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Radical Reframing of (Dis)Ability: Deconstructing Autistic Stereotypes and Ableist Normativity in *A Boy Called Po*

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Abstract: Cinematic depictions of disability often succumb to the reductive tropes of the ‘medical model,’ which treats disability as a deficit to be cured. However, the emergence of disability studies challenged this paradigm, with the ‘social model’, differentiating disability as a socially mediated experience rather than a purely biological condition. This paper examines John Asher’s less explored film, *A Boy Called Po* (2016), as a potent counter-narrative that destabilises such dominant epistemologies of disability, with a multi-faceted exploration of neurodivergent experiences. Moving beyond conventional ‘saviour’ narratives, the film foregrounds the evolving relationship between a widowed father, David, and his autistic son, Po as they navigate the shared trauma of maternal loss. The study argues that the film produces an alternative visual and affective economy, what may be termed a ‘counter-visuality,’ that resists the stigmatising gaze and invites spectators into Po’s perceptual world, most notably through the imaginative ‘Land of Color.’ The paper further voices against the institutional failures that perpetuate exclusion by privileging normality over recognition of diversity. The close reading of the film employing the key tenets of disability theory reveals that the narrative departs from the hegemonic discourses of pity and ableism to reclaim the protagonist’s agency and subjectivity.

Keywords: *Disability Theory, Medical Model, Social Model, Neurodivergence, Ableism*

Introduction

Disability has long been a site of misunderstanding, oppression, and social exclusion. Historically, disability has been interpreted through various theoretical lenses. The traditional paradigm, the medical model, frames disability as an undesirable medical condition that requires diagnosis and treatment. However, the emergence of disability studies in the late twentieth century challenged this view, introducing the ‘social model of disability.’ This framework locates the root of disability not in impairment but in inaccessible social structures and discriminatory attitudes that restrict their participation.

Film, as a powerful cultural medium, contributes in moulding and reflecting societal attitudes toward disability. While many cinematic representations have perpetuated reductive stereotypes, certain films like *Black* (2005), *The Miracle Worker* (1962), *Tare Zameen Par* (2007), and *My Left Foot* (1989) have shifted the discourse toward more thoughtful and humane representations. *A Boy Called Po* (2016), directed by John Asher, belongs to this evolving tradition. It is a semi autobiographical work which drew inspiration from the director’s own experiences with his autistic son. The narrative centres on David and his autistic son, Patrick affectionately called Po, struggling to navigate the grief of a loss in a conformity driven society. Following the mother’s death, both father and son retreat into their own isolated worlds to cope with the grief. David immerses himself in an airplane designing project, while Po encounters a world that offers little room for his neurodivergence, leading to his retreat into an imaginary world called the ‘Land of Color.’ While these fantasies ensure Po a safe haven, they create a void between him and his father, as David’s job loss pushes Po into specialised care. This crisis facilitates their eventual reconnection, as David learns to bridge the gap between their internal realms. As a result, Po’s reliance on his fantasy world fades as his social environment including the schooling system, finally validate his neurodivergence. Thus their journey captures a fundamental shift in the father-son bond, where both learn to inhabit the same world.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in the interdisciplinary field of disability studies, engaging with the seminal contributions of disability theorists like Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. Erving Goffman’s concept of ‘stigma,’ illustrates how disability is treated as a ‘spoiled identity’ within social interactions. Similarly, Michel Foucault’s analysis of power and discipline demonstrates how institutions use norms of productivity, and bodily regulation to shape disabled subjectivities. Lennard J. Davis further critiques the notion of ‘normalcy,’ arguing that it is a cultural construct used to enforce exclusion. Meanwhile Garland-Thomson examines the representational politics of disabled bodies in literature and culture and Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of narrative prosthesis reveals how disability is often employed as a

narrative device rather than a reflection of lived experience. Together, these theoretical basis provides a clear structure for analysing the construction of disability in cultural texts.

The paper examines *A Boy Called Po* as a counter-narrative to conventional ableist tropes, with focus on its authentic portrayal of disability and the engagement with contemporary disability theory. The analysis adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, concentrating primarily on the central motifs, narrative structure, dialogues, and character development. By tracing the growth from a medicalised to a social model of disability, the study reveals the power of social environments in shaping the disabled experience. Also, the paper explores how compassion, inclusive infrastructure, and anomalous ways of being can dismantle our biased perception regarding disability. Ultimately, this study asserts that *A Boy Called Po* voices against the reductive images of pity and attempts to situate disability within broader familial, social, and institutional contexts.

