

## Research & Essays

### **Cinema on the Spectrum: The Importance of Representation of Persons with Autism in a Post-COVID World**

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#### **Author Note**

The first draft of this article was completed in 2019. However, as 2020 unfolded and many turned to their screens for an escape, the growing influence of media on its audience became impossible to ignore. So, my article now explores this development in the context of those who have historically been sidelined by media - an active pursuit that I believe is imperative in a rapidly changing, post-COVID world.

### Abstract

Be it the cooky sidekick or the awkward genius, mainstream media has seen many variations of the autistic character – some more realistic than others. This essay explores some reasons why representation of persons with autism in mainstream cinema can be important for their successful integration into society. It also suggests this need is exacerbated during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. These ideas are explored through the analysis of landmark representations of autism in both Hollywood and the Indian Film Industry. These two geographic zones (United States and India) are chosen as they are the two largest film industries in the world, collectively contributing over 2500 moving pictures per year. The findings indicate that there are noticeable distinctions between the different types of representations. Moreover, it is evident that there exist specific steps which can and should be taken by content creators in the field to achieve a responsible array of media representation which both benefits and entertains our increasingly conscientious society.

*Keywords:* autism, cinema, film, representation, media

## Cinema on the Spectrum: The Importance of Representation of Persons with Autism in a Post-COVID World

I've learned that every human being, with or without disabilities, needs to strive to do their best, and by striving for happiness you will arrive at happiness. For us, you see, having autism is normal - so we can't know for sure what your 'normal' is even like. But so long as we can learn to love ourselves, I'm not sure how much it matters whether we're normal or autistic.

-- Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump*

Media is often referred to as the mirror of society. Audio-visual mediums, film and television in particular, have an increasingly significant effect. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated this influence. As the world went into lockdown, media consumption hit a record high. In India, the first month of lockdown saw a 75% increase in video streaming (Keelery, 2020). Netflix reported a total of 16 million new users worldwide in the first 3 months of 2020, double the amount it saw in the three months prior. Netflix's share also rose by 30% as investors placed their bets on people remaining indoors for the foreseeable future (Thomas, 2020).

Ironically, however, six months into the global pandemic, Wells Fargo's Steven Cahall cut down his estimate for Netflix's third quarter subscriber growth over outrage regarding the French film *Les Mignonnes [The Cuties]* which faced allegations of oversexualizing minors (Szalai, 2020). So among a backdrop of skyrocketing media consumption as well as "outrage culture," viewers demand an increase in both quantity and quality. An increasing number of modern audiences expect the media they consume to also align with their personal values and morals. Therefore, not only is film and television media being consumed by more people than ever before, its impact may be unprecedented.

In this context, discourse surrounding representation in media gains newfound importance. As posited by W. J. T. Mitchell's seminal work *Picture Theory*, representation constructs knowledge (Mitchell, 1995). In other words, representation *matters*. This belief is affirmed in the contemporary post-COVID world as industry leaders such as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences begin to call for broader inclusion and representation in the

industry (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2020). In India too, this conversation has brought attention to challenging the “ideal” of fair skin and more recently, the caste hierarchy.

Discrimination based on skin color, race, ethnicity and gender is endemic. The Clark Doll Experiment, first conducted in the 1940s to gauge the destructive impact of segregation, consisted of children between the ages of 3 and 7 asked to pick out who is “nice,” “bad,” “pretty” and “ugly” from a pair of two dolls - one black and one white. When picking the “prettiest” and “nicest” doll, most children, regardless of their own ethnicity, picked the white doll. If we were to now consider adding a quadriplegic doll to this mix, it would not be unreasonable to assume that a black, disabled doll would be chosen even less frequently by young participants.

Such attitudes towards race and disability stem at least in part from stereotypes and misinformation perpetuated by media. For better or worse, media images are often the principal exposure many non-disabled people have to persons with disabilities. In 1991, a poll conducted in the wake of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act showed that Americans were less likely to feel awkward around persons with disabilities after having viewed a fictional television show or movie featuring a disabled character (Harris, 1991). This suggests that many people rely on these fictitious accounts and portrayals to, at least in part, construct their view towards people with disabilities.

In the case of autism, specifically, this issue becomes even more pertinent because the condition is not often easily understood. Autism was first defined by in 1943 as an ‘innate’ disorder (Kanner, 1943). However, its definition continues to evolve. Currently, it is defined as a “spectrum disorder,” on a continuum of severity, as well as a “syndrome,” encompassing a wide variety of traits” (Strate, 2006). Three specific symptoms - deficiency in social interaction, repetitive and restricted patterns of behavior and childhood manifestation - *are* defined, but most characteristics outside of these are subjective and vary by person. Hence, the difficulty with accurately representing autism in media in part stems from the fact that autism is a spectrum on which a myriad of abilities, behaviors and personalities lie. Attempting to reflect this complexity in media has had mixed results.

