

Staging Ableism and Social prejudice: Crip Theory Reading of Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*

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Abstract

Staging ableism in contemporary theatre is a complex issue that requires a deep analysis. One of aims of this study is to analysis ableism and social prejudice in *The Elephant Man* (1977) by Bernard Pomerance. The guiding theory for this study is Crip theory, which supplies a critical lens to analysis the representation of disability on stage and challenges the ableist expectations of privilege social and cultural narratives. Moreover, the study searches for finding an answer for how contemporary theatre supports and inquires the portrayal of disabled individuals in society. Simultaneously, challenging and transforming societal attitudes towards disabled individuals is one of this study's significances. This study demonstrates theatre's role in staging ableism through authentic representation of disabled character, John Merrick, to raise audience awareness of negative results of ableism and social prejudice in society.

Keywords: (Ableism, Crip Theory, Disability, Social Prejudice).

تمثيل الإيبيلية والتحيز الاجتماعي: قراءة في مسرحية برنارد بومرانس الرجل الفيل من

منظور نظرية الكريب

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المخلص

إنّ تمثيل التمييز القائم على القدرة («إيبيلية») في المسرح المعاصر قضية متعددة الأبعاد ومعقدة، وتتطلب دراسة معمقة وشاملة. يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل مظاهر التمييز القائم على القدرة والأحكام الاجتماعية المسبقة في مسرحية برنارد بومرانس الرجل الفيل. وقد تم اعتماد «نظرية الكريب» (Crip Theory) «كإطار نظري لهذا البحث، إذ تتيح منظوراً نقدياً لدراسة كيفية تمثيل الإعاقة في المسرح، وتفكيك الافتراضات الإيبيلية الكامنة في السرديات والممارسات الثقافية السائدة. كما يسعى البحث إلى الكشف عن كيفية إسهام المسرح المعاصر في دعم أو مساءلة الطريقة التي ينظر بها المجتمع إلى الأفراد ذوي الإعاقة. تكمن أهمية هذه الدراسة في قدرتها على تحدي المواقف الاجتماعية السائدة تجاه ذوي الإعاقة والمساهمة في تغييرها. ويخلص البحث إلى إبراز الدور الذي يلعبه المسرح في تجسيد مظاهر الإيبيلية من خلال تقديم تجارب واقعية وشخصيات معاقة أصيلة، بهدف رفع مستوى الوعي لدى الجمهور حول التمييز القائم على القدرة وآثاره السلبية في المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (التمييز القائم على القدرة، نظرية الكريب، الإعاقة، الأحكام الاجتماعية المسبقة).

1. Introduction

In 1979 Bernard Pomerance presented *The Elephant Man* which appeared during a crucial time for theater to represent disabilities while exploring Joseph Merrick's story to unsettle viewers' disability understanding and humanity knowledge about social power structures. Depicting Victorian England as its setting the play investigates how medical facilities met socially stratified institutions and public shows

combined to handle those whom society marked as "abnormal." (Davis, 1995, p. 92). Through his seminal disability studies Pomerance established a foundational knowledge that explores societal questions regarding exploitation and compassion as well as the creation of social "others" in Western culture.

Earlier studies of this play have discussed Pomerance's portrayal of Merrick as a human with dignity and mercy, celebrating his subverting of ableist spectacle (Hurley, 2010). But others, such as Snyder and Mitchell (2006), argue that, accidentally, the play addresses the medical gaze and put Merrick as a clinical case to be treated as a human needs medical care and attention. Petra Kuppers (2011) emphasizes on authentic disability performances to engage audience with real experiences of disabled character on stages. By depending on such previous studies, Crip theory refers to the play as both a social product and as a text that will be studied by other contemporary theories for future disability studies.

Crip theory as a branch of disability studies challenges traditional thoughts and beliefs of ability, body difference, and personal identity. It reclaims and redefines the word "Crip" as an aspect of resistance, authority, and power. It highlights how socially constructed concepts of ability interact with broader systems of oppression. Essentially, Crip Theory questions systematic inequalities by seeing disability as a necessary cultural and political lens rather than individual weaknesses (McRure, 2006). Several factors explain the development of Crip theory and particularly the role that disability studies have played in its formation. Crip activists have increasingly disavowed the normalising tendencies of disability studies, which tend to take identity, inclusivity, and minority rights approaches (Chen et al., 2023). As Chen et al. (2023, p. 2) have noted, "the praxis of crip is about being in relation to

each other in such a way that risks a falling out with disability studies.” Those with disabilities have experienced harmful historical narratives: they have been pathologised by medical institutions, demonised by religious doctrines, discriminated against in housing, employment, and education, stereotyped in media representations, victimised by hate groups, and socially isolated, frequently within their families of origin (Sandahl, 2003). In contrast, Crip theory and politics embrace difference, striving to de-essentialise identity, and advocate for ethical forms of non-normativity and alternative ways of living (McRuer, 2006).

