

HUMAN DISABILITIES EMPOWERMENT REFLECTED IN MICHAEL GRACEY'S *THE GREATEST SHOWMAN* MOVIE

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Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in Michael Gracey's film *The Greatest Showman*, with a particular focus on the potential elements of human disability exploitation. The film, set in the 19th century, follows the life of P.T. Mr. Barnum and his creation of the Mr. Barnum & Bailey Circus. While celebrated for its vibrant musical numbers and inspirational themes, *The Greatest Showman* has faced scrutiny for its representation of characters with physical differences. This abstract explores the film's use of stereotypes, the narrative roles assigned to characters with disabilities, and the balance between empowerment and exploitation. By delving into the historical context, audience perception, and real-world impact, this analysis aims to provide a comprehensive examination of how the film handles the delicate subject of disability and whether it contributes to a nuanced portrayal or inadvertently perpetuates exploitative tropes. The abstract also considers the filmmaker's intentions and the broader implications of such portrayals on societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: exploitation, disabilities, sociology

Introduction

The development of movie's production is getting more and more enchanted, the variation of themes has been explored by the producer and movies direction to amuse and educate the audience in learning life. The presence of movie in the middle of human life today is increasingly important and equivalent to other media. Its existence is practical, almost equal to the need for food and clothing. It can be said that there is almost no daily life of a cultured human being who is untouched by this medium. However movie is still movie which more imaging occurs in the media than in the real world. Everyone must be wiser in watching a

movie since a few people fall into the scene by actors in the film that could endanger them.

Since the movie's themes vary, some of them probably are considered controversial to the audiences. In the dazzling world of cinematic enchantment, few films have captured the essence of human diversity, both its vulnerabilities and strengths, as vividly as "The Greatest Showman." Released in 2017, this musical extravaganza not only brings to life the extraordinary story of P.T. Barnum's rise to fame but also beckons audiences to contemplate the thin line between the exploitation and empowerment of human disabilities. As the spotlight illuminates the circus performers, each possessing unique abilities or differences, the film prompts a critical examination of societal attitudes towards diversity and the ethical considerations that arise when artistic expression and commercial success intersect with the lives of those who live with disabilities. This essay aims to delve into the intricate interplay between exploitation and empowerment within the narrative of "The Greatest Showman," exploring the impact it has on shaping perspectives on human diversity and disability in contemporary society. Through a careful analysis of characters, themes, and underlying messages, the watchers will navigate the complex terrain where the spectacle of inclusion meets the responsibility to empower, pondering the movie's contribution to our understanding of the possibilities and pitfalls surrounding the portrayal of disabilities in popular culture.

In the exploration of these concepts within the context of "The Greatest Showman," it becomes essential to analyse how the film portrays the balance between showcasing the extraordinary talents of individuals with disabilities while avoiding the pitfalls of exploiting their differences for mere spectacle. The movie's narrative journey allows for a nuanced examination of whether the characters are presented as objects of exploitation or as agents of their empowerment, shedding light on broader societal attitudes towards human diversity. To understand how the movie presented the empowerment process that led the main character in the movie to reach his dream, and how does the impact of empowerment to the disabilities characters' life, the researcher will explore some aspects deeper.

Literary Review

Sociology of Literature

Sociology of literature is a specialized field that focuses on the relationship of literary work and social structures. It revealed that the creators of literary works have a predetermined social situation. Because there is always a reciprocal relationship between literature and social structure, which has been proven in the understanding of culture, social economy, politics, community organizations, the relationship of one's thoughts and the creativity of an artist who creates his work as a determinant of literary work. In this chapter the researcher will discuss the general theory of sociology of literature.

According to Alan Swingewood (1972:15), Sociology of literature contains the standard of behavior that are accepted between individuals. It can be seen from the way they act towards other people who are intended to make the action justified. Not only their action but how people judge others must also be considered. Studies that object to human in social life, learn about social institution, social processes that occur to find out the reasons why the community still exists. As well as values which are consciously formulated and which people strive to realize socially. Swingewood's ideas are also supported by Leo Lowenthal (1948: 16). He said that sociology of literature must be to discover the 'core of meaning' which one finds at the heart of different works of literature and which expresses many aspects of thought and feeling on subjects as varied as social class, work, love, religion, nature, and art.

