

Re-Presenting Disability in the Postmodern Era: A Study of Historiography in P. H. Reaks*: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities

Betty Elsa Jacob¹, Dr. Helen Unius Backiavathy², Dr J. Sundarsingh³,

¹Research Scholar at Karunya institute of Science and Technology and Assistant Professor, Department of English, CMS College, Kottayam, , ²Assistant Professor, Karunya Institute of Science and Technology, , ³Professor, Karunya Institute of Science and Technology

Article Info

Volume 83

Page Number: 8319 - 8324

Publication Issue:

May - June 2020

Abstract:

Disability has become a visible entity only in the postmodern era. Historiography has been used widely by many writers in the process of claiming identities, however much less in the field of disability. The play P. H. Reaks*: The Hidden History of People With Disability, a collaborative work in disability theatre has used many fictional elements like frame story, comic parodies and love scenes, in order to exhume characters from the historical past and to house them into the modern setting. Several instances adapted from historical resources, have been retold by various playwrights. This collaborative project itself becomes a metonym for the community identity they envisioned. The critique looks at how historicising disability has caused its re-presentation, thereby leading to a collective consciousness and has helped in forming an “imagined community” as Anderson envisioned. The historicising has also enabled the disabled people to envision a reversal of roles and also to reclaim their identities.

Keywords: Disability Theatre, Historiography, Imagined communities, Collective consciousness.

Article History

Article Received: 19 November 2019

Revised: 27 January 2020

Accepted: 24 February 2020

Publication: 18 May 2020

Introduction

Historiography is an important aspect of the postmodern thought, as it allows anyone to offer transparency in the historical events. Thus, in an age when disability studies is gaining prominence, historicising disability has an important role in providing a vicinity and voice to the disabled. Disability Studies has been increasingly gaining prominence in the 20th and 21st Centuries. The Disability Rights Movement began in the 1960s in the United States, following the models of Civil Rights and Women's Movements. Since then, the Movement has spread its grip wide and far into Canada and to United Kingdom. Disability Theatre was a movement that derived inspiration initially from various therapies like expressive therapy and drama therapy and later on from the Disability Rights Movement. Disability Theatre then turned its focus from medical purposes to empowerment. Playwrights like John Belluso, David Freeman and

others, scripted plays from the early 1970s and most of these plays have been staged by actors with disabilities. Thus Disability Theatre became a powerful medium of expression for people with disabilities; simultaneously became a means of historicising disability.

On a close analysis of certain plays of disability theatre, one understands that history plays a major role in the setting of the play. One such play is *P. H. Reaks*: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities*, which was a collaborative project developed and adapted by Doris Baizley and Victoria Ann Lewis from the writings of Isaac Agnew, Doris Baizley, Victoria Ann Lewis, Mary Martz, Ben Mattlin, Peggy Oliveri, Steve Paillet, Vincent Pinto, John Pixley, Paul Ryan, LeslyeSneider, Bill Trzeciak and Tamara Turner. It was during a workshop conducted by Other Voices' History Project that this play took its initial shape

and was later collaborated by Baizley and Lewis. As Lewis (2005) herself claims in the article "Theatre Without a Hero", it was Paul Longmore's article "Uncovering the Hidden History of People with Disabilities" which gave impetus to this collaborative project. The purpose behind writing this play was "to recover and fashion a history for a collectively imagined community of disabled people" (Lewis, 2005, p.115). As Romain Rolland says "History teaches us that we are members of a community and that we possess a spirit of fraternal solidarity with all the members... this sense of communal past and future provides the individual with sufficient strength and the most urgent reasons for action" (Lewis, 2005, p. 116)

While analyzing the play, it can be understood that history is used as a strategy to give multiple meanings to the text. History manifests itself through the structure, characters, themes and motifs in the play.

