

# Depiction of Tyrion Lannister as a Dwarf in Game of Thrones Series

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**ABSTRACT--***Disabled people have always been a topic of discussion in media from the early days itself. But they were always portrayed as the weak, jealous, wicked and not-so—good category. Many studies had been done in this concern. Studies have proven that the demonstration in media influence people a lot in their real life. Their attitude towards disabled people were also influenced by main stream media. And alot of those researches suggested a new wave of change to come in main stream media regarding the depiction of disabled. Many television programs and web series are made portraying disabled people in new light. ‘Good Doctor’ television series is a popular example. The leading character Shaun is a surgeon with autism. Game of Thrones has paved a new path in the whole television and web series breaking all the norms and stereotype existed till date in media. The female characters were treated equal to male characters, disabled characters were depicted with equal importance to abled characters, masculinity was a choice, and representation of other gender in good light were the major milestones in the 9 year long television series. Here, the study analyses the representation of one of the main disabled characters of the series: Tyrion Lannister, who is a dwarf. With the support of early studies, the depiction of disabled in powerful way, giving them equal screen space as the other leading characters, and casting a real dwarf man to play the role of Tyrion Lannister has made a change in the attitude of viewers towards disabled people. Other than Simply naming them ‘Differently abled’, people have actually started accepting them so.*

**Keywords--** *disability, dwarfism, game of thrones, non-stereotype, attitude*

## I. INTRODUCTION

“What unites people. Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There’s nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it. And who has a better story than Bran the Broken? The boy who fell from a high tower and lived. He knew he’d never walk again, so he learned to fly. He crossed beyond the wall—a crippled boy—and became the Three-Eyed Raven. He is our memory. The keeper of all our stories: wars, weddings, births, massacres, famines. Our triumphs, our defeats, our past. Who better to lead us into the future?”  
— Tyrion Lannister

HBO’s *Game of Thrones* occupies a unique place in popular culture as it is an adaptation piece, a product of the post-television movement, and its controversial themes of intense violence, sexuality, and other mature content. As a result, the series attracts a diverse audience, all of which have different expectations and desires for the series. This diverse viewership, arguably, plays a significant role in propelling writers and producers of the series toward the dramatic and often shocking plot twists and character developments that has made the show a hit. Among being praised for complex plot, dynamic characters, and willingness to push the boundaries of television, *Game of Thrones* has been commended for its inclusion of disabled characters as prominent figures in the series. This

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discourse is interested in examining how these disabled characters fit within the medieval setting of the series. Specifically, how it has changed the attitude of viewers.

Television, film, current periodicals, and other mass media are a part of our everyday life. Attitudes regarding a variety of issues can be affected by these media, not the least of which are attitudes towards disability. Since disability is widely portrayed, it could be assumed that the public is affected in some way by the nature of portrayal in these mass media. This literature review concerns itself with portrayal of disability and its effect on attitudes towards disability.

Societal attitudes have been the subject of much research in various areas. Defined Liebert as a “common attitude toward one selves or others is recognized as an obstacle to rehabilitation of many disabled people. Research is done for valuation and modifications of the orientations to make the life of those with disabilities around us.”

## II. SIGNIFICANCE OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Through reciprocity and encounter with the environment, attitude begin articulation early in infancy, providing an image of existing orientations, and forms a tendency to connect to the existing attitudes prevailed by the society. Liebert suggested: “Children learn established attitudes and behaviour through observational learning and multiple modelling. Observational learning develops through three stages: Exposure, Acquisition, and acceptance of behaviours. Multiple modelling occurs when consistent patterns of behaviour are presented, and the observer incorporates the behaviour, convinced it is condoned by the environment.”

