

Re-claiming the punchline: British Asian television comedy

by Marie Gillespie

Comedy and Ethnicity

Since the time of Aristotle theories of comedy have differed on many points. Freud (1960), like Aristotle (1992), saw laughter as the release of tensions crucial to preserving our sanity in the face of life's absurdities, contradictions and deeper irrationalities. For Freud jokes had one of two purposes: either to destroy (as in sarcasm and satire) or to expose (as in obscenity, bawdry and ribaldry). For Bergson (1956) the inversion of roles is crucial as when the villain becomes a victim of his own villainy. This results in ironic social commentary which is at the heart of farce in particular. Farce was the *tour de force* of the Marx Brothers whose early films, like *Animal Crackers* entailed an aggressive comic assault on WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) society and its exclusionary practices (Musser, 1991). The narratives of their films revolve around the intrusion of outsiders (Jews) into WASP social territory where they were not welcome. Their only means of entry to the society was through mimicry, disguise and role-play.

Bakhtin (1994) analysed comedy in terms of its carnivalesque and anarchic subversion of established social hierarchies. He was interested in the role of comedy for its potential to deliver a pleasurable transcendence of everyday realities which, if only momentarily, permits fantasies of liberation and dreams of an alternative social order. But just as comedy can liberate us from the oppression of societal restrictions, it can also just as easily affirm societal norms.

Despite differences of emphases, theorists of comedy seem to agree that most humour is based on some form of degradation since there is always a butt to a joke. All jokes have a

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tripartite structure: the comic source or teller, the receiver/s and the object of humour. There are formulaic jokes, jokes that trade on insider knowledge, and jokes that change with different audiences. Those who share a joke share a social intimacy. Jokes create and confirm closeness (Cohen, 2000). Those who share a joke belong to a community, however temporary, of people alike enough in outlook and sentiment to laugh together. This an essentially human quality. But jokes are also exclusionary. Jokes define social categories and group boundaries incorporating some as insiders and others as outsiders, delighting some and offending others. Jokes trade on stereotypes of national, racial and ethnic categories give pleasure and offence simultaneously. But the key question remains who is laughing at who and why?

This chapter examines issues of comedy and ethnicity through a case study of a British Asian comedy sketch show called *Goodness Gracious Me!* (GGM). It became very popular in the UK in the late 1990s and is widely perceived as groundbreaking in its approach to tackling comedy, racism and ethnicity (1). The chapter sets the case study of this particular programme in the wider contexts of its production and reception. First we examine different approaches to analysing ethnic comedy on television. Second we look at the institutional context of GGM's production. The third and main part of the chapter examines the comic and textual strategies used by the scriptwriters and performers. Finally we examine audience responses and wider issues of anti-racist television comedy.

Analysing media representations of race and ethnicity

The analysis of television, ethnicity and comedy often focuses on the question of whether images and narratives of particular ethnic groups are either “negative” or “positive”. In this approach, the solution to the problem of negative images is to replace them with positive images. But how do we judge whether an image or narrative is positive or negative and according to what criteria? The teller and the telling of the joke, the context of its telling, as well as the social and power relations between the participants all play a critical role in determining who laughs *with* and *at* whom and why. Joking relations can be a very ambiguous feature of social life. They flourish in both difficult and 'safe' social domains

and are frequently used to defuse potentially difficult or antagonistic social relations. Terms of racist abuse like 'honky' 'nigger' or 'Paki' may be used inoffensively among white, 'Asian' and black friends. Similarly, ritual exchanges of, say, Irish or Jewish jokes that trade on stereotypes, when told among Jewish and Irish neighbours and friends, may confirm intimacy. So in everyday social life, we are not necessarily promoting stereotypes or unpleasant attitudes by telling such jokes. Jokes based on stereotypes can be funny and the kind of moral rectitude promoted by certain forms of political correctness will not wipe the smile of your face if you find it funny. For jokes to work you need knowledge of the stereotype but this is not necessarily to endorse it.

