

Challenging Blindness as a Means of Resistance for Change: Lenin El-Ramly's (*Weghat Nazar*) *A Point of View* (1989)^(*)

Amal Ibrahim Kamel
Faculty of Arts, Fayoum University.

Abstract

This paper examines the image of blindness in Lenin Al-Ramly's play *A Point of View* and attempts to discuss the ambiguity of blindness in the light of a variety of critical frameworks related to disability studies offered by critics and scholars such as: Leonard J. Davis, Siebers, Longmore, Susan Wendell and others. The research also sheds light on how society views people with impairments and treats them as marginalized individuals. Moreover, the blind people's rejection and challenge of such a perception is highlighted. The questions raised in this study are: What is the distinction between disability and impairment? Do the blind lack insight or merely sight? Do all normal people have insight? The debate is related to the way disability and normalization are to be understood. The role of voluntary agencies originally established to care for the disabled people is challenged in this play as they tend to dehumanize and oppress the blind although it is their responsibility to offer them charity and help. Ironically, their lack of insight marks a failure to come to terms with their situation. *A Point of View* addresses the question of how the disabled people resist the passive and tragic view of themselves and how they react against the traditional charity-based agencies that deal with them as an excluded social group depriving them of their basic needs. Issues related to citizenship rights and equality are also dramatized.

Keywords: disability, marginalization, exclusion, challenge, voluntary agencies

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المستخلص:

تبحث هذه الورقة البحثية صورة العمى في مسرحية لينين الرملي "وجهة نظر" كما تناقش غموض مفهوم العمى في ضوء مجموعة متنوعة من الأطر النقدية المتعلقة بدراسات الإعاقة التي يقدمها النقاد والباحثون مثل: ليونارد ديفيس، سيبرس، لونغمور، سوزان ويندل وغيرهم. كما يلقي البحث الضوء على كيف ينظر المجتمع إلى الأشخاص ذوي الإعاقة ويعاملهم كأشخاص مهمشين. وعلاوة على ذلك، يبرز رفض وتحدي الأشخاص ذوي الإعاقة البصرية لمثل هذا التصور. الأسئلة التي طرحت في هذه الدراسة هي: ما هو الفرق بين الإعاقة والعجز؟ هل يفتقد الأعمى البصيرة أم البصر؟ وهل كل الأشخاص العاديين لديهم بصيرة نافذة؟ ويرتبط النقاش بالطريقة التي ينبغي بها فهم الإعاقة وعدم الإعاقة.

و يتطرق البحث الي مناقشة دور المؤسسات الخيرية التي أنشئت أصلا لرعاية المكفوفين والذي يواجه تحديا في هذه المسرحية لأن بعض هذه الجمعيات للأسف تميل إلى إهانة المكفوفين وقمعهم على الرغم من أن من مسؤوليتها تقديم المساعدة الخيرية والعون لهم. ومن المفارقات، أن انعدام البصيرة يمثل الفشل في التوصل إلى تفهم لوضع ذوي الإعاقة. وتتناول "وجهة النظر" موضوع كيف يقاوم المكفوفون وجهة النظر السلبية والمأساوية لأنفسهم، وكيف يتفاعلون مع المؤسسات الخيرية التقليدية التي تتعامل معهم باعتبارهم فئة اجتماعية مهمشة ومن ثم تحرمهم من احتياجاتهم الأساسية. كما أن البحث يلقي الضوء على القضايا المتعلقة بحقوق المواطنة والمساواة التي جسدها الكاتب دراميا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإعاقة، التهميش، الإقصاء، التحدي، المؤسسات التطوعية

*Do the seers know that they see? Do the non-seers know
that they see differently? What do we see? Do eyes see
that they see? Some see and do not know that they see.
They have eyes and do not see that they do not not-see.*

- H  l  ne Cixous, *Veils*

Introduction

Sight is particularly aligned with rational perception and sightedness represents an access to reality. Characters with disabilities appear throughout the entire literary canon and the image of blindness in particular was explored in literature since the Greeks. Ever since, blindness as a theme has acquired symbolic implications and reflected upon spiritual crises; it bears within it multiple meanings. Eventually, it denotes the dichotomy between illusion and reality. Generally speaking, when disabled characters were presented on stage prior to the twentieth century, their disability served a metaphorical end. Nevertheless, the dramatic representation of physical disability has changed and the politicization of disability issues emerged with postmodernism when disabled people were challenging dominant stereotypical power structures.

