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Prejudice and Pride writer dismisses political correctness

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The man developing a contemporary Asian version of Jane Austen's classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* was determined yesterday to dispel any suggestion he was making a political point.

In an outspoken interview with the Guardian, Farrukh Dhondy, the former head of multicultural programmes at Channel 4, attacked the "Zadie Smith school of writing".

"Blacks ought to be seen as what they are, murdering dirty swine. They are just as murdering and just as swine-like as any whites," he said, referring to the fact one of his characters runs away with a black rap star, rather than the white army officer of Austen's original.

Mr Dhondy said his version of the 19th century tale of romance and family tension would focus on the drama of the story.

"Drama is not a vehicle of social policy, it is a vehicle of narrative, a vehicle of story," he asserted.

He said the values of a modern Asian family matched Austen's template perfectly.

"I thought the Asian family today fitted completely into the standards and values of regency England, with the resistance against runaway daughters and the romance exhibited by the central characters."

Mr Dhondy said his script, which is being developed by Yorkshire TV, mirrored the original in many ways.

The Bhonot family is headed by a retired Punjabi accountant living in Saddleworth with his five daughters; Mr Darcy becomes an Oxford-educated US lawyer, Dara Singh; the daughter with whom he falls in love, Elizabeth Bennet in the book, becomes Lit.

Instead of running away with an army officer, her younger sister falls for a rap singer.

The writer has no specific actors in mind to play the leading characters but said he would not object to white actors playing the roles.

"I would like them to have brown faces but if they have to black up, then fine," he said.

This week, concern at the portrayal of ethnic minorities on screen was raised by the cultural diversity network, set up by broadcasters to keep track of their commitment to reflecting Britain's multicultural society.

But Mr Dhondy said black actors and writers should not expect special treatment and TV executives should not force change.

"There are no special concessions to be afforded. Drama should be the criteria, not race relations.

"Nobody, not Greg Dyke, not Michael Jackson, has got a clue about this."

Mr Dhondy acknowledged that other black writers might be irritated at his characterisations in *Prejudice and Pride*.

"I want to make them real, deep - but I want to avoid the idea that they ought to all be anti-racist in some form," he explained.

He said black drama on TV was too political. "The writers they choose have all been anti-racist men and women," he said, citing Zadie Smith, whose best-seller, *White Teeth*, is being adapted for television.

Andrea Wonfor, the creative director of the Granada TV group, which includes Yorkshire, said Mr Dhondy's script played up the comedy and irony of Austen's original.

Speaking at the cultural diversity network's conference, she expressed a hope it would be commissioned by ITV.

The last TV adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* was BBC1's 1995 production, starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth.