



ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 9 No.2 June 2024

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

Literary Disability Studies: An Overview

Rimjhim Bhattacharjee, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Udaynarayanpur Madhabilata Mahavidyalaya

Received 20 May 2024 Revised 25 June 2024 Published 30 June 2024

Abstract

Literary disability studies, an interdisciplinary field that examines the representations of disability in literature, remains significantly underrepresented in Indian literature departments. Despite global interest in disability studies, Indian academia has yet to fully integrate this critical area of study into curricular frameworks. Literary disability studies interrogates how literature constructs and challenges social attitudes towards disability, offering insights into cultural narratives and stressing the significance of the embodied experiences of disabled individuals through literary analysis. This academic overview explores the existing literature on literary disability studies, highlighting key theoretical frameworks and methodologies within the field. It also examines some efforts of Indian scholars to incorporate disability studies into literary analyses. This overview underscores the need for a more inclusive literary curriculum that embraces critical representations of disability, advocating for diversity and inclusion within academia. It also aims to open up an exciting field of study for budding scholars. By integrating literary disability studies into literature departments, this field not only enhances understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of disability but also enriches the academic exploration of literature.

Keywords: Disability and literature; Disability representation; Indian academia; Literary disability studies.

Introduction

Literary disability studies is an interdisciplinary branch of disability studies that scrutinises representations of disability in literary texts. It parses constructions of disability in literature, thereby exposing and challenging disability stereotypes and pervasive social stigma attendant upon disability. By thus probing narratives, this critical field deconstructs cultural narratives that shape our understanding of disability and attempts to engender more nuanced and critical perceptions of disability as an identity category. It also stresses the importance of embodiment and seeks to augment disabled voices through critical analyses of



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

texts. While this field of study is now well-established in the West, most literature departments in India have yet to embrace it. Only a handful of universities in India offer dedicated modules or courses on literary disability studies, thereby beseeching more academic engagement with this area of study.

While literature departments—once traditionally focused on canonical texts and established critical theories—have embraced diverse theoretical perspectives today, including feminism, ecocriticism, and queer theory, among others, literary analyses still often remain oblivious to the theoretical directions opened up by disability. Moreover many, even today, refuse to concede disability studies as a recognised field. Therefore, students often remain unconscious of the necessity of engaging with literature through a disability lens and are denied several crucial insights that many texts have to offer.

This overview aims to outline the existing literature on literary disability studies. It aims to introduce beginners in the field to the history of its development and some of its key theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Further, it shall mention the ideas of certain Indian scholars who have contributed significantly towards the emergence of literary disability studies in India. The pervasive oblivion of literary disability studies within most literature departments of the country exposes the broader concern of marginalisation of persons with disability within the academic landscape in India. The need for this overview lies in its potential to spur more scholarly work in an emerging field and thereby advocate for a more inclusive and critical literary curriculum that recognises disability as a central concern in reading texts. In so doing, it contributes to a wider discourse on the significance of a more accessible and equitable educational environment. It also forwards the idea that the inclusion of literary disability studies in literature departments not only widens our understanding of disability but also expands the horizons of literary analysis itself.

Literary Disability Studies: Historical Developments

As an interdisciplinary field, disability studies draws concepts and ideas from various sources including medicine, law, activism, lived experience, language, representation, education, and so on, to conceptualise disability as a diverse and complex category. As previously stated, literary disability studies is one of the interdisciplinary branches of disability studies that studies language and representation through a disability-centred lens. This field developed as literary scholars began to probe how disability is perceived



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

in literary representation, criticism, and theory, gradually leading to its establishment as an academic discipline. Literary disability studies establishes disability as a minority category and experience, much like gender, race, and class. Scholars in this emerging field analyse narratives in ways that challenge normative ideas regarding disability.

David Bolt (2018) identifies three phases in the development of literary disability studies in the West, tracing its evolution from initial critical engagements to its current status as a robust academic discipline. These phases reflect the growing recognition of the importance of examining disability within literary contexts and the increasing sophistication of the theoretical frameworks applied.