Liebert postulated: “Observational learning and multiple modelling directly influence the three components of attitudes. This three components as the cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains. The cognitive component consists of beliefs acquired through information provided to the individual. The affective element is based on emotional reactions elicited by this stimuli presented. The behavioural component is the action prompted by the cognitive and affective components. The behaviour does not necessarily coincide with the beliefs, and beliefs do not necessarily coincide with emotions.” All the factors of our society has a prejudiced negative impression toward persons with disabilities. Roehrer pointed out: “Attitudes determine treatment toward an individual, and that treatment will influence the personality developments in that individual. Thus, normal treatment produces normal personality, exceptional treatment produces exceptional personality. The results of negative societal attitudes toward disability are devastating. Such attitudes can be communicated through avoidance, anxiety, over protectiveness, pity, segregation, alienation, and rejection. These attitudes, once communicated, culminate in embarrassment, self-pity, self-consciousness, dependence, apathy, lack of motivation, lowered self-images, and stunted vocational development.” Both Yamamoto and Roehrer points out that the most effective way to change the attitude is interconnection between disabled and non-disabled people. And they add to successfully alter attitudes of the society, it is imperative to operate in a medium that can provide due respect and recognition in interaction. The three components of attitudes- the cognitive, affective, and behavioural- are receptive to information, communicated in interaction. These must be influenced before attitudes can be altered. Since attitudes are formed to a great degree through observational learning and multiple modelling, it is worthy to examine primary sources of interaction within our society which transmit information concerning societal attitudes towards disability. Our culture relies heavily on the mass media system for information.

### III. POTENTIAL OF MASS MEDIA TO MODIFY ATTITUDES

According to Liebert, “Television is the greatest force of socialisation in terms of social behaviour in our society”. An average kid spends more than half of the time watching television. Because of the audio and video facilities, television is easier to understand and influence than most media. According to Leonard,

“Television to be an image of the culture that has given it birth. It can distort facts and events to suit the values, wishes, and needs of the audience. By maintaining and reinforcing these values, it gives an individual identity, aspirations, motivation, and escape from reality. Liebert, who has suggested the formation of the attitudes through observational learning and multiple modelling, submits that television provides children with the largest amount of observational learning involving disability. If the portrayals on television and film are inaccurate, stereotypic and negative, an individual who steadily watches television will be bombarded with observation of models that help construct attitudes. The cognitive and affective components will process the information from the model provided and the behavioural component will act on the basis of the cognitive decision and emotion elicited. Thus, the unrealistic depictions influence negative attitudes and the negative attitudes are projected on to those with disabilities.” In her research on prime-time television, Leonard studied widely on the depictions on television of the three major networks; demographic, dramatic, and personal profiles were formed from the study of various disabled characters depicted. The conclusion of the study was evident:

“Television does stigmatize people with disabilities. Of the disabled characters portrayed, 40% were depicted as children, and none were over the age of 65. They came from predominately lower classes of society and were unemployed. If they did have employment, it was characterized by a low status occupation. They were excluded from important family roles, and generally were in schools and institutions. Two/Thirds were characterized as being single. Almost one half of the portrayals were recipients of some type of abuse, both verbal and physical. Hero status was generally denied, and villain roles were minimum. However, story endings were more positive than those with nondisabled characters, in that most disabled characters experienced a miracle cure at the end of the program. One-half of the disabled characters were either included and/or excluded from a desirable group. Two-thirds were depicted as being succoured, and three-fourths were depicted as submissive. Personality traits surveyed revealed most were portrayed as being dull, impotent, selfish, defensive, and uncultured. They were regarded as objects of pity and care. Overall, they were considered not quite human, and virtually immobile in society”. According to the view of many researchers, “television and the other forms of media have the capacity to set the public images of persons with disabilities. Television could easily capitalize on the public curiosity concerning disability. Several studies have shown that the Public Broadcasting System has been the forerunner in the portrayals of disability. Potter discussed the ability television has shown to generate questions concerning types of disability”. Wagner discussed the approach used in the PBS program “Mr. Roger’s Neighbourhood” to increase the curiosity of children on disability. The program emphasized discussions of disabilities with empathy and affection to see the individual first, and not their limitation in ability. It was believed that the approach would affect the attitudes of the children. Hoyt reported a similar approach in a television series designed to show the non-disabled children the familiarities they have with the disabled children. “The viewers began to show a degree of attitude change, liking disabled children because they were interesting, and wanting to know them personally.

In cultivating this interest the program had to address many of the children's stereotypes". Mogk makes an argument: "Disability is prominent in film and television, yet it operates on a subconscious level as symbol, metaphor, and genre, which explains why its prevalence in popular culture is generally unrecognized. Disability acts as a narrative device and is arguably among the most powerful vehicles of expression and narrative structure available" (Mogk 2013, p. 1). "Common themes associated with the inclusion of disability in texts is the identification of those with disabilities as other with negative connotations, concept of disability as an impairment leading to maladjusted people, and the feeling that people with disabilities are a burden to society" (Altschuler, 2014; Black & Pretes, 2007).