However the same is not true of public and commercial television stations. In the UK for example, from 1950s to 1980s it was not uncommon to see comic performers (like Bernard Manning and Jim Davidson for example), use television as a platform to express xenophobic and racist attitudes. Thus television institutions may find that they are colluding in the institutionalisation of racist regimes of representation. Since the mid 1980s such overt racism is much less common but subtle forms of racism persist. We are now becoming more aware that to understand how racism works we have to go beyond analysing whether images are positive or negative and take a close look at how media institutions operate: their employment practices, equal opportunities and cultural diversity policies and the monitoring of the implementation of such policies. So what kind of approach can we take to the analysis of media that does justice both to the aesthetics of comedy and to the politics of 'race' and difference in media texts and institutions?

In the 1960s and 1970s, studies of 'race' and the media often invoked white ethnicity as the taken for granted norm against which black and south Asian ethnicities were analysed. More recently, an approach which conceives of ethnicity – not a natural or biological set of characteristics – but as constructed and contested, relational and contextual has been developed. This has helped dispense with unproblematised and essentialised notions of ethnic minorities and with studies focusing exclusively on the portrayal of specific ethnic groups. We are all ethnically located, whether we belong to dominant or minority ethnicities. The idea that only media texts which foreground 'race' or ethnicity are relevant for analysis is clearly absurd. Musser (1991) suggests a more adventurous approach. He

argues for shift from in analytical focus. Too much attention has been paid to examining ethnic comedy simply as a way of expressing or affirming identities. Instead, he says, it might be productive to take 'a more ironic look at the larger question of ethnic identity itself' and the complex and contradictory negotiations which take place in the interactions between of institutions, texts and audiences (Musser, 1991: 41). In a similar vein, Shohat (1991) has argued for a methodology that analyses ethnicities in a relational fashion. In other words, rather than isolating one ethnic minority group, it is more productive to examine how ethnicities are constructed through relationships of difference (“I am me because I am not you” or “we are what we are because we are not like you”). Problems arise, of course, when difference is perceived as a threat rather than as a cultural resource but analysis should go beyond the obvious and visible to examine ethnicities in relation to one another, absences as well as presences, and repressed racial and ethnic contradictions in mainstream media texts.

The following analysis aims to explore how ethnic stereotypes and caricatures operate in wider systems of racialised representation (Hall, 1995). It analyses the use of comic techniques such as satire, parody, comic inversions, and forms of verbal humour. It aims to situate textual analysis in the wider institutional and national frameworks of production and reception.

“Goodness Gracious Me”: The institutional context

Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s British TV Comedy often used British Black and Asian people as the object and target of laughter – the butt of the joke. Their speech and language, clothes, food and mannerism provided raw material to ridicule and mockery. In recent years there has been much more effort to develop and employ Black and minority ethnic writers, performers and producers who can represent themselves. According to Meera Syal, one of the writers and performers on *GGM*, the emergence of British Asian comics in the 1990s reflects the growing confidence and sense of ease with being British and Asian and 'barely noticing the seam'.² What is special and comic about *GGM* is its hybrid quality: the comedy draws on Jewish, British, Indian and Punjabi comic traditions. In this way it very

much reflects the cultural hybridity of the lives of its creators-cum-performers who grew up in 1960s Britain. But how did the show come about? What were the institutional opportunities and constraints that resulted in this rather unique TV comedy sketch show?

Anil Gupta, the producer of GGM, had worked on a number of other comedy shows. As part of his job he toured the live comedy circuits and spotted a number of outstanding British Asian stand up performers (3). This sparked the idea of producing a show that would transcend the Asian ethnic label and have wide cross-over appeal to mainstream British audiences. It was part of a strategy of mainstreaming multiculturalism. He set about organising a series of BBC workshops for Asian comedy script writers and through that met Sharat Sardana and Richard Pinto (a pair of school friends familiar with living in multicultural milieu) who wrote the scripts of the first series. It was very much based on their everyday experiences of living in multicultural London. The scripts had an authentic ring to them. He then hand-picked the best stand-up Asian comics from the comedy club circuits including Nina Wadia, Sanjeev Bhaskar and Kulvinder Gir. In fact one of the unique features of GGM is that many of the writers are also performers in the show.