Disability Studies refers to a relatively new interdisciplinary field of study starting in the 1970s. It draws on a plethora of theories and approaches. Nevertheless, what unifies all these approaches is the fact that the disabled individual is the object of the study. As a critical theory, disability aims at freeing the disabled people from their position on the margins of subjectivity. The aim of this paper is to examine Lenin El-Ramly's *A Point of View* in the light of a Disability Studies perspective. The research also sheds light on the issue of blindness and normalcy and how people with impairments are stigmatized by their society and are treated as marginalized individuals. Furthermore, the challenge of the visually impaired people of such a perception is highlighted. The role of voluntary agencies originally established to care for the disabled people is challenged in this play as they tend to exploit and ill-treat the impaired individuals although it is their responsibility to offer them charity. This paper seeks to argue that El-Ramly creates counter hegemonic images of disability that resist dominant stereotypes and challenge the cultural imagery surrounding impairment. Foucault maintains: "As soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance" (123). In *A Point of View*, the visually impaired inmates struggle to assert their opposition to the process of dehumanization.

The use of violence by the administration to dominate them is faced with a mobilizing force that works for reasserting their full access to humanity.

In his influential book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Erving Goffman notes that the term “stigma” arose from the Greeks who used it “to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier” (1). The bodily signs, “cut or burnt into the body” was a silent but significant indicator “that the bearer was slave, a criminal, or a traitor—a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided” (1). Although Goffman points out that the precise original meaning of the Greek term has changed, its shame remains. Moreover, a person with a stigma is “a tainted, discounted one,” which can also indicate “a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap.” As a result of its deeply “discrediting” (3) nature this “undesired differentness” (5) relegates the stigmatized to a “not quite human” status, “imput[ing] a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one.” To justify this “we construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (5).

The United Nations offers a distinction between impairment and disability: “Impairment: Any loss or abnormality of psychological, or anatomical structure or function .Disability: Any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being” (U.N. 6-7). In a sense, disability includes the cultural and social aspects of the impairment. The disabled people suffer from either physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments or illnesses that hinder their effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. As a result, they are excluded and marginalized by the society. The UN website further notes that “disability resides in the society not in the person.” This definition for obvious reasons is, as noted by Susan Wendell (1996) “favoured by disability activists and other advocates” (13).

Notably, society sets the standards of normality and most likely marginalizes the disabled, including the sick and the old-aged people. As Susan Wendell (1997) rightly contends: “Disabled people share forms of

social oppression, and the most important measures to relieve that oppression have been initiated by disabled people themselves” (264). In fact, people with disabilities are ridiculed, stereotyped and victimized by able-bodied people. They are unemployed or underemployed because they lack the resources that would enable them to make their full contribution to society (Matthews 1983; Hannaford 1985).

Lenin El-Ramly is an Egyptian writer and director of both T.V. films and theatre. He is basically specialized in satirical works and absurd plays. El-Ramly was born in Cairo in 1945 and wrote forty well-known plays including *In Plain Arabic* (1992), *A Peace of Women* (2004). He believes that ultimate artistic freedom does not exist. He says: “Success is not what matters to me ...I believe it is much more important to explore the philosophical thought processes that occur in the minds of men- these are universal and recognizable. And you can say more with art than you can with words. In the end, you want to get people thinking” (Leetz). El-Ramly won the Netherlands-based Prince Claus Award for theatre in 2005. This paper aims to analyze the image of blindness in Lenin Al-Ramly’s play *A Point of View* and to reveal the significance of blindness in the light of a variety of critical frameworks related to disability studies. *A Point of View* addresses the question of how the disabled people have been rendered culturally invisible by the unjust society. This play has been chosen for the study because disability permeates the world of the play and the social stigma disabled people suffer from is highly dramatized. Though the portrayal of visual impairment in drama is not new as it is known since the Greeks, no previous study has dealt with *A Point of View* from a disability perspective. I contend that the play gives voice to a marginalized social group of disabled persons and highlights the possibility for resistance to marginalization and dehumanization through a journey of spiritual and emotional recovery. The analysis of the play would prove that just because a person lacks his/her visual acuity does not mean s/he lacks insight.