History as manifested in the structure:

The play is divided into three parts namely Magic, Medical and Movement. The titles indicate how each part of the play proceeds according to the chronology of the notions of disability, initially starting with the religious model where Father John condemns the Wild Man and Sister Elizabeth saying that they have sinned and their disability is a punishment for their sins. Then moves on to the historical perception of disabled people as court dwarfs, circus clowns and freaks. The second part looks more into the medical terminology associated with disability: "... the Giant presents a severe case of acromegaly, the Half Woman – Quadriplegia, the Princess Angie – Acromesomilia, The Wild Man – Cerebral Palsy" (Baisley & Lewis, 2006, p. 85). The third part is more concerned with the activist aspect of disability, presenting a few demonstrators asking for jobs for the disabled people and demanding their rights. Along with the plot the playwrights critique the different models like the religious model, medical model and the social model.

The action of *P.H. Reaks* moves back and forth in time and place, between documentary materials and fantasy. Slide projections are used in every scene, so as to allude to a historical event or art work. P. H., in the title of the play stands for Physically Handicapped, "the civil service classification used in 1937 to exclude people with disabilities from federal work programmes of the United States" (Baisley & Lewis, 2006, p.69). The play is an attempt at historicizing the disability experience, as the subtitle suggests.

History as manifested in the characters:

The play is a multi-voiced character play, where a single actor plays multiple roles. For instance, a woman in wheelchair acts the roles of Sister Elizabeth, Beth and Telethon Guest; a young man in wheelchair with speech impairment takes the roles of a Wild Man, Zoltan and Joey; and a woman of small stature acts as Eugenia, Princess Angie and Angel Golf Caddie. There are other non-disabled actors as well who take up different roles. In addition to these characters, the playwrights have brought the historical persons like F D Roosevelt; Carreno, the artist; Mattisse, the artist; Lia Graf, the circus player; J. P. Morgan and so on.

Beginning with Sister Elizabeth being portrayed as a saint in a wheelchair, the plot moves on to provide various religious interpretations of disability with slide images of satyrs, fauns, mermaids, hunchbacks and woodcuttings of pan-Gods. The plot then shifts to a hospital where characters with disabilities are examined. There are allusions to many historical incidents starting with 1911 Ugly Law prohibiting any disabled person from exposing himself in the public; demonstrations by the people asking for employment opportunities; Telethons; and so on. The play also has incorporated certain love scenes, so as to give a holistic image of people with disabilities.

History as a Postmodern Technique:

The play is postmodern in its rendering, as there are multiple inter-related stories, which in its

entirety provides meaning to the text. A pastiche of different textualities are used in the form of scenes, slide projections, photographs, etc. There is a constant attempt at a re-visioning of the historical narrative or the mega narrative of the disabled people. Postmodernism offers a highly critical approach to the notions of history and the process of historiography. As Linda Hutcheon (1989) says, this notion offers a problematizing of the established history. According to her, ‘historiographic metafiction’ is the representative postmodern art form, one that offers the model of self-reflexive representation. ‘Historiographic metafiction’ both reinforces and subverts the idea of history, only to problematize our notions about history and its truth value:

In challenging the seamless quality of the history/fiction (or world/art) join implied by realist narrative, postmodern fiction does not disconnect itself from history or the world. It foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness and asks its readers to question the process by which we represent ourselves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we make sense of and construct order out of experience in our particular culture. We cannot avoid representation. We can try to avoid fixing our notion of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and transcultural. We can also study how representation legitimizes and privileges certain kinds of knowledge including certain kinds of historical knowledge.(Hutcheon, 1989, p. 23)

The play does exactly the same. Various photographs from history are projected as slide projections in the course of the play. The well-known pictures of seventeenth century court dwarfs, painting of Eugenia in court dress, the photograph of the circus dwarf named Lia Graf sitting on J. P. Morgan’s lap, a Painting of Eugenia as Bacchus by Carreno, images of disabled demonstrators asking for jobs for the people with disabilities, the images of Beggars on streets in 1940s and so on are included as slide projections in the course of the

play. A situation parallel to the projected historical event is created in the contemporary setting to provide a different version of history.



