
Disability Studies: A Path Breaking Approach in Literature

Geethu Vijayan

University of Kerala

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Abstract:

“Man is unique, though he is impaired”. The uniqueness had been challenged in ancient time and considered disabled as sinners and cursed people. During middle-ages the uniqueness of disabled persons has been challenged and used them for entertainment purposes. Later they have been considered as wild and brutal and also gave much importance to the caretakers rather than disabled. Modern age especially later half of twentieth century the disabled got good position in literature due to the impact of civil rights movement and the writings of literary personalities. The life writings of disabled people made them to fly up to the heights of their life and also it inspire both able bodied and disabled to achieve their goals. At present disability studies is one of the growing branches of literature.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Disability Civil Rights Movement, Disability Narratives, Life Writings, Academic Discipline

The term disability covers all impairments, activity limitations and participant restrictions that affect either organs or body parts or a person’s participation in life. It is concerned with abilities in the form of composite activities and behaviours that are generally accepted as essential components of everyday life. This includes disturbances in appropriate behaviour, in personal care (such as excretory control, ability to wash and feed oneself), in the performance of other activities of daily life and in loco motor activities such as the ability to walk.

Attitudes to disability are deeply rooted in social and cultural values of society, and consequently, disabled people are deeply affected by physical and socio-environmental factors. During earlier times, disabled people were treated as the 'other' in society. For most disabled and non-disabled people, throughout the English speaking world, terms such as 'crippled', 'spastic' and 'mongol' have lost their original meaning and have become terms of abuse. A variety of terms and phrases are used in the media and in academic literature which depersonalise and objectify the disabled population as unacceptable. This includes phrases such as 'the handicapped', 'the impaired', 'the disabled', 'the blind' etc. Oppressive implicatures were given to the term 'handicapped' as 'cap in hand', a symbol of begging and charity. Such distortions in meaning still remain with terms like impairment and others, which disabled people and their organisation tend to avoid (Barnes et al. 6).

Disability is a major concern in literature even at the dawn of it’s life. Disability has long been studied within the applied health sciences, framed as a medical problem needing a medical solution. It is also studied as a social problem, a negative form of being, as it prevails

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in the sociological study of deviance, the anthropological study of medicine and abnormal psychology. But critical disability studies seek both to correct and expand the way in which other fields of study explain disability. Though disability is a new concept in literature it has a glowing history. It has undergone many transitional processes even from the birth to the present life. Disability features as a constant presence in literary production, whether in the bodies that produce countless narratives containing physical disability or in the mental difference that informs so much detail about character and psychology.

Disability studies was considered as an academic discipline that examines the meaning, nature and consequences of disability and its effect in the context of social, ethical, political and cultural factors. The interdisciplinary that characterises disability studies allows for a variety of methodologies and approaches to be applied to the study of disability and this expands the field. Some of these include narratives of disability, analysis of representations of disability in literature, in arts, in law and media, challenging the absence of researches on disability in the academia, and writing or rewriting histories of disability. During late twentieth century 'disability studies' emerged as part of a clustered politicised identity-based interdisciplinary field of study that arose from “disability civil rights movement” – which is based on social justice influenced knowledge building and disseminating initiatives. Disability studies emerged in the 1980s primarily in the US, UK and Canada. In 1986, the section for the study of chronic illness, ‘Impairments and Disability of Social Science Association’ (US) was renamed the ‘Society for Disability Studies.’ The first US disability studies program emerged in 1994 at Syracuse University. The first edition of the 'Disability Reader' (one of the first collection of academic papers related to disability studies) was published in 1997. The field grew rapidly over the next ten years. In 2005, “The Modern Language Association” established disability studies as a ‘division of study’.

Disability being an input for literary production, thus, becomes a practice across periods, from the earliest expression of poetry to the contemporary global novel and all points in between them. However, in the early forms of literature, disability was not a running theme but they gave a positive assessment of how disability functions. Best example for this is the seventy first verse of “Havamal” or “Saying of the High One” a collection of old Norse mythological and heroic poems written in thirteenth century, where the speaker notes,

The lame can ride horses,
The handless drive herds;
The deaf can fight and do well;
Better blind than to be burnt.

In mediaeval ages people believed that the disabled persons are cursed people and they might have to experience the bitterness of life as they are sinned. In most places the elite so called cultured used them for their amusements. This was evident in ancient farce plays *The Romance of Alexander* and *The Boy and The Blind Men* and also the pig beating game, which shows the most pathetic situation in which a few blind persons were put in an indoor place where there is galleries and convince the blinds that they are going to beat the pig in

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order to save their lives. Believing the falsehood the poor blinds beat together imagining that they are fighting with the pig. The people around them find delight in such a cruel game. There is a vision of disability in Elizabethan age as a sign of moral impairment. They were keeping the idea that the people with physical disabilities are evil and those who are mentally ill were wild and animal like. They also keep the entertainment value of disability like middle age. Most of the plays Shakespeare combined the perspectives of ancient, mediaeval and even modern outlook of the disability especially in Richard III.