Arguably, the title of the play describes how the disabled people are regarded by their society due to their physical trauma or it could also refer to how those impaired individuals experience the world. The readers, therefore, are aware of two possible meanings for that “point of view” mentioned in the

play's title: the society's point of view or the disabled individuals' point of view. This mysteriousness is meant by the skillful dramatist to encourage his readers to interpret the play. *A Point of View* is set in a supposedly humane institution for the blind. In the prologue, a dialogue between two male inmates of the institution, Mas'ud and Mokhlis, is heard. In contrast to what his name suggests, Mas'ud is portrayed as a defeated and depressed figure. Both live in humiliation represented by 'darkness' as when Mokhlis says that "Every night has an end", Mas'ud replies: "Except our night...Its sun will never rise" (7). For Robert Murphy, a disabled anthropologist, "disabled people lived in a state of social suspension, neither 'sick' nor 'well', 'dead' nor 'alive', 'out of society' nor wholly in it...they exist in partial isolation from society as undefined, ambiguous people" (112). It is evident from the opening moments of the play that Mas'ud becomes frustrated as a result of his vision loss. He is deeply upset by the repercussions of being not only physically but also psychologically impaired. His psychological disability, manifest in depression and anxiety, impacts all his major life activity.

In scene one, the group of the visually impaired people living in the institution move "slowly and aimlessly" singing a song that unmask loss of their way and hope that night and darkness would end. Ashmawy, a supervisor in the institution, deceives the blind for though he is too short, he lets them think that he is a giant as he uses a small chair to stand on while talking to them. In a sense, El-Ramly asserts that masculinity is defined by society in terms of 'strength' and 'perfect bodies' (Morris, 93). The society superficially puts certain qualities such as the values of activity, initiative and control to evaluate the male figure as normal. Ashmawy appears as a tyrannical figure who takes everything from the helpless boarders of the institution including the radio, the piano and the TV. Therefore, constant cultural bias against people with impairment can be best revealed in societal responses. Even Sab'awy, the institution's manager, shouts at the objectified impaired individuals:

Are you bothered? No kids, you have no right. Instead,
you should thank God that Sayed Bey thought about
you and established this institution especially for you.

We do all we can for you. We've given you shelter and will offer you jobs. We give you money, food and best clothes... We beg the United Nations and other associations for the blind in different parts of the world, so as to give you gifts and grants. We serve you for the sake of God and humanity.

(Translation mine 16-17)

Although there is some reasoning in what Sab'awy says, it remains a big lie. The visually impaired persons in the institution live in poverty; they eat the worst food and wear the oldest clothes; and even the donations granted to them are stolen by the oppressive administration. What is that if not exploitation? In his influential work "No Place for the Voluntaries" Michael Oliver argues that some charities use disabled people's impairments as the 'selling point' or 'product' in their business and this means that disability is socially created.

The disabled writer Tom Shakespeare argues that people with impairments are not simply disabled by material discrimination but also by prejudice. He explains this prejudice with reference to the objectification of disabled people as 'other' due to their bodily limitations (283). This prejudice expresses itself in the form of inhumane treatment and discrimination. Mainstream cultural and social norms view disabled people as tragic individuals whose physical defects hinder success and happiness. In *A Point of View*, El-Ramly examines the blindness shared by some persons living in a non-profit charity organization. Rather than remaining helpless in what it means to be blind in a sighted world, Arafa El-Shawaaf is presented as an enlightened figure ever since he is admitted to the institution. Arafa is not troubled by adapting himself to the new place where he lives, nor does he seek any help from the administration in regaining his visual acuity. Arafa's struggle throughout the play is one of exposing how the visually impaired individuals are abused and the donations granted to them are squandered by non-disabled people who administer and control the charity agency.

Notably, Arafa El-Shwaaf, though disabled, is a powerful individual who

tries to overcome his impairment and to live up to non-disabled norms in order to be an esteemed citizen. His name suggests that he is a man of inner vision or insight. He is able to overcome his tribulations through his development of mental faculties and intelligence. Al-Shawaaf never feels ashamed of his impairment and when he came to the institution, he was carrying a book. Nazira, the social worker in the institution whose name ironically denotes visual sight though she really lacks insight, thought that he can see and to this he responds: "Well, I'm not totally blind" thus symbolically using the word 'blind' to mean 'ignorant' and 'narrow-minded'. Moreover, when she asks him about how weak is his sight, he responds: "99.9%. I'm The Leader of the Blind!" (33). Longmore cites some slogans used by disabled people such as "Disabled and Proud", "Deaf Pride" and "Disability Cool" as an indication of their visibility and positive identities (5). These slogans are to the disability movement what "Black is beautiful" is to the Anti-Racism Movement (Abbas et al.). The slogans used are meant to empower the marginalized people whether they belong to racial minority groups or disabled people. Through these motivational or inspirational slogans used in the play, El-Ramly brings focus to the ability of the impaired persons to have their voice heard loudly in the world and defy the social constructs of marginalization.

