

## Postmodernity as a Disability Experience in Lyle Victor Albert's *Cut!*

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### Introduction:

Postmodernism has exerted its influence in almost all walks of life. It is a cliché that postmodernism is indefinable. It can, however, be defined as a set of critical, strategic, and rhetorical activity that uses ideas like difference, repetition, trace, simulacrum, and hyper-reality to destabilise other concepts like presence, identity, historical progress and epistemic certainty. The literary critical arena welcomed postmodern philosophy and it has been fundamental in various experimentations in the field of literature. The focus shifted from the central characters to the marginalized characters and the stories began to be told from the subaltern's perspectives. Postmodernism also opened up spaces for talent and creativity, no matter where it came from. Lyle Victor Albert, in spite of his Cerebral Palsy, has used theatre as a medium for communication. His writing skills, coupled with his histrionic abilities, has made him a popular playwright of 21st century Canada. The paper is an attempt to examine *Cut!* as a postmodern drama and to consider the postmodernity in the play as coming from a form of disabled experience.

Lyle Victor Albert is a well-known playwright who received his diploma in Theatre Production from Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton. He has been involved in play writing since 1980 and has been produced across Canada, in the US, Europe and Australia. Northern Light Theatre and Theatre Network have both hosted him as a writer-in-residence. He has twice won the Alberta Culture Playwriting Award (1982 and 1986), and a Sterling Award (1996). Being a person with Cerebral palsy, Lyle Victor Albert had deliberately avoided the 'disabled writer' tag. He says, "Freeman wrote *Creeps*, and it was a good play and had a lot of success, but it sort of defined him after that. I really wanted to avoid that". (Albert vii) He succeeded in avoiding disability as a theme for his plays in the beginning, but later his disability became the material for his own play almost by accident. His play *Scraping the Surface* is one where he narrates his own struggles while attempting to shave with a razor. His other published plays include *The Prairie Church of Buster Galloway* (1983), *Cut!* (1985), *White on White* (1985), *Scraping the Surface: Three Plays by Lyle Victor Albert* (2000).

The play *Cut!* belonging to one of his initial plays has avoided disability as a theme. But the entire experience of the characters of being cut and exiled from the earlier plays parallels the experience of disability. The article will focus on the postmodern elements in the play and also attempts to examine how this postmodernity is a reflection of the disability experience.

### Misfits and the Disability Experience in *Cut!*

*Cut!* is a play which depicts characters supposedly cut from renowned plays. In the play, they are located in a purgatory, a sort of celestial rest house. The main characters include Prince Clyde (supposed to be the brother of Prince Hamlet from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), Fiddleditch, (a Victorian Butler who was cut from all of Oscar Wilde's plays), Mrs. Kowalski (mother of Stanley

from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*), Nippletitus (sister of Oedipus Rex), and Joey (from *Hey Dude!!!*, an American comedy series that was aimed towards a teenage audience).

The play which is set in two scenes has the same setting and a simple backdrop. "An almost-bare stage, except for a couch and chair: a celestial waiting room with an illusion of infinite space" (Albert 3). All the five above-mentioned characters are supposedly cut from various plays belonging to Greek, American and English theatres. They all belong to different temporal settings.

Nippletitus claims to be the sister of Oedipus Rex, whose possibility of becoming a queen was usurped by her mother Jocasta. The Play *Oedipus Rex* was written around the year 429BC. Hence Nippletitus is the one belonging to the classical Greek play. Prince Clyde, whose place as the Prince of Denmark in the play *Hamlet* (1603) was taken by Prince Hamlet, who is supposed to be his younger brother. Many times, Prince Clyde attempts quoting from Hamlet, but is never able to complete a dialogue. He keeps forgetting them. Fiddleditch happens to be cut from all the plays of Oscar Wilde, an Irish poet and playwright whose plays became popular in the 1890s. Mrs. Kowalski has been cut from Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). The main character Stanley is said to have inherited the loud and rough nature from his mother, Mrs. Kowalski. Joey is the last major character who has been cut from *Hey Dude*, an American comedy series and musical.

Here Lyle Victor Albert has completely eliminated the temporal and spatial barriers by bringing together Greek, American, Danish and English characters belonging to different ages – classical, Elizabethan, Victorian, modern and post- modern. The setting is a celestial waiting room. This evasion of spatial and temporal barrier reflects a universality of feelings experienced by the characters cut from the various plays. This also suggests that the focus of the play is not the specific characters or the playwrights, but the common feeling and frustrations of being cut from the classics, shared by all the characters.