Ableist Normativity and Autistic Agency in *A Boy Called Po*

The representation of disability, in *A Boy Called Po* can be critically examined through certain foundational concepts within contemporary disability studies. Central to this field is the critique of the medical model, which is defined as, “locating the problem of disability within the individual, and regarding the cause of the problem as stemming from functional limitations or psychological losses which are assumed to arise from disability” (Oliver 11). This approach privileges professional expertise and often compromises the autonomy and agency of the person involved. In contrast, the social model recognizes disability as an imposed barrier of the environment and collective attitude, rather than the reflection of a person’s inherent worth. This is underscored by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), which asserts, “it is the society which disables physically impaired people” (4). This view shifts the focus away from fixing the person and toward fixing the barriers that keep them out. Robert Murphy describes how societal prejudice marginalise the lived experience of disability as:

Whatever the physically impaired person may think of himself, he is attributed a negative identity by society and much of his social life is a struggle against this imposed image. It is for this reason that we can say that stigmatisation is less a by-product of disability than its substance. The greatest impediment to a person’s taking full part in his society are not his physical flaws, but rather the issue of myths, fears, and misunderstandings that society attaches to them (113).

The film initially depicts a social environment that problematizes neurodivergence, viewing his unique traits through a clinical lens. This perspective is championed by institutional authorities, like

the social services representative Bill Haze, who recommends placing Po in a residential treatment centre. When David resists this suggestion, Bill counters by viewing Po's internal world as a dangerous departure from reality, asking, "What do you intend to do of your son who continues to drift? He is moving somewhere in his mind" (*A Boy Called Po* 00:39:38). Although therapeutic methods such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) aim to improve communication, behaviour, and life skills, Po's experience unmasks their fragility as they weigh compliance over human connection. Po's increasing withdrawal into the 'Land of Color' can be interpreted as a silent protest against these strictly mechanical approaches. Nevertheless the character of Amy introduced as a sensory integration therapist, indicates a shift toward a more inclusive and humanistic approach. Her techniques like playing music during therapy sessions, helps to retain Po's meaningful engagement with the physical world. Beyond her professional role, she becomes a source of hope for David who struggles with the solitude of fatherhood, encouraging him to look beyond Po's challenges to witness his intrinsic potential. For Po, she is a safe maternal presence who values his unique way of being without insisting on normality.

Po's imaginative world, called the 'Land of Color', also assumes a significant role by functioning both as a crucial narrative device and as an internal landscape for healing. It is the primary space where he processes grief, navigates social alienation, and give voice to the thoughts that remain silenced in his daily life. Figures like Amelia and Jack act as manifestations of his subconscious realm, providing the kinship and refuge which the external environment failed to ensure. Amelia, in particular, emerges as a guardian spirit particularly after a bullying incident as she appreciates him for his quiet resilience. It was the first time he received validation and appreciation from an outsider, which led to his reliance on this imaginary companion. Jack is another figure in Po's inner landscape, who frequently invites Po on various quests. In a forest scene, Po expresses concern for his father's anguish to Jack, admitting, "I am just worried about my dad. I have seen him sad all the time" (00:48:01). This moment is crucial as it reveals Po's 'affective empathy,' that challenges the misconception that autistic individuals remain insensitive to others' feelings. Although Po appears detached, he remains perceptive of his surroundings and his father's grief. The story later uncovers that Jack is the subconscious reflection of the school attendant who stood by Po after a bullying incident. It is notable that the imaginary Jack frequently turns to Po for guidance. This reverses the real-world hierarchies in which Po is stripped of agency as a dependent. However, this sanctuary also carries a risk of permanent withdrawal. The pivotal moment arrives when Po is at the brink of yielding entirely to this imagined landscape. As he prepares to depart in an imaginary spaceship with Amelia, Po hears his father's heartfelt plea to return. He then realises his fantasies, however perfect, cannot replace the genuine, and chooses to leave them behind to join his father in grieving.

The film uses these sequences to mirror the drifting associated with autism, where the line between imagination and reality blurs. Neurotypical children frequently engage in such imaginary or pretend play. However, autistic children display a divergence in this capacity. Even though Po engages in imaginary play, he experiences it as real, not as pretend. These imaginative plays often involve an imaginary companion like Amelia. Margaret Svendsen defines an imaginary companion as an “invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child, but no apparent objective basis” (988). The film shows how these imaginative spaces turn out to be a double-edged sword as they not only provide a escape mechanism, but also pose a hindrance to social reintegration.