El-Ramly portrays disability in a positive way through Arafa's character whose surname, Al-Shawaaf, suggests 'enlightenment', 'illumination' and "insight". Actually, the whole play is built on disparity between visual sight and insight. Once he enters the institution, Arafa's individual empowerment comes to the foreground as soon as he begins to urge his colleagues to ask for their rights and to stop being passive recipients. First, he urges them to learn as education leads to enlightenment and better life: "Arafa: You expect them to give you bottle-feeding education? You should have asked them to teach you" (41). Second, he urges the blind to be active citizens and to ask for the money that was cut off their wages and kept in an emergency colleagueship fund but they cannot get it back: "Arafa: You lost only your sight but you can speak" (43).

According to Sutherland, charities are diverting resources which disabled

people could themselves administer, and to complicate matters, although disabled people are the logical choices of persons to run the organizations that supposedly represent their interests, they are deprived of that employment, which is instead given to non-disabled people. Significant as well is that the visually impaired people depicted in the play are constructed as marginalized and dehumanized as a result of social conditions.

Clearly, Arafa's dignity and pride are revealed when he says to Sab'awy "I can make fun of myself, but I don't allow you to do so" (18) and "I can't live with people who treat me as a blind man. I can't beg for my rights and dignity (44). Arafa's words unmask his success in overcoming his disability and help in exposing the manipulation and deceit of the administration. He is among the ones whom Irving Kenneth Zola talks about:

The folk heroes of disability and chronic diseases have been not the millions who came to terms with their problems but those few who were successful that they passed: the polio victim who broke track records, the one-legged pitcher who played major league baseball, the great composer who was deaf, the famous singer who had a colostomy. They were all so successful that no one knew of their disability, and therein lay their glory...Management in daily living does not involve dramatic tasks, but mundane ones. Examples of persons who overcame their disability once and for all mask the time element required for such achievements... Moreover, the problem for the majority of the disabled is not a temporary one but one that will last a lifetime. (51-52)

El-Ramly presents Arafa as a hero who manages to conquer his disability not only for himself but also for the visually impaired inmates in the institution. He is a fighter whose soul never surrenders to circumstances. He eventually manages to overcome his disability and to help his inmates to learn and to become independent. His intelligence and his creativity help him to liberate the blind from their passivity and submission to others. He mobilizes his colleagues to call for adequate standards of living and freedom

from exploitation.

Paradoxically, the caregivers of the institution steal the money of the disabled people, while people in prison who are supposed to be ignorant and criminal help Arafa to develop his personality. Arafa tells Saniya, one of the female boarders of the institution with whom he fell in love, that he was in prison before coming to the institution and that in prison he met an educated man who taught him how to have a point of view of his own. But when he came to the institution, he was shocked to find stealing and cheating. The sarcastic tone of the dramatist can be clearly distinguished in the whole play. Clearly, the marginalizing systems which are human constructs are criticized in Arafa's speech about the way he was treated when he was young. Some people tried to exploit his visual impairment and teach him to beg but he resisted them. This reveals El-Ramly's attempt to establish points of power for disabled people on stage unlike traditional depiction of the impaired individuals as inferior creatures. In his *Disability Aesthetics*, Siebers argues: "disability now serves as the master trope of human disqualification . . . in disability oppression, the physical and mental properties of the body are socially constructed as disqualifying defects" (26), and that this system of oppression "occludes in each case the fact that the disqualified identity is socially constructed, a mere convention, representing signs of incompetence, weakness, or inferiority as undeniable facts of nature" (37). The social paradigms, rather than the impairment itself, are held responsible for assuming that disabled persons are considered weak, incompetent and unfit for work or socialization. The physical defect is seen by society as a barrier that obstructs interaction and communication. Nevertheless, El-Ramly portrays Arafa as a model of defiance and resistance to these oppressive social assumptions. Arafa, though disabled, never allows his physical defect to interfere with his communication with all the people in the institution.