As a theoretical framework, Crip theory draws on other theories, such as feminist criticism and social justice activism, to foreground intersectionality and social justice. It emphasises the similarities between the compulsory nature of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness; hence, it stresses how societal structures privilege certain bodies, identities, and movements while marginalising others. By doing so, Crip theory challenges the ableist experiences and celebrates diversity at the same time. Applying this theory to *The Elephant Man* helps the study to investigate how the playwright represents the tension between exploitation and visibility. Merrick’s portrayal becomes a tool to audience to understand that ableism has a long history from Victorian age to contemporary theatres, reinforcing audience’s role as the spectacle of disability.

1.1 Historical and Cultural Contexts

During the 1880s Joseph Merrick experienced the concurrent social backgrounds of Victorian England. During that time, he inhabited a societal structure where there was both substantial economic success together with widespread destitution as well as modern scientific developments alongside enduring religious convictions and rigid

ethical standards existing alongside systematic mistreatment (Ackroyd, 2003). Science along with medicine experienced substantial progress during the Victorian time period. Medical organizations took dominance over medical evaluations and healthcare delivery as Charles Darwin's theories changed the fundamental scientific perspectives. Medical observers modified their healthcare approach to study sick patients scientifically but this transformation isolated patients from full human treatment (Foucault, 2003). Joseph Merrick's medical examination followed this scientific process to reduce him from a person into a clinical specimen for public entertainment.

Victorian era society grouped people according to pre-established social categories combined with ethical guidelines. Visible disabilities and differences among people ended up being confined to workhouses alongside asylums and exhibition spaces since these areas functioned as sites for human deviation control (Davis, 1995). At the same time, the freak show business reached its peak as audiences witnessed bodily anomalies to entertain themselves and the Victorian community demonstrated their frets about physical standards alongside their concerns about social class divisions.

1.2 Production History and Significance

Bernard Pomerance first staged his play in London during 1977 then brought it to Broadway in 1979 to receive the Tony Award for Best Play. Pomerance deviates from the 1980 film adaptation of *The Elephant Man* since his stage production refrains from using prosthetics or makeup to depict the character's condition. During the course of the performance Merrick's actor begins with typical physical characteristics which transform over time into movements depicting his physical disability features thus making audience members participate directly in constructing his difference (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

When the play premiered it matched a vital period in disability politics since disability rights movements were starting to develop in both the United States and United Kingdom. The combination of critical praise and audience attraction drew disability depiction questions to traditional theater audiences (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Scholars have acknowledged *The Elephant Man* for its compassionate depiction of Merrick yet they also question how it could potentially sustain the "extraordinary body" concept by creating customer experiences for disabled individuals (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 73).

Through *The Elephant Man*, Bernard Pomerance stages a multifaceted analysis of Victorian and existing ableist practices by exploring how Joseph Merrick's physical body transforms into an institutional battleground among medical authorities and elite social classes who contest human norms. The play portrays disability as an identity that emerges from institutional power alongside cultural narratives which construct perceivable body conditions into social constructs. Pomerance uses Treves' dual behavior of saving while colonizing Merrick's identity to show how ableist ideologies continue affecting modern treatment of differently abled people while proving real dignity demands eliminating normative body standards from humanity definitions (Howell and Ford, 2001).

2. Discussion

Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* (1977) is a critical text that represents ableism through performance and spectacle. Intertwined frameworks of Crip theory and disability performance show how Joseph Merrick, a disabled protagonist of the play, exposes and complicates the social hierarchies that identify and marginalizes

disabled individuals. The play is not a biographical story but it is a Crip production of contemporary theatre, raising audience awareness as spectacle of disability.