In addition, Lowenthal defines that sociology of literature is essentially able to interpret the contents that found in various literary works, so many aspects of thoughts and feelings are expressed. Because many human beings are distinguished from one another by the aspects that mentioned above. People must be more critical in understanding a person's work so as not to fall into the sentences uttered by artists in their works. The problem usually lies with someone who distinguishes himself from others through social status which basically should be equal without any limitations. Thus, literature, is a reflection of values and feelings, aimed at changes that occur in different societies then between individuals are socialized to the response of their experiences arranged in social structures.

Human Empowerment

Human empowerment is no longer a strange or a new term for people. However, some people are still misunderstanding the term, or do not really engage to its meaning. Empowerment is something crucial for

society because it will help the ones who do not find their potential, or who are not able to boost the prospective in them to reach the dream.

According to Rappaport (Rappaport, 1984), Empowerment is a concept that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems and proactive behavior to social policy and social change, in other words, empowerment links the individual and his or her well-being to the wider social and political environment in which he or she functions. From a psychological perspective, empowerment links mental health and well-being to mutual help and to the creation of a responsive community (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

Empowerment, as introduced by Klyubin et al. (2005a, b), aims to formalize the combined notion of an agent controlling its environment and sensing this control in the language of information theory. Meanwhile, according to Blanchard, empowerment is the process of increasing the strength of individuals, teams or communities. It covers spiritual, political, social as well as economic strength; it can also be developing confidence in one's own capacities. It encourages people to gain skills and knowledge that will allow them to overcome obstacles in life or work environment and ultimately help them develop within themselves in the society, (Blanchard, 2003).

Human empowerment, on the other hand, is the process of enabling individuals or groups to take control of their lives, make choices, and assert their rights. Empowerment involves providing people with the tools, resources, and opportunities to enhance their abilities and contribute meaningfully to society. In the context of disabilities, empowerment encompasses creating an inclusive environment that recognizes and respects the capabilities and potential of individuals with diverse abilities. This involves dismantling societal barriers, promoting accessibility, and fostering a culture that values and supports the unique contributions of every person. Empowerment seeks to uplift individuals, ensuring they have the means to actively participate in social, economic, and cultural spheres on an equal footing with others.

Methods

This study applied descriptive qualitative method in which the researcher analyses, compares, and narrates the data found in the movie. This study employs to the theory of sociology of literature especially the theory of human empowerment to reveal the message behind the movie and to answer the problem statements. The primary data source of this

study is Michael Gracey's "The Greatest Showman" Movie, and the secondary data sources are the previous studies and other documents related to the topics.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982) the characteristic of qualitative research are;

1. Qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data and researcher is the key instrument
2. Qualitative research is descriptive. The data collection is in the form of words of picture rather than number
3. Qualitative research is concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products
4. Qualitative research tends to analyse their data inductively
5. "Meaning" is often essential to the qualitative approach

Based on the qualitative methods, the researcher gives description and explanation about something related to support the data, as a Creswell said;

"Qualitative research is description in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through the words, and the qualitative researchers are interested in meaning – how people make a sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the words". (Creswell, 1994: 145)

Findings and Discussions

Human Disabilities Empowerment Reflected in Michael Gracey's "The Greatest Showman" (2017)

Difable people or Human with disabilities are often considered as weak and useless creatures. Thus, society often treat them differently without any respect that bring about insecurity to the difable people. *The Greatest Showman* movie was created based on a true story. This movie amazingly gives the watchers insight how people with disabilities, can be successful under the great leader. This movie also suggests the audiences not to 'judge the book by it cover' through the representation of the characters and the story lines of the movie.