Significant as well is that, the role played by Arafa to help Saniya, who has a limited visual ability, to undergo a surgery and retain her sight symbolizes mutual empowerment. Arafa is trying to remove the obstacles that prevent the disabled bodies from full participation in their society and reinforce their subordination. Unfortunately, the nondisabled carers and guardians would

never allow Saniya to restore her sight through the surgical operation as they benefit from aggravation of the blindness of the disabled. El-Ramly proves that disability is not of the body as it is more of the society that creates barriers of communication with the disabled people which lead to their exclusion. As Hunt rightly contends: The disabled people “are then marked out as members of a ‘minority group’ in a similar position to other oppressed groups such as black people or homosexuals because like them they are viewed as ‘abnormal’ and ‘different’(152).

Though physically blind, Arafa can nevertheless see beyond the superficialities of the people around him in the institution. He has a certain amount of power in confronting social attitudes. This undercuts sympathy for him based on his impairment. When Nazira asks Arafa about his relationship with Saniya, he diverts her attention to what happened between her and Sab’awy and suddenly she becomes accused of an illicit relationship and she begins to respond in self-defense. Eventually, the able-bodiedness of the administration members does not guarantee their ability to possess insight. El-Ramly subverts the stereotypical view of the blind people as wanting, in need of care, victims of infidelity and irreparably flawed. Siebers(2015) states we must “pierce false ideologies” by “overturning the dominant image of people with disabilities as isolated victims of disease or misfortune . . . it means opposing the belief that people with disabilities are needy, selfish, and resentful – and will consequently take more than their fair share of resources from society as a whole” (750). Additionally, Arafa’s love for Saniya is a challenge to the traditional perception that an impaired individual is lacking in normal instincts such as sexual desire. As DeLoach puts it : “An abundance of anecdotal reports and research findings reveal that there exists a widespread belief that individuals with disabilities are asexual- that they lack sexual desire” (20). These assumptions, rather than the impairment itself, reflect prevalent offenses against disabled people.

Arguably, El-Ramly’s choice of a comic rather than tragic form for his play marks the fact that “ the subject matter of comedies is not necessarily always light, but may reveal harsh truths or threatening situations” (Simpson, 90). *A Point of View* reveals the absurd situations that stand as barriers in the way of the visually impaired people. It is absurd for a charity to deprive the blind of

**Challenging Blindness as a Means of Resistance
for Change: Lenin El-Ramly's**

their basic needs and to tell lies to them. The administration members keep the second floor for themselves where they enjoy marvelous furniture, air-conditioning sets, vases, curtains and carpets whereas they put all the impaired individuals in the first floor with broken chairs and garbage. Brisenden states that he and other people with impairments:

...are disabled by buildings that are not designed to admit us, and this in turn leads to a whole range of further disablements regarding our education, our chances of gaining employment, our social lives and so on. However this argument is usually rejected, precisely because to accept it involves recognizing the extent to which we are not merely unfortunate, but are directly oppressed by a hostile social environment. (176)

The play places emphasis on the image of the blind as a litmus paper used to test the values of justice and equality in society. It also highlights the emotional and psychological trauma of the visually impaired people through Arafa's significant speech to Nazira:

Sometimes I see everything clearly: thirst, hunger, heat, cold, justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy. I see the sun when I get hurt. I can tell it's gone when I feel sad. Sometimes I'm inspired and can tell what's in front of me or beside me. I can tell who is my friend and who is my enemy. Thus, people would say I'm not blind and can see. I feel proud but deep inside I know the truth. I'm blind counting steps by my hands and feet. I get mad when I feel you moving freely... When I hear your silence and understand that you're capable of communication through eye-language. I get mad when I see you so certain, but sometimes I suspect it and feel that you're lying to me, or you don't see the truth. (104-105)

Clearly, the unjust social standards that Arafa and all the impaired

individuals suffer from put barriers in their way and leave a sense of alienation and bitterness in them. Arafa alludes to the fact that the blind are deliberately abused and kept in darkness by the brutal cultural and social norms. He problematizes the assumption that visual perception is the access to identity and that the impaired people have been denied this access. The society renders them weak and vulnerable and blurs all their needs. Furthermore, Arafa communicates issues of loneliness and desperation through the following speech:

Arafa: I fear darkness. Yes, though I live all the time in darkness. Sometimes I feel that darkness is deliberately meant for me. It seems like a rusty iron blocking my way like a bottomless well where I was thrown. I feel that you put certain curtains down and shut the windows and turn the light off. I feel I want to shout at you to open the windows, pull up the curtains, turn the light on or light a candle. (105-106)

Nevertheless, the play presents Arafa as a fighter or a man with an undefeated spirit who resists the inequity of the authority represented in the administration. He even begins to take positive steps to prove the administration's involvement in stealing the grants and donations supposed to be for the blind. He manages to take some important documents from Sab'awy's office and to hand them over to a journalist. Meanwhile, the inhumane administration members have been injecting Arafa with a medicine that causes him severe headache and they attempted to bribe the journalist so as not to publish any offending document. But Arafa never surrenders to their threats of kicking him out of the institution and he continues his mission of collecting proof.

