

Research Article

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Decolonizing Disability Studies: Identities, Epistemologies and Global South Perspectives

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Abstract

This research paper explores the concept of decolonizing disability studies as a critical and transformative approach that challenges the Eurocentric presumptions that currently dominate the field. Disability studies as traditionally constituted often perpetuates a colonial epistemology by universalizing Western conceptions of disability and neglecting other cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts. This study explores the connections between colonialism, disability, and systemic inequalities in order to advance an inclusive, pluralistic paradigm that gives voice to oppressed groups and indigenous knowledge systems. The study looks at how colonial legacies have shaped global perceptions of disability, especially in the Global South, where ableist beliefs are deeply embedded in policy, healthcare, and education. The imposition of Western biological ideas of disability, which often overlook indigenous and local interpretations with deep social and spiritual roots, is contested. By emphasizing decolonial theory, the study emphasizes the significance of opposing these hegemonic frameworks and advancing a more nuanced understanding of disability as a lived experience influenced by intersecting identities such as race, class, gender, and geography. This study employs an interdisciplinary technique, drawing on concepts from critical disability studies, postcolonial philosophy, and indigenous scholarship. It employs case studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to illustrate the diversity of disability experiences and the resilience of regional narratives that resist colonial and ableist conceptions. Through five case studies, the paper demonstrates how community-led initiatives and indigenous knowledge can direct more egalitarian and context-sensitive approaches in disability research, policy, and activism. The

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study also argues for a shift in thinking from one that sees disability as a weakness to one that respects and acknowledges the agency, creativity, and achievements of individuals with disabilities in their unique cultural settings. The study also makes the case for a change in perspective from one that views disability as a deficit to one that values and honours the agency, inventiveness, and accomplishments of people with disabilities within their cultural contexts. By appreciating different epistemologies and collaborating on knowledge production with academics and activists from the Global South, it advocates for the decentring of Western academia.

Keywords: Decolonization, Disability studies, Postcolonial theory, Indigenous knowledge, Global South, Ableism, Intersectionality, Colonial legacies, Cultural epistemologies, Disability justice, Representation, Alternative frameworks, Hegemonic narratives & Lived experiences.

Introduction:

The late 20th-century social and civil rights movements gave rise to disability studies as an academic field with the goal of combating the marginalization and stigmatization of people with disabilities. Nonetheless, a large number of its underlying theories and frameworks were created in Eurocentric environments, frequently ignoring the sociocultural realities and epistemologies of non-Western countries (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 49). A “one-size-fits-all” attitude to disability has resulted from Eurocentrism, which erases many interpretations with roots in the Global South and universalizes Western conceptions (Grech 53).

These hegemonic frameworks have been significantly shaped by colonial legacies. Indigenous knowledge systems were frequently dismissed as outdated or unnecessary by colonial authorities, who imposed their medical and social philosophies (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 27). For example, many communities in the Global South view disability through relational, communal, or spiritual perspectives, whereas the medical model of disability, which emphasizes individual impairments, has its roots in Western biomedical traditions (Hunt 91). In addition to marginalizing alternative interpretations, this imposition of Western frameworks has sustained ableist beliefs ingrained in colonial processes (Grech and Soldatic 189).

Therefore, decolonizing disability studies is both theoretically and practically necessary. It necessitates tearing down Western epistemologies’ hegemony and making room for intersectional, postcolonial, and indigenous viewpoints (Santos 45). This process entails redefining disability as a lived experience influenced by overlapping identities, such as race, gender, class, and geography, rather than only portraying it as a deficiency or medical disease (Kafer 13). Furthermore, it urges a reconsideration of how language, representation, and power relations contribute to the continuation of ableist and colonial narratives (Hall 77).

