

Representation of People with Disabilities in Film: Increasing Stories, Fewer Actors

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Abstract

This paper is a broad study on the Representation of People with Disabilities in Film and the facts surrounding it. One billion people, or 15% of the world's population experience some form of disability, and yet only 3.1 percent of characters on-screen are disabled in the US. These numbers are even more hopeless in terms of Indian Cinema. This non-representation of a significant part of the population is trying to convey a warped and disproportionate reality. In a world that is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of representation in media, the authentic representation of disabled actors is still nowhere near satisfactory. How many of us can recall the last time they saw an actor with a disability on screen, one that was not a stereotypical caricature used for comic relief. Time and time again we see able-bodied actors trying to mimic people with disabilities in an exaggerated manner in cinema, often rewarded for their performances with critical acclaim and awards. Be it Rani Mukerji in *Black*, Priyanka Chopra in *Barfi*, Hrithik Roshan in *Guzaarish*, Shahrukh Khan and Anushka Sharma in *Zero* or Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump* and Freddie Highmore in *The Good Doctor*, the list is endless. Notice how all these actors were highly praised for their portrayal of their respective characters? Able-bodied actors play 95% of TV's disabled roles, according to a new study released by Ruderman White Paper. Even this would be fine if there wasn't an abundance of disabled actors being rejected and not getting hired because of their disability. Imagine seeing an already well established, able-bodied actor taking away

one of the few roles you might actually get, and bagging awards and acclaim for acting like you. This is a reality for disabled actors. Therefore, while stories revolving around disability are increasing, the representation is still skewed and dismal. This paper will tackle problems related to disability representation in the media and its repercussions.

Keywords:

People with disabilities; Film; Ableism; Representation; Able-bodied; Caricature; Media; Disabled Actors; Recognition

The importance of movies in our society is manifold. They act as cultural artifacts for generations to come, provide entertainment in an accessible way, and have the ability to convey strong messages in a consumable manner while having far-reaching impacts. Hence, representation becomes an integral part of movies and the conversations around it. Even as the discourse around representation widens, one section of society still seems to be relegated to the sidelines when it comes to representation in films. They are, of course, people with disabilities. In a world that is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of representation in media, authentic representation of disabled actors is still nowhere near satisfactory. This paper will aim to problematize present-day practices in the movie industry in relation to people with disabilities and why these practices must be changed expeditiously.

I

One billion people, or 15% of the world's population experience some form of disability, and yet only 3.1 percent of characters on-screen are disabled in the US. These numbers are even more hopeless in terms of Indian Cinema. This non-representation of a significant part of the population conveys a warped and disproportionate reality and it needs to change now. Just like it is impermissible for a Hollywood movie to only cast white people for a movie in this day and age, unless it's integral to the plot of the movie, people with disabilities should also be given the same platform. With growing awareness about social issues, stories about people of colour, LGBTQ+ folks and people with disabilities, are increasing. But disabled people still haven't been given screen space as actors, for the most part, and that is gravely disappointing. "Nothing About Us Without Us", the slogan popularized by disability activists, puts this case in

point. It focuses on the active involvement of persons with disabilities in the planning of strategies and policies that affect their lives. In the same way it is important for actors with disabilities to be casted in movies or shows that profit off of their stories. This will positively impact the lives of common people with disabilities as they would be able to relate to characters that look like them and have similar challenges. This can be compared to how it is important for an Indian teen living in the US, to see someone who looks like them being represented in the media, and not only as a negative stereotype. Or for girls interested in scientific exploration to see themselves in a field often represented by men.

As Jonathan Abbott aptly puts it, "Accurate, authentic representation can break down barriers, open us to new ideas, create powerful role models, and even be a source of inspiration." Representation does not only provide marginalized communities with relatability but also encourages them to rise above the stereotypes surrounding them.

II

About 1 in 4 adults in the United States have a disability, either physical or psychological, and 26.8 million people in India have one or the other kind of disability. So this is beyond just a minority issue at this point. It was revealed that able-bodied actors play 95% of disabled roles, according to a new study released by Ruderman White Paper. Surely, anyone can see that there is something really wrong with these numbers. To put this into perspective, just how it's extremely problematic for a non-black actor to do blackface, mimic a black person's mannerisms, use African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and take up roles that belong to black people, in the same way able-bodied actors taking up roles with disabled characters is problematic.

But we see able-bodied actors doing this all the time and instead being rewarded for it. I see it as another form of appropriation. Be it Rani Mukerji in *Black*, Priyanka Chopra in *Barfi*, Hrithik Roshan in *Guzaarish*, Shahrukh Khan and Anushka Sharma in *Zero* or Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump* and Freddie Highmore in *The Good Doctor*, the list is endless. In fact, these actors were explicitly praised for their portrayal of their respective characters, often being told it was the performance of their careers. This is to the point that there's a saying in Hollywood about it, if an actor wants to win an Oscar, they should play a character with a disability. This expression isn't entirely unfounded either, because 62 actors have been nominated for the academy awards for playing a disabled character, and 28 of those have been successful and won recognition, and only three of those were actual actors with disabilities. In India, too, Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Rani Mukerji swept all awards in 2005-06, from Filmfare to

International Indian Film Academy Awards (IIFA) to even the National Award, for their movie *Black*, loosely based on Hellen Keller's life. Amitabh Bachchan also won the National Award for his movie *Paa*, along with an abundance of praise. Hence, it is safe to say that able-bodied actors benefit both monetarily and critically when they take up such roles.