Once together, the writers adopted a deliberate strategy of attracting multicultural audiences, and not alienating the white audience. The aim was to hook the white audience in, and once it was captured, to take the comedy further. This kind of 'entry' strategy was essential, according to Gupta, if the show was to make white people 'feel comfortable' about Asians telling jokes. It was a deliberate attempt to break into the mainstream. They did not want a 'guilt-tripping' kind of show, constantly reminding the white audience about racism or the legacy of imperialism – but neither did they eschew such issues. The team was also keenly aware that if the show was perceived to be targetted at ethnic minorities alone, then the white audience will not watch it.⁽⁴⁾ They wanted sketches that had universal appeal where the humour worked both ways - using whites and Asians as butts of humour. It was recognised that Indians, too, have stereotypical and sometimes odd views about the English, for example, that they treat their dogs better than their children, sending them to boarding school at age 3. Sanjeev Bhaskar, actor and writer on the show, claims that *GGM* works as a cross-over show 'because we used our Asian identity to get our humour across, not the other way round'.⁽⁵⁾

Anil Gupta is scathing about the kind of condescending and dismissive attitudes that he encountered at the BBC. In his early days working at the BBC he was introduced to the Head of Comedy by a senior producer as ‘the new boy who’s here on an Equal Opportunities scheme’ (6). Later on, discussing ethnicity and humour, he reports one senior producer of comedy programmes as saying: ‘Black Americans are funny, Jews are funny, but Asians– they’re not funny’. Another producer at the BBC is reported by Gupta to have said: ‘I did not realise Asians had a sense of humour until I saw *GGM*’.

The title *GGM* has an interesting origin. It refers to the theme tune to the film *The Millionairess* (dir. Anthony Asquith, 1960). Based on a play by George Bernard Shaw, the film centers around Epifania Parerga, an Italian in London, who becomes the world's richest woman when her father dies. The British comic actor Peter Sellers 'blacked up' and impersonated an Indian doctor, Dr Ahmed Al Kabir. He adopted ridiculously exaggerated language, speech and mannerisms and throughout the film exclaimed with idiotic frequency 'Goodness Gracious Me!' in a very exaggerated Indian accent. As a result of this film, for decades, white racism was often expressed with the phrase “Goodness Gracious Me!” White people would use it to imitate, mock and laugh at the way that British Asians spoke English with an accent. So the show was called *GGM* as a way of reclaiming the power of the punch-line and turning racist humour on its head.

Disguising and 'passing', masquerading and mimicking identities are central to much ethnic comedy (as in the Marx Bother films). Much of the comedy exploits the pressures on migrants to assimilate and change their identities in their new country where they are often treated as outsiders. The comic play on what is the real, essential ethnic identity and what is the new, artificial, assimilated identity of immigrants provides excellent comic material. Much of the humour of *GGM* derives precisely from the comic collision of different cultural systems. Comic performances of ethnicity in *GGM* aim to smash discourses of immigrants as victims, subvert notions of cultural authenticity, ridicule essentialised ethnicities, and imagined new identities (Gillespie, 1992, 1995; Gokturk, 1999). Let’s take a closer look at some of the textual strategies used in *GGM*.

Comic techniques and strategies: Playing with Language and Class

The GGM team of writers cum performers drew on their knowledge of Jewish humour from American movies – from the Marx Brothers to Woody Allen. Jewish humour is noted for the ways in which it uses language and logic to subvert authority and reason (Cohen, 2000). The GGM team aspired to this subversive quality and to the way in which Jewish humour and Yiddish vocabulary and idioms passed into colloquial usage in mainstream America. GGM knew from their own personal experiences of growing up as Punjabi and Hindi speakers in Britain that bi-lingualism, foreign accents, misunderstandings and word play can be intrinsically funny. Thus their comedies played very much with language and with social class hierarchies.

GGM succeeded in bringing Punjabi and Hindi jokes, vocabulary and idioms into popular public culture. At the height of its popularity some of the catch phrases from the series, particularly those used by the Bhangra Muffins, could be heard in playgrounds across the UK. The Bhangra Muffins are a pair of working class, street boys. They are not very bright and are great fans of Afro-American hip hop. They desperately want to be “cool” but fail miserably. They speak a London street-wise argot interspersed with Hindi and Punjabi vocabulary. Phrases, such as, 'kiss my chuddies' (or kiss my underpants) and 'Ras Malai' (an Indian sweet or a sweet girl) could be heard in playgrounds and popular parlance all over Britain among youth of all backgrounds. Sanjeev Bhaskar claims that skinheads in a London school were using the term 'Ras Malai' and that white working class kids regularly ask their Punjabi friends to teach them Punjabi catch phrases from the show (7). Other phrases which became popular were 'Chaa Man!' (greetings and salutations); 'Kabbar Dar' (watch it, buddy!); 'Pindoo' (a idiot, a fool); 'Basti' (shame).

