

The 'Othered' Body: Deafness and Disability in Nina Raine's Tribes

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Abstract : Under the new developments in science, medicine, sociology, psychology and literary theories, body studies has gained huge importance and the body has become a debatable issue. There has emerged, among sociologists and literary theorists, an overwhelming consensus that body is socially, politically and culturally perceived and constructed and thus, the position of an individual in the society is determined in accordance with his/her body image. In this regard, the most complicated point is the theoretical views propounded upon disability studies, where the disabled body is considered to be a site upon which social and political restrictions as well as repressions are inscribed. There has been the widely-accepted view that no matter what kind of disability it is, those with physical, mental or learning impairments face varied social, political and environmental obstacles that prevent them from being an active citizen, worker, lover and even a family member. In parallel with these approaches, the matter of the sufferings of disabled individuals attains its place in cinema and literature as well as in theatre studies under the category of disability theatre. One of the prominent plays that deal with physical disability came from the contemporary British playwright Nina Raine. In her awarded play Tribes, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 2010, Raine develops the social strata where her deaf protagonist, Billy, caught up between two tribes - namely his family and his lover Slyvia, a member of the deaf community- experiences personal and social hardships due to his hearing impairment. In the play, intransigent and self-opinionated family members foster no sense of empathy towards Billy, there are noisy talking and shouting, but no communication, love, compassion or mutual understanding, and language becomes just a tool for the expression of rage and oppression. In the disordered atmosphere of the family life, Billy experiences isolation and loneliness. Billy's hopes for success and love are destroyed when Slyvia, troubled between hearing and deafness, rejects him because she does not utterly grasp what Billy is experiencing. Drawing upon the hardships, Billy undergoes in his relationships with his family and his girlfriend, Tribes problematizes the concept of deafness and explores to what extent a deaf person can find a place in the hearing world. Setting 'the disabled' bodies against 'the abled' bodies in a family, a microcosm of the society where bodies are socially shaped and constructed, Tribes dramatizes how the disabled bodies are disenfranchised, stigmatised, marginalized and othered on the grounds that they are socially misfit. Tribes, with a specific focus on the dysfunctional family, shows that the lack of communication and empathy numbs the characters to the feelings of each other and thereby, they become more disabled than Billy. In conclusion, this paper, with the reference to the embodiment of disability and social theories, aims to explore how disabled bodies are socially marked and segregated from family and society.

Keywords : body, deafness, disability, disability theatre, Nina Raine, tribes

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