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## Disability and Sexuality: Performativity and Sexual Therapy in Films

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### Introduction

One of the popular decrees of disability studies is that the disabled are *not asexual*. Most of the writings on the sexuality of the disabled at least once use this expression. But actually, there is no need for making such a decree over the sexuality of the disabled because, it is obvious that the disabled persons cannot be and need not be asexual for the singular reason that humans being social animals have moved their sexual desires and even performance (*at times*) from their bodies to their minds. It is doubtful that whether any of the non-human species would fantasize about a fellow creature of the opposite sex or the same sex. But humans do. Now the question is how humans who are physically disabled would achieve their sexual desires fulfilled. First thing, the people who are physically disabled have a very low self-esteem about their bodies and there is a deep self-remorse and pessimism, they may be wealthy or intellectually able. But sexuality which is a combination of narcissism, love and desire requires a different kind of self-image. In the case of the disabled persons, it is their self-image about their sexuality that is damaged and that requires attention and to be repaired to make them enter in to sexual life, normative or performative.

This paper touches upon a few films such as *Live Flesh* (1997) *Rust and Bone* (2012), *Babel* (2006). However, the prime focus of this analysis will dwell upon the film *The Sessions* (2012) which is based on the article "On Seeing a Sex Surrogate" (published in "The Sun" magazine in May 1990) by Mark O Brien and *Scarlet Road* (2011), a documentary based on the Australian sex-worker who specializes in people with disability. This brief analysis has two central arguments first psychological and the second physical: first, in order to have a sexual life the disabled people must be helped to get rid of their poor self-image; second, depending of their physical disability, they must be helped to get sexual pleasure either normatively or performatively.

### Psychic Sexuality, Transferability of Erotogenicity

Normative sexuality, in other words known as heterosexuality or heteronormativity, involves the binary male and female positions and primarily depends on biological/physical means of sexuality, i.e. genitalia. Performative sexuality deviates from what is known as natural and normal and involves what Judith Butler describes as "psychic sexuality" and "reterritorialising sexuality." Deviating from the heteronormative sexual practice, "psychic sexuality" need not primarily depend on the genitalia for sexual pleasure. Similarly, while someone is trying to reterritorialize their object of sexual desire, they can obtain the results of sexual pleasure even without the primary help of genitalia. Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble* argues

My own conviction is... that there are structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian

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sexuality and relationships. Further, there are other power/discourse centres that construct and structure both gay and straight sexuality; heterosexuality is not the only compulsory display of power that informs sexuality... A psychoanalytic elaboration might contend that this impossibility is exposed in virtue of the complexity and resistance of an unconscious sexuality that is not always already heterosexual. In this sense, heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy. Indeed, I would offer this insight into heterosexuality as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself. (155)

The film *Live Flesh* by Pedro Almodovar can be cited as an example for performative sex because, the character David who is paralytic beneath the waist, is unable to function normatively in the matters of sex, chooses to pleasure his wife Elena by other sexual activities such as cunnilingus. He not only gives pleasure to Elena but also derives sexual pleasure through a non-genital organ. Nevertheless, when Elena indulges in the act of sex with Victor, another character who loves and adores her, she hugs and caresses his legs. “When Elena spends an entire night having sex with Victor, it is Victor’s feet that she caresses afterwards...because what she misses most are powerful legs full of life-which her husband David no longer has because he is paralysed” (Strauss 174). This particular scene emphasizes that fact that Elena derives more pleasure in caressing Victor’s legs than through the actual heterosexual act. Elena has simply transferred her object of pleasure to legs. In her essay on the phallus in the book *Bodies that Matter*, Butler elaborately argues to disprove that the phallus is not just a symbol of the male reproductive organ. Her central argument lies in the “transferability” and “plasticity” of the erotogenic organs. Butler asserts,

the phallus is neither the imaginary construction of the penis nor the symbolic valence for which the penis is a partial approximation. For that formulation is still to affirm the phallus as the prototype or idealized property of the penis...the ambivalence at the center of any construction of the phallus belongs to no body part, but is fundamentally transferable and is...the very principle of erotogenic transferability.(32)

### **Self-Image and Sexual Therapy**

As it is mentioned earlier, disabled people are not asexual and they have their own sexual needs. However, since they couldn’t function like other able bodied people, they need special care and counselling to boost up their self image. Both psychological counselling as well as sexual intimacy is important anything that is done to boost the morale and self-image of the disabled person should be patient centric.

In the French film *Rust and Bone* and the Hollywood bio-pic *The Sessions* both have a strong sensitivity towards the disabled and their sexual desires and gratification. In both the films sex functions as a therapy to boost the self image of the disabled. In the French movie it happens quite casually whereas in the Hollywood film sex is offered as a therapy indeed.