The Minx Twins are the female counterparts of the 'Bhangra Muffins': tarty, brash and desperately seeking boys. Everything they say ends with the tag 'innit'? Working class, British Asian behaviour, 'dumb' speech and mannerisms are the butt of the humour. Thus GGM is just as likely to poke fun at British Asian social behaviour as it is to ridicule white British.

The Minx Twins and Bhangra Muffins appeal mainly to the younger audiences who enjoy the following kind of exchange:

A - Hey man, there's a global, pan-continental, inter-racial Ras Malai festival going on. In fact in the year 2050 everyone on the earth will be brown cos of inter-racial mixing

B - Yeah so what you're saying is right that everyone's gonna be Asian?

A-Yeah that's what I'm saying

B-That's gonna be a massive problem

A-What are you chattin' about now?

B-Well if everyone in the world is gonna be Asian who can I smoke in front of without my mum finding out?

A-That's a small price to pay for racial harmony man but you gotta think about the positive aspects of Asia World

B- What's that, man?

A- Well, for example, all shops will be permanently open and you won't have to spend ages waiting for a doctor cos you will be one!

Here we get a utopian fantasy about a world dominated by Asians (a comic reversal the status of the Asian working class in UK), and of racial harmony that, with triumphant bathos, is immediately reduced to an image of a society of surveillance where transgression of parental norms becomes impossible. The stereotypes of Asians as owners of cornershops and as doctors are exposed, and used to good comic effect in this vision of Asia World which is as naive as the stereotypes used to describe it.

Reclaiming Punch-line Power: Comic Inversions

A central comic technique used in *GGM* is the comic inversion. For example, a group of Indian students come to England for a holiday in search of authentic English villages and who complain bitterly about the homeless beggars on the streets and the awful food. Another sketch shows a new white English employee in an Indian firm who is plagued by the miserable failure of his colleagues to pronounce his name ('Jonathan') correctly. This highlights how absurd it is that white British people so often find it so difficult – or simply

don't make the effort - to pronounce Indian names correctly. The aim, according to Gupta, is to subvert and challenge stereotypes: 'but we could not do it if they did not exist. When the number of stereotypes is too small – when there is only one main stereotype of Asians then that is a problem. That was the case in this country when Asians were seen mainly as working in cornershops'.⁽⁸⁾ One of the most famous examples of this kind of comic inversion alludes to white racism in Indian restaurants – prevalent in the UK

Britain boasts an Indian restaurant in every town. An Indian curry is now the British national dish. 'Going For an Indian' has become a quintessential British experience, even if new kinds of dishes like the Balti, designed to cater for British tastes, are an excellent example of "invented tradition". *GGM* turns this British experience around in one of their most popular and famous sketches 'Going For an English'.

'Going for an English': Turning the Tables/Reverse Racism

The setting is Friday evening in down town Bombay at a Berni Inn. The pubs have just shut.

a- I'm totally off my face (drunk). How come every Friday night we end up in a Berni Inn (a very British steak house)?

b- Cos that's what you do, innit? You go out, you get tanked up (drunk) and you go for an English [..].

c- I'll have prawn (mispronounces) cocktail with it. What are you having Nina?

d- Could I just have a chicken curry?

all -Oh no, its an English restaurant you've got to have something English, no Spices Shisis.

d- I don't like it, too bland.

c- James (calls waiter and mispronounces his name as Jam ess) What have you got that's not totally tasteless? There you are! Steak and kidney pee! (that is urine not a pie which he should have said)

d- No no it blocks me up I won't go to the toilet for week

c- That's the whole point of having an English!.

In the above comic exchange, a group of Indian friends create a reverse image of what many British people do. They go out on a Friday night, get very drunk, “go for an English” (in this case), insult the waiter and make fools of themselves. This sketch holds a mirror up to British society and to the kind of drunken and racist behaviour that some engage in. In doing so it ridicules racism through humour and the message comes across in a powerful way.

