



A feminist model of Disability Studies, What, Why and How

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Abstract

The disabled are one of the most discriminated and dehumanised groups of people in the world. Till recently the disabled were largely in a receiving angle without a theoretical model of their own. However, since, the development of disability studies and various writings in that field, a theoretical frame work is being evolved to approach the question of disability with an autonomous and experiential involvement from within the disabled community. However, a few critics in the field are of the view that disability studies as it exists today is largely masculine oriented and since, there is a strong cultural and theoretical linkage between the scholars in disability studies and feminist criticism, there has to be an expansion of the disability studies giving emphasis to the questions raised by the feminist critics as well. These mandate a clear cut revision in the existing paradigms and perspectives.

Key words

Feminist Model. Disability Studies. Identity and marginality. Bodily differences. Cultural Attitudes.

The very term “Disability” itself is in a kind of wilderness, since there is no unilateral perspective, comprehensive understanding or unanimous agreement between the activists among the disabled or scholars in

this field on how to define or conceptualise disability. The large variety of terminological constructions used in this regard “Especially in compliance with the general stereotyped perception of disability” and the inconsistency created by the prevalence of these multitudinous terms make any analysis of this kind quite problematic. However, a significant change of the postmodern era is the readiness of the physically inconvenienced to articulate their problems and to develop a theoretical perspective of their own. It has to be analysed in the context of the larger theoretical perspectives on identity and marginality facilitated by the postmodern environment such as Postcolonialism, Feminist Theory, Cultural studies, Dalit Literature, Queer theory and so on. This new development is also closely related to the socio/political awareness and the subsequent consciousness of the disabled community which are evolved as a result of the new inclusive paradigm advocated by the international conventions, national/regional documents, laws and pronouncements.

From the receiving and requesting end, the disabled is now trying for a declaring, asserting and self-defining perspective. The theoretical model thus evolved is called “disability studies”. Lennard J Davis in His preface to the first edition of *Disability Studies Reader* opines that Disability studies is a field of study or discipline whose time has come. He writes “For centuries, people with disabilities have been an oppressed and repressed group. People with disabilities have been isolated, incarcerated, observed, written about, operated on, instructed, implanted, regulated, treated, institutionalized, and controlled to a degree probably unequal to that experienced by any other minority group. (xv). He considers Disability Studies both as a field of inquiry and an area of academic activity. Constructing such a body of knowledge by the disabled community against what has been already constructed, internalized and very often enforced by the general community is a highly challenging task. However, borrowing from other such perspectives and giving emphasis to the panorama of the experience of the disabled, Disability Studies is gaining momentum and establishing itself as a powerful and unchallengeable area of study.

Though there were many scattered responses and attempts to understand and conceptualise disability across the world from time to time, both within and outside the disability community, the first organized and structured move in this regard could be the publication of the *Disability studies reader* by Lennard J Davis in 1996. The second edition to the reader again edited and published by Davis himself in 2006 also adds to the concepts and

perspectives on disability. Following this a wide range of writers such as Linn Rose, Douglas Bayntan, Ruth Hubbard, Michael Davidson, Erving Goffman, Susan Sontag, Simi Linton, Tobin Siebers, Shelley Tremain, Tom Shakespeare, David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Bradley Lewis published their books and concepts in this area.

Most of them borrow from the new theoretical perspectives such as The Freudian/Lacanian Psycho analysis, the Poststructuralist theory of Derrida, the historical and cultural paradigms introduced by critics like Foucault and Althusser and the various feminist theoretical perspectives that are articulated from Woolf to Judith Butler. As a body of knowledge, Disability Studies not only articulates the real problems, feelings and aspirations of the disabled community, but it also tries to voice the concerns, traumas, anxieties Handicaps, and stereotyping attitudes that really pause questions on the very existence of the community as a result of the wrong social model and obsolete patronizing discourses prevalent in both developed and developing countries in different ages. It aims at clarifying the difference between various terminologies such as Impairment, Disability, Handicap and Different-ability which are indiscriminately used by the scholars and activists while referring to the disabled. It invalidates many existing perspectives and suggests many autonomous alternatives to conceptualize and theories disability. Many concepts such as stigma, Different ability, Cultural disability studies, Normalcy, Different models of disabilities and different aspects of the body theory are analyzed under disability studies.

