



'DISABLED' AS THE CENTRAL CHARACTER IN VICTOR HUGO'S NOVEL, *THE MAN WHO LAUGHS*

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ABSTRACT

*According to Post-Disability Theory, the construction of 'abled' and 'disabled' happens at the societal level. The constructions often understand disabled characters as deviations, as deformed, inferior, abnormal and incomplete people. Representations of these disabled people are there in fictional works. The paper concentrates on the main character Gwynplaine in *The Man Who Laughs* (1869) and the representation of this character with physical disability. The paper focuses on the motive of the representation. Disabled characters are usually linked with evil traits. In literature, through the idea of the norm, deviations are constructed. Disabled fictional characters are seen as defectives of the generation. The paper attempts to reread the above text using the Disability Studies perspective, and to critique the representation of the differently-abled.*

Key words: *stereotype, disability, normalcy, differently abled, stigma, eugenicists, non-normal.*

INTRODUCTION

Disability and Literature is an emerging field of study. The novel, *The Man Who Laughs*, is read here on the lines of Post-Disability Theory. It deconstructs the depiction of the disabled as tragic and abnormal on the basis of impairment. David Bolt states in his study that impairment is just the medical condition of a person and it is that society which makes them disabled. It is necessary to understand the key terms, impairment, disability and handicapped. Impairment is loss in function and structure of any part of the body, whereas disability is a

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position of inability to perform any activity, and handicap is a state of disability. As apart from the above discussed terms, the word deformity refers to a person who is misshaped. A compact word for these types of distortion could be differently abled. There is a stereotypical belief that persons who are deformed, are troublesome and negative, and they are considered as unequal and unbearable. The dis-like that society shows towards a deformed person creates a stigma around them. Most of the times, the stigma in a deformed person suppresses his creativity, which makes his/her life wretched. The novel has a deformed character, who is sculpted to have a monstrous appearance which is supposedly meant to amuse people and aristocracy.

The novel, *The Man Who Laughs*, is set in the late 16th century and early 17th century England. In the novel, Gwynplaine, who is a physically deformed person challenges his deformity, and through fairs, entertains and educates all. Dea a blind girl, assists him in his endeavors. The representation of disabled characters in works of art is never to discuss disabled people themselves, but to discuss social order or to talk about 'abled' protagonists and reaffirm the concept of the norm. This is often done through a process of negation. These are the strategies of non-disabled or abled people to subjugate disabled people. So the disabled person is shown with a deformity to suit the convenience of society.

The novel, *The Man Who Laughs* (1869), was written when Hugo was exiled to England from France for the controversial political content of his previous novels. The novel is set in England and deals with political corruption and prejudice. It is one of the lesser known novels by him. It has the Comprachicos as the base of the novel. They are a part of old human ugliness. They are connected to an evil form of slavery, worked against the Orthopedy. They work on a child to degrade, deform and disfigure so that it looks like a monster, who is there to be laughed at. The general understanding is that a dwarf has to be fashioned, and a well-formed person is not amusing though a hunchback is fun. The character of Gwynplaine is a work of Comprachicos, who is mutilated, and has a grin face, and entertains everyone. He leads and controls all events in the novel though he is a disabled person. When he is abandoned by the Comprachicos from their ship, Gwynplaine does not worry about himself but rescues Dea, a helpless child, whose mother died in a snowstorm. In spite of him being a stray, he takes on the responsibility of the child, who lost her sight. He finds shelter with Ursus, a carnival vendor. Gwynplaine, a deformed man, with his acting tricks becomes the bread-winner for Ursus. His fame spreads as he expands his shows from one place to another: one village to another, one town to another, and one city to another. The shows appeal to large audiences as they entertain and educate. They are such that even Duchess Josiana wants to be entertained by Gwynplaine to relieve her boredom. She is attracted to his deformed visage his performance. In the meanwhile, Gwynplaine comes to know about his