The reason why the characters are cut from the play is not stated obviously, but certain hints are given. Clyde has memory issues. He is not able to complete any dialogue written by Shakespeare. Fiddleditch is a simpleton, always ready with cucumber sandwiches that appeal to no one in particular. He is a representative of all those who don't claim to have any particular talents or abilities to conquer the world. Mrs. Kowalski is rude and loud; Stanley is said to have inherited these qualities from his mother, yet he finds a role in the play and Mrs. Kowalski does not. Nippletitus, the Greek beauty has no specific reasons for being cut. Joey is also cut for no particular reason, but he is called back to continue his role. No matter what the situation they belonged to, they all have experienced the feeling of being abandoned. This reflects the universality of human feelings. A twist to the play comes at the end, when an old man, who has been continuously weeping on the stage, appears. His name is Godot, the character who has never been seen on stage from the time of its origin in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The role of Godot is played by Victor Albert himself. Hence it can be noticed that all the characters were perceived as misfits to the plays where they should have originally belonged.

This idea of a misfit is very often narrated by the persons with disability. Disability is only one among the many reasons for anyone to be considered a misfit. The Oxford dictionary defines a misfit as an "inaccurate fit". Rosemarie Garland Thomson, in her article "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept" says that the process of misfitting is a social phenomenon:

Misfitting serves to theorize disability as a way of being in an environment, as a material arrangement. A sustaining environment is a material context of received and built things ranging from accessibly designed built public spaces, welcoming

natural surroundings, communication devices, tools, and implements, as well as other people. A fit occurs when a harmonious, proper interaction occurs between a particularly shaped and functioning body and an environment that sustains that body. A misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it. The dynamism between body and world that produces fits or misfits comes at the spatial and temporal points of encounter between dynamic but relatively stable bodies and environments. The built and arranged space through which we navigate our lives tends to offer fits to majority bodies and functioning and create misfits with minority forms of embodiment, such as people with disabilities. (Thomson 594)

People with disabilities find it a struggle to fit into most of the social situations. When it comes to theatre, hardly a person with disability gets a chance to play a role in either a staged drama or a movie. MaysoonZayid, an American actress with Cerebral Palsy, has recounted an event in which she was auditioned for the role of a disabled character (a CP victim) but was ultimately denied due to her Cerebral Palsy condition. She poses a significant point as to who knows more about a Cerebral Palsy person's demeanour than the one who has lived through it.

In the play *Cut!*, the characters lament their ability to fit into the established theatre. It is equally interesting to note that the characters who have substituted them in the original version of the plays mentioned are also misfits in their own spatial and temporal settings. For example, Prince Hamlet who has taken the role of Prince Clyde, as per Clyde's claim, is also a misfit. His mental agony leads him to act as a madman. Similarly, Stanley, taking the role of Mrs. Kowalski, is a misfit because of his unruly behaviour. So the characters in the play are misfits in a double sense. They are misfits in a world of characters who are already misfits in their own respective settings.

### **Postmodernity and the Disability Experience in *Cut!***

Postmodern theatre challenges and questions the accepted norms and conventions of seeing the world. In the play *Cut!*, Lyle Victor Albert introduces the possibility of a totally different character playing the roles of well-known characters. It could be Albert's way of challenging the established characters. He gives a voice to these imaginary characters who could possibly have taken the lead roles in the respective plays from which they were cut off.

There is a great extent of intertextuality in the play. Almost six texts have significant references made in the play. They include Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Oscar Wilde's plays, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Hey Dude!!!* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The cut characters from all these plays come together in the form of a pastiche. They also belong to different spatial and temporal set up.

The language used by the characters also reflects the specific age to which they belong. Even though they all speak English, the usage pertains to the specific age. Their appearances also relate to the ages they are a part of. Nippetitus is dressed as a Greek Princess, Clyde as a Danish Prince, Joey is trendily dressed like a modern, Fiddleditch is dressed as a Victorian and so on.