P.T Mr. Barnum (Mr. Barnum), the main character in the movie has shown the audience how to empower other people, especially human with disabilities to find their own potential and be independent with that. The movie begins with Phineas Taylor "P.T." Barnum (Hugh Jackman) joining his circus troupe in a song ("The Greatest Show"), playing to an

enthusiastic crowd as he and his performers put on a dazzling show. The part of the song's lyrics is as follow:

Mr. Barnum : 00:00:58>00:01:25
"Been searching in the dark, your sweat soaking through the floor. And buried in your bones there's an ache that you can't ignore. Taking your breath, stealing your mind and all that was real is left behind. Don't fight it, it's coming for you, running at ya. It's only this moment, don't care what comes after. Your fever dream, can't you see it getting closer. Just surrender cause you feel the feeling taking over."

(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

The above song lyrics represent the way Mr. Barnum empowered his circus troupe which consist of mostly people with disabilities. The song lyrics he sang in his performance were deep in meaning and telling the audiences about the hard way his circus troupe have to pass. The song lyrics also used to motivate his member to be success. The song, is one of the ways Mr. Barnum took to empower his circus troupe.

Multitude of people, especially them who born with disabilities, often do not realize that they are special, they are given potential to dig and show. Therefore, they sometimes need someone else to guide them or to lead them to reach their dream. This situation happened to the disabilities character in the movie, they need Mr. Barnum, to encourage them to step forward and show their potential. At first, those disabilities people just lived an ordinary live and accepted any judgement the society gave them, until Mr. Barnum came and gave them hope as described in the following quotation:

Announcer Man : 00:08:20>00:08:35
"Come! Join The Great American Railroad! Three meals a day, roof over your head, fair and ample wages. Come make your fortune! See the open plains of America. Opportunity awaits your, sir, out on the rails."

(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

Mr. Barnum is characterized as a smart, creative, and stoic person. He was told to experience many obstacles in his life including bankruptcy that made him fall into poverty. But, since Mr. Barnum was tough and creative, he was able to explore some possibilities that most people could not see. He saw some potential of the disabilities people around him, and 'use' yet empower them to walk with him confronting the difficulties and unfair social judgment. Mr. Barnum's action in using disabilities people around them bring about any contempt to him. Some critics to the movie said that the thin line between exploitation and empowerment in this movie arouse.

Mr. Barnum used smart strategies to gain people heart around him, especially them with disabilities. Mr. Barnum's sweet mouth was the weapon to empower them. The following quotation, described the empowerment process:

Charles : "You want people to laugh at me."
Mr. Barnum : "Well, they're laughing anyway, kid, so might as well get paid. I see soldier, no, a general riding across the stage with a sword and a gun, and the most beautiful uniform ever made. People will come from all over the world, and when they see him, they won't laugh. They'll salute."

(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

The above quotation occurred when Mr. Barnum tried to get the member of his circus troupe. He traveled to many places looking for distinct, unique people. The language shows in the above quotation is one of examples how smart and though Mr. Barnum to reach his dream.

Mr. Barnum believed that he could govern people, as described in below quotation:

Mr. Barnum : 00:01:29>00:01:36
"It's a preacher in the pulpit and you'll find devotion. There's something breaking at the brick of every wall it's holding all that you know."

(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

The above quotation shows the optimist manner of Mr. Barnum, he is the one who understand and realize that he is the person with power. With his power, he governs people to be obedient to him. Not only he meets people he needs in person, he also uses advertisement to help him achieves his dream.

Mr. Barnum : 00:22:24>00:22:35
“Wanted! Unique persons curiosities. Daring acts wonders of the worlds.”
(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

The word “unique persons curiosities” in the above quotation is something smart to use to manipulate or to encourage disabilities people to see themselves differently. Psychologically, the word above will give disabilities people hope and motivation that they are unique, or potential. The quotation also another proof to support the statement that the movie has thin line in showing the human disabilities exploitation and empowerment.

