Locating 'Disability' in Edward Bond's *Lear*

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Abstract

Edward Bond's *Lear* has contributed to scholarly readings centering on the concepts of violence, atrocity, madness, grotesque, biopolitics, and nihilism. The present paper, thus, would attempt to diagnose how Edward Bond's *Lear* manifests the presence of elements of disability within its textual concern. The theoretical arguments focusing on disability studies would form the theoretical framework for analysing how disability functions in Bond's play *Lear* with the help of close textual analysis.

Keywords: Ableism, Disability, Lear, Transformation, Violence

"We have come out, not with those brown wool lap robes over our withered legs, or dark glasses over our pale eyes, but in shorts and sandals… straight forward, unmasked, and unapologetic… We are everywhere these days, wheeling and loping down the street, tapping our canes, sucking on our breathing tubes… We may drool, speak in staccato syllables, wear catheters to collect our urine, or live with a compromised immune system?" (Linton 4-5).

Disability pride resonates in this defiant undertaking of Simi Linton, who raises her voice on behalf of people labelled as disabled. Disability has been pervasive throughout history, yet it is only in the latter half of the twentieth century did a discourse on disability emerge. Why was disability invisible despite its pervasiveness? Is there a politics behind this? If so, what is it and what brought about a shift?

Emerging in the late 1960s, Disability Studies aimed at lifting the diverse community of the disabled from social and political marginalization. Disability, termed as the 'disabled experience,' goes beyond a medical condition, shaped by the broader social and political context. As observed by Tobin Siebers, Disability Studies is "more about the development of critical enquiry into those social and political forces that frame and inform our relationships with each other and the institutions of society that we have created" (Johnstone 2). Disability Studies originated from the Disability Rights Movements post-WWII, leading to legislative acts like the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) in the United Kingdom and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the USA, testifying to the movements that eventually created a political shift towards claiming the rights of the people with disabilities. It became an academic discipline, expressed through the voices of the disabled individuals and publications, especially in the form of memoirs and life writings, acting as a driving force behind enabling Disability Studies as a serious discourse of the unnatural 'othered' social category.

Disability Studies can be traced along the line of three major models: the medical model, social model and the cultural model. Initially, disability has been conceived from a medical point of view, focusing on physical disability and rehabilitation. However, there was a growing consciousness against the individualistic viewpoint propagated by the medical model. As Siebers notes, "The medical model situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment, isolating the patient as diseased or defective" (738). Irving Zola distinguishes 'impairments' and 'disability,' stating that

impairment becomes a disability when society creates barriers based on the concepts of 'normalcy' and 'ableism.' Thus, "an impairment only becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers-affective, sensory, cognitive, or architecture" (507). This is addressed by the social model of disability, which is influenced by the branch of Social Constructivism, where disability is viewed as a social construct. Erving Goffman, in his 1963 text *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, defines 'stigma' as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance," (qtd. in Wilson 3). The prevailing stigma is gradually internalized by the disabled person, leading to a withdrawal and resulting in their 'invisibility' in society.

However, towards the late twentieth century, the social model was critiqued for completely avoiding the medical and bodily realities (pain) while focusing exclusively on the political and the social aspects. From the hands of social scientists, Disability Studies entered Cultural Studies and Humanities, which is considered to be a major turning point. The figures associated with this model are Lennard Davis, David Mitchell Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Simi Linton, Catherine Kudlick, James Charleton, Tobin Siebers, and others. Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, term it the 'cultural model' of Disability Studies and in their "Introduction" to *Cultural Locations of Disability* define it as having "an understanding that impairment is both human variation encountering environmental obstacles and socially mediated difference that lends group identity and phenomenological perspective" (Wilson 5). The cultural model problematizes the distinction between disability and impairments of the previous social model of disability. Citing Strikers, Alice Hall claims that "social identities and even the materiality of the body cannot pre-exist or be separated off from systems of language and culture" (31).

Disability, often stigmatized and posited as the 'other,' is scrutinized with societal dynamics of 'normalcy' and 'ableness.'