The play opens with prologue which directly defines Merrick as a clinical object rather than a human subject. In his first lecture, Dr. Treves explains Merrick's body to his guests onstage, as a case of study. Treves states:

TREVES: The most striking feature about him was his enormous head. Its circumference was about that of a man's waist. From the brow there projected a huge bony mass like a loaf, while from the back of his head hung a bag of spongy fungous-looking skin, the surface of which was comparable to brown cauliflower. On the top of the skull were a few long lank hairs (Pomerance, 1977, p. 5).

Treves's speech is clear example for McRuer's (2006) concept "Compulsory able-bodiedness" in which bodies that deviate from a norm are classified as pathological and they might be exploited (p. 8). Alison Kafer (2013) extends this by noting that such plays are shows of "salvation," where disabled individuals are mediated through able-bodied gaze (p. 45). However, Michel Foucault's (2003) notion of "Medical gaze" is clear in this scene, showing Merrick as an object of medical spectacle. Pomerance uses clinical terminology through the play, when Treves explains Merrick's body to others, echoing what Garland-Thomson (1997) calls "Stare dynamic," a social and cultural action in which able-bodied individuals state again strongly their normativity through looking at these disabled bodies. This act of looking, as Crip theory confirms, is an ableist spectatorship and Merrick is categorized as a case who needs cure and pity. Audience, also, is implicated in Pomerance's theatrical plan. He rejects that Merrick's disability be represented by prosthetics elements. His

decision makes audience imagine Merrick's deformity instead of watching it. Pomerance's technique reveals disability performance is an artistic and performative act. As Garland-Thomson (2009) maintains this technique echoes a call of resistance of voyeurism and changing the representation into Crip aesthetics, what is explained by Koppers (2011) as a process that keep disabled people safe from ableism and at the same time raise audience awareness critically.

Additionally, playwright's style of writing including language and imagery have an active effect in explaining Merrick's condition throughout the play. His disabilities are clearly described as monstrous that highlight in Treves's onstage explanations when he says: "Its circumference was about that of a man's waist. From the brow there projected a huge bony mass like a loaf," (Pomerance, 1977, p. 5). Merrick's body is broken into parts by Treves and his medical staff through their discussions. They objectify him instead of treating him as a whole and complete humanity. The play employs two parallel emotional spectrums consisting of horror and pity which produces diverse reactions from both characters and theater spectators. Society typically interprets Merrick through his physical form as his strange appearance reinforces public fear of different body structures (Garland-Thomson, 2009). The physical elements of Merrick function as persistent dramatic tension. Through his physical movements as well as his deformed body structure, the writer uses physicality to portray his physical and emotional pain. The actor playing Merrick needs to recreate his strange configurations with gestures to make audiences feel accountable and show the clash between his mental state and visible physique (Howell and Ford, 2001). Through his physical manifestation, Merrick compels his audience to rethink their attitudes towards disability because they must rely on unconventional emotional signals

to understand him. In this staging, both characters display opposing power positions where Treves takes an elevated position compared to the vulnerable Merrick. Because of his severely deformed face Merrick completely lost his capacity to display emotions or emotions “Merrick’s face was so deformed he could not express any emotion at all. His speech was very difficult to understand without practice” (Pomerance, 1977, p. v). The actor performing Merrick revealed how his speech needed practiced pronunciation for audiences to understand his words.

Throughout the play, Merrick grapples with the stereotypes of being labeled a "freak" or "monster." Merrick both absorbs and encounters these social tags from others while he interacts with them in ways that cause an identity complication. Merrick's presentation as a monstrous exhibit shifts toward showcasing his cognitive abilities along with showing emotional behavior and wishing to make relationships (Graham and Oehlschlaeger, 1992). Through the play, Pomerance presents a display that compels viewers past superficial representations of Merrick to witness his human qualities. The conflicting portrayal of stereotypes and human qualities becomes central because it requires the audience to adjust their thinking about disability. The attractive price of Tuppence will reveal a special viewing opportunity inside. For instance, “Tuppence only, step in and see! To live with his physical hideousness, incapacitating deformities and unrelenting pain is trial enough...” (Pomerance, 1977, p. 3) reflects the stereotype of Merrick as a "freak," while contrasting with the moments of humanization that emerge later in the play.