This paper seeks to explore the relationships between decolonization and disability studies, with a focus on identities, epistemologies, and views from the Global South. It argues that a decolonial approach to disability studies is necessary to address systemic injustices and advance inclusive policies and practices. Through an examination of case studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, this study highlights the resilience and agency of disabled individuals and communities in challenging colonial narratives and developing alternative frameworks. Ultimately, it encourages a paradigm shift in disability studies from a Eurocentric

to a pluralistic approach, emphasizing collaboration, contextual awareness, and respect for diversity.

The sections that follow will go into great length on the research goals and objectives, methodologies, reviews of the literature, and critical remarks. The sections will end with recommendations for abolishing disability studies.

Literature Review

- **Disability Studies Using Western Epistemologies**

Western epistemologies, which have their roots in the medical and social conceptions of impairment, have a significant influence on disability studies as it exists now. The medical paradigm, which emphasizes personal limitations, has come under fire for pathologizing disability and viewing it as a flaw that needs to be corrected or treated (Oliver 22). On the other hand, the social model—which was created by academics such as Michael Oliver—focuses on societal obstacles and highlights the necessity of systemic reform (Shakespeare 45). The social model has been attacked for its universalist inclinations and failure to take into consideration regional and cultural differences in the experience of disability, even though it has offered a crucial framework for advocacy and policy (Meekosha 672).

For example, the social model's focus on structural barriers assumes a separation between impairment and disability, a dichotomy that does not resonate in many non-Western contexts where spiritual, relational, and community-based understandings of disability prevail (Grech and Soldatic 191). By framing disability primarily as a Western socio-political issue, these models often ignore the intersectional realities faced by individuals in the Global South, where colonial legacies continue to shape access to healthcare, education, and employment (Connell 45).

- **Disability Studies and Postcolonial Theory**

Disability studies' colonial foundations can be critically examined via the lens of postcolonial theory. Scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Frantz Fanon have highlighted how colonialism contributed to the continuation of systemic injustices, especially those that impact people with disabilities (Fanon 250; wa Thiong'o 30). Fanon draws comparisons between the experiences of disabled people who encounter both systematic and symbolic violence and the psychological and physical effects of colonial oppression.

By promoting the inclusion of indigenous views and narratives, postcolonial disability studies aim to dismantle the Western lens that predominates in the field (Santos 51). By highlighting the necessity of placing disability within particular cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts, these viewpoints cast doubt on the universality of Western frameworks (Grech 55). Disability studies can transcend Eurocentric paradigms and promote a more inclusive and equitable discourse by using postcolonial philosophy.

- **Native American Views on Disability**

Indigenous epistemologies, which are frequently based on relational and communal values, provide alternative frameworks for comprehending disability. For example, the African philosophical notion of Ubuntu emphasizes community and connection, considering disability as a shared obligation rather than an individual deficiency (Mji et al. 240). In a similar vein,

many indigenous societies in Asia and Latin America view disability via symbolic and spiritual lenses, frequently linking it to special skills or divine intentions (Grech 59).

For instance, case studies from India show how, in stark contrast to Western biomedical treatments, traditional healing techniques and community-centered care models offer disabled people comprehensive support (Das and Addlakha 320). In Latin American Andean communities, disability is frequently placed within cosmological myths that emphasize community and environmental harmony (García 78). These approaches stress the richness and diversity of indigenous knowledge systems, challenging the dominance of Western epistemologies.

Challenges and Criticisms

The incorporation of indigenous viewpoints into disability studies is fraught with difficulties, despite its potential. The underrepresentation and underappreciation of non-Western academics in mainstream academia is one of the key problems (Connell 47). Furthermore, indigenous knowledge is frequently decontextualized as a result of Western institutions' monetization of it, which compromises its relevance and authenticity (Santos 56).

Additionally, new kinds of marginalization have emerged as a result of the convergence of globalization and colonial legacies, where local practices are either co-opted by Western frameworks or degraded (Grech and Soldatic 193). A cooperative, decolonial strategy that emphasizes the agency and voices of academics and activists from the Global South is needed to address these issues.