Po’s imagination again find expression in the recurring symbols of rainbows. What David initially considers as flaws, such as food splattered on a wall or disorganised cloth, is a meaningful aesthetic expression for Po as in his words, “your rainbow, daddy.” However this recurring rainbow motif foreshadows an upcoming event, as in the final scene Po’s observation of an aircraft traversing a rainbow inspires David’s aircraft design which finally restores his career. Thus by using Po’s ‘rainbow logic’ to solve a real world problem, David validates his son’s neurodiversity.

The study also pinpoints the systemic failure of the school to accommodate Po as a child with different needs. The institution proves unable or unwilling to adapt its structure, pedagogical strategies, and environment to support a child with diverse learning needs. The school principal pathologises Po’s condition, reducing his complex emotional state to ‘self-attacking’ and ‘regressive’ behaviour. She lists his perceived shortcomings in language, communication, and social responsiveness, concluding that he is not thriving and need to be moved elsewhere. Po’s class teacher also takes the same stand asserting, “We simply cannot provide what he needs here. We are calling to recommend Po to a specialised programming” (00:56:40). Disability studies emphasize that educational systems often operate on certain normative assumptions regarding behaviour, communication, and learning pace and styles. When students do not conform to these expectations, they are misjudged as ‘incapable,’ or ‘problematic.’ Besides, the film underscores the distinction between mere physical integration and genuine inclusive practices. The school practices inclusion by physically placing Po in a mainstream classroom, but fails to provide the ‘scaffolded support’ necessary for his academic progress. Whenever he struggles to answer a question verbally or participate in classroom activities like experiments, the teachers simply redirect their attention elsewhere instead of adopting suitable learning strategies. Essential tools for inclusion such as Individualised Education Plan (IEP) remain absent, leaving Po’s needs unaddressed. Despite being gifted in math, he is placed in a regular classroom without the one-on-one support needed to nurture his aptitudes. Moreover the institution fails in its most basic duty of

ensuring the safety of its students. Though Po endures a cycle of bullying and physical violence at the hands of his peer, Taylor, the educators remain indifferent.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, French philosopher and social theorist, Michel Foucault examines how such institutions including schools operate as mechanisms of surveillance and control. As Foucault notes, “Schools, like prisons and military barracks, are sites where disciplinary power is exercised through hierarchical observation and normalisation” (Foucault 170). When analysed through a Foucauldian lens, the school in *A Boy Called Po* emerges as a disciplinary space that monitors, classifies, and punishes deviation. Po’s body is regulated through schedules, timetables and behavioural expectations. His inability to conform is seen as a sign of pathology. Po is continually observed by teachers, administrators, therapists, and even peers and his actions are documented, classified, and compared against normative standards of learning and behaviour, which aligns with Foucault’s concept of ‘surveillance.’ Additionally, the clinical interventions described by the therapist embody Foucault’s notion of ‘medical gaze’- “your brain is constantly receiving signals from countless receptors in and on your body. Would you be able to solve a math problem while hearing your neighbours arguing? Without the ability to flexibly manage the system, you felt overwhelmed, lost focus which is Po’s struggle. Here we are therapeutically training his nervous system to manage himself” (00:26:23). This medical gaze, refers to the way medical professionals observe bodies as objects to be studied, diagnosed, and controlled, separating the patient’s identity from their condition.

Schools, much like prisons and mental asylums, function as sites for defining, classifying, regulating, and controlling individuals. This regulatory power operates through meticulous routines, codified rules, systems of reward and punishment, and monitoring. This gradually cultivate self-regulation in individuals who are made to internalise normative standards of behaviour, akin to the disciplinary logic of the panopticon. This process is driven by ‘normalisation,’ through which institutions establish a binary of conformity, categorising students as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’. Eventually the individual body is reduced to what Foucault terms a ‘docile body,’ one that is moulded, and managed to meet institutional demands. However, the film also reveals a paradox. Instead of overt discipline, Po faces institutional neglect. The teachers neither show concern for Po nor adopt any pedagogical strategies suited to a neurodivergent child. The classroom is labeled inclusive only because Po is integrated among his peers without any scaffolded interventions. This disconnect between policy and practice suggests that refusal to accommodate difference can be as disempowering as overt disciplinary control.