Even though the examination of disability in literature has roots dating back earlier, Bolt identifies the ‘foundational phase’ of literary disability studies as commencing in 1995 with the publication of Lennard Davis’s seminal work, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Davis contended that discourses on race, class, and gender frequently neglected disability, despite its pervasive influence on how individuals read, write, and perceive the world. This crucial text widened the horizon of disability as a theoretical category by exposing social imperatives at work in the engendering and interpellation of normative notions of ability and normalcy.

Davis’s powerful work inspired a smorgasbord of critical scholarship on literary representations of disability. Significant names include Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000). These two volumes, along with Davis’s are part of what is often referred to as the “classic trilogy” of literary disability studies (Bolt 2018). These pivotal texts deconstructed how literary and cultural representations of disability often reinforce social norms and perpetuate negative ideological formulations regarding physical and mental difference.

Edited collections began to complement the work begun by these foundational monographs. Works such as Davis’s *The Disability Studies Reader* (1996), Garland-Thomson’s *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), Snyder and Mitchell’s *The Body and Physical Differences: Discourses of Disability* (1997), Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson’s *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and*



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

Culture (2001), and Snyder, Brueggemann, and Garland-Thomson's *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (2002) helped situate disability within wider social, cultural, and political discourses and provided wide-ranging theoretical and methodological insights, creating the foundation for further research in literary disability studies.

These edited volumes not only expanded the limits of academic discourse by stressing the significance of recognising the intersectionality of disability with various facets of identity and society but also entrenched disability studies within the humanities. They focused critical attention on how literary texts can both reflect and shape social attitudes toward disability, thereby advocating for more inclusive worldviews.

After this initial spate of works establishing the field, Bolt identifies the late 1990s and early 2000s as the 'formative phase' of literary disability studies. Scholars such as Petra Kuppers, Robert McRuer, Stuart Murray, Felicity Nussbaum, Ato Quayson, and David Serlin, who had earlier written important chapters in anthologies began publishing monographs. Further, they were joined by new voices of importance in the field. A significant development during this phase was the establishment of the *Corporealities* book series by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. This series became a platform for substantial projects exploring cultural aspects of disability, paving the way for similar endeavours like Stuart Murray and Robert McRuer's *Representations: Health, Disability, Culture, and Society*.

Furthermore, the formative phase saw the launch of specialised journals, addressing the growing need for scholarly outlets. The *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* (JLCDS), initiated in 2007, played a crucial role. One notable edition of this journal was *Cripistemologies* published in 2014, guest edited by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer. This issue explored alternative ways of understanding disability, contributing to contemporary discourses that emphasise affirmation, complexity, and positivity in disability studies.

Bolt identifies the onset of the focused phase of literary disability studies in 2012 with the publication of *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*, edited by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth Donaldson. The editors observed that while Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* had been extensively studied from various angles, disability studies had been largely overlooked in scholarly discussions of the novel. This book aimed to fill the gap, becoming the first scholarly volume to explore



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

disability exclusively within the context of a single literary work. Lennard Davis, in the foreword to the volume, praised the work as a landmark event in literary disability studies, calling it “a coming of age moment for the study of disability.”

Encouraged by the positive reception, and inspired by earlier initiatives like the *Corporealities* series, Donaldson, Miele Rodas, and Bolt further launched a new book series titled *Literary Disability Studies*. This series, inaugurated in 2015 with the publication of Patricia Friedrich’s *The Literary and Linguistic Construction of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*, works toward initiating critical disability-centred ruminations in literary analysis. It seeks to provide a platform for innovative, futuristic research in the field.

Literary disability studies in India remains at a nascent stage. Much like its development in the West, the field’s emergence in India has been shaped by activism, lived experiences, cultural perceptions of disability, language, and other intersecting dimensions. The growth of disability formulations in India broadly reflects what is known as the ‘models approach’ in disability studies where disability perceptions have been categorised into various models such as the medical model, the social model, the cultural model, and the human rights model. Although much critiqued, a basic understanding of these models is required for any scholar of disability studies.