The following quotation will enlighten the readers about another example of empowerment did by Mr. Barnum:

Mr. Barnum : 00:23:00>00:23:39
“I’m sorry who is doing that singing?
It’s you, aren’t it?”
Lettie : “Sir, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”
Mr. Barnum : “You are so talented, blessed.
Extraordinary, unique. I would even say beautiful.”
Lettie : “Sir, please leave me alone.”
Mr. Barnum : “They don’t understand, but they will.”
(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

The above quotation occurred when Mr. Barnum met a freaky physique woman who has melodious and heavenly voice. At that time, he tried to persuade her to join his circus trope, at first, the woman named Lettie refused, but in the end, she accepted Mr. Barnum’s invitation. When the woman asked Mr. Barnum to leave, he felt that previously Mr.

Barnum was just mocking, but it was reversed when the daughter of Mr. Barnum gave out an advertising flyer that had been made and the woman smiled after reading it and indicated that she accepted the offer.

It is told in the movie that the disabilities people Mr. Barnum wants to recruit are the ones who are at first experience unfair social judgment and treatment that affect the way they see themselves negatively. The following quotation shows how the disabilities people see themselves:

Mr. Barnum : 00:23:48>00:24:12
"Okay Anne and W.D Wheeler, brother and sister?"
Anne Wheeler : "Yes, sir."
Mr. Barnum : "Terrific, and what do you do?"
Anne Wheeler : "Trapeze."
Mr. Barnum : "Trapeze? Okay."
W.D Wheeler : **"You know, people aren't gonna like it if you put us on the stage."**
Mr. Barnum : "Oh, I'm counting on it hahaha."
(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

And also, the following quotation:

Mr. Barnum : 00:27:07>00:27:55
: **"I see it in your eyes, you believe that lie that you need to hide your face, afraid to step outside so you lock the door, but don't you stay that way."**
Lettie : "No more living in those shadows, you and me, we know how that goes."
Vasily Palvos : "Cause once you see it, oh, you'll never, never be the same."
(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

The utterances with bold writing on the quotation above are the evidence of how the people with disabilities see themselves. They feel unconfident about their physical condition because the society treat them differently as if they are weird human. Until Mr. Barnum comes and give them enlightening hope.

Mr. Barnum did empowerment techniques to all the prospective members he wanted to recruit, and its work. The disabilities people he recruited response his empowering act positively that they finally see the result of their belief. The unfair social judgment and treatment success in empowering the members can be seen through the response of the members as it is described in the following quotation:

Human Disabilities : 00:57:50>00:58:10
"I am brave I am bruised I am who I'm meant to be, this is me. Look out cause here I come and I'm marching on the beat I drum. I'm not scared to be seen I make no apologies."
(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

Also, another quotation bellow:

Charles : 00:57:50>00:58:10
"Another round of bullets hits my skin, well fire away cause today I won't let the same sink in we are bursting' through the barricades and reaching for the sun."
Human Disabilities : "We are warriors."
Lettie : "Yeah, that's what we've become."
(Michael Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

Not only before he got the prospective members, but Mr. Barnum also applied the empowerment strategy after he finally successful in building his company. During his shows, he used songs as the media to empower his members, and to change people's point of view toward disabilities people as described in the following quotation:

Mr. Barnum : 00:25:26>00:25:59
"You stumble through your days, got your head hung low. Your skies' a shade of grey. Like a zombie in a maze. Your asleep inside, but you can shake awake. Cause you're just a dead man walking, thinking that's your only option, but you can flip the switch and

brighten up your darkest day. Sun is up and the color's blinding, take the world and redefine it. Leave behind your narrow mind, you're never be the same. Come alive come alive."

(Gracey, *The Greatest Showman*: 2017)

The above song lyrics are deep in meaning. It is full of motivation to uplifting Mr. Barnum's circus troupe. In every performance of his Circus company, Mr. Barnum uses song as the media to empower and boost his troupe.

Conclusion

The study aims to reveal the empowerment action done by the main character in the movie, that is Mr. Barnum toward his Circus Troupe who are mostly people with disabilities or different in physical appearance with other people. Based on the analysis, the research finding of the study are, Mr. Barnum successfully did the empowerment toward his circus troupe where the members are able to boost their motivation to show their potential, he also successful in gaining public eyes through his unique circus company, and the last, he is able to change public opinion about disabilities people. Future research on other issue related to the movie, such as psychological study toward Mr. Barnum's personality is suggested.

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