

Traversing Disability Stigma: Re-presenting 'Disability' as a form of 'Identity' in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*



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Abstract: “Disability is a matter of perception. If you can do one thing well, you are needed by someone” – Martina Navratilova. Though Disability Studies focused on the distinction between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ defining Disability as a social construct, we still perceive Disability as something abnormal, drifting from the normality, an impairment to human mind or body. This paper reflects how Quasimodo, attains an Identity in the society with his disability of hunchback and deafness in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre - Dame*. He was crowned as the “Pope of Fools” for being the ugliest person in Paris. Though the identity he gained had a negative connotation, it was his disability that made him known among the people. The deflection from normality – his hunchback made people recognize him. This paper reveals how a disabled person is perceived by the society and the struggles he faces for his survival living among the people who are ready to use him and exploit him for their personal gains and finally leaving him in the crisis with a preoccupied notion that the disabled deserve only such kind of treatment. The character Quasimodo is a living example that a disabled person also possesses the same feelings like love, care, happiness, lust etc. just like a normal human being do and how these feelings are restricted for him. This paper also evaluates the Disability Stigma working on the character Quasimodo making him stereotyped, discriminated, blamed, internalized and made victim of physical, mental and sexual violence.

Keywords: Disability, Identity, Disability Stigma, Stereotype
The Hunchback of Notre Dame

I. INTRODUCTION

“Able doesn't mean enabled. Disabled doesn't mean less able” Khang Kijarro Nguyen Disability refers to an individual's restriction to participate in what is considered normal in their society. It is the consequence of an impairment that may be physical, cognitive, intellectual, mental, sensory and developmental or combination of these.

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It can be inborn or occur during a person's lifetime. It could be analyzed as an impairment having activity limitations and participation restriction. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement of life situations. The WHO defines Disability as “a complex phenomenon reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives.” In simple terms, disability is nothing but a lack of ability or weakness.

Disability studies is an academic discipline that focuses on the meaning, nature and consequence of disability. Disability studies earlier focused on distinguishing between impairment and disability. It analyses disability as a social construct. It not only analyses the history and theory of it, but also stresses on lived experiences. It teaches to focus on the lived experience of individuals with disabilities in practical terms. The main intention of Disability studies is to make the disabled access their civil rights and help them to lead a quality life in the society. It promotes people with disabilities to present their experiences and perspectives on discrimination. Hunchback characters could be traced back from Indian Epics. Manthara – literal meaning humpbacked, in Ramayana is said to be hunchbacked, ugly, and antagonistic in appearance. She is portrayed as an expert talker and a cunning woman who can manipulate her way to get what she wants. It was she who convinced Queen Kaikeyi that she should use her boon and make her son Bharata- the King and should sent Rama to exile. Her disability is portrayed with ugliness and is presented as a manipulated character. Other hunchback characters include Vizzini in William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*, Gru in *Despicable Me*, Salad Fingers in *Salad Fingers* by David Firth, Fritz in *Frankenstein*, Tom from *Harry Potter* series etc. Victor Hugo, a French Romantic novelist, poet and dramatist is considered one of the greatest and best among the French writers. He was a committed Royalist at his younger age and turned to be a passionate supporter of Republicanism. His works reflect on the social and political issues of his time. He is primarily known for his poetry collections *Les Contemplations* (The Contemplations) and *La Légende des siècles* (The legend of the Ages). He was profoundly influenced by Francois Rene de Chateaubriand, the famous figure in the literary movement of Romanticism. His novels include *The last day of the Condemned* (1829), *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), *Les Misérables* (1862), *The Man who laughs* (1869), *Toilers of the Sea* (1876) etc.

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II. THE FABLE OF HUNCHBACK

Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (*Notre- Dame de Paris*) was published in 1831 and was soon translated into many languages across Europe.

His main agenda of the novel was to shame the city of Paris into restoring the much neglected Cathedral of Notre- Dame which attracted many tourists after reading the novel.