The ‘medical model’ of disability, as the name suggests, understands disability as an inherently medical issue located in individual bodies. Disability is regarded as a defect or malfunction of an individual bodily system, thereby carrying connotations of abnormality and pathology. This model thereby focuses on the cure or correction of the ‘abnormal’ body/mind and its rehabilitation. Persons with disability are expected to follow a regime of medical treatment and depend on certain ‘special’ services and institutions aimed at providing them with ‘normalcy’. In this model, disabled people are conceived of as passive recipients of medical care and attention by ‘experts’ such as doctors and other trained professionals (Olkin 1999; Fisher & Goodley 2007).

Staunchly opposed to a strictly medical understanding of disability, Oliver (1983) formulated what is known as the ‘social model’ of disability. Under this model, the ‘problem’ of disability is located not in individual impairments but rather in disabling social structures. Therefore this model conceives of



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

disability not as a biologically-determined but as a socially constructed category. This theoretical shift repositions the conceptualisation of disability from the individual body to the broader social inequities that create access barriers for persons with disability. In essence, disability is fundamentally about its social context.

The conflation of the social model and the human rights model of disability is commonplace in disability studies literature and beyond. However, it is essential to note an important point of distinction between these two models. The social model is primarily explanatory, offering insights into how social barriers and disabling conditions arise and persist. In contrast, the human rights model extends beyond explanation, providing a theoretical foundation for policymaking designed to uphold and protect the dignity of persons with disabilities.

Disability studies, propelled by the insights derived from the social model, witnessed a rapid growth in the West. Increasingly, scholars from the humanities took interest in the field, leading to the emergence of the 'cultural model' of disability. This model aims to examine how specific cultures conceptualise and frame notions of disability and ability. It considers three levels at which these notions are formulated, understood, and perpetuated. Firstly, it looks at the individual level, focusing on personal identity and narrative. Secondly, it examines the social level, where cultural beliefs and discourses are embedded and sustained through history, myth, and shared values. Lastly, it addresses the macro-level, exploring the challenge of reconciling specific cultural understandings of disability and ability with global discourses on the subject. The cultural model of disability has proved to be of seminal importance in the growth and development of literary disability studies, in the West as well as in India.

In the years following India's independence during the 1950s, the literary canon was so structured as to help engender a national identity. This occurred largely at the cost of disability experiences and perspectives. Even the Indian Constitution, with emphasis on securing social justice and equality for citizens, failed to acknowledge specific concerns of citizens with disability. It reflected a narrow understanding of disability as a medical concern and a private tragedy, thereby failing to include the issue of disability within the ambit of rights. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act was only enacted in 1995 and even then it could only introduce certain



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

welfare measures. Albeit inadvertently, this promoted charity approaches to disability reinforcing discourses of dependency surrounding the issue. The year 2007 was landmark in this regard in that India ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), thereby onboarding onto a rights-based approach towards disability policy. This was further entrenched with the formulation of the The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill in 2016, a progressive and far-reaching legislation avowing full inclusion and realisation of fundamental rights for persons with disabilities without discrimination.

This shift towards a rights-based conceptualisation of disability in law reflects a broader recognition of disability as a crucial aspect of India's socio-cultural landscape. Literary and academic spaces have also begun to re-evaluate the conspicuous absences of disability and are attempting to incorporate disability as an essential subject of study. This transition is imperative towards a richer understanding of both Indian literature and society. The integration of literary disability studies into academic curricula helps dispel negative disability stereotypes and aids in the perception of the world from perspectives of marginality, thereby challenging the limitations of both normative discourses on disability and literary scholarship.