Disability Studies critique the politics of the representation of the body, revealing its negative impact: "Recent body theory has reproduced the most abhorrent prejudices of ableist society" (Siebers qtd. in Mollow 5). For Foucault, "people with disabilities are not yet 'subjects': their bodies appear as a speck of reality uncontrolled by the ideological forces of society" (Siebers 739). Rosmarie Garland, in her text *Extra-ordinary Bodies*, observes that "Disabled bodies come to represent the "freak show"; "Disability is the unorthodox made flesh, refusing to be normalized, neutralized, or homogenized" (qtd. in Siebers 740).

Davis observes an 'obsession' with 'normalcy' emerging in tandem with Eugenics and the concept of the 'bell curve,' categorizing bodies as normal/abnormal. Compared to the unachievable notion of an ideal body, the concept of a normal body seems to provide a new imperative. As he says, "the rest is history," citing the Nazi agenda of extermination of the deaf, blind, and so on with the appropriation of Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' (505). Disability Studies thus aim to subvert these notions of normalcy and open the reality of the body as changeable and permeable.

According to Hoffman, the stigma that people with disability face from society's negative attitude is comparable with that of the marginalized. This accounts for the intersectionality of Disability Studies with other frameworks like gender, race, class, caste etc. Christopher Bell's *Blackness and Disability* (2012), attempts to club both Disability Studies and African-American studies, claiming that the absence of such an intersectional approach limited the scope of the former.

A clear picture of disability and experience was nowhere to be found in the existing discourse. When it comes to literature, in the ancient and medieval periods, disability has been portrayed as evil, wild and sometimes to serve comic purposes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the portrayal of disability appeared in marginalised roles often as a foil to uphold 'normalcy'. This could be read along the lines of the changes in the perception of the body within

the industrial background.

Literary disability critics focus on how disability appears in literature, especially novels. Disability Studies is important to literature as it provides new angles of perceptions. Similarly, on the other hand, as David Bolt and Lucy Burke argue, the literary model offers a major framework for disability studies adding to its overall project (qtd. in Hall 31). The scholars focused on how the 'normal body' is manifested in literature. They also engage with authors who are disabled, and how disability is deployed in various literary and cultural texts. One such interesting observation is that of Davis' who argues that the presentation of disability as a trope for de-eroticisation, "the frequent use of disability as a trope in postmodern theory is troubling for many reasons. For example, disability is alternately de-eroticized (e.g., blindness as castration) and hyper-eroticized (e.g., bodily difference as sexual transgression)" (Mollow 2).

Literary disability studies, under their skeptical lens, conclude that in literature, disability is often deployed as a trope. As Hall observes, "Many 'first wave' scholars highlight the tendency for disability to be invoked in literature as an easy metaphorical shortcut: a marker of pity, vulnerability or, less frequently, the heroic 'supercrip'" (36). For Leonard Kriegel, there is little difference between the portrayal of disability as a source of pity and threat, both before and after Shakespeare. One of the most influential theorizations of disability is that of 'narrative prosthesis' by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, where disability is used as a trope to evoke the stereotypes ascribed to it for narrative purposes. Following the flood of the prosthesis in the war narrative of WWII, prostheses became a theoretical tool in analysing these narratives. Rather than speaking for the concerned, disability is deployed to highlight normalcy. Such an attempt is suspicious as it divorces itself from reality and "aestheticize and depoliticize disability issues" (Hall 37).

Placing twentieth-century literature in the broad spectrum of

Disability Studies, scholars focusing on disability studies have subjected many narratives to be re-interpreted along the lines of how disability has been dealt within literary constructions. While the distinction of the normal from the abnormal has been used differently, it is notable to look at how re-readings of some of the established works by famous literary figures have been attempted by twentieth-century writers. One of the most notable literary endeavours in this regard was taken up by Edward Bond, who penned *Lear* based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Building a realist version of Lear in the twentieth century, Bond sought to present a modern-day Lear who transforms; a transformation driven by socio-political reasons at the cost of his protagonist becoming disabled. Bond's *Lear*, known for its profuse violence and bloodshed, attempts to showcase the journey of a politically blinded person to that of an enlightened common man, who sacrifices his life in an act of bringing out a political transformation.

