THE RISE OF DIVERSITY IN THE MCU

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The discussion about diversity when it comes to the film industry mainly focuses on gender and race, with a slightly narrower focus on LGBTQA+ but partly on the concept of mental health/illnesses or physical disabilities. While Marvel is nowhere near a perfect example of how a company should diversify throughout its films, their comics have been improving, and slowly but surely, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is trying to catch up.

According to an interview with Paul Terry, the co-author of the book Marvel’s Cinematic Universe: The Making of Marvel Comic Universe, the studio’s mantra is “never stop planning.” Planning is not saying that an idea is bad or wishing it was something else, but instead accepting it as an starting point and building from there. This is what Marvel has been doing and should continue to do with their characters, especially when it comes to representation of gender, race, mental illnesses, LGBTQA+ and physical disabilities.

MENTAL ILLNESSES

Mental illnesses and mental health may seem to be one of the least likely things to be portrayed appropriately in films and shows, but there’s not much that most of the MCU’s protagonists face some sort of issue with their mental health at one point or another. This is not only because of the toll that going through battles and even that the people in general, but also because Marvel tends to use mental illnesses as a way to humanize their heroes more and give them a “weakness” as opposed to showing other aspects of their lives. This is by no means the correct way to give characters multiplicity dimensions, and Marvel is moving away from it as of late, but it is in the way they have been generally approached in the past.

In the 2022 series Moon Knight, Marvel took a dive into Marc Spector, a man who suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). With most things, there were a few aspects that got Hollywood locked by Marvel, but they did let him use a psychological disorder to play the best they could and even manage to get some things right. Along with that, there are a multitude of characters that have carried mental illnesses amongst multiple movies and shows throughout the MCU, some of which are listed below.

THREE

Loki Laufeyson Borderline Personality Disorder

Gamora & Nebulah Childhood Trauma

Wanda Maximoff Stress & Grief

MOON KNIGHT

Dissociative Identity Disorder

Q&A: PHYSICAL DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

A question & answer session with Ihechi Okoro, one of the producers on Marvel’s latest streaming series for Disney+, Moon Knight.

Q1: Do you think the way Marvel and the film industry as a whole has been representing more groups of people is going in a positive or negative direction and why?

Ihechi: I would say mostly positive in my opinion. There’s a variety of different people and it can be hard to work with and around all of the different groups that are out there.

Q2: Is there any specific Marvel character, movie or show that you think that actual physical disability representation is in a very good way?

Ihechi: I think the character Moon Knight, played by Tilda Swinton, in the MCU is a great example. He is a character who has a disability, and the way his character is portrayed is done in a respectful and positive manner.

Q3: What can we expect from Marvel moving forward in terms of physical disability representation?

Ihechi: Marvel has a history of creating unique and powerful characters who are often portrayed with disabilities. I believe they will continue to push boundaries and create even more diverse and inspiring characters in the future.

PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

Physical disabilities are initially the most visible representation of characters in the MCU. The main source of physical disability representation that Marvel has produced has been through the use of gear and props or body casting, which all of which are in films and shows are used respectfully. The character Clint Barton, aka Hawkeye, from the original Avengers series, and Maya Lopez, from the series Hawkeye, and, of course, Moon Knight from the Marvel movie. These are great strides in representation of people with disabilities, but when paired with the fact that there are only three other characters with disabilities in the MCU. Dr. Strange, who lost one of his hands in a car accident, is the only one to have the plot point somewhat centered around his disability in the MCU. Jedi Writer [with lenticular lens], and Thanos, who completely changes his appearance in the MCU, really shows how little Marvel focuses on them.

FILM DIRECTOR GENDER & RACE

For a long while after the first MCU film, every director of a Marvel movie was white male. Some people don’t want to see diversity, but how blind is a diversity behind the camera? While seeing a character on screen can be inspiring, the director of a film is the one making sure that each character is treated as human. The lack of diversity is one of the main reasons why it’s important to have a non-white male to direct and to have a decade of female directors. The directors themselves have told us that the color of their films are from each other.

2008

First MCU Film

Iron Man

2017

First Non-White Director

Taika Waititi

2019

First Female Director

Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck

2021

First Male Director

Chad Stahelski

First Female Director

Cate Shortland

First Woman of Color

Director

Chloé Zhao, Dominique

CHARACTER GENDER & RACE

When it comes to a newer Marvel or non-Marvel fan, the first non-white lead, also a lead, Panther in 2018 and Captain Marvel in 2019. Both of these films performed very well at the box office, and Marvel fans, with that Panther placing third of their 24 films in box office and Captain Marvel among the top 20 in box office. Marvel acknowledge the increase in the number of diverse characters and ideas they pointed in their films and shows to make in the MCU. In the MCU’s 2021 spot, which included a total of four films and 10 Disney+ shows, there were a number of characters that were either non-white, non-male, or different. Significantly adding to the amount of diverse scenes in the MCU. A females, there is no point to point that a Marvel film should have a main female character or even non-white character. While Kevin Feige in 2022’s Ms. Marvel may not have been the first to approach this storyline, it was still brought in a great representation for Pakistani Americans. He was able to tell the story of the Parokia, which many viewers must have not heard of before. Ms. Marvel was the only appearance in Ms. Marvel and The Marvels, but fans are excited to see what the MCU does with her character next.