Disability and Literature: Theoretical Directions

Literary disability studies owes its origins to scholarly efforts in the West at critically unpacking a myriad of disability metaphors that pervade literary and cultural narratives. Early figures in the field such as Lennard Davis (1995) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) did pioneering work in the deconstruction of the notion of the 'normal.' Davis theorised 'normalcy' while Garland-Thomson coined the term 'normate' while elaborating on cultural constructions of the 'normal' body and mind. Davis notably argued that the 'problem' of disability did not reside in the disabled individual but in the social construction of 'normalcy' that framed disability as a deviation.

These pioneering scholars underscored that literary representations of disabled characters frequently depicted them as deviations from the 'norm', thereby inherently portraying disability as a negative or even villainous trait. At best, disability in literature was perceived as a deficit or a challenge that characters were expected to 'overcome'. Consequently, disability was not recognised as a complete, embodied experience but was instead defined in terms of what it lacked compared to the constructed 'norm'.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

The early scholars of literary disability studies exposed this kind of disability representation to theorise on ableism and establish it as a divisive and oppressive category akin to colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and casteism. By critically unpacking the burden of meaning attendant on disability representations in literary and cultural texts, these scholars helped reveal the ableist ideologies that underpin negative social attitudes towards disability. This approach called for a reconstitution of disability as a legitimate and diverse human experience.

Literary disability studies thus seeks to dismantle normative and pejorative understandings of disability that marginalise disabled individuals. Its theoretical tools are crucial for the growth of a more inclusive literary canon that acknowledges and respects human experience in all its diversity. Through such critical interventions, literary disability studies contributes to broader efforts to combat ableism and promote social justice within and beyond literary contexts.

Mitchell and Snyder (2000) observe that “disability pervades literary narrative, first as a stock feature of characterization, and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device.” They coined the term ‘narrative prosthesis’—a pivotal concept in literary disability studies—to reveal how fictional narratives regularly employ disability motifs, tropes, or metaphors to propel their plotlines forward without any critical engagement with disability itself. Narrative prosthesis refers to the use of disability as an ‘opportunistic device’ to evoke feelings like pity, fear, or disgust in the minds of the reader without engendering any idea of disability as a socially constructed category or an embodied experience. Examples include Captain Ahab in Melville’s *Moby Dick* whose dismemberment drives his villainy and Tiny Tim in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* whose suffering is simply used to elicit the readers’ pity. Similarly, the negative depictions of disability in traditional epics are further instances of narrative prosthesis.

The task of literary disability studies is not just to critique limited representations but also to emphasise how nuanced portrayals of disability have the power to enrich narratives, aesthetics, and literary theory. Two landmark works in this regard are Ato Quayson’s *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007) and Tobin Siebers’ *Disability Aesthetics* (2010).

In his trailblazing study, Quayson observes a ‘crisis in representation’ or a ‘short-circuiting’ of narrative itself with the appearance of a disabled character. This crisis can manifest in several ways. First, there is



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

the question of how to represent the disabled character: should they be depicted in the same manner as non-disabled ‘normal’ characters, or should they be relegated to a negative, degraded, or subaltern position within the narrative? Second, can such a character embody a complete individual existence within the narrative, or is their disability merely a metaphor for other forms of human experience? The final aspect of this ‘crisis’ concerns the readers and their reception of disabled characters. Quayson asserts that representations of disability carry serious ethical implications, as they can directly influence social views of people with disabilities in ways that representations of other literary details, tropes, and motifs do not. This assertion underscores the ethical responsibility of authors and scholars in how disability is represented and analysed in literature. By addressing these critical questions, literary disability studies seeks to nurture more authentic and nuanced representations of disability, contributing to a broader understanding and acceptance of diverse human experiences in both literature and society.

The interactions of the aesthetic, the ethical, the social, and the political ramifications of disability representation is a concern that vexes literary disability studies to this day. What extant work on disability aesthetics and narrative theory has achieved is to broaden the horizon of understanding disability representations in literature beyond merely ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ towards promoting more critical insights into the complex layers of disability representation in many fictional texts.