Consequently, Sab'awy suspects that Arafa is not blind and he asks a doctor to examine him. To the disappointment of Arafa's colleagues, who have put all their hopes in him, the doctor reports Arafa's impaired vision. Arafa expresses his sympathy for his colleagues by saying: "How miserable is Mas'ud! He made us think he was desperate, but he still has hope in me. Forgive me, Mas'ud. Nothing I can do" (118). Arguably, Act II, scene viii marks Arafa's partial success in making all the blind people in the institution

**Challenging Blindness as a Means of Resistance
for Change: Lenin El-Ramly's**

gather to investigate the mystery of the second floor as it was forbidden for them to enter there. When Ashmawy sees them, they hold his hands together and they all beat him with their shoes. Thus, El-Ramly subverts stereotypical roles assigned to disablement in this scene. The visually impaired individuals, who used to be passive, now assume a powerful position whereas the brutal administration member becomes weak and helpless. In a sense, El-Ramly challenges Bloor's argument that principally through the use of social orchestration, disabled people find themselves constrained in roles characterized substantially by passivity and powerlessness (307).

Eventually, the success achieved by the co-operation of the blind to attack Ashmawy and enter the second floor, is continued when they become organized and choose Arafa to represent them. They bravely intend to discuss their problems with the institution's owner, Mr. Sayed who already knows everything about deception, injustice, embezzlement, bureaucracy...etc. But he plays a trick to make them believe that those who complain are only a minority and to suspect Arafa's loyalty to them. Oliver rightly contends: "Disabled people and other oppressed minority groups are now empowering themselves and this process could be far more effective without the dead hand of a hundred years of charity weighing them down" (10). The visually impaired boarders of the institution are now able to confront social perceptions which isolate them as disabled individuals and they can now assert their dignity and citizenship rights. Sayed promises to give the blind all what they need on the condition that they appear decent when they meet Mrs. Box, the United Nations Deputy, who will come to survey the conditions of the blind in the developing countries. Arafa agrees but on the condition that Saniya is to enter the hospital tomorrow to have the operation done. In this scene, Arafa appears as an equal to, if not greater than, Sayed. Unlike disabled people, Arafa is depicted as a self-confident person who rarely stumbles during walking. He never feels insecure or stressed as a result of his physical impairment or social barriers. This proves Finkelstein's view that: "psychological insecurity and distress are a result of the social relations to disability, not the physical experience of impairment" (42).

Notably, due to social restrictions and structural barriers put in the way of disabled people, they feel embarrassed in social situations. Siebers (2008) argues that a society

sets the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons. It affects nearly all of our judgments, definitions, and values about human beings, but because it is discriminatory and exclusionary, it creates social locations outside of and critical of its purview . . . disability defines the invisible center around which our contradictory ideology about human ability revolves. For the ideology of ability makes us fear disability. (8-9)

In contrast, Arafa is portrayed as a strong-willed individual not as an object of pity. His intelligence, his sense of humor, and his creativity are emphasized in the play. The administration's effort to get rid of Arafa and to exclude him as he represents a threat to them, is met with a sense of defiance and a struggle not only to regain his personal rights but also the rights of all the people who live in the institution including Nazira. Siebers contends that "the sharp difference between disability and ability may be grasped superficially in the idea that disability is essentially a 'medical matter,' while ability concerns natural gifts, talents, intelligence, creativity . . . in brief, the essence of the human spirit" (9).

In addition, Nazira's character undergoes a significant change in the play with the help of Arafa as her guiding spirit. As a social worker employed in a non-profit agency for the blind, Nazira has to facilitate social development, ensure empowerment and social justice, guide and support the visually impaired people. Additionally, she must have been knowledgeable about methods of helping them in reaching their full potential. But unfortunately, right from the beginning of the play she is portrayed as an objectified female who blindly surrenders herself to the administration's orders. By contrast to Arafa's spiritual insight, her spiritual blindness is emphasized throughout the whole play. A major aim of the play is to challenge the assumption that only able-bodied people have insight. Ironically, Nazira is guided by Arafa, the impaired hero, who takes her on a

**Challenging Blindness as a Means of Resistance
for Change: Lenin El-Ramly's**

journey of self-discovery and disillusionment. Thus blindness here in the play acquires a metaphoric connotation. It alludes to ignorance, illiteracy, lack of insight, and illusion. A suggestion that sometimes visual sight might be misleading and misguiding is reinforced throughout the whole play. El-Ramly portrays disability as a cultural phenomenon not solely a medical phenomenon. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2005) suggests: "(Disability) is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change" (4).