## Methodology

For the purpose of this article, only portrayals from the United States of America and India will be analyzed. As the top two film industries in the world with a collective viewership of over 6.2 billion, their impact can be assumed to be objectively higher than any other regional industry in the world. Moreover, only films and series which have either had a theatrical release or have been aired on television or major streaming platforms are considered as the objective is to assess media with the highest possible viewership. The chosen films and series, thus, are those which are recognized in the mainstream and/or can be defined as pop culture stalwarts by the general public.

## Media Analysis

### Hollywood

In the well-known 1989 film, *Rain Man*, directed by Barry Levinson, Dustin Hoffman stars as Raymond, an autistic savant (a person with autism who has an extraordinary ability or area of knowledge). Tom Cruise plays Charlie, his selfish brother. The character of Raymond is consistent with the ‘savant’ stereotype, an extremely common representation of autism in mainstream media (Prochnow, 2014). This style of portrayal can be seen in contemporary television shows such as *The Good Doctor*, which is based on the premise of a genius autistic medical professional. Such portrayals are also often seen in characters which are “autistically coded,” i.e., they display symptoms and characteristics of being autistic, but the condition is never explicitly addressed in the script. Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* and Sherlock Holmes from BBC’s *Sherlock* are examples of non-canonical autistic characters who play into the “savant” stereotype.

In a telling scene from *Rain Man*, Charlie takes Raymond to a doctor to be evaluated. The doctor informs Charlie that Raymond is an “idiot savant,” i.e., he is actually extremely intelligent and high functioning but that his autism “causes him to have a problem communicating and learning.” This statement rings true to the extent that most persons with autism appear to have a functioning and layered consciousness, which they may be unable to express due to the disconnect between their mind and physical body. However, while this stereotype appears to be a positive one at first glance, it may do more harm than good. By focusing on the small minority of “autistic geniuses,” the media places this archetype on a pedestal, making it the “model neurominority” (Toon Ruins, 2019). These representations

skip past the majority of persons with autism who are of average or low intelligence, forming an inaccurate image in the mind of the uninformed viewer. Hence, such stereotypes place undue expectations on persons with autism, as the media representing them primarily only focuses in on and romanticizes this fantasy of an awkward prodigy.

Whether accurate or not, these images in media can have a profound impact on public perception of disability. It is well documented that in preparation for his role as Raymond, Hoffman spent a year studying real-life savants such as Temple Grandin, and he also worked closely with an expert (McCarthy, 2018). The problem then emerges not necessarily because such portrayals ring untrue but because, at the time of release, it was the *only* portrayal the general public had access to. This has helped perpetuate the ever-pervasive myth of “special abilities” in autistic individuals.

Nevertheless, mainstream Hollywood *is* moving towards more realistic portrayals of autism. Prochnow (2014) suggests, “these [realistic] depictions most closely match the criteria laid out for ASD in the DSM-5. The characters are neither over-the-top in their behaviors nor subdued in the display of their symptoms. They are also not portrayed in an overtly positive or negative light” (p. 143). A fitting example of such representation comes from the 2017 Netflix series *Atypical*. The show revolves around the personal and family life of Sam, a teenager with autism. Over the course of three seasons, the web series explores various themes which are prevalent in the lives of intellectually disabled children including - but not limited to - counselling, sexuality, social integration and independent living. The format of the show consists of 8 to 10 30-minute episodes per season. This extended time, coupled with the freedom of producing for an online platform, appears to have allowed the creators to explore these themes at length and in detail, allowing for a more realistic, nuanced portrayal.

## **Bollywood**

Indian media charts a different landscape for its autistic characters. Before 2010, the existence of canonical autistic characters in mainstream media was virtually non-existent. Films which did feature autistically-coded characters, such as *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003), did not outrightly acknowledge the condition. Moreover, these films treated autism as a flaw needing to be fixed, in line with the outdated medical model of disability. 2010’s *My Name is Khan* was the first mainstream Bollywood film to feature an autistic protagonist with Asperger’s Syndrome. The film has been widely praised for its more accurate and nuanced portrayal of life with autism. It correctly represents some of the quirks observed in people on the spectrum

such as constant fiddling or “stimming” (self-stimulating behaviors) and aversion to the color yellow. While Rizwan Khan in the film does display some characteristics of the savant stereotype, this characterization is muted and less exaggerated as compared to Hollywood films like *Rain Man* (Aiofe, 2017). However, *My Name is Khan* isn’t without its fair share of criticism. Ben Belek, an anthropologist from Cambridge University, observes that the overarching theme of the film seems to convey that humans are all the same despite differences in religion, ethnicity and neurological make-up (Belek, 2019). This messaging, while well-intentioned, may overlook the importance of *acknowledging* difference rather than ignoring it, to achieve harmony and equality in society (Bumiller, 2008).