royal lineage through Hardquonne, who had arranged Gwynplaine's abduction 23 years ago. After coming to know the truth that Gwynplaine is the son of Lord Linnaeus Clancharlie through the confessions of Comprachicos, Queen Anne, instated him as Lord Fermain Clancharlie. In his first address in the House of Lords to the peerage, Gwynplaine speaks about the unequal and callous attitude of the nobles towards the common people. He becomes a true royal representative in his concern towards people. In the novel, the blind character, Dea is as important as Gwynplaine. After losing her mother, she finds shelter with Ursus with the help of Gwynplaine, and grows up as a tall girl. She is fragile and slight in appearance with brown hair but beautiful with eyes full of brilliance, though sightless.

The reference to physical disability in the novel attracts the attention of the readers and helps to understand the inability of the abled to achieve the feats of the disabled. Hugo says:

“Two slits for eyes, a hiatus for a mouth, a snub protuberance with two holes for nostrils, a flattened face, — all producing the effect of violent laughter, certainly Nature never produced such perfection single-handed. But is laughter a synonym of joy?” (Hugo: 1869, Vol-1, 295)

The description of Gwynplaine the peerage in the House of Lords is an example of grotesque, substandard criticism which constructs him in a bad light. It says:

“That forest of hair, those dark hollows under the brows, the deep gaze of eyes which they could not see, that head, on the wild outlines of which light and darkness mingled weirdly, were a wonder indeed. It was beyond all understanding; much as they had heard of him, the sight of Gwynplaine was a terror. Even those who expected much found their expectations surpassed. It was as though on the mountain reserved for the gods, during the banquet on a serene evening, the whole of the all-powerful body being gathered together, the face of Prometheus, mangled by the vulture's beak, should have suddenly appeared before them, like a blood-coloured moon on the horizon. Olympus looking on Caucasus! What a vision! Old and young, open-mouthed with surprise, fixed their eyes upon Gwynplaine.” (Hugo: 2004, 374).

Gwynplaine, who has a mutilated face, speaks in the House of Lords against the gross unequal treatment of the common people by lords. In spite of it, the lords are going in for new increments and allowance. Gwynplaine is against this. He is no longer a mountebank which he had been a day before. He musters all his energy to control his laughing face. He appeals to them that they are doing a mistake by leading themselves into danger in doing injustice to



people, who are all powerful. Gwynplaine comes to know that he is the heir to Lord Linnaeus Clancharlie. Initially he does not accept to be a lord but as a God's messenger he comes to the House of Lords and warns the lords about the wretched life the poor are living. Though the message that Gwynplaine makes is serious, the mutilated visage of his makes the listeners to remain careless. As Gwynplaine addresses the Peers of England, he says that God should pity them for their cruelty. He calls them honest men, intellectuals and general souls and urges them to give hope to the oppressed people. He warns the lords to protect: girls, who are forced into prostitution; mining workers without food consuming coal to fill their stomachs, an old man, who has to pay in advance for his funeral rights in the hospital. He asks the Prince George of Denmark rather to forego hundred thousand pounds more as annual provision for the cause of common people. Gwynplaine appeals to the lords that death spares no one, and they come to the rescue of needy in the society. He is in a terribly bad mood as his usual laugh is misleading audiences and makes the lords laugh at his grin. He is in a state of "to be comic with out and tragic within" (p.378). In his speech, Gwynplaine stands out as greater human being and as a savior of poor. Though this does not reach the lords, he is genuine in his concern to make way for a just society.

Literature and Disability Studies is a new area of research. *The Man Who Laughs* finds a good shelf in it. Much of work has to happen in this regard. The book is voluminous, a good part of it is devoted to the differently-abled characters, Gwynplaine and Dea, who are the hero and heroine of the novel in spite of their disability. They stand out as true lovers conscious of their disabilities, sending a strong message that even the aristocracy should come down to serve them.

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