The concepts of American scholars, Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson also decodes Po's experiences within these structures of control. In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, Davis argues that disability is not an individual problem but a social, cultural, and political category created by the hegemony of the norm. As he puts it, "Disability is not an object but a social process" (2). In contemporary society, this 'enforced normalcy' is maintained through statistical averages and institutional expectations across education and media. This is clearly reflected in the film, where Po's divergence from neurotypical ways marks him 'abnormal' within the school. This deviance makes him a target for bullying. His differences such as repetitive actions and unconventional behaviour, set him apart from his peers and are considered as aberration from the norm. Thus through physical assaults, Taylor is punishing Po for his inability to blend into this normal social fabric, thus becoming an unofficial 'enforcer' of normalcy. The school's failure to intervene shows that they silently accepts this marginalisation until the deviation (Po), is pushed out of the mainstream environment.

Davis also argues that disability is constructed in part by the 'gaze' of non-disabled (temporarily abled bodies), toward the disabled that pathologises the 'other.' A striking example of the stigmatising gaze occurs in the scene where Po runs away from David in a distressed moment. Upon locating Po, a police officer remarks dismissively, "If I were you, I would keep your retarded son on a leash, so he won't run away" (00:54:05). This comment reflects the ableist gaze that reduces Po to less than a human. David's immediate reaction of striking the officer signals his refusal to accept such dehumanising language. The silence and implicit support from the second officer, who recognises the cruelty of the remark is notable as it suggests a brief break in this ableist attitude.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, further offers key concepts for understanding how disability is culturally constructed and visually interpreted. Central to her work is the concept of the 'normate', which she introduces in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, to describe the socially privileged, able-bodied figures used as the universal benchmark for human value. In *A Boy Called Po*, institutions such as the school and healthcare system operate according to such normate expectations, by treating Po's sensory preferences, repetitive behaviours, and language disorders as deficits to be corrected. Simultaneously, David also attempts to uphold the normate image of 'self-sufficient professional,' even though the realities of single parenthood make that ideal impossible to maintain. Garland-Thomson goes on to distinguish between 'ordinary' bodies, which conform to normative standards, and 'extraordinary' bodies, which are fabricated as deviant or inferior. Po is cast as extraordinary not due to inherent deficiency but because the hostile environment refuses to accommodate his uniqueness. However, his 'Land of Color' functions as a counter-space where the rigid boundaries of norm vanish and destabilises the authority of the normate.

In *Staring: How We Look*, Garland-Thomson explores the act of ‘staring’ as a social practice that marks disabled bodies as objects of curiosity and discomfort. Staring occurs when a ‘normal’ person (starer) encounters a ‘disabled’ person (staree). Unlike the gaze, which operates as a disciplinary mechanism, staring produces and reinforces hierarchies of normalcy and power, making the disabled hypervisible. This power structure is apparent in the film, where Po undergoes scrutiny within the school environment, where he is treated less as a student and more as a subject to be managed. The harassment he faces, ranging from mockery to physical aggression, extends this visual attention into acts of violence. However Garland-Thomson highlights the agency of the ‘staree,’ who can resist or redirect such encounters. From this perspective, Po’s withdrawal into his imaginative world is more than just an escape. It can be read as a refusal to participate in this oppressive exchange, thereby denying the viewer’s demand for an explanation or compliance.

The work of Erving Goffman add another dimension to this study, through his theory of ‘stigma.’ In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman defines stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” which reduces a person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted or discounted one” (3). He identifies three categories of stigma namely, physical deformities, flaws in an individual’s character, and tribal stigmas associated with race, religion, or nationality. Within disability studies, the first category is significant, as it establishes how bodily or cognitive difference is socially perceived as deficiency. Goffman argues that stigma is born out of social interactions and the negative meanings society attaches to one’s body.

Goffman further observes that “the term stigma and its synonyms conceal a double perspective. In the first case one deals with the plight of the discredited, in the second with that of the discreditable” (4). The discredited are those whose stigma is visible or already known, while the discreditable possesses stigma that is hidden but could be revealed. In *A Boy Called Po*, Po occupies the position of the discredited. Although autism is not physically visible, his behavioural patterns, and unique responses make the condition recognisable to others, exposing him to constant monitoring, and judgment. David, as a caregiver, belongs to the category of the discreditable. His stigma is not bodily but social, rooted in the fear of being perceived as an inept parent. His struggles with financial instability, emotional burnouts, and the pressures of caregiving remain invisible unless disclosed. In order to handle this, David engages in what Goffman calls “impression management”(208). As stated in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, this involves individuals consciously performing roles in social situations in order to control how others perceive them. Po, on the other hand, does not consciously engage in impression management. His behaviour reflects authenticity rather than social performance.

