



Shruti Rajkumar · July 15, 2021 · 6 min read

### “Never Have I Ever”: A Challenge To Be Intersectional In Critiques

As season two of the Netflix hit, “Never Have I Ever” hits the internet, Shruti dives into the show’s problematic ableist plot that often goes unmentioned by other critiques.

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Shruti Rajkumar

Staff Writer

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TW// Ableism, ableist language

When the first season of the TV series *Never Have I Ever* came out on Netflix a little over a year ago, I was immediately excited to see Indian-American representation. The coming-of-age comedy-drama created by Mindy Kaling follows Indian-American high school student Devi as she tries to navigate her culture and life while dealing with her father’s sudden death.

Within the first few minutes of the show, viewers see Devi suddenly unable to walk while at swim practice, and for a split second, I was even more thrilled to see intersectional representation—a physically disabled Indian-American, just like myself.

A disabled Indian American storyline seemed too good to be true—and that’s exactly what it was.

“ The representation I had always dreamed of dangled in front of me, only to be revealed as ableism in disguise.

The show opens with Devi praying to Hindu deities, acknowledging how rough the last year was for her and asking for things that she wanted her sophomore year of high school to bring. Following that, the narrator provides a flashback of the prior year of Devi’s life, revealing that one week after her father’s death, she suddenly became paralyzed for reasons unknown and (in the ableist manner her teacher put it) “confined to a wheelchair.” A few months later, Devi miraculously was able to walk again after attempting to get a better look at a guy she liked. With her first day of sophomore year just around the corner, Devi planned to do everything she could to shed the image that the previous year had given her, carry on with her life, and experience normal teenage things.

*Never Have I Ever* included a very common ableist trope found in the media: the miraculous cure. This trope leans into the ableist concept that disabled people are pitiable and that a “full” life is unimaginable with a disability, as well as the misconception that they want and wish for their disability to be “cured”—which is exactly what we saw with Devi’s character. Although we don’t know if Devi was hoping to become cured from her disability since it isn’t revealed to the viewer, we do see her exhibit a newfound sense of confidence and hope for the new school year once she becomes non-disabled.

The miraculous cure trope results in a “feel good” effect on the audience as well, which is connected to what is known as inspiration porn: the exceptionalization of one community for the benefit of another. When Devi stood up from her wheelchair, her mom jumped and cheered joyously—a happy feeling that the audience likely felt as well on some level. We see this same joy from non-disabled people when they see videos on social media of disabled people “overcoming” their disability.

“ This holds a lot of harm when absorbed by viewers because it promotes **the idea that disabled people need to overcome their disabilities**, which is then used as one of the many **justifications for inaccessibility in our society**.

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Additionally, Devi standing up out of her wheelchair for (or because of) a guy that she liked leans into another common ableist trope where the disabled person risks everything for the sake of love or where love has the ability to “fix” everything for them. Devi’s attraction to Paxton had such a strong effect on her that she “overcame” her disability, which

☛ promotes the idea that disabled people just need to let love into their lives.

At the end of the introduction, the narrator sets the stage for the show by saying, “Can she shed her old identity as the paralyzed Indian girl whose dad dropped dead at a school function? It’s not likely. Those things are pretty unforgettable, but with working legs comes a whole host of new possibilities.” The sentence itself is ableist, and implies a sense of shame and negativity that is associated with being a disabled Indian girl: that having “working” legs (or an “abled body”) is correlated with a good life—a better life than if one were disabled. And that’s exactly what every young disabled Indian viewer would internalize after hearing that—if I didn’t know any better, so would I.

← As a disabled Indian American woman myself, the ableism in a show about Indian Americans felt like a slap in the face, and as though I was being told that existing at the intersection of my identities is invalid and not welcomed here. That is, my experiences as an Indian American are valid, so long as it exists in an able-body. →

Upon release, *Never Have I Ever* was praised for deviating from Asian stereotypes and was deemed to be a groundbreaking moment for Indian representation in Hollywood.

I saw numerous critiques of the show begin to pop up, specifically on TikTok, many of which were centered around how the depiction of Devi was unrealistic to the Indian-American experience. Many people complained about how she got away with being extremely disobedient and disrespectful to her mother (something that would never fly in an Indian household). Others countered that point, claiming that Devi was obviously lashing out due to her grief over losing her father and that any mother would be lenient in such a situation.

Yet amid all these critiques I found online, I saw very few bring up—let alone take issue with—the blatant ableism that the plot is founded on. Several articles were written calling attention to ableism, along with fatphobia, casteism, and anti-semitism within the show. But from what I saw, and continue to see today, many are focused on critiquing the show for the unrealistic depiction of the Indian American experience more than anything else, and failing to consistently critique the show from an intersectional lens.

When Indian Americans were happy to even have representation through this show and claimed that “*It may not be great, but at least young Indian Americans will see themselves represented on the screen,*” I knew that they were not talking about people like me.

☛ I was at a crossroad where my identities were forced to diverge—a feeling I know all too well.

Am I supposed to agree with my fellow Indian Americans and smile with gratitude as I watch half of me—the brownness, the bindis, and the lehengas—exist on the screen, all while consoling my brown disabled body and promising her with uncertainty that maybe one day, her time will come to be seen, just not today?

☛ Disability is a culture and identity that permeates every single community in the world, yet it was used as a plot point to make the show more comedic and interesting.

I continued to watch the show because of the good reviews people were giving it. I tried desperately to find justification for the ableist plot by telling myself it was okay because it was meant to be satirical. But disability satire without disabled actors, producers, or writers isn’t satire—it’s just ableism.

In an ideal world, I would love to see disabled Indian representation that explores how Asian and disabled identities, as well as expectations, interact with one another and shape our lives and experiences. *Never Have I Ever* was a lost opportunity to represent our stories. Instead of using disability as a comedic plotpoint, the show could have been written in a way that addresses the reality of disabled Indian Americans: the multi-oppression we face, the beauty and joy of our cultures and communities, the pride we have in our identities, the complex and evolving relationship we have with our bodies, and the frustration of not always being afforded those “everyday teenage experiences” due to society’s perception of us.

We live in an already ableist society that has yet to truly confront the issues with these ableist tropes and mindsets. Disability and ableism are often overlooked or shrugged off by the media and its non-disabled consumers, which only gives a platform to and perpetuates more ableist tropes in the future.

☛ The **ableist plot** of *Never Have I Ever*, in cumulation with the **ableist slurs** and jokes thrown around about Devi’s disability, further **perpetuates ableism and is several steps backward** in our fight for

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good disabled (let alone intersectional) representation.

The minimal criticism, the justification, and the overwhelming silence that has persisted one year later from viewers, especially non-disabled Indian Americans, just goes to show how much more work needs to be done to dismantle ableism, both within America and in our Asian community.

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Shruti Rajkumar

Staff Writer

Shruti Rajkumar is a part of the Editorial team at Overachiever Magazine. As a journalism student in Boston and a disabled Indian American woman, she enjoys writing articles about the intersectional of race and disability. In her free time, she can be found absorbing the joy and peace of community healing, watching TikToks, and going on spontaneous adventures with her friends.

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