Aims and Objectives of the Research

The main objective of this research work is to investigate the decolonization of disability studies by analysing its Eurocentric underpinnings and promoting the inclusion of viewpoints from the Global South. In order to accomplish this overall goal, the study concentrates on the following particular goals:

- The goal of this study is to pinpoint and evaluate the Eurocentric presumptions that permeate disability studies, especially the idea that Western concepts like the social and medical models are universal. Alternative perspectives on disability that are based on indigenous and non-Western epistemologies are frequently marginalized by these frameworks (Meekosha 673).
- The goal of the study is to look at how colonial history and practices have influenced current Global South disability discourses. For instance, ableist beliefs that still exist today were solidified by the colonial imposition of Western healthcare and education systems (Grech and Soldatic 194).
- Recording and examining indigenous knowledge systems and how they understand disability is another important goal. Examining social, spiritual, and cultural perspectives that contradict Western ideas of deficit and disability is part of this (Mji et al. 245).
- Through the use of an intersectional perspective, the research aims to comprehend how various identities—including those related to race, class, gender, and geography—intersect to influence the lived experiences of people with disabilities in

postcolonial settings. This method draws attention to the structural inequities that disproportionately impact underprivileged groups (Santos 57).

- The study aims to provide comprehensive and sensitive to context frameworks for disability studies by emphasizing the need for policies and practices that consider the numerous realities of the Global South. This entails learning from case studies of community-led initiatives in regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America (García 81).
- Last but not least, the study urges communities, activists, and scholars from both the Global South and the North to collaborate in the production of knowledge. This means challenging the hegemony of Western academics and fostering partnerships that value heterogeneity and decolonial approaches (Connell 48).

These aims and aspirations underscore the potentially transformative effects of decolonizing disability studies. By confronting systemic inequalities and elevating marginalized voices, the research aims to promote an additional inclusive and equitable vision of disability.

Research Methodology:

- **Methods of Research**

This study employs a multidisciplinary and decolonial method, combining case studies with theoretical analysis, to examine the connection among disability, colonial legacies, and perspectives from the Global South. The goal of the strategy is to draw attention to indigenous knowledge systems, evaluate existing frameworks critically, and offer inclusive alternatives.

- **Design of Research**

The study integrates critical discourse analysis and case study methodology using a method based on qualitative research. This design is perfect for examining the sociocultural and historical dimensions of disability in a range of contexts, particularly in places where the legacy of colonialism has had a major impact.

- **Data Gathering Main Sources:**

- I. Examples of indigenous and community-led approaches to disability from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. These include recorded methods like ancient Indian healing systems, Ubuntu-based caregiving in Africa, and Andean tribes' spiritual interpretations of disability (Mji et al. 243; Das and Addlakha 325; García 80).
- II. Oral histories and testimonies of disabled activists and people from the Global South, gathered from archives and published interviews.

- **Secondary Resources:**

- I. Scholarly works that concentrate on disability studies, postcolonial theory, and indigenous epistemologies include books, journal articles, and policy documents (Grech and Soldatic 190; Meekosha 675).
- II. Biases and alternative narratives are revealed through an analysis of media and cultural depictions of disability in the Global South (Hall 79).

- **Conceptual Structures**

The study bases its analysis on the following theoretical frameworks:

- I. **Postcolonial Theory:** Postcolonial theorists like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Frantz Fanon shed light on how colonialism upholds structural injustices, especially those that impact people with disabilities (Fanon 251; wa Thiong’o 31). In disability studies, this approach is crucial for dismantling Eurocentric myths.
 - II. **Critical Disability Studies:** By focusing on intersectionality, lived experiences, and the influence of power dynamics on disability discourses, critical disability studies contest the shortcomings of the medical and social models (Shakespeare 46; Kafer 15).
 - III. **Indigenous Epistemologies:** Alternative conceptualizations of disability that emphasize relational and spiritual aspects are provided by indigenous knowledge systems. The deficit-based narratives of Western models are contested by these frameworks (Mji et al. 241).
- **Techniques of Analysis**
 - I. The study of how colonial ideologies and Eurocentric presumptions are ingrained in disability studies literature and practices is known as critical discourse analysis, or CDA. The power dynamics that influence the creation and representation of knowledge are also shown by this approach (Connell 50; Santos 60).
 - II. Analysis of Case Studies: In the Global South, case studies offer in-depth understandings of community-led and indigenous responses to disability. In opposing colonial and ableist paradigms, they emphasize the agency and tenacity of oppressed communities (Das and Addlakha 330; García 85).

Limitations and Scope

Scope: To highlight the variety of disability experiences and knowledge systems, the study focuses on three regions with different colonial histories: Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Limitations:

- capacity to record current and first-hand narratives is restricted by the dependence on secondary sources.
- Not all global disability-related issues may be addressed by the study's decolonization focus, especially in areas with little colonial influence.
- This methodology offers a thorough framework for investigating and disputing the Eurocentric presumptions in disability studies by fusing theoretical analysis with practical instances.

Discussion:

Disability Discourses and Colonial Legacies

Modern conceptions of disability were greatly influenced by colonialism, especially in the Global South. Alternative epistemologies were marginalized as a result of colonial forces forcing their social, medical, and cultural systems on native populations. For instance, disability was largely viewed via a biological lens during British colonial authority in India, disregarding traditional interpretations that frequently viewed disability as having spiritual or community significance (Das and Addlakha 326). Similarly, the introduction of Western education and healthcare systems undermined pre-colonial attitudes to disability in many African civilizations, which placed an emphasis on social participation and societal responsibility (Mji et al. 242).

Policies that barred disabled people from political, economic, and educational opportunities during colonial authority are clear examples of how ableism was institutionalized during that time. These policies reinforced the medical paradigm of disability by assuming that impairment was a deficit that needed to be corrected (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 52). Since many postcolonial countries still base their laws and services pertaining to disabilities on Western frameworks, the legacy of these policies endures today (Grech and Soldatic 195).

Furthermore, colonial narratives frequently portrayed people with disabilities as burdens or objects of sympathy, which continues to influence public opinions. Christian missionary narratives from Africa, for instance, often depicted disabled people as victims in need of salvation, perpetuating stereotypes that diminish their autonomy and self-respect (Connell 49). Indigenous knowledge systems were erased and handicapped voices were marginalized as a result of these narratives.

Alternative Frameworks and Indigenous Epistemologies

Indigenous knowledge systems contradict Western deficit-based theories of disability by providing broad and varied views. The Ubuntu philosophy, which frames disability as a shared communal obligation rather than an individual issue, places an emphasis on interconnection and community well-being in African communities (Mji et al. 244). Western approaches, which isolate the individual as the primary site of action, stand in stark contrast to this strategy.

Disability is frequently incorporated into larger conceptions of health and spirituality in Asian traditional healing systems. Ayurvedic techniques in India, for instance, provide alternate approaches to comprehending and treating impairments by viewing disability as a component of a holistic balance between body, mind, and spirit (Das and Addlakha 328). Similar to this, disability is frequently associated with cosmological beliefs among Andean communities in Latin America, where infirmities are interpreted as symbols of special purposes or spiritual ties (García 82).

In addition to casting doubt on the universality of Western paradigms, these frameworks emphasize how crucial it is to place disabilities within historical and cultural contexts. Disability studies can advance toward a more diverse and inclusive paradigm by embracing various viewpoints (Grech 57).

Disability and Intersectionality in the Global South

Race, class, gender, and location are just a few of the interacting identities that influence the experiences of disabled people in the Global South. For instance, especially in patriarchal countries, women with disabilities frequently experience exacerbated kinds of discrimination because of both gender and ableism (Connell 51). Similarly, systemic disparities stemming from colonial histories sometimes deny indigenous and rural disabled people access to healthcare, education, and employment possibilities (Meekosha 677).