Merrick's experiences heavily reflect the medical practice that controls his medical condition. The doctor started his interest in Merrick because medical curiosity motivated him to examine and classify his

physical abnormalities (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Through medicalization Merrick loses control over his treatment because doctors transform him from a subject in need of care into an examination object. During the events of colleague visits Treves displays Merrick as a specimen with consequences that confirm the oppressive medical system fundamentals. Treves states, “I must examine him further at the hospital. Here is my card. I’m Treves. I will have a cab pick him up and return him” (Pomerance, 1977, p. 4), serving as an example of medical authority upon disabled individuals. Society generates such serious exclusion by describing each part of Merrick’s body. He is excluded from participating in everyday tasks by public audience. Treating as a freak, declares the general marginalization of disabled individuals as they are often appeared as a tool of entertainment rather than being a human being, whom deserve understanding and respect. *The Elephant Man* represents how ableism is an important reason for separation and exclusion. That is because of society’s rules about whom will deserve dignity and compassion. This is clear in Merrick’s speech, when he states: “I would prefer it where no one stared at me” (Pomerance, 1977, p. 22), showing how he was examined and inspected closely and thoroughly by others. Merrick suffers from internal ableism which he views himself through others’ ableist gazes. He had a long and difficult struggle with ableist attitudes in order to be look as a normal and accepted person in his ableist society. This reflects the damaging effects of societal ableism and prejudice on self-respect and real identity (Sasani, 2015). The play discusses this notion through Merrick’s speech: “I have never even seen a real woman” (Pomerance, 1977, p. 47), indicating his internal conflict of insufficiency and how society rejects his self-worth.

By entrance of Mrs. Kendal to the play, tone is shifted into beauty and form more than personal conversation.

MRS. KENDAL: Good morning Mr. Merrick.

MERRICK: I planned so many things to say. I forget them. You are so beautiful.

MRS. KENDAL: How charming, Mr. Merrick.

MERRICK: Well. Really that was what I planned to say. That I forgot what I planned to say. I couldn't think of anything else I was so excited (Pomerance, 1977, p. 31).

Their conversations describe what Kupperts (2007) notes as Crip intimacy, that celebrates disabled body as relational rather than tragic. Although these moments reveal humanizing moments but will form these bodies as objects of artistic viewing (Johnston, 2016). Stanton notes that Mrs. Kendal's behaviours and her open treatment return back to her personality as an actress, where she used to be close to audience. She clarifies herself through her speech:

MERRICK: Well. You are a famous actress.

MRS. KENDAL: I am not unknown.

MERRICK: You must display yourself for your living then. Like I did.

MRS. KENDAL: That is not myself, Mr. Merrick. That is an illusion. This is myself.

MERRICK: This is myself too (Pomerance, 1977, p. 32).

Class and Gender play important roles in intersecting disability with other social systems of oppression. Class differences strongly affect how Merrick and Treves encounter each other. Merrick shows poverty starting from his childhood at the workhouse because his mother

discarded him before he spent time in these inhumane conditions (Sasani, 2015). Living in the workhouse for several years, exemplifies Davis's (1995) view that industrial modernity gives labor rights to able-bodied and deprive disabled individuals. By contrast, as a surgeon Treves has privileged access to social benefits along with the perks that come from his education and social status.

The Elephant Man is a clear example for systematic ableism against disabled people, where it shows that Merrick has not enough opportunities to live better than his real life. Ross highlights: "His own ma put him there age of three. Couldn't bear the sight, well you can see why" (Pomerance, 1977, p. 4), reflecting Merrick's abandonment, in contrast to Treves's privileged social condition. Treves as a doctor has authority over Merrick's freak status. Treves's medical position gives him rights to make decisions about Merrick and his life, care, and treatment that fundamentally reflects social ableism concerning normalcy. Their relationship bases on power dynamic, Merrick often stays voiceless and depending on Treves's authority (Sasani, 2015). Treves, for example, tells: "I must examine him further at the hospital. Here is my card. I'm Treves. I will have a cab pick him up and return him" (Pomerance, 1977, p. 4). This reflects Treves's control over Merrick's life and treating him as a case of study, in contrast of appearing as a charitable rescuer (Alzughairi, 2015). Social status as an active dynamic treats and deals with disabled people, inquiring the moral principles of authority when it refers to the lives of these marginalized group. Treves greets the generosity of elite visitors, telling: "The English public has been so generous that Merrick may be supported for life without a penny spent from Hospital funds" (Pomerance, 1977, p.20), echoing social status dynamic in the play.