Though *Rust and Bone* has a strong plot, strong characters and serious sociological issues, in this analysis the focus would be only on Stephanie, the female protagonist. Stephanie is a whale trainer who meets with an accident and gets both her legs amputated. Her initial reaction was a deep self remorse was having suicidal thoughts. She even steals a surgical knife but was found by the nurse and hence saved from committing suicide. After realising that she was abandoned by her boyfriend and other

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acquaintances, she approaches Ali for help. She complains that she stinks and the expression on her face during such an utterance was self-hatred. When Ali takes her to the beach, she asks him to carry herself on his back to the sea and Stephanie finds solace in swimming. Later, when Ali asks for casual sex, she immediately agrees and after the act, when she comes out of the room in the wheel chair, one cannot miss the expression on her face which was beaming with joy and ecstasy. Apparently, sex has acted in her life as a therapy and brings her out of her self-hatred and brings back her faith in life.

Another important scene occurs in the bar. When Ali takes her to a bar along with his friends after winning a fight, she was approached by a stranger who offers her a drink. She accepts it because it was recognition of her beauty and she is indeed happy. When the man tries to make advances, she gently rejects him by stating that she was not in mood on that particular night. But when he notices that she is wearing prosthetic legs he apologises. It is the apology that hurts her a lot and in the quarrel that ensues, she even hurts him using her walking stick. This scene is an instance to prove that “disabled people have similar emotional, sexual and relationship needs as their more able-bodied peers” (Elaine Cooper and John Guillebaudiv).

The Hollywood movie *The Sessions* is based on the article by Mark O’ Brien (1949-1999), a man who was disabled by polio attack in 1955. In this article entitled, “On Seeing a Sex Surrogate” he recounts his experiences of how he managed to lose his virginity with a help of a surrogate named Cheryl. In this movie too the self-image of the protagonist gets boosted up by professional counselling and the therapeutic uses of sex are proved. The following lines from Mark O’Brien’s article can be considered a representative voice of the disabled and their attitude towards sex and sexuality:

I still felt embarrassed by my sexuality. It seemed to be utterly without purpose in my life, except to mortify me when I became aroused during bed baths. I would not talk to my attendants about the orgasms I had then, or the profound shame I felt. I imagined they, too, hated me for becoming so excited.(1)

This is the self-image the disabled person has especially when it comes to his sexuality. Mark’s craving for love, care and touch equals the intensity of his self-hatred and fear. He writes, “I wanted to be loved. I wanted to be held, caressed, and valued. But my self-hatred and fear were too intense. I doubted I deserved to be loved. My frustrated sexual feelings seemed to be just another curse inflicted upon me by a cruel God (1).It takes a lot of counselling and self-will to make the patient get rid of such a kind of image. When Mark decides to meet Cheryl for the first time, he was anxious and he felt that she would flee from him after an apology. Instead, Cheryl, the sex surrogate, has handled him professionally and gained his confidence. She has said over the phone that she would spend an hour on interviewing him before starting their “body-awareness exercises”(3). And during the first session Mark could see that she was accepting him and treating him with respect (Mark 3). This has given him hope and Mark’s confidence on his seeing a sex surrogate has improved. At the end the first session with Cheryl, Mark has learnt an important lesson. He writes that “sex is a part of ordinary living, not an activity reserved for gods, goddesses, and rock stars. I realized that it could become a part of my life if I fought against my self-hatred and pessimism”(4). Apparently, for an able bodied adult, sex is a part of ordinary living but for a disabled person like Mark, sex has its own therapeutic purposes. It has helped him to overcome his self-hatred and develop a positive self-image. The greatest assurance comes to Mark from Cheryl, she offers him confidence just by saying that he too deserves to be loved sexually and this simply gives him the trust that she didn’t hate him and didn’t find him repulsive (5). Understanding the psyche of the patient and catering his psychological needs is the key to therapy. Cheryl realized that unless she breaks the poor self-



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image that Mark has about him, it is impossible to make him enjoy sex and to build trust about himself and his manhood. Therefore besides giving him psychological counselling and sexual therapy she did something really resourceful. She brought a mirror and showed Mark's naked body when he is sexually aroused (it is hinted in the film). Mark, who is attacked by polio, could not bend his spinal cord and he is all the time bed ridden. Hence he has not seen himself properly yet. For the first time he saw his adult self and he is indeed happy about it. Mark writes in his article:

*It (the mirror) was about two feet long and framed in wood. Holding it so that I could see myself, Cheryl asked what I thought of the man in the mirror. I said that I was surprised I looked so normal, that I wasn't the horribly twisted and cadaverous figure I had always imagined myself to be. I hadn't seen my genitals since I was six years old. That was when polio struck me, shrivelling me below my diaphragm in such a way that my view of my lower body had been blocked by my chest. Since then, that part of me had seemed unreal. But seeing my genitals made it easier to accept the reality of my manhood.*(6)

People who are severely disabled have their personalities formed as a result of their disability. Most of them turn to be asocial, introverts who prefer to be alone though there is a deep rooted craving to be loved and to love at the same time being sceptical whether they could be genuinely loved by the opposite sex in the sexual way. The general cultural training has taught people to love good looks, health and so on. The disabled people are often sympathised by others but whether they are loved (sexually) is a million dollar question. To answer this question positively, the disabled people indeed require professional help and people like Cheryl could make a great difference in the life of people like Mark. He writes in his article: "I began this essay in 1986, then set it aside until last year. In re-reading what I originally wrote, and my old journal entries from the time, I've been struck by how optimistic I was, imagining that my experience with Cheryl had changed my life"(9).