One of the instances in the play throws light into another insight. Joey gets a call to rejoin the comedy musical series, but the letter does not reach Joey. Clyde, as he learns the possibility of being able to get back on the stage (disguised as Joey), hides the fact from Joey and uses tactics to learn the dialogues from Joey and gets Joey to exchange his dress for Clyde's. Thus Clyde, masked as Joey, gets on the stage and has a terrible experience. When he comes back to the celestial room, he is devastated and narrates to his fellows that the modern theatre is beyond their hold

and perceptions. He says that the show is directed by a madman and that William Shakespeare would have been far better.

This instance can be read as an example of the struggles faced by the people with disabilities in the established theatre. They believe that they have the talent, just like Clyde believed in his ability. But their socially constructed disability prevents them from being a part of it. Disability theatre has to an extent resolved this problem. Disability theatre, provides the people with disability, a space for scripting, acting and taking lead roles in the plays created by themselves.

As the play proceeds, Joey and Nippletitus befriend each other and Nippletitus compliments Joey as Zeus, the Greek God. Not accustomed to praises, Joey feels flattered. Later when Clyde betrays Joey, so that he can take a chance on stage, Joey revels in his position in the celestial room. He has a Prince's costume on, to add to his pride. He says when he comes to know of the call back,

Look, you are all grown up characters. You understand that the characters that are cut don't hold a candle to legitimate characters like me. That's life. Show biz. Look I shouldn't be here, I am real. But as long as I am here, you guys have to face facts. I've thought about this and I've come to the conclusion that I'm superior. I'm a god compared to you... a very warm god... Hey Fiddleditch, you could get me something to eat – no cucumber sandwich, all right? How 'bout you Kowalski? I bet you could whip up a helluva meal, feeding that boy of yours. Why don't you just wander to the kitchen and see what you can come up with. Nippletitus can go give you a hand, all right girls? (Albert 30)

When he starts bossing over the other cut characters, Fiddleditch loses his temper and stabs Joey with a cucumber. Joey drops dead at that moment. Two postmodern ideas are reflected in this incident: One is the denial of an ultimate powerful being; when Joey takes the power of God and claims himself to be superior, he is finished. He has no existence in the celestial room hereafter. Secondly, a different perspective of Fiddleditch is provided. Fiddleditch has been referred to as a simpleton from the beginning. He is constantly seen as making cucumber sandwiches and distributing them to the inmates. But towards the end, it is Fiddleditch who performs the act of killing Joey and emerges heroic. Nippletitus wishes to court him after this incident. Postmodern discourses very often provide a space and platform for the subaltern group, often considered as misfits in a society. The voice/power of the subaltern is exhibited through the actions of Fiddleditch stabbing Joey with a cucumber.

Denial of an ultimate being is seen reflected in the disability studies as well. The able-bodiedness and its discourses are questioned. A lot of emphasis is also given to what a person with disability can perform.

Ato Quayson in his work *Aesthetic Nervousness* refers to the crisis of representation of disabled characters in modern and postmodern literary works. When a character with any sort of disability appears in a literary work, it causes a crisis in representational conventions. The author is faced with a question of how to portray the character, whether the character would be viewed in the same way as the "normal" characters or whether they will be forced to take a subordinate or degraded role in the text. At times the character's infirmity would be represented as a metaphor for a facet of the human condition.

While considering the heroes of the early Greek tragedies or Shakespearean plays, most of them are the so called 'able bodied' characters. For a character with a disability to take the place of the hero would be unimaginable. For Prince Claude with a memory defect to be taking the

place of Prince Hamlet would be questioned, if not for a particular role assigned for that character. Lyle Victor Albert in turn assumes such simple characters and defective characters to be playing the roles of heroic and other characters.

### Conclusion:

It is evident that even while Lyle Victor Albert has denied the disabled writer tag and claims that he has evaded the theme of disability in his initial works, the play *Cut!* clearly portrays a disability experience – one which keeps hinting on through various characters, actions and interpretations. The use of postmodern elements in the play has been central in evoking the disability experience. Lynne Van Luven in his “Introduction” to the book *Scraping the Surface* says “One imagines Lyle Victor Albert would have become a writer even if he hadn’t developed CP (Cerebral Palsy), but one suspects that at least some of his subject material might have been handled differently” (Albert vi) This stresses the fact that disability as a lived experience can never be evaded. The author has effectively presented the feelings of the excluded characters, as he himself belongs to one such category.

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