Changing Names: Satires on Class Snobbery and Family Rivalry

Racism is a common experience for migrants in the UK as elsewhere. One response to racism is to assimilate fast into the host society. Some even reject or deny their cultural background and, like the Marx Brothers comedies, strive to become part of English society. They adopt the behaviour, dress, manners and speech of the English middle classes and their masquerade of Englishness provides a good deal of comic material for GGM. Take for instance the meeting of two couples who parade as quintessentially English:

a-Hello hello so glad you could make it come in!

b-So sorry we're late, got held up on the golf course

a-What is your handicap these days?

b-Still my footing I'm afraid

a-You must be Vina

c-Actually, I prefer to be called Vanessa

a-Oh Vanessa! You never told me your wife was so beautiful Surjit!

b-Still got the old charm you silver-tongued devil. Incidentally, it's not Surjit its St.John (pronounced Sinjin) So at last I get to meet the lovely Mrs Kapoor

d-Pronounced Cooper

b-How's that son of yours Subrash?

d-Sebastian, oh he's abroad at the moment spending a year in India

b-Good God! Why India of all places?

d-Apparently he's gone to find his roots, you know what these crazy youngsters are like he says we're losing our cultural identity here in Chigwell

b-Oh my god, what's this? A brick? Hang on, there's a message on it. It says 'Pakis go home!'

all- Quite right!

The 'Coopers' sketch plays with language and identity. It performs a comic inversion of typical generational relations (the children want to find their roots while their parents reject theirs), and shows how mechanisms of dis-identification and misrecognition work to deny racism. This is where the comic and the serious, if not tragic, come close together. Such comic inversions are a very typical strategy across GGM and they depend on ethnic caricatures.

Ethnic caricature

The series draws upon a range of stock characters whose idiosyncracies are played out across episodes. *Hunky La Funga* is the archetypal Bollywood macho male, conceited, phony, stupid and deeply uncool. *Smeeta Smitten the Showbiz Kitten* opens each sketch with 'Miaow pussycats!' and claims to loiter in the 'litter tray of the stars to unearth hot juicy turds of exclusive gossip for your delight'. These characters send up the sham flamboyance and glitter of Bollywood stars, and the gossip columnists of the ever popular Hindi film magazines. *Mr Everything Comes From India* is the ultimate chauvinist who is forever pointing out the Indian origins of everything English – 'verandhas, polo, shampoo, bungalow, all Indian!' Also Father Christmas: 'big beard, fat man, terrible suit. Indian!' In fact everything comes from India except Apache Indian (a British Asian pop act) and Balti cooking (a type of curry unknown in India but popular here). 'They're from Birmingham'. Then there is the thrifty matriarch *Mrs Bedi* 'I can make it at home for nothing'. 'Why would anyone want to pay perfectly good money for something you can make at home for nothing? Heh ha?'

Parody

The team are talented singers and they regularly include a song and/or dance act. They have spoofed a number of pop songs with their own lyrics which again have caught on in the manner of catchphrases. These include 'I'm a Barbie Girl' which translates into 'I'm a Punjabi Girl' and parodies prevalent stereotypes of Asian girls as passive, oppressed creatures. They have also reworked Pulp's hit 'Common People' into 'Hindi People' which parodies the 'Asian Cool' fashion trend (taken up by pop stars like Madonna), while at the same time satirising the dependence of young Asians on their parents, and their parents' willingness to put up with them:

Take a medical degree graduate at 33
Move back in with mum and dad
Even though they drive you raving mad
You sure you want to live like Hindi people?

I wanna live like Hindi people
I wanna eat what Hindi people eat
I wanna dress like Bindi people
I wanna wear Mendhi on my feet

The show is as unsparing towards whites as it is to Asians. So we get the young Asian lad trying to rebel against his parents by becoming a doctor not a pop singer and refusing their offers of cocaine reflecting a new interest in careers in media. On the other hand there is the Indian woman fleeing her violent husband. She arrives at a women's refuge, pursued by her husband brandishing an enormous knife, but the worker won't intervene, in case that would be 'culturally oppressive'. The cultural relativism of white liberals is thus attacked in this aggressive but hilarious comic assault. White liberal society loves *GGM* and has used the series as a token of harmonious 'race' relations. But what of British Asians?