Additionally, intersectionality shows how neoliberal policies and global capitalism worsen the marginalization of disadvantaged groups. For example, in Africa, structural adjustment programs have cut social service financing, which disproportionately affects people with disabilities (Grech and Soldatic 197). Disability studies can more effectively address the complicated realities that marginalized populations in the Global South experience by embracing an intersectional viewpoint.

Policy and Practice Decolonization

In order to decolonize disability studies, policies and procedures must be rethought to take into account the many realities found in the Global South. Initiatives run by the community provide insightful information about how to accomplish this. DPOs, for instance, have been successful in advocating for inclusive education policies in Kenya that place a high priority on cultural relevance and accessibility (Mji et al. 247). Similar to this, grassroots movements in Brazil have emphasized the value of local knowledge and group action while promoting disability rights within the framework of social justice (García 84).

Language and cultural hurdles that support colonial narratives must also be addressed by policy reforms. For instance, in non-Western cultures, disabled people are frequently alienated by the use of Western terminology and diagnostic standards. Fostering inclusion and empowerment requires the development of frameworks and terminology that are sensitive to cultural differences (Santos 61).

Power Dynamics and Representation

One crucial place where ableist and colonial narratives converge is representation. Stereotypes are frequently reinforced by media and scholarly representations of disability, which present disabled people as either heroic survivors or tragic victims. The complex reality of disability in the Global South are not adequately represented by these representations, which are mostly influenced by Western cultural norms (Hall 80).

Indigenous narratives, for instance, frequently highlight the communal and relational dimensions of disability, which are rarely represented in mainstream media. In a similar vein, Western academics continue to dominate disability research, excluding perspectives from the Global South (Connell 52). In order to address these disparities, it is necessary to challenge the power structures that influence the creation and sharing of information in addition to elevating the voices of the underprivileged (Santos 63).

Discourses on Globalization and Disability

Globalization has influenced current disability discourses in two ways. On the one hand, it has promoted global collaboration on disability rights by facilitating the cross-border sharing of best practices and ideas. For instance, inclusive policies have been promoted globally thanks in large part to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (Degener 144). Globalization has, however, also maintained Western frameworks' supremacy, frequently ignoring indigenous and local knowledge systems in the Global South (Grech 61).

The spread of neoliberal policies that put economic prosperity ahead of social justice is one significant effect of globalization. Disabled populations have been disproportionately affected by structural adjustment plans that have resulted in large cuts to public healthcare and education in nations like Kenya and Zimbabwe (Connell 54). Furthermore, paternalistic narratives that diminish the agency of people with disabilities are reinforced by the worldwide commodification of disability, such as that which occurs through the charity sector (Santos 67).

Leveraging globalization's advantages, such technology and worldwide lobbying, while bucking its homogenizing impulses is the difficult part. Digital platforms, for example, have made it possible for grassroots organizations to interact with global networks, challenge Western-dominated discourses, and magnify their voices (Mji et al. 248).

The Function of Grassroots Movements and Activism

Decolonizing disability studies and promoting rights-based methodologies have been made possible in large part by activism and grassroots organizations. In the Global South, Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) have been effective in organizing communities to demand inclusion and fight structural inequalities. By connecting ableism to more general concerns of oppression and inequality, the South African Disabled People's Movement, for instance, has been a trailblazer in promoting disability rights within the framework of social justice (Grech and Soldatic 199).

In Latin America, grassroots movements like the Bolivian Movement for Disability Rights highlight the value of locally relevant, community-led solutions. These movements frequently advocate empowerment and self-determination over the Western charity model (García 86). Similar to this, grassroots initiatives in India have called for more nuanced governmental interventions by highlighting the intersections of caste, gender, and disability (Das and Addlakha 331).