Notably, Arafa's speech to Nazira is shocking particularly when he says: "You are mistaken. You don't follow your conscience. You don't like to see the actual world you are talking about" (62). In several instances in the play, Arafa confronts Nazira with her passivity as when she was alone with Sab'awy, the immoral manager, who tried to embrace her. When she tries to write a report and question Arafa about his ability to adjust himself to the conditions of the institution, Arafa asks her too whether she adjusted herself or not:

Arafa: Whoever can adjust himself to our life here should be abnormal.

Nazira: What?

Arafa: Those around you.

Nazira: I see nothing.

Arafa: So you're blind!

Nazira: I mean to say I don't know.

Arafa: So you're ignorant. (88)

The peak of Nazira's transformation comes only towards the end of the play when the visually impaired boarders of the institution confront the tyrannical administration. She fearlessly announces: "I side with you" (120).

Arguably, for Saniya, disability provides a mouthpiece for addressing issues of gender and disability. Although she clings to a dream of normalcy, Saniya is portrayed as dependent, unfortunate, weak and object of sympathy,

thereby reinforcing gendered and disabling stereotypes. Garland-Thomson(1997) considers the disabled body alongside other minority identities, particularly femaleness. She “introduce[s] such figures as the cripple, the invalid, and the freak into the critical conversations we devote to deconstructing figures like the mulatto, the primitive, the queer, and the lady” (5). Unlike her colleagues in the institution, Saniya is short-sighted or not completely blind- a fact which makes her a symbol of hope for her colleagues. In her article, “Invisible Disability: Georgina Kleege’s Sight Unseen” (2002), Susannah Mintz refers to the fact that Kleege has some limited visual abilities. Because of these visual abilities, Kleege refers to herself as “imperfectly blind” (150), suggesting “that what sight she has actually debars her from full participation in the category of blindness” (Mintz, 159). Saniya is in the same position of Kleege and the experience is repeated. Both of them live in a position that lies someway between blindness and sightedness and they could not fit the dominant stereotype of either gender or disability.

Saniya’s wish for cure, however, seems to be threatening to the able-bodied community. Sab’awy always lies telling her that the doctor is on a vacation. Driven by her insight together with her sense of powerlessness, she asks: “Why do you lie to a blind, helpless woman like me?” (21). Traustadottir argues: “Policymakers and service providers needed to become aware of the stereotypical assumptions underlying disability policies and practices. In particular, they needed to recognize gender as a critical issue when policy and practices were formulated, instead of approaching families with a view that ignored gender, thereby reinforcing women’s subordinate position in society” (63). The quotation alludes to the fact that women with physical defects are alienated. Saxton and Howe have discussed the contradictory image of the disabled female:

Disabled women are typically regarded by the culture at two extremes: on the one hand, our lives are thought to be pitiful, full of pain, the result of senseless tragedy; on the other hand, we are seen as inspirational beings, nearly raised to sainthood by those who perceive our suffering with awe. (105)

**Challenging Blindness as a Means of Resistance
for Change: Lenin El-Ramly's**

Ironically, it is Arafa, who supports and offers loving care to Saniya. In this sense, the disabled individuals can be seen in a new light as certainly they can, and do provide care as well as receive it. Arafa provides Saniya with a form of security and empowerment. She finally succeeds in turning disability into a driving force for transgressing dominant gender stereotypes. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) rightly contends:

[t]he figure of the disabled women is a product of a conceptual triangulation. She is a cultural third term, defined by the original pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman, the figure of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman. (29)

Furthermore, both women and people with disabilities have been excluded from the mainstream of community life by unjust social assumptions that tend to use the dualist construction abled/ disabled as well as highly negative and binary language to refer to them. As Hall notes:

the conception that women are disabled by patriarchal oppression actually works against feminist efforts to resist and end patriarchal oppression because it is shaped by norms of embodiment that have been used to justify the oppression of those marked different. Indeed, as some feminist disability scholars have demonstrated, feminist conceptions of patriarchy as disabling have at various moments actively contributed to efforts to institutionalize disabled women. Feminist attempts to measure the harms of sexism by the extent to which it disables women furthers an ableist perception of disability as a despised condition that should be prevented or eliminated, a perception that continues to have harmful consequences in the lives of disabled people. (x)