Literary disability studies has also broadened the horizon of disability studies itself. While the social model of disability continues to exert huge influence in the realm of disability studies and activism, literary and cultural disability scholars have stressed the need to probe this model further to arrive at a more holistic understanding of disability. They contend that the location of disability away from the body and in society as forwarded by the social model fails to consider complex, embodied experiences of disability. In *Disability Theory* (2008), Tobin Siebers talks about ‘complex embodiment’ demonstrating how “the body and its representations [are] mutually transformative” meaning that it is not only representation that has the power to determine how disabled bodies are perceived; disabled bodies, by asserting their differences, also possess the power to transform representation. Similarly, Mitchell & Snyder—stalwarts of the ‘cultural model of disability’—in their work, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006) state that the “meaningful materiality” of disabled embodiment can offer rich insights into social experiences and cultural formations



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

of disability. An acknowledgement of the varied ways in which disability possesses the capacity to enrich human experience, encapsulated in the recent concept of 'disability gain,' flows from this manner of comprehending disability.

Thus, the field of literary and cultural disability studies has significantly transformed perceptions of disability from being viewed as negative, problematic, and characterised by lack to a more progressive discourse that includes liberatory concepts such as 'disability gain.' This momentous shift is testament to the impact of literary and cultural disability studies on social and academic conceptualisations of disability. In a move away from solely metaphorical or negative formulations, contemporary scholarship foregrounds the valuable insights and perspectives disabled people contribute to the human experience. Disability thus helps literary theory grow as well in the nuanced readings of texts it makes possible through the recognition of the richness and diversity that disability brings to narratives and theory. This further highlights the significance of continued scholarly engagement in the field.

Literary disability studies has significant impact in the analysis and critique of life writing as well. This genre, comprising autobiographies as well as memoirs, personal narratives, and diaries, offers a rich terrain for comprehending the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. Life writing foregrounds the voices of disabled people themselves and thereby offers intimate and nuanced perspectives on disability, challenging stereotypical narratives. Literary disability scholars explore the myriad ways in which these texts negotiate the complexities of disability agency, identity, and embodiment. They work towards emphasising the significance of disabled voices within the oeuvre of life writing.

G. Thomas Couser, a pioneering scholar in the area of disability life writing, has observed (2005) that cultural representations of disability have been oblivious to or have worked to the detriment of persons with disability largely because such narratives have been constructed by the able-bodied and disabled people have not had control over their own representations. The form of life writing, for Couser, offers a corrective to this loss of control. Since the twentieth century, persons with disabilities have increasingly sought to reclaim their stories through this medium. This shift has empowered persons with disabilities to articulate their experiences and unique perspectives, dismantling existing oppressive and erroneous representations of disability.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

Through disability-focused analyses of the genre of life writing, Couser uncovers a history of disabled life narratives in the West. Instances of such life writing were scarce before the Second World War. The war had resulted not only in widespread disability but also in the valorisation of certain forms of disability (think of disabled war veterans) and therefore it proved a significant catalyst for the emergence of these narratives. Consequently, numerous narratives by disabled veterans appeared in the post-war period. During this time, polio narratives also gained prominence. Wilson (1994) notes that polio is most likely to be the first disability to have generated a substantial body of autobiographical literature.

The period between the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of several life narratives by persons with breast cancer and HIV/AIDS. These texts often challenged and resisted the tragedy and stigma associated with these conditions with nuanced and empowering representations. The production of a significant corpus of life narratives about specific conditions thus emerged as a major cultural phenomenon in the post-World War II era, reflecting a broader social engagement with the personal and collective experiences of disability.

A few but significant life narratives centring rare and relatively lesser-known conditions such as autism, Alzheimer's, Asperger's syndrome, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, epilepsy, obesity, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's syndrome, among others, emerged at the end of the twentieth century. Couser (2005) writes, "As the twentieth century drew to a close, then, many disabilities came out of the closet and into the living room of life writing" (604).