In their research on the "Representation of Physical Disability on the Silver Screen," Black and Pretes (2007) found: "[...] filmmakers are making efforts to portray characters with disabilities having depth, demonstrate high awareness of feelings, motivations, and desires of individuals. It is rarely depicted as part of the natural variation in the human condition" (p. 81.)

This difference of ideas within Disability studies is illustrated in the split within relevant scholarship. There are those such as Kozinsky (2015) and Norden (2000, 1994) who studied disability as narrative device. On the other side of the spectrum are Black and Pretes (2007) who saw disability in media not through a literary view, but by examining the interpersonal relationships of the characters with disabilities and their social integration. The issue lies in the use of disability as narrative device perpetuating a collective negative view of disabilities. Norden (2000) argues: "Media shape a negative view of disabilities by reinforcing the negative theme prevalent in literature and media that disability is symbolic of evil or villainy. When media do portray disabilities as negative or villainous audiences are likely to adopt this "lens"" (Black & Pretes, 2007; Norden, 2000, 1994; Nelson, 1994). Black & Pretes (2007) suggest "media can play an active role in challenging society's fear and misunderstanding of disability by consciously seeking to portray characters with disabilities realistically, fairly, and frequently" (Black & Pretes, 2007, p. 82). "Yet, more often than not, the presence of disabilities in films and other media is overwhelmingly negative, as the perpetual use of disability as narrative device dictates this portrayal" (Black & Pretes, 2007; Nelson, 1994). An example of disability being used negatively as narrative device is made by Adelson (2005) who tracks evolution of people with dwarfism in both history and media and explains that traditionally the only role available to people with dwarfism were those of freaks and spectacle, such as circus acts or court jesters. Their alienation within society and this typecasting has left people with dwarfism little other options but to seek employment as actors in roles that only further projected this stereotype (Adelson, 2005). Black & Pretes' (2007) analysis of Hollywood films argue the convention of portraying disability as negative is largely reinforced by the exclusion of those with disabilities from normalized daily life. George R. R. Martin and HBO answer Black and Pretes' (2007) call to action as both the novels and HBO's Game of Thrones adaptation collectively depict a surplus of characters with disabilities, both physical and mental who provide ample opportunity to engage with, and challenge, existing discourse.

Though the majority of scholarship on Martin's work (and HBO's adaptation) is occupied by the rampant incest, women's gender issues, and the sex and violence of the narrative, there is limited criticism that deals directly with Martin's inclusion of people with disabilities. The amount of literature available that deals directly with the Game of Thrones narrative stands in stark contrast to the number of disabled characters present in the series. The lack of discourse on disability in both the book and television adaptation is astoundingly illustrated in the absence

of any mention of Martin, the narrative, or the HBO's television series in *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television* (2013), a collection of research that is specifically focused on Disability Studies (Mogk, 2013). In fact, the same year of the publication of this book (2013), HBO's *Game of Thrones* received a Media Access Award that applauded their treatment of disability as "promoting awareness of the disabled experience" (Ellis, 2014). This absence may be attributed to the conflict in scholarship regarding disability studies. Possibly HBO's *Game of Thrones* has yet to be approached critically as its treatment of disability is unlike any seen before. What is present in terms of academic scholarship pertaining to the presence and role of disability in the *Game of Thrones* narrative can be defined as fitting into one of two categories. The first category being discourse that focuses on how the representation of characters with disabilities deviates from stereotypical and past inclusion of disabled characters in texts. The second category is based in literary criticism as disability is treated narrative device, or specifically as a metaphor for the shift of identity in characters.

