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Disabled Realities: An overview of the disabled community

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Abstract

Disability Studies is a nascent field and an inventive area with its basis and roots in the social sciences, humanities and rehabilitation sciences. The field encompasses the life experiences of the disabled, the critical issues that are in need of attention, better understanding of the problems and effort to venture into integrative approaches to unify the field. This multiplicity of the diverse voices, perspectives, goals combine in shaping the field of disability studies. The research paper recognizes the relationship between the concept of normalcy and the notion of stigma that is attached with the disabled community.

Key Words

Disability, Lived experiences, Stigma and Normalcy

Introduction

Disability has forever evoked a sense of enigma and has its own share of prejudice and bias attached to it. It is something that all has experienced at one point in life but have not necessarily understood. From times immemorial, 'people have felt compelled both to stare at the disabled people in their midst and then to turn their heads in discomfort' (Berger:12). For centuries civilizations have oppressed disabled people and subjugated them to a marginal position. They have been isolated from the mainstream society, incarcerated, written wrongly about, operated upon in the guise of 'treatment', implanted with devices without their consent, institutionalized and controlled to such a degree that no other marginalized group has been subjected to in the known history.

Science has contributed a lot in the transitioning of disability incidence, its prevalence among the people and its awareness by making life with serious and chronic impairments increasingly comfortable and feasible for the disabled. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) defines disability as 'a long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in the society on an equal basis with others' (CRPD Article-1).

Disability Studies

Disability Studies is a nascent field and an inventive area with its basis and roots in the social sciences, humanities and rehabilitation sciences. It unites a variety of ongoing work. As disability studies scholar, Lennard J. Davis proposes, 'it would be more appropriate to say that disability studies have been in the making for many years, but, like people with disabilities, has only recently recognized itself as a political, discursive entity' (Davis: 4). The framework of the field encompasses the life experiences of the disabled, the critical issues that are in need of attention, better understanding of the problems and effort to venture into integrative approaches to unify the field. This multiplicity of the diverse voices, perspectives, goals combine in shaping the field of disability studies. This emergence of the new field gives the disabled a new non-medicalised and a positive legitimacy which works both as an academic discipline and as an area of political struggle. As a relatively new discourse, disability studies struggle to find and claim space in a highly contested and distorted area. It argues for its existence and justifies its assertions. For centuries, this area unlike other fields of study such as race, gender, class has not had the academic or political visibility. Progressives in the academia might boast themselves of being sensitive to issues of race, gender and class but all have been through 'ableist' when it comes to the disabled community.

This reversal of the historic writings on the aspects of the body, disease, freakishness and so on forces the present generation of scholars in the field of disability studies to look forward towards the Feminist, Marxist, Postmodern and Cultural Studies model for comprehending a better understanding the dynamics and relation between body and power. This was done with the sole purpose of invoking a sense of sympathy. The works evoke a high sense of inappropriateness from the scholars of the field. It is as if the whites are explaining what it is like to be black or a man explaining the difficulties faced by a woman in the society. This discredits the writer's authority to talk on the topic and at the same time it distorts the concept to the reader who will never be able to grasp the correctness of the experience as espoused by the writer in the work. As Davis reiterates that disability studies, for the most part, shuns this unequal power transaction in favour of advocacy, investigation, inquiry, archaeology, genealogy, dialectic, and deconstruction (Davis: 7).

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies is such a field of study that gives an appropriate platform for such narrative maneuverings. It is a lens that explores the cultural and literary arrangements in addressing a few pertinent questions. First is the question of what constitutes the Canon? It is through canons that discipline

approach to consolidate their field of study. As critic Tobin Siebers says that ‘my withered limb is my compass, which directs me to newer directions’ (Siebers: ii). This helps in creating an archive of discourse.

The Second question is of the way in which an art form is interpreted involving texts and contexts. A text is a direct result of the context in which it takes birth. With the aid of close reading of narratives, the attention to style and rhythm can give huge understanding about the political context in which the work was produced. All these factors ‘make’ the text.

The Third is the multilingual question that comprehends the enduring relationship between the disability politics and multilingualism. It is not only the spoken language. It is a multivalent expression from all directions, different media, different registers and so on.

Lastly comes the question of interdisciplinarity and the problem of accommodation. Teaching disability texts, ethics of care in teaching and learning disability component, the moral politics with its varied forms of interpretations is a challenge in itself. With the baggage that the readers come with be it the preconceived notions about disability or the prejudices, the problem of accommodation is as much a pertinent question as the literary question.