Figure 1: a 17th Century Court dwarf



Figure 2: Lia Graf with J. P. Morgan



Figure 3: Eugenia in court dress



Figure 4: Painting of Eugenia as Bacchus by Carreno

History as a Strategy for the reversal of power positions:

While attempting to contrast the representations of these historical figures with the representations in the play, a huge difference can be noted. For example, when Princess Angie (also Eugenia)- the short statured woman, who exposes her nudity in front of Carreno to be painted as Bacchus - is courted by the doctor Joshua, she reverses the power positions. Angie uses him as a specimen rather than letting her be medically examined. She checks his reflexes by poking him using a pin in his legs and buttocks. She keeps saying “You are a fascinating case” or “you are a pretty interesting specimen”. This reversal of role is an important attempt in the reclaiming of her disabled identity. Similarly when Sister Elizabeth, the woman in wheel chair; Andreos, the legless man; Wild Man or Zoltan, the man with Cerebral Palsy approach a clerk in the employment Office, they are asked a number of questions that limit them to their disability. Sister Elizabeth responds to these questions by saying, “This isn’t anybody’s business. We are here to find jobs”. (Baisley & Lewis, 2006, p.91) The courage to voice one's desires and needs is a way of reclaiming the disabled identity. Thus the play is both a retelling of the history from a disabled person’s perspective and also a creation of the “hidden history” of the people with disabilities.

Narrative Determinism and Historiography:

This process of historiography is made possible with the help of narrative determinism. Narrative determinism is the idea that when a person is trying to determine the truth, he takes the available knowledge and makes a narrative out of it. Victoria Ann Lewis (2005) in her essay “Theatre Without a Hero: The Making of P H Reaks” elaborates on the process of the creation of the play, as a history reconstructed through time.

In the process of creating P. H Reaks, we (re)discovered many people’s theatre dramaturgical strategies: first, a process of collaborative playwriting or collective creation that served as a metonym of the identity we were endeavouring to construct; second, the inclusion of documentary, found materials to reconstruct historical events and recover forgotten history; third, exhuming known and unknown persons with disabilities from the past and absorbing them into the modern social construction of disability... and fourth, fictional elements including a frame story, comic parodies and love scenes. (Lewis, 2005,p. 116)

In the play *P.H. Reaks*, there is a scene where the disability of Franklin Roosevelt is used as a material for a scene. The revered Franklin Roosevelt is reduced to an inanimate dummy that gets tossed around by Secret Service officers who are rehearsing how to make FDR not look disabled in front of the public. Another one is a protest scene where certain demonstrators argue for job opportunities. There are also hecklers who make fun of these demonstrators, but the scene ends where the demonstrators say, “Go ahead and stare, we are staring back.” (94) Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls staring as an expression of power relations of able-bodied and disabled subjects. Thus when the demonstrators say that they are staring back, it is very clearly a reversal of power positions.

The artist Matisse in a wheelchair, along with a woman in a wheelchair is another prominent scene. They are constantly under the supervision of an attendant. The attendant keeps on offering help to these people; the excessive sympathy or the help

offered by the attendant is suggestive of his feeling of superiority as an able bodied man and his view of those in wheelchair as extremely dependent. All these historical incidents form a frame for the play and the authors have combined these narratives for making meaning and for framing a historical narrative.

The love scenes in the play need specific attention. At the beginning of the play, the disabled saint rejects the advances of the disabled sinner and opts for the non-disabled caretaker, Father John. Later, Princess Angie exposes and rejects the sexual exoticism of the non-disabled country doctor. The penultimate love scene, set in the 1930s during the Washington protest depicts a non-disabled woman's flirtation with a handsome, disabled protestor. She ultimately rejects him because of her fear of his disability. The final love scene is in fact a reclaiming of their sexual selves, as Joey and Beth, though helped by an attendant to be on bed, engage in sexual activities. In Lewis' view, "sexual union becomes public rather than private not only because of the characters' given circumstances, but because the love between the two disabled people symbolizes an acceptance and claiming of the disabled identity" (Introduction, p. xxix). As Irving Zola, a social scientist and disability studies pioneer said, the denial of anger along with the denial of sexuality is a major contributing factor to the invisibility of disability identity in modern era. (Lewis p. xxv) The play gives scope for anger and sexuality for the people with disabilities, thus proclaiming an identity and an independent status for them.