It was the death of his wife, who had been the primary caregiver, which forced David into this role for which he was unprepared. His inability to visit Po at the centre results from the pressure of working double shifts to afford Po's therapy treatment. This reveals how financial limitations affect caregiving decisions. From a Goffmanian perspective, David embodies the burden of the discreditable individual, who carries the anxiety about exposure and the social consequences of being 'found out.' David's experience shows that stigma can attach not only to disabled people but also to those associated with them- a phenomenon Goffman calls 'courtesy stigma' or 'stigma by association.' As a single parent coping with the recent loss of his wife, David represents those who experience this 'caregiver syndrome.' This caregiving crisis do not arise solely from Po's autism, but from external friction created by workplace demands, unsupportive school authorities and a lack of affordable specialised care. Additionally, the film brings out the concept of 'mutual dependency', which challenges traditional, one sided notions of care. Instead of portraying Po as entirely dependent and David as purely responsible, the film shows how both characters contribute to each other's emotional growth. Po, for instance, indirectly contributes to David's professional success through his insight, while David consistently advocates for Po to protect him from institutional or social misrecognition. This reciprocity highlights that caregiving is a shared journey that brings about growth to both the caregiver and the recipient.

The representation of disability in narrative has been further theorised by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder through the concept of 'narrative prosthesis.' In the work, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, they argue that disability is frequently used as a symbolic crutch that supports plot development, creates emotional impact, or encourages character transformation, often at the expense of marginalising the lived reality of the disabled. In *A Boy Called Po*, disability initially assumes this prosthetic function as Po's disability becomes the central 'problem' the story focuses on and his presence drives many of the key plot development. His specific traits such as drifting into fantasy world, make him a unique and engaging focus of the narrative. David's growth as a father and as an individual is made possible through Po's disability. The film uses his autism to establish moral polarity as well. Characters who show compassion towards Po represent humanity, while those who respond with indifference or aggression are positioned as morally flawed. This reflects Mitchell and Snyder's observation that disabled characters often become ethical markers to measure the moral worth of the non-disabled people around them. However, the film incorporates elements of lived experience, as it draws the director's personal connection to autism. A significant example is the use of scarf left by Po's mother. It not only facilitates his withdrawal into the imaginative space, but also symbolizes grief and intimacy. When he places the scarf over his head, the setting shifts into his magical world, where Po is just a carefree child temporarily freed from the

restraints of society. Though the film uses disability as a catalyst for David's personal transformation, it does not fully conform to Mitchell and Snyder's critique that such narrative ignores the lived reality of disabled subjects. The film ensures his subjectivity remains visible and allows his experience to exist on its own terms.

The narrative presents communication barriers as a central focus, using dialogues that reflects receptive language difficulties, a common challenge for autistic individuals. Po frequently relies on repetitive speech, and fixed phrases to cope with overwhelming situations. He struggles with complex sentences, and figurative language, which make him appear unresponsive or unable to follow verbal instructions. His repeated question, "Where's Mommy?", reflects both his grief and inability to articulate loss, while his insistence, "Patrick is a nice name for a boy, but you call me Po," is a way of asserting his identity using limited expressive means. Early in the film, Po repeatedly tells his father, "Don't be afraid daddy," a statement he cannot initially explain, which reveals how hard it is for him to convey abstract emotions. However by the film's conclusion, he clarifies, "Don't be afraid of me. I don't want you to be afraid of me" (01:21:06). This signals both his awareness of his father's fear and his own desire to be understood. Besides, in the real world, Po's speech remains fragmented and minimal, whereas in his imaginative realm he articulates complex thoughts with a flawless accent. This indicates the gap between Po's external communication and his rich inner consciousness.

The 'Double Empathy Problem theory' proposed by Damian Milton, challenges the long held assumption that communication breakdowns in autism occur solely because autistic individuals lack social understanding. Instead, Milton argues that misunderstandings arise between autistic and non-autistic people as they experience, interpret and communicate about the world differently. Just as autistic individuals may struggle to decode neurotypical norms, non-autistic individuals often lack insight into autistic modes of communication. Milton identifies this as a 'double problem,' because both autistic and non-autistic people experience a lack of understanding for the other group. As he observes:

One could say that many autistic people have indeed gained a greater level of insight into non-autistic society and mores, and more than vice versa, perhaps due to the need to survive and potentially thrive in a non-autistic culture. Conversely, the non-autistic person has no pertinent personal requirement to understand the mind of the 'autistic person' unless closely related socially in some way (884).