The reception of GGM among British Asians

Here I shall summarise some general patterns of response from British Asians of all ages whom I have interviewed.⁽⁹⁾ First and foremost the series is seen to create a generational division in that it is understood by all age groups to appeal mainly to young British Asians (10-35 years) born and brought up in this country. Its very Britishness is thus stressed. Those parents who do enjoy it tend to be younger, and their pleasure in it is understood to expose their 'westernised' and liberal values. It thus used as a kind of test to expose underlying values among parents:

H: Like the guy who eventually tells his parents he's gay and that his white friend is his partner and they go 'well, couldn't you find yourself a nice Indian boy?' (laughter) it really brings home their real values which come out as hypocritical you know [...] that's all they're concerned about that you don't go out with a white person [...]

S: Like I'm Hindu and if there came the option [...] they'd go for the Hindu first, the Muslim next but no way English, no way! (laughter)

P: it shows how ridiculous those values are

In contrast some parents protest that *GGM* is corrupting children's minds, others that it takes too many easy jibes at grandparents and the elderly (thus flouting a key norm of unconditional respect for elders). In treating all things Indian as 'Pindu' (backward or peasantish), some say it plays into the hands of racism. Many parents claim that the show started out very well exposing white racism and offering comic caricatures of Asians. However, in later series it lost its critical edge and took taboo subjects too far, becoming overly preoccupied with sexually explicit and bawdy humour that prevented families from watching it together. But as one young girl said 'nothing's going to be good without offending someone'.

It is the direct exposure and airing given to taboo subjects such as homosexuality and the norms of endogamous marriage that so delights its fans. The rivalrous mothers who compare the size of their sons 'dundaars' (penises) sends up the Oedipal attachment of sons and mothers so reminiscent of much Jewish humour. But most of my interviewees recoil at

the Punjabi Adult Porn Phone Line where a son reaches orgasm on the phone to the impersonated sounds of his mother's voice. By the third series many found that 'they were scraping the barrel for cheap laughs'. Punjabi humour is known for its 'quick fire repartit and bawdiness but this is not Punjabi humour', according to one parent. He claims that *GGM* has reinforced regional stereotypes of Punjabi Sikhs as terrorists and obsessed with Bhangra music. Numerous complaints about a alleged mockery of a Hindu wedding ritual by Hindus were upheld by the Broadcasting Standards Commission. The *GGM* team said they missed the point. The object of humour were the second generation kids who practice rituals without bothering to find out about their symbolic meanings. The hostile reactions of some Hindus has resulted in a death threat to the team according to Nina Wadia. This gives some indication of the different degrees of provocation felt, and the hugely variable responses to *GGM* among British Asians.

GGM is seen to bring out not only the religious and class differences between families but also the commonalities and sharing the jokes creates intimacy:

P: The programme brings out a lot of things that are so common in Asian families that you tend to forget about [due to an emphasis on religious and other axes of differences among British Asians] and the way the programme keys into that is really amusing

G: like suitcases on the top of wardrobes, plastic covering carpets, crazy family picnics and parents over-reacting at things

Amarjit- and Fruit cream on every dessert (laughs)

Status competition and rivalry among parents over their children's achievement and upward mobility is one of the key butts of laughter. As Sarita says 'It's always like you've got to do one better you know, it's quite common'. But parents are also the butt of humour due to their failure to assimilate and understand British ways: 'like the one where the dad turns up and says kids I've got a pet for you and he brings a cow into the kitchen'. Here the incongruous concepts clash to great comic effect.

Across the interviews young British Asians are able to reel off sketch after sketch and appropriate the comic narratives to make points about their own lives and the lives of

British Asians more generally. But perhaps what is most appreciated are the comic assaults on racism which are widely held to be affirmative and to bolster confidence, helping young people to reject discourses of victimhood, alienation and marginalization:

'*GGM* does cover the difficulties of our lives as Asians but it makes you feel inspired to go out and assert yourself and not to be afraid to challenge anyone in authority [...] we do love our parents but we can't always agree with their ideas so that inevitably creates conflict'. Therein lies the identificatory processes with *GGM* that are the ultimately empowering face of comedy.

Re-branding Britain 'multicultural'.