Historiography - Creation of an "Imagined Community":

The process of historicising has actually helped in the creation of an imagined community – a collective consciousness, a socially constructed community, imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of that group. For Benedict Anderson, who introduced that term, it was nation which formed an imagined community. Nation is a

cultural construct that lead people to consider themselves as part of a cultural heritage and a responsibility to serve the nation. Similarly only when people with disabilities are aware of how they have been treated since the beginning and of the universality of their experiences, will they feel a part of the community. *P. H. Reaks* has succeeded to a great extent in this, as the play offers a historical understanding of disability – of how disability was perceived based on various models over the course of time, of how they have been exploited and misinterpreted over the course of time and thereby coming to a realization of the commonalities of their experiences, finally leading to a sense of community.

Choreographer Naomi Goldberg, who worked with the acting ensemble of *P. H. Reaks* - a diversified group of people using wheelchairs, with spinal cord injuries, short stature and cerebral palsy – commented, "the biggest contradiction for me was that we were saying that this was a group and yet everyone was so completely different, more diversified than any other group I had ever worked with." (Lewis xxvii) This is the difficulty in dealing with the disabled group as a community. But the play through its historicising of disability experience, which has its universal appeal, has succeeded in doing that. The idea of imagined community is created through the use of images. A set of stereotypes usually associated with individuals with disabilities, some symbols that signify disability all help in the creation of an imagined community. The play *P. H. Reaks* is an attempt to dismantle certain notions of disabled people and also to reclaim their identities through a historical journey of disability.

Re-claiming the Disabled Identity through History:

Historicising has also helped in reversal of roles and reclaiming the disabled identity. For instance, in the play *P. H. Reaks*, the characters with disability like Matisse, Eugenia, Princess Angie, sister Elizabeth, Joey are all shown to be overcoming the mental constraints of disability and

are given a voice. The characters like F D Roosevelt, who have tried to hide their disabilities in front of the crowd are brought to light, thus making disability, an experience not to be hidden, but to be acknowledged and respected.

P. H. Reaks evidently uses history to dismantle the idea of disability. There are other plays of disability theatre that uses the technique of historiography to reclaim the disabled identities. Very often they question the institutions that make impairment of body, a disability. The play *Creeps* by David Freeman is set in a sheltered workshop. The idea of sheltered workshops and their effectiveness in the lives of disabled people are questioned when the characters express their discontent with the monotonous routine and their desire to do more creative work like art or writing. Here again the disabled characters come together to raise their voice. The idea is that no individual voice will be heard, but when it becomes a community, the voice becomes heard in a way it can't be ignored.

Thus to conclude, it can be noted that history has multiple levels of significance in the play *P. H. Reaks*. The structure, the plot, characters and themes of the play revolve around history and contribute to the dense meaning of the play. The use of history enables a postmodern rendition of the play and also contributes to the subversion of power positions and reversal of roles as concerns the people with disabilities. The authors have used the technique of narrative determinism, frame story, comic plot and loves scenes as a strategy for reclaiming their history and for the creation of an “imagined community” for the disabled people.

References

- [1] Anderson, B. (2016) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso Books.
- [2] Baizley, D & Lewis, V.A et.al. (2006) *P.H. Reaks: The Hidden History of People with*

Disabilities. Beyond Victims and Villains. Edited by Victoria Ann Lewis, New York: Theatre Communications Group.

- [3] Hutcheon, L. (1989) *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
- [4] Lewis, V. A. (2006) Introduction. *Beyond Victims and Villains*. Edited by Victoria Ann Lewis, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- [5] Lewis, V. A. (2005) Theatre Without a Hero: The Making of P. H. Reaks: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities. *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*. Edited by Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander. USA: University of Michigan Press.
- [6] Narrative Determinism pg 165-166 Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/hp/Downloads/_book_9789047433231_Bej.9789004165984.i - 326_006-preview%20(1).pdf