However, certain feminist activists and critics in the disability studies are completely dissatisfied with the current model of disability studies. Such critics who have got greater orientation to Feminism argue that the present discourse on disability is more masculine oriented and there is a vacuum for a Feminist theory of disability. They also try to identify the common links that exist between Feminism and Disability studies as discourses of the marginalized. In her article published in the Disability Studies Reader, entitled “Toward a Feminist Theory of disability”, Susan Wendell argues that “Any deep understanding of disability must include thinking about the ethical, psychological and epistemic issues of living with disability. This theory should be feminist, because more than half of disabled people are women and approximately 16 percent of women are disabled (Fine and Asch 1988) (Wendell 243). The Critics like Wendell are of the view that the feminist

thinkers have raised the most radical issues about cultural attitudes to the body. Explaining the mutual relationship between Disability Studies and Feminism she writes, “Some of the same attitudes about the body which contribute to women’s oppression generally also contribute to the social and psychological disablement of people who have physical disabilities. In addition, feminists are grappling with issues that disabled people also face in a different context: Whether to stress sameness or difference in relation to the dominant group and in relation to each other; whether to place great value on independence from the help of other people, as the dominant culture does, or to question a value-system which distrusts and devalues dependence on other people and vulnerability in general; whether to take full integration into male dominated/able-bodied society as the goal, seeking equal power with men/able-bodied people in that society, or whether to preserve some degree of separate culture, in which the abilities, knowledge and values of women/the disabled are specifically honored and developed.(243 244). The Women Critics in Disability studies like Wendell try to reveal the multiple layers of Colonization or suppression that the disabled women go through. Wendell elucidates this idea when she says that “Disabled women struggle with both the oppressions of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppressions of being disabled in societies dominated by the able-bodied. They are bringing the knowledge and concerns of women with disabilities into feminism and feminist perspectives into the disability rights movement. (244).

Rosemarie Garland-thomson in her article “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” tries to show how Disability studies and Feminist theory are interdependent and how the presence of one makes the other more comprehensive, solid, meaningful and original. She tries to establish that Feminism and Disability studies are complimentary to each other. She writes,” I must wearily conclude that much of current disability studies does a great deal of wheel reinventing. This is largely due to the fact that many disability studies scholars simply don’t know either feminist theory or the institutional history of women’s studies. All too often the pronouncements in disability studies of what we need to start addressing are precisely issues that feminist theory has been grappling with for years. This is not to say that feminist theory can be transferred wholly and intact over to the study of disability studies, but it is to suggest that feminist theory can offer profound insights, methods, and perspectives that would deepen disability studies. Conversely, feminist theories all too often do

not recognize disability in their litanies of identities that inflect the category of woman. Repeatedly, feminist issues that are intricately entangled with disability--such as reproductive technology, the place of bodily differences, the particularities of oppression, the ethics of care, the construction of the subject--are discussed without any reference to disability. Like disability studies practitioners unaware of feminism, feminist scholars are often simply unacquainted with disability studies perspectives. (247). According to her, the most genuine Disability Studies critics are those with adequate exposure to the different nuances of Feminism and the best of the Feminists are those who have got a cleared cut awareness about the complex and challenging aspects of Disability studies. She writes, "The most sophisticated and nuanced analyses of disability, in my view, come from scholars conversant with feminist theory. And the most compelling and complex analyses of gender intersectionality take into consideration what I call the ability/disability system--along with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. (257).

Thus, those critics who stand for a feminist model of Disability studies try to identify how the disability studies has been framed as an academic discipline of the Patriarchy. Along with constructing a new autonomous model to discuss the concept of disability, they also reveal the kindred spirit that Feminism shares with Disability studies. It is obvious that as a new paradigm of knowledge disability studies must consider the theoretical concepts introduced by Feminism and other such discourses to make it more authentic and flexible in nature. However, whether limiting it simply into a feminist framework can be all that convincing is a question that the researchers have to answer with a deeper understanding. To conclude one can, say that a feminist model of disability is a possibility which can be effectively developed and shaped. The socio/political nature of the theory itself offers it a wider space in the academia. It will not weaken the disability studies but add more vigour and strength to it by incorporating a new and revolutionary chapter to the existing epistemological pronouncements in this realm.

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