Eighteenth century witnessed plenty of dramatic changes in the attitude of society towards the impaired. It is well explained in Oliver Sack's work *Seeing Voices* which has a long eye opening chapter individual couragement and eighteenth century philosophies. He also developed and taught sign languages to deaf, which helps them to be an integral part of society. There is a huge development in nineteenth century literature that most of the works of many men of letters have a character who is disabled. Ages among them portrays impaired are the evils, savage, monstrous, and grotesque, which was well explained in Antony Trollop's *Barchester Towers*, T.S Eliot's *Lifted Veil*, Tarchetti's *Fosca* and so on. Similarly some other authors like Elizabeth Gaskell and many others give much importance to the caretakers and their predicaments rather than the dilemma of the impaired. This century shows inspiring literary works which is being done by many writers on the goodness in their life. Especially the novels *The Little Prince and His Traveling Cloak* by Dinah Cloak, *What Katy Did* by Sarah Channcy Woolsey, *The Crofton Boy* by Harriet Martimer etc. Modern age as well as contemporary literature explicated an uncourageous perspective on disability studies. Many disabled came with literary works that not only illustrates their agonies in their life but strongly emphasizes how they gain victories life. Peter Winkler, Octavia E. Butler, Jean Dominique, John Hocckenberm, John Milton and many others arraying in this category.

As time passes, disability becomes a central theme in literature. The fact that disability is now being studied politically and sociologically not due to the work of sociologists but due to the pioneering study of disabled people themselves. "Disability studies takes the medicalised model of disability as its primary object of critique." (Mercer et al.66) Recent decades in the field of study are characterized by disabled people "fighting back" using their disability as a tool. The application of labelling to people with impairments is vividly instructed in Erving Goffmann's widely referenced study *Stigma* (1968). *Stigma* is broadly defined to include "abominations of the body; the various physical deformities, blemishes of individual character and tribal stigma of race, nation and religion plus in Britain, social class." (14) Goffmann suggests that the notion of 'normal human being' may have its own medical definition but it is also very much a normative system of grading people. An important figure who plays an important role in paving the way for the interdisciplinary identity based approaches to impairment and disability studies other than Goffmann is Michel Foucault (medical gaze).

So, like feminist, critical, race and queer approaches to literature and culture, disability studies is related to a specific group, the disabled people. When scholars turned

their attention on disability literature, they began to explore the numerous ways that disability operates in canonical works and in culture or moving in between the two. One of the first steps they took was not in disability but the one that seemed its opposite – 'normalcy,' which they revealed often to be socially formed and to have enormous influences. Many critics came forward with this idea in mind, some of them being Lennard J Davis (*Enforcing Normalcy*, 1995), Rosemarie Garland Thompson coined the term 'normate' to describe an idealized position that has dominance and authority in society. Some others like Robert Boyd speak on exceptional bodies displayed to the public for profit. Exhibited figures included 'Saartjie Baartman,' 'Gotten Tott Verses' and others.

Extending Davis's and Thomson's ideas, David Mitchell and Sharon Sunder argued in their most influential work *Narrative Prosthetics* (2000) that disability is a narrative device that gives fiction energy and ultimately reaffirms normalcy in the works. They outlined several stages in this process. Firstly, disability calls for an explanation, inaugurating the narrative act (telling story about it); then they offer an account for the causes and consequences of disability; next they bring disability from the margins and centralise it; and finally they cure, rehabilitate or eliminate the deviances in some way, restoring a sense of order. They call this theory 'Narrative Prosthetics' because such narratives employ disability as a sort of crutch. They showed how their theory functions in the works of Melville's *Moby Dick* (1889) and Dunn's *Greek Love* (1959). These foundational works in literary disability studies argue that literature and culture in the West upheld 'normalcy' and marginalised disabled people that they had real world consequences (even) in theories. In literary disability studies while one has revealed the formation and hegemony of normalcy, another has shown how both fiction and film through disabled character, disability metaphors and even their underlying structure use the same to address countless aspects of human thought and experiences. They demonstrate that disability which initially seemed marginal is actually pervasive and does significant cultural work. This was the beginning and actually the inspiration for disabled authors to write about their victorious life history.

Along with the emergence of disability studies, came increased attention to writing by disabled people themselves. Their work gives a true portrayal of the lives of disabled folk, their sufferings, hardships, agonies and how they overcome challenges what they face. Some of these books are *The World I Live In* (1908) by Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind, *My Left Foot* (1954) by Christie Brown, who had cerebral palsy, *Face to Face* (1957) by Ved Mehta who was blind, *One Little Finger* (2011) by Malini Chib, Naseema: *The Incredible Story* (2005) by Naseema Hurzuk, who is a paraplegic, *The Other Senses* (2012) by Preeti Monga, the first visually impaired aerobic trainer of India, *No Looking Back* (2014) by Shivani Gupta, a wheelchair bounded activist, *River of Time* (2017) by Jeeja Ghosh, who is cerebral palsy, *As the Soul Flies* (2007) by Yasmin Sawhney, a blind painter and so on.

The autobiographies of disabled persons reveal the fact that they make their life meaningful in spite of their disabilities due to the impact of literature. The life they achieve for themselves is the result of their determination and self confidence. Though the disabled

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people are a minority in society, many of them have succeeded in their life. Their perseverance, resolution, optimism and courage have crowned them with success in their endeavors and inspired them to lead a better life than the able-bodied who are ill-equipped to face misfortunes. It is a beautiful irony of life that able bodied people take life for granted and very often overlook the finer aspects of life, while disabled people keep their eyes open for opportunities and count their blessings one by one.

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