This book was an inspiration to renew the Pre- Renaissance buildings. The novel opens with Quasimodo crowned as the “Pope of Fools” for being the ugliest person in Paris. Quasimodo, the central character is “a hideously deformed – a hunchbacked – a protrusion in his back and a giant wart that covers one of his eyes.” He has become deaf due to the sound of the bells in the Notre – Dame. He was abandoned by his mother in Notre - Dame due to his disability and was adopted by Claude Frollo. His life is confined to the walls of the Cathedral and he becomes the Bell ringer of Notre-Dame. His only outlets include ringing the bells and his love and devotion for Frollo- his caretaker. He rarely steps out of the Cathedral. The ringing of the bells is his only form of communication to the outside world. The whole of Paris enjoys Quasimodo’s singing while they detest him for his ugliness.

The 1482 “Festival of Fools” witness two events – Quasimodo crowned as “Pope of Fools” and Esmeralda, a Gypsy dancer’s performance. Claude Frollo falls in love with her and he assigns Quasimodo to abduct her. Pierre Gringoire, the playwright also had an eye on her. He decides to follow her and finds that she is being kidnapped by Quasimodo. Though he tries to restrict him, Quasimodo knocks him down unconscious. The abduction is thwarted by Captain Phoebus and his guards and Esmeralda is saved and Quasimodo is arrested. When Gringoire regains senses, he roams in the street screaming and he is planned to be executed by King Clopin Trouillefou, except if one of the gypsy women would marry him. Esmeralda takes up the move and agree for a four-year marriage period and hence he was saved. Quasimodo at the same time was brought into trial who was innocent and worked according to the order of Claude Frollo. Quasimodo was sentenced to be scourged for an hour then locked up in stocks for public humiliation for two hours. He is mercilessly whipped and left for crowd to deride and abuse. Worn from his ordeal, he calls out for water. Hearing his cries, Esmeralda is moved and she offers him water. This act of mercy captures his heart which is his first touch of human love and affection.

Captain Phoebus tries to woo her and bed her and he manages to seduce her and Frollo comes in and stabs him maddened by jealousy. This murder is then blamed on Esmeralda. She is arrested and brought to trial. Though she refutes the charges, she is tortured and finally she admitted the crime and she was sentenced for hanging. At the jail, Frollo confesses his love to her, she spurns him, sealing her faith. When she was about to be hanged on the gallows, she is snatched by Quasimodo swinging from a bell rope from one of the towers of Notre- Dame. He thought that she is safe in the Cathedral. Frollo informs Pierre Gringories who in turn came to Cathedral to rescue her. Thinking that they came to kill Esmeralda, Quasimodo fights them off. Conversely, he thought that the King’s troops came to rescue her, he handed over her to them and finally she was hanged. It was only after that he realized the lustrous devil in Frollo

and he pushed him from the tower of Notre – Dame to death. Quasimodo fully broken in spirits heads to Montfaucon where the bodies of the convicted are dumped. The novel ends with the gravediggers finding a pair of skeletons in the sepulcher, separate from the rest, one with a deformed spine aligning to a female skeleton – Quasimodo and Esmeralda. This shows the love of Quasimodo to her. Though he is deformed in his physical dimension, his love for her could not be restricted in that disabled body.

III. METHODOLOGY

Quasimodo, the literal meaning of the name is half made – that is not like human. His disability was his hunchback which made even his mother to abandon him.

“He appears: he’s a hunchback; he walks: he’s bandy-legged; he looks at you: he is blind of one eye; you talk to him: he is deaf. By the way, what use does this Polyphemus make of his tongue?” (51-2)

In the novel, we find that Quasimodo is never given a humane consideration by the people around him. He is even publically crowned as the “Pope of Fools” and criticized in open for his ugliness – “Perfection of Ugliness” (50). Though he is taken care of by Claude Frollo, he merely used Quasimodo as a tool for executing his wishes. Quasimodo doesn’t have any touch with the external world except the walls of the Cathedral. He bonds emotionally with the stone statue of Saints and Gargoyles. He views the latter as protectors and identifies strongly with them due to his perceived physical similarity to them.

