

Idris Elba and the James Bond Debate

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Why Idris Elba?

The celebrity who I would like to look at in this paper is Idris Elba. He is a male black actor who was born and raised in Hackney, London. His parents have roots in Sierra Leone and Ghana.

For the last decade Idris Elba was in debate for playing the role of the next James Bond. But what is interesting is why this debate came up? I would like to have a closer look at *Britishness* and *race* in this context. There would have been no debate if Elba had been a white actor, as the “anti-Elba” James Bond fans declare that James Bond always has been and always should be a white Scotsman. Elba, however, is neither white nor Scottish.

I think this analysis will be relevant to present today’s society’s view on race and racism in the UK film world. Furthermore, it will be interesting to look at the image of Britishness that James Bond embodies and how Idris Elba fits into that.

So my question is, how did this debate shape Elba’s star image? And how did/does he represent himself during the controversy?

“my name’s Elba, Idris Elba.”
(Idris Elba)

The “on-brand” Bond:

Britishness and masculinity in James Bond:

- 6 archetypes of masculinity
- Each actor brought their own twist on the character of Bond
 - both regarding Britishness and masculinity
- But in 59 years and 25 films one thing stayed the same
 - James Bond is always a white man!

Racism in fandoms:

- Outcry of James Bond fans because of possible change of the “on brand” Bond into e.g. a different race or gender
- Fans reaction to Elba as the next Bond is an example of racism (and sexism) in fandoms
 - hindering diversity

Talent over Identity Categories:

Elba on diversity in the film industry:

- Diversity not just regarding race but also gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, social background
- “Because the TV world helps shape the real world. It’s also a window on our world. But when we look out the window, none of us live in *Downton Abbey*.” (Idris Elba, Speech on Diversity)
 - diversity on TV helps the society to see the importance of it
 - also normalizes diversity
 - does not make diversity seem like a “risk”
- talent as the most important factor when it comes to casting:
 - So much lost talent because the film industry chooses people who do not seem to be a “risk” over real talent
 - lack of opportunity for underprivileged people
 - lack of diversity

Elba in the BBC Series Luther:

- proves his talent/ capability of playing a British detective
- at the time there were merely any black detectives in London
 - makes it seem more normal

“Of course, if someone said to me ‘Do you want to play James Bond?’ I’d be like, Yeah! That’s fascinating to me. But it’s not something I’ve expressed, like, Yeah, I wanna be the black James Bond.’ He now has fun with rumormongering, riling up fans with 007-esque tweets and a selfie with Daniel Craig.”
(Idris Elba in his interview with Austin Collins)

“Isn’t it time for a black James Bond?”

- Elba was not the first black actor to be speculated as the next Bond
 - Colin Salmon
- Are fictional characters always white?
 - if skin colour is not mentioned, automatically white?
 - hinders imagination of society
 - shows that the concept of a post-racism society is simply untrue

Not all “anti-Elba” fans are white:

1. some want the directors to stick to Bond’s character (how can a *character* be black or white?)
2. some want black people to have their own “agent-film”

None of us are just one flavour or one colour. If we were, we’d be one-dimensional. And that’s what used to drive me mad as an up and coming actor. My agent and I, we’d get scripts and we were always asked to read the “black male” character. Or “the athletic type.” And that was just Crime watch... But when a script called for a “black male”, it wasn’t describing a character. It was describing a skin colour. A white man – or a Caucasian – was described as “a man with a twinkle in his eye”.

My eyes may be dark, but they definitely twinkle! (Ask the Mrs...) And I was like “I wanna play the character with a twinkle in his eyes!” So I got to a certain point in my career, and I saw that glass ceiling; I was very close to hitting my forehead on it.

I was busy, I was getting lots of work, but I realised I could only play so many “best friends” or “gang leaders”. I knew I wasn’t going to land a lead role. I knew there wasn’t enough imagination in the industry for me to be seen as a lead.

(Idris Elba, Speech on Diversity)

Idris Elba’s star image:

Self representation on Twitter:

- Social media platforms made it possible for celebrities to portray themselves however they want to (Giles)
- Celebrities become a “product” of culture in this context (Redmond)
- Elba uses his Twitter to play with the rumours of him being the next potential Bond
 - fuels the debate on racism and diversity in the film industry but also keeps him on screen
 - Elba as a person becomes secondary and starts to function as a symbol on behalf of the black acting community (=he becomes a “product of culture”)

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