Very similar to the emergence of life writing among other marginalised groups—such as women, queer peoples, and African American peoples—life writing by disabled individuals has emerged from broader movements for human rights. These narratives can be viewed as cultural manifestations of activist movements. The proliferation of disability life narratives in the West can be closely traced alongside the growth of the disability rights movement. According to Couser (2005), "Disability autobiography should be seen, then, not as spontaneous 'self-expression' but as a response—indeed, a retort—to the traditional misrepresentation of disability in Western culture" (604).

Disabled individuals often feel compelled by social expectations to explain their conditions, taking responsibility for their disabilities and alleviating the anxieties of ableist listeners. For instance, a person



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

with cancer might be expected to justify their illness by discussing lifestyle choices. Autobiographies or other forms of life writing offer persons with disability platforms through which they can reclaim their narratives, contest historical marginalisation, and represent themselves as full individuals. Sharing their stories enables disabled people to rise above stereotypical representations as either victim or ‘supercrip’. Life narratives authored by persons with disability have the power to serve as antidotes to external ‘expert’ prescriptions providing intimate insight into the complex experiences that disabled people have to negotiate. By reinstating disabled people as experts on their lives, such narratives promote a more nuanced understanding of human diversity.

Furthermore, studies on autobiographies by disabled individuals have shown how they also function as forms of advocacy, emphasising the need for social accommodations and support for disabled persons (Kleege 2005; Newman 2013). Through these personal accounts, disabled people not only reclaim their narratives but also advocate for systemic change, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and accessibility in society. This includes access to healthcare, education, employment, but also to often-overlooked aspects that lend meaning to life—love, sexuality, dignity, and meaningful relationships. These life writings and their analyses are integral to promoting a deeper and more empathetic understanding of disability, contributing to the broader discourse on human rights and social justice.

Literary disability studies is a rapidly developing field. While it began with a handful of texts studying disability representations majorly in the Global North, today it has expanded and includes a plethora of works studying varied experiences and representations of disability in the Global South and other contexts. The development of critical disability studies is particularly significant in this regard. Critical disability studies entails the usage of an interdisciplinary array of theoretical and methodological approaches to understand and establish disability as a relative social, cultural, and political category. This approach acknowledges both the materiality of the disabled body and the fact that notions of disability vary widely across socio-cultural and geographical contexts. It enables humanities scholars and social scientists to identify the socio-political constructions of disability in various settings and to understand the implications of these constructions not only for persons with disability but for society at large. Critical disability theory,



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

as noted by Sleeter (2010), recognizes that no single framework can comprehensively capture the disability experience or disability as a constructed category, hence the emphasis on interdisciplinarity.

Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) outline four primary principles of critical disability studies.

First, critical disability studies states that disability is irreducible to mere facts; the methods employed reject quantitative analysis as reductive for understanding a phenomenon as complex as disability. This perspective also dismisses purely medical analyses of disability for similar reasons.

Second, critical disability studies insists on linking theory with praxis in the pursuit of an autonomous and participatory society (52). While earlier disability theories equated autonomy with independence, critical disability studies expands this notion to encompass emancipation from hegemonic and hierarchical ideologies (52-53).

Third, there is an emphasis on historicity. Critical disability studies views the analysis of disability as situated within specific historical and cultural contexts, recognising the importance of understanding both the historical construction of disabilities and the contemporary work within a historical framework (53-54).

Fourth, critical disability studies engages in dialogue among cultures, stressing the need for an explicit conversation with human rights and emancipatory thinking from diverse cultural perspectives. This approach seeks to avoid the pitfall of projecting a Western-centric ideal onto non-Western cultures (54).

The qualitative emphasis of critical disability studies makes it particularly suitable for literary research. Applying this framework to literary studies involves a contextual analysis of disability in each text, where the politics of disablement is understood through the lenses of gender, caste, class, geographical location, sexual orientation, and other pertinent categories. This critical understanding of disability can help pinpoint where and how the devaluation of disabled individuals occurs within societies, providing a nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the issue.