The Concept of Normalcy

Statistical Historian Daniel J Kevles argues that the concept of normal was used synonymously with the word ‘ideal’ in the seventeenth century, as exemplified in the ideal nude body of the Venuses. This notion of ‘ideal’ implies that the ideal human body of the divine visualized in the art must be composed from the ideal parts of living models (Kevles). The concept of the average or the norm enters the European culture in the nineteenth century. French Statistician Adolphe Quetelet (1796-1847) noted that the law of error, used by the astronomers, could also be applied to the distribution of human features. Later Sir Francis Galton, a British Statistician binds statistics with eugenics. In its central idea stands the basis that the population can be normed. It divides the entire population into standard population which is the norm and the nonstandard population which is the ‘abnormal’. When the idea of normality and abnormality pervaded the human physiology, it led to the assumption that humans with higher intelligence, decreased birth defects and such things became a desirable aspect in the population (Davis).

In this broad task, it can be argued that the notion of ‘normal’ is neither a natural category nor is it a norm. The research in this area should aim at revisiting the historical origins of the word and analyse its present-day usage. It must delineate and reinterpret the relationship between disability and stigma. As a result, Disability Studies emerged as a field of study in the late twentieth century as a result of the disability rights movement, a flourishing interdisciplinary identity-based approach that revealed a compelling and a totally new aspect of the humanities which emphasized rights of a human as an individual. The field consciously built on the American civil rights movement. With varied forms of protests, people with various impairments contested the long-held belief about the disabled of being pitiable individuals with tragic medical problems,

perpetually shrouded in darkness. Instead, they presented themselves as a unified group facing widespread discrimination.

Erving Goffman, a sociologist in his monumental work *Stigma* (1963) analyses the interactions around people including those with “abominations of the body” who are different from the expected norm in the society (Goffman: 4). In *The History of Sexuality* (1976) Michel Foucault argues about the bodies that differed from the norm. He demonstrates how in the nineteenth century bodies with ‘problems’ were “sequestered, controlled, diagnosed, and otherwise socially managed” (Foucault:15). Leslie Fiedler, a literary critic, in his seminal work *Freaks* (1978) explored the disabled bodies as “non-normative human bodies and their display for profit” (Fiedler).

The relationship between biology and culture, vis-à-vis cultural constructivism, has formed a unique complication in the case of disability. In order to denounce the medical model for disability, Simi Linton in her manifesto *Claiming Disability* (1998) claims that by “refusing the medicalization of disability”. Linton argues, disability activism emphasized how disabled people are connected, not by personal symptoms, but by “social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group” (Linton:2, 4).

As the field evolved, theorists have called for a nuanced approach, better than the social model. Leading theorist Lennard J Davis, in his book, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions* (2002) asserts that “an insistence on social construction alone was intellectually unsatisfactory” (Davis: 35). Another prominent theorist Tom Shakespeare, in his work, *The Social Model of Disability* (2006) supports the idea that though social model was crucial, a newer more sophisticated approach that recognises disability as a phenomenon “requiring different levels of analysis and intervention, ranging from the medical to the socio-political” (Shakespeare: 204).

In *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Lennard J. Davis, put normalcy on the table of investigation. He connected the ideology of normalcy with the notions of progress and ultimately with the deadly concept of Eugenics, the nineteenth century invention. He suggested that the nineteenth century novels reinforced this idea of normalcy by showcasing heroes who are ordinary citizens, whereas the disabled characters, like that of Hippolyte in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* (1857) or Tiny Tim in Charles Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) would typically be relegated to marginal roles without having much contribution to the plot of the novels.

In *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007), Ato Quayson summarizes that disability can reveal the morality of other characters, it can show the disjuncture between thematic and narrative trajectories, it can represent moral deficit or evil, or it can be part of a sudden epiphany, it can serve as ‘hermeneutical impasse’.

Many post-colonial theorists have also cautioned against the blanket use of the experiences by the disabled and simply exporting western disability theories. They are of the opinion that cultural meanings attached with normalcy and disability differ from the West to the rest of the world. Clare Barker *Postcolonial*

Fiction and Disability (2011), marked the interventions focused on physical, sensory, and cognitive difference in postcolonial literature. In an exhortative essay collection, *Blackness and Disability* (2012) Christopher Bell seeks to bring disability studies and African-American studies more forcefully. Critic Ellen Samuels in *Fantasies of Identification* (2014) investigates how the “disadvantaged groups have subversively performed racial, gender, or disability passing to escape oppressive institutions such as slavery” (Samuels: 11). Hence it becomes the need of the hour to develop a framework of academic deliberations where a structure might be developed to study disability studies as per the necessity and accommodating the cultural diversifications

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above discourses help us to analyze present undercurrents of the field of study both at the national level and internationally. The research paper recognizes the relationship between the concept of normalcy and the notion of stigma that is attached with the disabled community. It envisages giving way to an inclusive literature where the disabled also stand a chance to be heard.

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