that writer happens to be: a heterosexual 34 year-old male Mancunian Muslim from a south-Asian origin with a bad knee.

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