Gender, in Merrick's life, makes his manhood harder to express as a disabled man. His deformity keeps him away from traditional and normal masculinity standards which causes lack of self-confident that leads to social exclusion. Mrs. Kendal represents a good example of femininity in the play (Alzughaihi, 2015). Merrick shifts his point of views on gender when Mrs. Kendal treats him with respect to reveal Merrick's human identity. Treves believes women have great effects in Merrick's experience and in his life, he says: "I am convinced they are the key to retrieving him from his exclusion" (Pomerance, 1977, p. 29). As Treves said, women help Merrick to make better connections with his surrounding environment. These complex relationships in the play show how Merrick considers as a mirror through whom the society constructs disability, humanity, and identity. During his discussion with Ross, Merrick remarks: "You see this church. I am building it. The people who visit are friends. Not clients. I am not a dog walking on its hind legs" (Pomerance, 1977, p.52). This moment illustrates Merrick's Crip resistance. Finally, he realizes his humanity, that he is not an animal or a case of curiosity. His creative work, a model of a cathedral, is a symbol of resistance, transforming confinement into artistic action which was celebrated by aristocratic visitors, for instance, Lord John states: "Here's the silver-topped walking stick, Merrick. Make you a regular Piccadilly exquisite. Keep up the good work. Self-help is the best help. Example to us all" (Pomerance, 1977, p. 37). It is Crip theory's call to represent dependency and imaginative freedom.

Additionally, time, like other dynamics in the play, has a role in Merrick's exclusion. Crip time, as clarified by Alison Kafer (2013), explains how Merrick lives apart of normative life. Being a critical point, time highlights that Merrick suffers from health problems and he has a danger of death. Treves notices that: "His heart won't sustain him

much longer” (Pomerance, 1977, p. 64), which showing that Merrick will die as soon as possible. Time has a danger side, destructing and limiting Merrick’s imagination and understanding of living as a normal person (Alzughaihi, 2015).

Merrick experiences powerful mental strain because he must conform to traditional life advancement toward love and companionship while society demands his approval. For example, he expresses his frustrations with relationships and the inability to connect with others on an intimate level when he says, “If I had been Romeo, we would have got away” (Pomerance, 1977, p. 33). Merrick experiences longing toward romantic love and normalcy which demonstrates the temporal pressure of ableist narratives on his life because he perceives his afflictions obstruct his romantic dreams. Society’s pace functions differently than Merrick’s life experiences since he faces constant medical challenges. His medical emergency has to compete with his delayed social growth because of his condition. Throughout his life Merrick races against time while seeking meaningful connections since society denies him many typical experiences thereby transforming his life story into a time-limited pressure cooker. Merrick’s disability and social time expectation describe how ableism treats disabled individual’s life by putting oppressive norms that ignore their real experience (Ansbro, 2023).

By collecting medical discussions, intersectionality aspects, temporal disruption, and aesthetics performance, *The Elephant Man* becomes a Crip text. It stages and criticizes ableism through Merrick’s journey from freak shows to hospital then to self-constructed, Pomerance uses gestures of reclamation, friendships, creativity acts, imagination, and dreams to follow disability justice principles. By refusing prosthetic portrayal, the play rejects voyeuristic engagement, forcing audience to

imagine Merrick's deformity through Treves's explanations and other characters' reactions. However, contemporary audiences view the play through disability justice, understanding their oppression lens. In contrast, Victorian see disabled people as freak without paying attention to their humanity. Kuppers (2007) argues, theatre can either reproduce or resist ableism. *The Elephant Man* compounds both; analysing ableism by centring Merrick as a mediator subject. Contemporary productions raise disabled actors' voices by giving them roles on stages not behind the curtains. Thus, *The Elephant Man* describes ableism in two different eras to emphasize on idea that ableism is socially constructed.

Conclusion

The research has analyzed Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* through Crip theory lens to discuss how the play critically examine the intersectional structures of ableism and social prejudice that represent disability in Victorian and contemporary cultures. By representing Merrick's life on stage, Pomerance gives audiences a chance to differentiate between compassion and exploitation. His theatrical techniques and his insistence on imaginative to avoid audience from voyeurism, exposing that disability always is a mediate of social expectations and desire. The research provides a background for future theatre scholarships to reimagine disability representation. Crip theory helps to challenge ableist aesthetics and explores how collaborative creation and accessible design can follow disability justice assumptions.

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