How does disability appear in the play? The madness that takes hold of Lear and his blindness seem to be the two major instances of disability in Bond's *Lear*. Since Bond's *Lear* is a re-working of Shakespeare's *King Lear,* the appearance of disability cannot be considered in isolation. In *King Lear,* disability takes the form of King Lear's madness, Gloucester's blindness, and Edgar's feigning of madness as Tom, the Bedlam beggar. Shakespeare himself models *King Lear* from Sydney's Paphlagonian King in *Arcadia*, who is blind, though in the play it is Gloucester who is blinded and not Lear.

In the article, "The Trouble with Disability in Shakespeare Studies," Jeffrey R. Wilson observes that Shakespeare's use of disability is different from the way it is perceived today: "He and other early-modern writers overwhelmingly used the word disabled to refer not to people whose physical impairments create functional and social disadvantages, but to people and things who are unable to perform the tasks such people and things usually perform" (3). This aids us in our reading of Gloucester's blinding and Lear's madness - to show their inability to act. Both fathers

fall prey to filial ingratitude, and disability becomes a 'trope' in both contributing to and emphasising the helplessness of these characters in the face of a moral discovery.

From this point of view, an examination of disability in *Lear* shows that Bond retains the 'trope' of disability in his adaptation as well. Initially, with his 'ableism,' Lear unleashed a tyrannous regime on his subjects for the construction of the 'wall'. The murder of the soldier in Act I Scene 1 bears testimony to how particular Lear is, regarding the construction and the condition of the workers involved in it. The madness Lear undergoes initially appears towards the end of Act I, where he becomes an outcast after losing his kingdom, and becomes a refugee in Gravedigger's boy's pastoral setting. Though he overcomes it out of the compassionate treatment of the Gravediggers boy, following the assault on the latter and his family, Lear's condition worsens. The rest of the plot deals with how Lear confronts the reality that has been the consequence of his tyrannous model and gradually emerges out of it. The transformation is brought out in a series of stages. The trope of madness is introduced to heighten the desolate situation of Lear, especially in the Trial Scene of Act I. The ghost of the Gravediggers boy is read by critics as the guilty conscience of Lear, as it is for protecting him that the boy and his family were tortured, and the gradual withering of the boy reflects the moral progress of Lear.

Moreover, Lear is also blinded to make him "politically ineffective." In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Gloucester's blinding draws along this line where the vision of his son's innocence and sincerity is available to Gloucester only when he loses his eyes. In "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account," Kleege argues that blindness is a prop to "highlight the importance of sight and to elicit a frisson of awe and pity which promotes gratitude among the sighted theorists for the vision they possess" (qtd. in Hall 98). Despite the agony or due to that agony, Lear fights with himself and emerges out as a philosopher, who sows the seeds of a revolution to follow.

Similarly, we may look at the portrayal of disability in *Lear* from a positive tone as it breaks the notion of the heroic figure bearing an 'able body,' or as one who becomes heroic when he overcomes his disability by retaining ableism. Lear, towards the end of the play, does not fit the traditional concept of a 'normal' body as he is blind and also old – ageing has often been placed alongside disability. He attempts to break the wall saying, "I'm not as fit as I was. I can still make my mark" (Bond 88). This goes beyond a conventional representation of disability as 'disabling' an individual. It seems to posit an alternate view to the use of disability, as a mere metaphor to emphasise an absence and provides an opportunity to re-examine the representation of disability. However, (especially) being a play that draws attention to the political dimension, the trope of disability in *Lear* cannot be taken from a neutral point. According to David Mitchel and Sharon Snyder, disability becomes a "crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (qtd. in Hall 37). Hall also sheds light on this as the use of disability as a metaphor from a value-based angle that "aestheticize and depoliticise disability issues" (37).