The achievements of these groups show how decolonial methods can change social and political structures more generally as well as disability studies.

Learning and the Creation of Knowledge

One of the most important steps in destroying Eurocentric narratives in disability studies is decolonizing schooling. Indigenous viewpoints are marginalized in many postcolonial countries' academic curricula, which nevertheless emphasize Western theories and approaches (Connell 56). In addition to erasing local knowledge systems, this dominance feeds preconceptions that portray disability as a pathology or deficit (Santos 70).

A more comprehensive view of disability may be achieved by including indigenous and alternative epistemologies into curricula. For instance, South African colleges have started integrating the Ubuntu concept, which emphasizes relational and communal approaches to inclusion, into disability studies programs (Mji et al. 246). In a similar vein, programs like intercultural education in Latin America aim to promote communication and respect between indigenous and Western knowledge systems (García 87).

In addition to formal schooling, academic knowledge generation must be decolonized. This means creating platforms for investigators from the Global South to share ideas and experiences, as well as challenging the dominance of Western scholars in the area of disability research (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 55). Collaborative research projects that respect local viewpoints and knowledge can be crucial to this process.

Conclusion

This study has examined the need to decolonize disability studies by revealing colonial legacies, questioning Eurocentric assumptions, and elevating indigenous and Global South perspectives. The analysis demonstrates how dominant Western paradigms, such as the social and medical frameworks, have universalized some conceptions of disability while marginalizing other epistemologies based on relational, spiritual, and cultural contexts. Due to colonial legacies that have embedded ableist ideas in healthcare, education, and policy frameworks, systemic injustices have persisted in the Global South. Conversely, indigenous knowledge systems offer broad and diverse frameworks for understanding and addressing disability. Cosmological stories in Latin America, ancient Asian healing methods, and Ubuntu

in Africa are a few examples of these systems. By highlighting community, connectedness, and the spiritual dimensions of human experience, these systems subvert the deficit-based narratives of Western epistemologies. The idea of intersectionality has played a significant role in helping us understand how several identities—such as race, gender, class, and geography—affect the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities. Activists and grassroots movements in the Global South have also demonstrated the power of community-led initiatives in challenging colonial and ableist systems. Similarly, the globalization of disability discourses presents both opportunities and challenges. Technology has facilitated international cooperation, but it has also reinforced Western frameworks' dominance, underscoring the need for pluralistic and context-sensitive approaches. Decolonizing disability studies involves a variety of strategies, such as curriculum decolonization, policy change, promoting collaborative knowledge development, and elevating marginalized voices. By renouncing a Eurocentric paradigm and embracing a pluralistic one, disability studies can more truly reflect the lived experiences and epistemologies of persons with disabilities around the world.

Further Research Suggestions

- Future research should focus on documenting and analysing indigenous knowledge systems related to disability. Ethnographic research can provide significant insights into a range of cultural frameworks in understudied regions such as Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.
- Comparing postcolonial nations' disability policies demonstrates how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary government. Such study also identifies successful models of decolonized policymaking.
- The ways in which digital platforms and transnational networks are transforming disability activism in the Global South might be further investigated. By understanding these processes, activists may capitalize on globalization while resisting its homogenizing impacts.
- Research methods must be developed with a focus on local viewpoints and participative techniques. Future research can look at how community-driven and cooperative techniques can resolve power imbalances in knowledge generation.
- Intersectionality remains a key lens for understanding disability in the Global South. Future studies can concentrate further on how overlapping oppressions like caste and disability shape lived experiences in specific locations, such as indigenous Latin America or rural India.
- Research could focus on practical strategies for abolishing disability studies curricula and creating academic settings that embrace heterogeneity and inclusivity.

By addressing these inadequacies, future research can advance the goal of creating a disability studies discipline that is truly inclusive, contextually aware, and representative of diverse global realities.

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