Alternatively, other representations in Indian cinema also portray autism as being linked to certain supernatural phenomena. Malayalam director Vivek’s 2019 thriller *Athiran* plays into this sinister stereotype by giving the autistic heroine superhuman reflexes which she utilizes in martial arts. In the first half of the film, the autistic character is portrayed as malicious and potentially supernatural. In the second half, the narrative is flipped to portray her as an object of violence, in need of rescue. For an audience unfamiliar with autism, this kind of representation can lead to the development of dangerously faulty constructs.

Additionally, it is important to note that every character discussed so far is a representation of *verbal* persons with autism. This is because the *non-speaking* section of the autism community is extremely under-represented in film. A mainstream film which attempted to portray this end of the spectrum was Anurag Basu’s *Barfi!* (2012). In line with the aesthetic of the film, Priyanka Chopra’s portrayal of the autistic character Jhilmil was lighthearted, quirky and romantic. Unfortunately, this aesthetic did not lend to a realistic portrayal as the character’s autism diagnosis seemed inconsistent, and malleable according to the needs of the plot, hence reducing the character to a caricature.

Such strategies of simplifying and making the condition of people with autism more palatable to audiences can have serious consequences. Dr. P. N. Sharma, Special Needs educator and author of *Autism: Nature, Needs and Diagnosis* (2018), suggests such representations can be dangerous. Sharma notes that “even films which supposedly feature autistic protagonists such as *My Name is Khan* or *Barfi!* feature them in a manner which is palatable for the general audience.” With real-life mannerisms and challenges “watered down to fit an aesthetic, as to not disturb the ignorant Indian populace,” audiences are left misinformed and are more likely to be insensitive to actual people with autism. Sharma

stresses the importance of more realistic media representation by saying, “In India, people who are uneducated about intellectual disabilities are extremely insensitive towards autistic people. They call them ‘pagal’ [crazy]. Such attitudes are extremely harmful and this is why media representation is vital in order to educate these masses” (P. N. Sharma, personal communication, March 6, 2020).

## Conclusion

Inaccurate representations of people with autism in mainstream media, such as *savant*, *supernatural* and *quirky* characters, do not represent the average person on the spectrum but instead serve the plot and stylistic choices of the film. By contrast, more realistic portrayals have the following characteristics: (1) they do not embellish the autistic character’s personality with traits which lie outside of what would typically be expected for dramatic effect; and (2) they serve as responsible templates for what a real person with autism may look like to an uninformed audience.

An inaccurate representation is not, in and of itself, negative. As Prochnow (2014) states, “it is better to have an unintentional negative representation than to have no representation at all and be ignored as a social group” (p. 148). However, in order for these kinds of representations to exist and not cause harm to the autism community, broader representation and “normalization” must pre-exist and be readily available as realistic alternatives. In much the same way that the Marvel superhero or villain is not mistaken as an average human, audiences must be prevented from seeing limited, atypical representations as accurate models of autism. The American film industry has, in contemporary times, taken strides towards such “normalization” with series like *Atypical*. The Indian film Industry too has moved in a similar direction with films such as *My Name is Khan* but is still behind the United States with respect to the quality and quantity of positive representation.

To conclude, though persons on the spectrum may not always be adept at communication, they earnestly wish, of course, like anyone else, to be parts of society. Summing up the sense of isolation many with autism feel, in the *Reason I Jump*, Higashida (2016) states “We’d love to be with other people. But because things never, ever go right, we end up getting used to being alone, without even noticing this is happening ... it makes me feel desperately lonely” (p.28). Ultimately, more accurate representations, especially in this time of steadily increasing, socially-vigilant viewership, may provide a small but real benefit for



many struggling to communicate their own wish for acceptance, and such portrayals could in turn contribute to the development of more inclusive communities in the real world.

**Ananya Kapoor**, a graduate in Multimedia and Mass Communication from the University of Delhi, is an author and aspiring filmmaker. She has directed several short films, assisted on the sets of popular web-series and was one of the selected participants at the Thailand International Film Destination Festival 2019. When not writing about or making films, she can be found in bed, *watching* films – or as she refers to it, “researching”. She is currently pursuing her Masters in Filmmaking and hopes to help make the industry a more inclusive space through her work.

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