Of course, one need not be disabled to portray such a character, but in an industry that has so many excellent actors who do themselves live with a disability, why the disparity in casting? This would not be such a big issue if there wasn't an abundance of disabled actors being rejected and not getting hired because of their disability. Imagine seeing an already well-established, able-bodied actor taking away one of the few roles you actually had a chance to secure, and bagging awards and acclaim for acting like you. This is a reality for disabled actors. Some might want to play the devil's advocate and say that able-bodied actors are casted in disabled roles because of the clout they bring to the movie and that they have a better chance at making the movie a commercial success. But it is important to acknowledge that as a society, we need to make space for marginalized communities, rather than take their space. If a movie is solely being made to profit off of Disability narratives without their representation, without them being able to tell their own stories, then it should not be made. Additionally, how will the industry find new talent that is equally capable of being successful, if they keep on casting the same old popular actors.

Take Peter Dinklage, for example; he has achondroplasia, a form of dwarfism. He is an extremely successful actor now and is highly praised for his acting skills. Imagine if he never got to make it big because an able bodied person took his role and was made short using CGI, similar to Shahrukh Khan in *Zero*. Then the world would miss out on Dinklage's talent and he would probably have to give up acting, even though he's extremely talented. This is what should not happen; imagine all the good actors we're missing out on just because they aren't being given space in the industry for having a disability. As a cinephile, this is a huge concern for me.

III

There are other issues with depiction of disability in films, like ableist stereotypes that reaffirm harmful biases against people with disabilities. These often are:

- 1) Life is not worth living as a disabled person, one is better off dead

- 2) Disabled characters being used for comic relief
- 3) A character becoming disabled after doing something "bad" in their lives, karma for their wrongful actions
- 4) Disabled characters having heightened remaining senses, a supernatural sixth sense.

The movies *Me Before You* and *Million Dollar Baby*, both extremely successful Hollywood movies follow the first stereotype where the disabled person prefers dying rather than living with their condition, and Bollywood's *Guzaarish* made use of the same formula. Then, the Bollywood movie *Golmaal* makes use of the second stereotype where a speech-impaired character is used for comic relief because of his inability to speak, and how, him trying to speak sounds "funny". People with dwarfism are also used for comic relief and are ridiculed in countless comedy movies in Bollywood. The karmic stereotype can be seen when a lot of movie villains have disabilities or facial disfigurements. Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*, and *James Bond* villains throughout history, majorly had facial disfigurements or physical impairments. The fourth stereotype relating to heightened senses and supernatural sixth sense in disabled people, especially blind people, is another overdone trope, and it can be seen in the movies *Daredevil* and *Kaabil*. While these movies are inspirational, they still put the onus of being accepted in society on people with disabilities rather than on the society itself. The connotation here is that if one is disabled, they should overcompensate by having an extraordinary power to be "useful" to society. These seemingly harmless tropes perpetuate harmful stereotypes about disabled people, which might become reasons why disabled actors would not want to participate in such films and refuse such roles, further narrowing down their options. Hence, writers need to come up with fresher and more progressive roles for disabled people for there to be mainstream conversations about disability.

Authentic representation of disabled people will benefit not only the film industry, but in turn society, too. Films will become more accurate and authentic as disabled actors bring their own experiences to the table and in their performance. Moreover, the time that able-bodied actors take to study disabled people to perfect their performances, that time can be cut down on as disabled people that have the same experiences as the character, are given roles. Then, as a result of more and more authentic representation, people in society will not feel uncomfortable around the topic of disability anymore, leading to normalization and destigmatization of disability. That is the end goal, of course.

Conclusions

To conclude, there is an urgent need to broaden the spectrum in terms of disability in cinema and cast actual actors with disabilities in movies that deal with the topic. Fortunately, there is a growing positive wave in this field at the present, and I am hopeful for the future. With the surge of OTT and streaming platforms, a lot of thought-provoking and progressive content is getting green-lighted, including an increase in disability media. Netflix's *Never Have I Ever* had Lily D. Moore, an actress with down syndrome, the extremely successful *The Peanut Butter Falcon* had a protagonist with down syndrome played by Zack Gottsagen, and the protagonist in Netflix's *Special* is played by actor Ryan O'Connell, who is gay and has cerebral palsy. John Krasinski's directorial venture *A Quiet Place* has deaf actress Millicent Simmonds, where her character and other characters benefit from her disability in the movie. And just recently, Troy Kotsur won best supporting actor for *CODA* at the Oscars, where *CODA* also became the first film starring a mostly deaf cast in leading roles to win best picture at the 94th Academy Awards. Hence, I am optimistic about the future and hope that people with disabilities are seen first and foremost, as people, and that their disability is just one aspect of their lives. The goal is for them to be known as actors, who also happen to have disabilities.

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