The very structure of the play, falling within the tradition of epic theatre, becomes crucial when assessing the deployment of disability as a prop. For instance, one of the defining features of epic theatre is the alienation effect, which creates a distance between the audience and the play, breaking the dramatic illusion of the proscenium arch. Bond and several other playwrights, drawing from Bertolt Brecht, employ this technique to facilitate a rational response in the audience rather than swaying them to the emotional cathartic pull. Disability becomes a trope that alienates the audience from a cathartic association, encouraging them to rationally engage with the transformational journey that Bond intends to achieve through choosing Lear himself with a mythical background. The signs of madness that Lear exhibits, represented through his broken thoughts and associations, his blinding, and even

the mutilation of Warrington break the thread of association between the characters and the audience.

The presentation of madness in the play, from a particular angle, brings out the way madness is perceived by the State. As Foucault has pointed out, madness is not to be thought of from merely a medical individual point of view; rather it is discursive. Bodice's statement that mad man is dangerous and that political trial should take care of it enforces the way madness is perceived in a political system as a threat, "This is a political trial: politics is the higher form of justice. The old king's mad and it's dangerous to let him live" (Bond 32). Later the fourth prisoner/doctor states that "Madmen often harm themselves" and blinds Lear to make him "politically ineffective" (Bond 62).

Mitchel Beruba, in accounting for the refusal of several scholars and academicians to consider Disability Studies as a separate discipline, speaks about a psychological distancing maintained with disability, which is the result of a 'disavowal.' He terms this distancing as 'ableism.' Disability critics have observed that, let alone ableist society, the academic domain of theory itself shows reluctance to engage in theorizing disability. An instance of such disavowal could be found in the play during the crucial Trial Scene in Act II Scene 1.

Lear refuses to identify his daughters and Bodice places a mirror before Lear stating that "Madman are frightened of themselves" (Bond 34). Lear, in the mirror, sees the image of an animal in a cage and he refuses to acknowledge himself, "No, that's not the king. This is a little cage of bars with an animal in it. (Peers closer.) No, no, that's not the king!" (Bond 35). The mirror might be a symbol of his conscience, and he feels guilty of looking at it. Later he says, "I shouldn't have looked. I killed so many people and never looked at one of their faces. But I looked at that animal. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. It's made me a stupid old man" (Bond 42).

Jacques Lacan speaks about the three registers of life – the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Imaginary Order begins with the

mirror stage where the infant identifies itself with the mirror image and distinguishes itself from the 'Other'. Tobin Siebers comments thus:

It has often been claimed that the disabled body represents the image of the Other. In fact, the able body is the true image of the Other – as a prop for the ego – a myth we all accept for the sake of enjoyment, for we all learn early on, as Jacques Lacan has explained, to see the clumsiness and ineptitude of the body in the mirror as a picture of health at least for a little while. (742-743)

Lear's disavowal is of himself, the condition in which he finds him. To put it in Kristeva's terms, Lear confronts the abject here – "the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (Fellugo 1). Towards the end, we have Lear articulating his view on the ideal political state with the metaphor of madness. He reminds Cordelia, "Our lives are awkward and fragile and we have only one thing to keep us sane: pity, and the man without pity is mad" (Bond 84-85).

Perceived thus, we see the deployment of disability in Bond's *Lear* as a 'narrative prosthesis.' Bond's intention behind the play is to rewrite the myth of King Lear, to posit the character in contemporary times. This requires him to move beyond resignation to confront the consequences of his tyranny and emerge as a transformative figure. Disability in Shakespeare's *King Lear* has been retained to some extent and modified as well to get along with Bond's intention. Considering the epic tradition that the play follows, the deployment of disability appears as a prop to amplify the alienation effect. Though the play treats disability never as 'disabling' its major character in bringing out poetic justice, disability is used as a metaphor or trope that acts as a yardstick to measure the moral transformation, which seems to gloss over the reality of those in question.

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