Bringing together scholarly criticism and online blogs from readers and reviewers (some having disabilities themselves) of the narrative, Ellis (2014) provides an interesting review of the *Game of Thrones*. Ellis explains "the narrative allows for characters with disabilities to develop outside discourses of tragedy and inspiration, the two terms she uses to sum up the usual stereotypical roles disabled characters fulfil" (Ellis, 2014, p.4). Ellis (2014), along with the online bloggers she cites, credit the narrative for humanizing characters with disabilities. "Part of this humanization is the sexualization of disabled characters that is equal to that of non-disabled characters" (Ellis, 2014; Meeuf, 2014). In an interview with Peter Dinklage, the actor who plays the role of Tyrion Lannister, writer Meeuf (2014) and Dinklage discuss the evolutionary role of Tyrion in regard to short people and people with disabilities in general. Dinklage is quoted, stating: "Nobody gives them a romance. Nobody gives them fully formed personalities, and Tyrion is one of the richest characters I have ever come across. He's a human being" (Meeuf, 2014). Meeuf (2014) points out that media has always denied sexuality to the people with disabilities and states Dinklage (and the *Game of Thrones* narrative) "signals a new era of inclusion in Hollywood" (Meeuf, 2014, p. 206)

#### **IV. DEPICTION OF TYRION LANNISTER IN GAME OF THRONES SERIES**

Sarah, a blogger with Crohn's Disease, says that the representation of disabilities in *Game of Thrones* doesn't get much importance that it actually deserved. She makes the definition of disability as "its dependence on the way we construct the world through the built environment and prejudicial attitudes which result in inflexible procedures, practices and people". She points out the methods how disability is crucial to the plot to the through characters such as Shireen, Hodor, Bran and Tyrion. Focusing particularly on Tyrion she describes three features of his characterisation which have importance for disability on television,:

"It's not often you get 1) a story about a disabled person, 2) that isn't a cheesy, uplifting story meant to motivate able-bodied people into appreciating their own lives, who 3) gets to consistently point out how terribly society treats people like him."

Sarah point out to Mallett and Wilde's suggestions to "pay attention to the transgression of established boundaries" (Mallett 9) rather than seeing negative stereotypes. Tyrion always break established borders of existing cultural images of people of limited growth (Gerber) as That Stark boy comments:

“I began to love the series because of Tyrion, I was just tired of seeing dwarves as clowns in every show I watched – and hear everyone around me applauding – and when I saw that dwarf that was just as complex as any character I knew this show was just as badass as they said.” (That Stark boy)

Tyrion who says having a "tender spot in [his] heart for cripples and bastards and broken things" had rejection from the society. His father, Tywin Lannister, constantly degraded him, who blame him for his disability and the death of his mother during childbirth. Tywin describes his thoughts about taking Tyrion to the ocean and "let the waves wash him away" calling him a "stunted fool", and "an ill-made, spiteful little creature full of envy, lust, and low cunning". Although Tywin always reminds Tyrion of his qualities as socially degraded, Tyrion displays wisdom, care, devotion, sharpness and courage. Significantly, his love and care extends to opponent family - the Starks.

When Bran got paralysed below his hips; losing the ability to do anything with his legs, Tyrion suggests an idea that with the right atmosphere and technical facility, disabled people can be equal to others: "With the right horse and saddle, even a cripple can ride". Although Bran does not want to be treated as a handicap, the modified saddle helped him ride a horse. As Sparky argues: “the disabled would navigate the world with much greater ease and far less limits if the world weren’t so completely designed around the needs of able bodied people with so little consideration for what the disabled need”. Along with Jon Snow who plays a major role in the series, Tyrion is the only character who is concerned of Bran’s life while others including Arya, Catelyn, Robb, and Ned focus on what he is not able to; with Cersei and Jamie suggesting “it is cruel to even keep him alive”(Sparky).

Disability of Bran and the attitude of people in his life opens a door into philosophical ideas such as death and individuality, the so called “good life and the choices we make” (Tedesco, 2012). When he was in coma, Jamie encourages Bran’s father Ned Stark to “end the boy’s suffering with a quick and merciful death rather than allow him to live on as a cripple”. As viewers of the show, We know that Jamie is not concerned about Bran, but of his secret – that he pushed Bran from the tower to stop him from telling Jamie and his sister Cersei’s impure connection and children born to them. For Tedesco, the end of Bran’s favourite hobby- climbing was the biggest concern than the possible relationship problems he may have in the future. However, “it is not uncommon for the news media in particular to perpetuate a view that you are better dead than disabled” (Haller).