GGM has come to occupy a central position in British popular culture as the series which broke boundaries in British 'race' relations. Though not a politically correct show some claim has done more for anti-racism than a thousand earnest documentaries. White British from liberals to skinheads have laughed at the hypocrisies and the arrogant prejudices of the English. The British establishment has also used the series to signal the re-branding of a multicultural Britain, and to mark and symbolise a new era of tolerant British 'race' relations: 'with no help from marketing departments, Britain is re-branding itself: ... "mainstream" is no longer synonymous with "white"'.⁽¹⁰⁾

The show ignited a public debate. Murdoch's conservative newspaper *The Times* (7 January 1998) published a leader article celebrating *GGM* as a British comedy classic and lauding it as the 'oil of race relations ... for when blacks, whites and Asians can laugh together the sting is taken from prejudice or crude generalisation'. According to *The Times*, *GGM* is eclectic, based on old traditions of quirky British humour which have been readily accepted and updated by the *GGM* team:

The British sense of humour is something that even foreigners, depressed by the weather and despairing over the food, agree makes life in Britain worth living ... The famous sense of humour has also emerged as the secret ingredient in that other little trumpeted success, Britain's increasingly successful race relations record.... It would be unthinkable in

America: race relations are too brittle and the tyranny of political correctness too pervasive. Old Britain and its more recent immigrants are lucky. When both laugh at each other, both like each other better for doing so.⁽¹¹⁾

Such assertions have to be considered in the light of a paradoxical feature of British society: the simultaneous tendency towards on the one hand multiculturalism and on the other hand continuing racism. Despite considerable advances made in multicultural broadcasting in Britain, both in mainstream and specialist television units, there is plenty of evidence that ethnocentrism and subtle forms of racism persist. There are few examples of overt racism thanks to established codes of practice, self-censorship and the prevailing climate of political correctness. Broadcasting institutions need to be proactive in the anti-racist struggle since the achievement of a truly multicultural society cannot be left to market forces or 'natural evolution' alone. But the pursuit of ratings increasingly makes producers play safe. With the success of *GGM* the BBC can claim to have 'done its bit' for British 'race'-relations. But has it and is it enough? Now that third series is over what next? What will happen to the writers and the performers? Will they find more work? Will they always have the 'Asian' comic label attached to their names? What of integrated casting? Will we arrive at a moment when we simply do not notice that half the cast of a comedy show is Asian or black? Will the numbers of blacks and Asians at the top echelons of television companies increase? Is the mobilisation of essentialist categories such as Black and Asian in the battle to secure scarce resources simply reinforcing categorical groupings which are, in the long term, counter-productive? Despite these enduring questions, *GGM* gives us grounds for optimism rather than pessimism.

Notes

(1) *Goodness Gracious Me* *GGM* first appeared on BBC Radio 4 in July 1996 in an 11.25pm slot and was popular with the middle-aged, middle-class white audience. In 1997 it received a Sony Gold Award (a prestigious radio award), having captured an audience of 2.83 million. It transferred to BBC2 television in 1998 and was no less successful. It got an average of three million viewers which, for a new BBC2 comedy series, is an excellent rating especially as 85% of the audience was not Asian. Given a population of 1.26

million Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, this is of course more a matter of arithmetic than an upsurge of interest on the part of white viewers. GGM had gone mainstream. (These statistics are reported in The Guardian Weekend February 20 1999 p. 30). The second and third TV series were given a prime slot on Friday night at 9.30pm in recognition of its success and status. According to Meera Syal, the TV show was watched mostly by white males aged between 11 and 20. She claims: 'you know you've made it when you get a response from middle England'. But the show has been hugely successful with Asian audiences too – a group that the BBC had failed previously to reach in any great number. More than half of the potential Asian audience watched the second series. Though no breakdown figures are available, judging from audience profiles at their nation-wide live performances, these audiences are young (mainly 18-35 age group), middle-class, and, like Meera Syal and the rest of the team, very relaxed with a hyphenated British-Asian identity (cited Hotline, November 1998).

(2) See [Http://www.wmin.ac.uk/media/pgjnet/sarah-gill/meera.html](http://www.wmin.ac.uk/media/pgjnet/sarah-gill/meera.html) page 2.

(3) *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4 10/11/98

(4) *The Guardian Weekend* February 20 1999: 28.

(5) *The Guardian Weekend* February 20 1999: 28.

(6) 'Making or Breaking Stereotypes.' Talk and Discussion by the GGM team in the *Inspirations and Aspirations Series* organised by Dhooleka Raj, at Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge, UK, held on May 10 1999.

(7) *ibid*

(8) *ibid*

(9) This section draws upon extensive interviews with 15 British Asians of all ages conducted over 1998-2000

(10) *The Times* January 9: 1999 p.9.

(11) *ibid*

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