“Why was I not made of stone like you?” (Quasimodo)

Quasimodo though is picturized as an ugly hunchback through animation, he is the most humane and capable of high feelings, he is a figure characteristic to Romantic. He is a person who loves to do something not for himself, but for the sake of his loved ones. This is exploited by Frollo. He doesn’t even try to show his innocence when he was put in trial for abducting Esmeralda and he never uttered Frollo’s name. He is a naïve who doesn’t have ability to think logically and rationally and is always carried away by the words of his mentor without thinking off its consequences. He is blind at his eye and heart to identify the lustrous devil Frollo. He has never experienced care or affection until Esmeralda shows her concern and offers him water. This made him fall for her and then onwards he lived for her and finally died with her. This reflects that though he is deformed and deaf, the human feelings of love, care, affection and concern sprouted in him just like any other human being. His ardent love for Esmeralda is reflected from his adventurous saving her from hanging and ending up his life with her.

His isolated life and lack of lived experiences made him mistake that the King’s troops came to save her and Frollo as a true lover. He is completely shattered when he finds that Esmeralda is no more and he too ends up his life with her. This shows the ardent love in a deformed body with a pure soul. The character transformation of Quasimodo from a fool to a sensible and affectionate true lover could be traced from the novel. Disabled is often perceived with a different identity in the society. It is often portrayed as an abnormality though it doesn’t harm the individual or others.

In the novel *The Hunchback of Notre- Dame*, Quasimodo is identified for his disability or deformity. He was abandoned by his mother for his hunchback. Victor Hugo has presented Quasimodo with hunchback right from his birth while he got deaf because of the sound of bells of Notre- Dame. He is crowned as “Pope of Fools” for his ugliness. Though his identity is perceived with a negative connotation, he is identified among the public for his hunchback. If this disability was not in him, he would have also become one among the crowd. Hence the domain of Identity is now synonymous with their disability. The attitude of society towards the disabled or deformed is very well reflected in the novel. Without considering that he is also a human being, he is publically criticized for his ugliness and is even crowned as “Pope of Fools.” He is made to believe that he is ugly and illogical and blunt in his thinking and is labeled a useless. He is brutally attacked by the public when he was sentenced to public humiliation. This shows the reckless attitude of public towards disabled. They convince themselves for this brutal act by believing that disabled deserve only this kind of treatment and hence justifying their act. Frolo literally used Quasimodo for fulfilling his personal needs and his lust for Esmeralda. He thinks that he can exploit and use Quasimodo as a return of taking care of his and giving him job as the Bell ringer of Notre- Dame who was banished even by his mother and society.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The imprints of Disability Stigma are well presented in the character Quasimodo. Disability Stigma refers to the set of negative beliefs about people with specific characteristics such as disabled children cannot learn, mental health episode is caused by evil spirits etc. These stigma profound social barriers to the victim. They are often forced to lead an isolated life, excluded from their communities, education, healthcare, entertainment and even their families. Disability Stigma is played out in number of ways like social avoidance, stereotypes, discrimination, blaming, internalization and victim of crimes and violence. Quasimodo is avoided even by his mother for his disability which is later extended to the society. Esmeralda is also reluctant to look at Quasimodo seeing his deformity and ugliness. He is never given a role in the society though he serves the pride of Paris – The Notre -Dame. He is discriminated on the basis of his hunchback, a deviation from the normality. He is blamed for abducting Esmeralda which was actually a well-knit plan by Frolo and Quasimodo simply executed Frolo’s advices. He himself felt ashamed and internalized for his Hunchback and deafness. He is made a victim of crime and violence. He was punished for the crime which he unknowingly or unintentionally committed obeying his Godly figure’s words. He was brutally subjected to public humiliation like a nonliving matter for this which expounds the limits of human mercy and concern. The question arises whether this brutal attitude of public would have risen if Quasimodo was a normal human being, one who is abled?

V. CONCLUSION

The meaning of disability keeps changing. In earlier times, even short sight and long sight was considered a disability. But now with the advent of technology and sight correction

gadgets like spectacles, lens and laser treatments, visual disability was terminated from the society. Nowadays disability has turned to that domain of imperfection to human body or mind which cannot be cured or corrected. Though there are rehabilitation centers for disabled and organizations for taking care of them and awarding them with civil rights, the social stigma connected with disability is still popping up even in this so called ‘modern literate civilized’ society which defines the “Disabled” as “Differently Abled.”

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