Thus the pressure to understand entirely falls on the autistic person, who must adapt to survive in a neurotypical culture. This is reflected in the strained relationship between David and Po. David initially fails to interpret Po's behaviours and emotional expression, while Po struggle to communicate

his grief in a way that matches his father's expectations. A key tenet of the theory is that autistic people often communicate more effectively with one another. In the film, Po relates easily to Jack, a character perceived as neurodivergent, suggesting a shared wavelength that Po does not have with his father. Ultimately the film's resolution supports the Double Empathy Problem by depicting a shift not in Po's ability to 'act normal,' but in David's willingness to comprehend his son's unique mode of communication and see the world through his son's eyes.

The film's visual and musical choices reinforce this emotional duality. As the film alternates between the stark reality of everyday life and the vibrant beauty of Po's Land of Color, it employs visual and musical contrasts to juxtapose both. This dual structure is well crafted in the background score. A subdued piano underscores reality, while harps and strings distinguish Po's imaginative world. Composed by Burt Bacharach, the recurring melody, heard in both the opening and final scene, suggests that characters have completed a significant emotional arc. While the circumstances may look similar, the character's internal perspectives have grown. In addition, since language shapes ideology, the film shows mindfulness in avoiding derogatory labels for disability. Instead uses neutral terms such as 'different,' and 'autistic' to mention the condition of the boy, while the term 'retarded' is reserved strictly for a bullying scene. This reflects the idea that how we speak about disability directly impacts how we value the person behind the diagnosis.

Conclusion

As noted by the United Nations, individuals with disabilities represent a significant portion of the global population, yet they continue to face hindrance in their full participation in the society. A lack of meaningful interaction between neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals further reinforces a cycle of misunderstanding and stigma. A close analysis of *A Boy Called Po* through the lens of disability studies reveals a film that transcends reductive cinematic archetypes of autism. By reframing neurodivergence as a distinct and valid mode of existence, the film avoids reducing Po to his social and communicative hurdles. Instead, Po emerges as a character of significant emotional depth and creative agency. This humane representation resists the prevalent ableist outlooks, and encourages us to rethink disability not as a lack, but as a meaningful form of human difference. The film's title also underlines Po's agency by asserting his preferred name as the identity instead of the rigid labels of the outside world.

Initially, the world around Po focuses on correcting him, treating his neurodivergence as a problem to be solved. However, the focus later shifts toward the cracks in the systems that fail him. By embracing the social model of disability, the film suggests that the true disability lies in a world that refuses to bend. Concepts like stigma, normalcy, and surveillance are not mere theories here. They are

lived experiences which Po and David navigate daily. By placing caregiving upon mutual dependency, the narrative resists the trap of narrative prosthesis and allows Po to remain the subject of his own story, instead of being a tool for his father's growth.

The film's evolution is mirrored in its language as well. The dialogues shift from being rooted in a discourse of pity, to becoming more empathetic and responsive. In this process, Po's non-verbal cues are also validated as legitimate. The film's character development also pinpoints these core themes. Po is neither a passive victim nor an idealised 'savant,' but a complex individual with specific needs and emotional life. While David's journey reflects the raw reality of caregiving, Po's imaginary companions act as windows into his internal psyche. In contrast, the institutional figures represent a rigid system that favours conformity over true inclusion. However, the gradual transformation of these characters suggests that change is possible through empathy and awareness. The film thus highlights disability as a socially constructed experience often shaped by stigma. It suggests that it is not Po who must be 'cured,' but the social environment and the parental outlook that must adapt. By critiquing exclusionary practice, the film questions whether specialised segregation actually fosters growth. At the same time, the film is not without its limitations. Though the film occasionally skirts the 'magical autism' trope through its use of fantasy and leans heavily on paternal love over professional support, these limitations do not diminish its value. By centering on lived experience, the film offers a vital counter-narrative to dominant representations that tend to reduce autism to either a tragedy to be mourned or an exceptionalism to be marveled at.

A Boy Called Po humanises the neurodivergent experience by situating autism within a realistic network of social relationships, emotional realities, and institutional contexts. It calls for a fundamental shift from stigma to empathy, from exclusion to inclusion, and from rigid normativity to genuine acceptance. Thus the film underscores a central tenet of disability studies, that neurodivergence is a meaningful manifestation of human difference. It calls for a move away from the 'clinical gaze', toward a world where empathy and radical acceptance replace the desire for correction. In doing so, the film asserts the collective responsibility to build a society that values diverse ways of being, seeing, and communicating.

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