As Singer recommends: “Tywin’s social exclusion of Tyrion, it began in his infancy when Tywin would have killed Tyrion at birth. However, disability activists caution against advocating to end the lives of people with impairments designated as illegitimate.”

Advice of Tyrion to Jon Snow about the life with prejudice of people and stigma of born out of wed lock is a good declaration on disability rights and incorporation that is important today in the real world, even though it was told in a fantasy fiction. He says: “Let me give you some advice, bastard: Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armour, and it can never be used to hurt you.” Tyrion convince with Jon Snow with saying “all dwarves are bastards in their father’s eyes.”

Other characteristics of Tyrion that is non typical to disability representations are discussed by bloggers. In contrast to Longmore’s argument: ”All representations of disability are fundamentally negative stereotypes of criminality, adjustment and sexuality”, blogger Andrew Pulrang, who is a disabled person, observes more detailed thoughts:

“Tyrion's main attributes are his sense of humor, in contrast to everyone else's deadly seriousness, his sexual appetites, his love of drink, and, increasingly, his knowledge and knack for strategy. The interesting thing about his sexual exploits is that in the context of this fantasy world, he's not depicted as a pervert or predator, as people with disabilities sometimes are in fiction, but as a more or less straightforwardly hard-partying dude. People joke about it, but no differently than they would any other randy young man in Westeros. There's a kind of equality here, but when he actually starts to fall in love, we see Tyrion again slow to accept that love and real attachment can happen for him”.

The status of Tyrion as the a character of *Game of Thrones* and Peter Dinklage as the person who played the role stood out in Season 4 in the scene of trial for poisoning and killing king Joffrey, in which he was innocent. He accused the whole world for spreading prejudice against people with bodily challenges. Tyrion: “I wish to confess. I wish to confess! I saved you...I saved this city...all your worthless lives. I should've let Stannis kill you all. I'm guilty...guilty...is that what you want to hear?”

Tywin: "You admit you poisoned the king?"

Tyrion: “No. Of that I'm innocent. I'm guilty of a far more monstrous crime. I'm guilty of being a dwarf.”

Tywin: "You are not on trial for being a dwarf."

Tyrion: “Oh, yes, I am. I've been on trial my entire life.”

Tywin: "Have you nothing to say in your defense?"

Tyrion: “Nothing but this: I did not do it. I did not kill Joffrey but I wish that I had! Watching your vicious bastard die gave me more relief than a thousand lying whores! I wish I was the monster you think I am! I wish I had enough poison for the whole pack of you! I would gladly give my life to watch you all swallow it! I will not give my life for Joffrey's murder, and I will get no justice here.”

In this scene, Tyrion points out the attitude of the people towards disabled. He accepts his physical disability (being a "dwarf") and his disability to live according to the social rules that he is always questioned about. Such a scene for Siebers as cited in Stein, "marks one as a target [and] exposes and resists the prejudices of society". "It is unusual for characters with disabilities to hold leading roles on television" (Cumberbatch and Negrine) and "even more unusual for audiences to identify with disabled characters" (Rodan, Ellis, and Lebeck). "Even disabled audiences will identify with non-disabled television characters rather than their onscreen disabled counterparts" (Wilde). Through Tyrion's role in the series, a new group of critiques also emerged, who points out the prejudice and unacceptance of the society towards disabled people, even after enjoying all the benefits of the services the disabled have contributed to the society.

## V. CONCLUSION

Disability is seen through the eyes of prejudice that human body is supposed to be in a particular shape and function in particular space. Tyrion Lannister has a body that is less accepted both in fiction and real society. Both disabled and non-disabled people accept that Tyrion's role is important as other leading characters and is a changing chapter in disability representation in visual media.

“*Game of Thrones* is an example the recent diversification of television content. This diversification has pioneered a new type of storytelling and led to an environment where television could be taken seriously”

(Sepinwall). Like the many programmes in the visual media, the series features disabled characters and make them as intense people with abilities and drawbacks, just like any other leading characters, be it abled or disabled, in movies. As evidenced through discussions, the series has made a change in the observation and orientation of viewers towards characters portrayed as disabled, especially dwarfs, within television and real life. This series has brought a new wave of change in the mainstream media.

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