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The Oscars and the rest of us

Bidisha



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In Hollywood, women and people from ethnic minorities are only rewarded for playing victims and villains

This year's Oscars, like every year, will be a veritable stampede of women and men who are black, brown, yellow, red and everything in between, of all ages, shapes and sizes, speaking multiple

languages in addition to English. On the day of the ceremony and for many hours afterwards valets, security guards, caterers, cleaners, ushers and other workers will be called up in their hundreds by the academy to work hard for low pay, invisible but so very vital, to facilitate the world's biggest dream machine: Hollywood.

For the few hours during the awards ceremony, the workers stay out of sight like nameless, faceless, voiceless Hogwarts house elves, while the academy members indulge in a cute gentlemen's club ritual where they pass prizes, opportunities, money, fame and influence around between themselves.

But at least the valets and cleaners are there. The writers, directors, actors, cinematographers, composers and producers of colour aren't even in the room. They weren't invited to be part of the club. Or shall we call it a system. Or let's just call it what it is: a white capitalist patriarchy.

The Oscar statuette is a gilded white man holding a sword — basically, a phallus holding a phallus. He gets an extra special polish this year because every nominated best director, screenwriter, screenplay adaptor and original score composer is a white man. All the nominated best actors and best supporting actors are white men. All but one of the best picture nominations are about how hard it is being an entitled, genius white man. All the nominated best foreign language film directors are men. All but one of the documentary directors — “Laura Poitras for Citizenfour” — is a man. In the best picture category, seven films are directed by white men and the eighth, “Selma,” is directed by a black woman Ava DuVernay, who was snubbed for best director.

“Unbroken,” directed by Angelina Jolie, is nowhere to be seen in the major categories, although it's nominated for cinematography and two sound awards. Odd, since Jolie is a major talent whose first film, “In The Land of Blood and Honey,” was a blazing, strongly feminist, serious and hard-core work about male sexual violence in wartime.

While the men get to be tortured geniuses, the nominated best actresses get to play victims, sufferers or monsters. Felicity Jones is Stephen Hawkings' mousy little helpmeet. Julianne Moore gets Alzheimer's. Reece Witherspoon is bereaved. Marion Cotillard is poor. Rosamund Pike is a she-devil in one of the most woman-hating films, adapted from a woman-hating novel, *Gone Girl*. And all the best nominated actresses and best supporting actresses are white.

What Hollywood thinks

I shouldn't be surprised. As the diversity group Writers of Colour has highlighted with an infographic from Lee and Low books, in the last 85 years of the Oscars, nominated producers were 98 per cent white, writers were 98 per cent white, actors were 88 per cent white, actresses were 88 per cent white and directors were 99 per cent male. Those who vote in the Oscars — industry insiders and longtime film professionals — are 94 per cent white and 77 per cent male. There was supposed to have been a watershed in 2002, when Halle Berry won best actress for playing a suffering woman in “*Monster's Ball*.” It didn't happen. There was meant to have been a watershed last year when Lupita Nyong'o was awarded best supporting actress for playing a suffering woman in “*12 Years a Slave*,” Steve McQueen was acclaimed for directing her and Barkhad Abdi was nominated for best supporting actor for playing a Somali pirate in “*Captain Phillips*.”

Victims and villains: that's what we get? That is, when we get anything, when we're visible at all. Is that what Hollywood thinks we are: capable of playing raped and beaten slaves, people in pain who deserve pity. But it doesn't think we're capable of writing, directing, editing, scoring or producing films? It doesn't want us working on sound or lighting or touching its cables. Hollywood screens its films all over the world. It expects women of colour to sit there and pay to help white men's careers and see films about how interesting, how tormented, and how complicated white men are.

Then it takes the profits and hands them out among white men, knowing that an Oscar nod will lead to a glorious spike in white men's careers.

I wish I could stick a middle finger up to Hollywood but it got there first and has stuck one up to us.
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