People like Cheryl make significant difference in the lives of the disabled people and the service of professional like Cheryl is much needed not just for sexual fulfilment of the disabled but also to get faith and love towards themselves and their lives.

Another instance like Cheryl, is Rachel Wotton, an Australian sex worker who is also the founder of "Touching Base" a non-profit organisation which aims to bring sex workers and disabled people together. The website of Touching Base reads thus:

Touching Base developed out of the need to assist people with disabilities and sex workers to connect with each other, focusing on access, discrimination, human rights and legal issues and the attitudinal barriers that these two marginalised communities can face. (Touching Base)

*Scarlet Road* is a documentary on the life of Rachel Wotton and how she helps people with disability. *Scarlet Road* intends to show that sex work is not just about money and flesh. It has its own therapeutic purposes. Rachel Wotton is a remarkable woman who has made an occupational choice that makes her profession unique and humanist. She also breaks the conventional image of a sex-worker by her educational profile. She is a university graduate, and having done research with her clients, she intends to pursue her PhD in her field. In an interview, she talks about the importance of touch and sex:

Everyone forgets that the skin is the largest organ of the body. Some people are lucky enough to always hug and kiss their friends and family hello and good bye. Others are more isolated and perhaps are working in a world where they only shake peoples' hands. Others

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have no other regular contact with other humans at all. Skin hunger to me is the craving of regular touch from others in a caring way. Even a regular therapeutic massage or scalp massage from your hairdresser can make you feel buoyant and more in touch with your body. That in turn can awaken a desire for a deeper level of intimacy or touch from another in a more sexual way. I, as a sex worker, provide services to consenting adults who wish to spend some quality time with a woman which can include being intimate with me. I get to put a smile on someone's face and make them feel good about themselves. To me this is a great job!" (Wotton Interview)

In this documentary, one of the clients of Rachel Wotton, Mark Mannita, a victim of cerebral palsy, confined to a wheel chair says in his voice machine, "People do not understand the difference that sex makes...Part of having cerebral palsy is spasticity and muscle spasms. I need sex all the time to make my muscles relax. And I like sex." This statement clearly informs the therapeutic value of sex and also the healing potential of sexual therapy.

### Conclusion

There are criticisms levelled against surrogates and sex-workers saying that it is not service but people do it for money. But one can argue that there is no profession that involves no remuneration. These sex surrogates and sex workers are paid for their services and the fulfilment and gratification they deliver to their clients is remarkable.

Apart from this, there is a specific criticism on the film *The Sessions*. A real life formerly sex surrogate and a currently sex therapist Isiah Mckimmie says that she is happy with the transformation that is shown in the character Mark O' Brien. But she is sceptical about the character Cheryl. Having been a sex surrogate herself she differentiates between a surrogate and a sex worker. A sex worker offers sexual gratification whereas a sex surrogate is there to help the client by teaching and there is no sexual intercourse involved (Green, Shane). However, it can be argued that whether you are a surrogate or a sex worker, the individual concerned can make a choice and they can decide what kind of service can be rendered to the client, as there is no coercion involved and it is purely an occupational choice. However, the above analysis has led to the following findings:

Characters with physical disability must have an active social life so that their sexual life also will be healthy. First thing, they must come out of their poor self-image so that their self-esteem rises. For such improvement of self-esteem choosing their interests within their limitations will be very helpful. For example, in *Live Flesh*, David chooses sports to come out of his mental agony of being disabled. He becomes a star player among the paraplegic sports persons. In *Rust and Bone*, Stephanie chooses swimming as well as sex itself to boost her self-image and comes out of the initial gloom and suicidal thoughts. In *The Sessions*, Mark O'Brien chooses poetry and writing to overcome his tedium.

Heterosexuality is not the only way of deriving sexual pleasure. Same results of sexual pleasure can be obtained through other means as well. Though performativity and its sub concepts are used to analyse the films, in conclusion, it has to be stated that except *Live Flesh*, it is heteronormativity that is reinforced and well-established in all the other films.

Sex is primarily meant for reproduction and pleasure is its by-product. However, it is has to be admitted that the pleasure part of sex is more dominant in the contemporary era and that can be easily proved by the prevalence of visual and print media that thrives on marketing sex as a commodity. While the able bodied persons could lead a normal sexual life, the disabled people require professional support

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to fulfil their desires. For them sex is not just a tool for pleasure but a therapy. Besides reproduction and pleasure, the therapeutic value is the third dimension of sex which is connected to the pleasure part of sex. As Thiruvalluvar in his work *Thirukkural* writes “*All joys that senses five- sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch- can give, In this resplendent armlets-bearing damsel live!*” (*Kural 1101*), *Sex is the only activity that appeals and pleasures all the five senses of humans and such an activity functions with therapeutic value in the case of the disabled persons.* Further, sex is also an important way of expressing adult love and such consenting adults respect and recognize each other’s feelings. This recognition of their adulthood and treating them with love and care is very important to the disabled people. Hence people like Cheryl and Rachel Wotton are indeed lending a great service to a marginalized section of humanity by their work.

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