With Arafa's love and support, Saniya restores her sight through surgical operation, thereby having a more positive self- image after suffering years of exclusion from normal life. Anita Silvers notes that like "women as a group, disabled people as a group have been denied and displaced because they do not comply with biological or social paradigms and therefore are dismissed as nothing more than anomalies" (132). As a woman and as a person with disability, Saniya has encountered a myriad of social and psychological problems that act as a barrier for her development in society. Arafa increases Saniya's awareness about her right for cure; he helps her to reject all forms of discrimination and he contributes to her integration into mainstream society. After restoring her eyesight, Saniya has been chosen by the administration to deliver a speech in front of Mrs. Box to praise the efforts made by the institution in helping the blind. Overwhelmed by fear and weakness, Saniya said that she has spent her best days in the institution. Then she suddenly stops reading and confesses that she lies and that her colleagues are the ones to be thanked for helping her to restore her rights. Moreover, she tells Mrs. Box that the second floor belongs to the oppressive administration and not to the helpless blind.

Significantly, towards the end of the play, Arafa attacks the social barriers put in the way of disabled people through the following speech to Mrs. Box:

O most venerated lady of the United Nations, we need no help or pity. We need no staff to lean on. It's enough you show us the way and leave us to choose the place we like to be in. O most venerated lady, the real problem isn't that our eyes are closed. The real problem is you whose eyes are so wide open, yet you see none but yourselves. You want us to remain in the dark. Thus you remain our masters and dominate us. The real problem is that though you have eyes, you don't have insight. Therefore, we should wholly depend on ourselves. (155-156)

In the above scene, Arafa's success in leading the blind to spiritual awareness is culminated in their rush towards the door leading to the second floor to live there. Mrs. Box decides that the administration does not deserve a cent and she goes out. Now the disabled individuals have nothing to fear as they have

**Challenging Blindness as a Means of Resistance
for Change: Lenin El-Ramly's**

finally gained insight. Ironically, though blind, Arafa lead his colleagues to truth and they finally regain their rights by confronting and challenging the oppressive socio-political forces which respond to impairment in negative terms. Barton argues:

One crucial lesson is the importance of connecting the personal with the political so that what has been seen in mainly individual terms can be viewed as a social predicament and thus a political issue...The task is an immense one- of moving from powerlessness and oppression to self and collective actualization (286).

The happy ending of this play disrupts feeling of pity for the visually impaired persons in the institution. El-Ramly communicates the message that the disabled individuals manage to challenge and resist the terrible social conditions in which they live. In a sense, he changes public perceptions of what disabled bodies are capable of doing. This encourages the audience to view them in fresh ways as differently-abled rather than non-abled and to have an equal access to humanity. When the play concludes, the audience can still find some hope amid hopelessness. Lewis argues that disability theatre must show both the personal characteristics of disabled people themselves along with the social conditions which they face (99). Therefore, a triumph over social barriers is what El-Ramly highlights at the end of his play. Disability theory provides El-Ramly with an impetus for both cultural and theatrical innovation.

Conclusion

To conclude, disability is already isolating because of social barriers that deny the full participation in civic life. Additionally, it is isolating because of the constant struggle to satisfy human needs taken for granted by the non-disabled. *A Point of View* elucidates El-Ramly's endeavors to portray the defiance and challenge of a group of visually impaired people who fight the social stigma of disability, thereby asserting citizenship rights and the dignity of the individual. What makes the play distinguished is the fact that El-Ramly quite consciously is subverting stereotypical views about the visually

impaired people who refuse to reconcile themselves to a separate life. Disability is a catalyst for them to resist being 'othered' by the totality of normalcy. The ultimate goal is to retrieve silenced voices and to hear them asking for liberation from injustice and full access to humanity. The message conveyed by El-Ramly is that it is the responsibility of the society to assimilate the impaired individuals and not the impaired people to adapt themselves to the social fabric. El-Ramly thus calls for the recognition of the equal rights of the disabled individuals as a minority group and their integration in society.

Notes

Quotations extracted from the play were translated from Arabic into English by the researcher.

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**Challenging Blindness as a Means of Resistance
for Change: Lenin El-Ramly's**

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