Scholars such as Anita Ghai (2002), Clare Barker & Stuart Murray (2010), and Fiona Kumari Campbell (2011) have used interdisciplinary frames to investigate the interactions between disability and postcolonialism, while the work of Miles (1995; 2001) has focused on the varied conceptions of disability in different cultural contexts. Shilpaa Anand (2015) insists that if literary studies in the Indian context engages in studying disability, it has to adopt a multidisciplinary approach and use its pool of critical tools



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

and methods to initiate nuanced, contextualised understandings of disability in India. Indian literary studies has already undertaken the responsibility with pioneering work in literary disability studies by Indian scholars including Shilpaa Anand, Someshwar Sati, G.J.V. Prasad, Hemachandran Karah, and Ritwick Bhattacharjee, among several others. The emergence of literary disability studies in India marks a significant departure from historical neglect and exclusion of disabled voices within the country's literary canon.

Conclusion

Despite significant advancements, the Indian literary scene still requires more sophisticated theoretical frameworks to fully understand the unique experiences of disability within its socio-cultural context. The preceding section has mentioned several scholars who are striving to decolonise disability studies by probing notions of disability India both historically and in relation to intersectional categories such as gender, caste, geographical location, and so on. In order for critical disability studies to be truly critical in India, further research is necessary in several areas. First, more rigorous research can be conducted to probe the development of plural notions of disability in India. Second, more intersectional analyses are the need of the hour to reveal the complex ways in which disability in India intersects with issues such as gender, caste, alternative sexualities, and so on. Third, spatial studies of disability in India, unearthing and analysing narratives from oft-marginalised experiences of rural and indigenous communities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of disability in India. Fourth, comparative studies between Western and Indian literary disability studies could highlight unique cultural dimensions and shared global challenges. Finally, the integration of insights from other disciplines, such as law, sociology, and anthropology, among others, are crucial to enrich the theoretical and methodological approaches in Indian literary disability studies. The intersection of disability studies with literary analysis promises to challenge existing paradigms and initiate a deeper understanding and representation of various facets of disabled experiences within Indian literature and society.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

Works Cited

- Anand, Shilpa. "Disability and Modernity: Bringing Disability Studies to Literary Research in India." *South Asia & Disability Studies: Redefining Boundaries & Extending Horizons*, edited by S. Rao and M. Kalyanpur, Peter Lang, 2015, pp. 246-262.
- Barker, Clare, and Stuart Murray. "Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2010, pp. 219-236.
- Bolt, David. "A Brief History of Literary Disability Studies." *Liverpool Hope University News*, 20 Mar. 2018. <https://www.hope.ac.uk/news/allnews/expert-comment-a-brief-history-of-literary-disability-studies.html>.
- Campbell, Fiona Kumari. "Geodisability Knowledge Production and International Norms: A Sri Lankan Case Study." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 8, 2011, pp. 1455-1471.
- Couser, G. Thomas. "Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation." *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, Mar. 2005, pp. 602-606. JSTOR, doi:10.1632/25486192.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
- Davis, Lennard J., editor. *The Disability Studies Reader*. Routledge, 1996.
- Donaldson, David, and Helen L. B. Taylor, editors. *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*. The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
- Fisher, Pam, and Dan Goodley. "The Linear Medical Model of Disability: Mothers of Disabled Babies Resist with Counter-Narratives." *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 29, 2007, pp. 66-81. Wiley Online Library, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9566.2007.00518.x.
- Friedrich, Patricia. *The Literary and Linguistic Construction of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: No Ordinary Doubt*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie, editor. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York University Press, 1996.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

Ghai, Anita. "Disability in the Indian Context: Post-colonial Perspectives."

Disability/Postmodernity, edited by M. Corker and T. Shakespeare, Continuum, 2002, pp. 88-99.

Government of India. *The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995*. Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, 1996, New Delhi.

Government of India. *The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016*. Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016, New Delhi.

Kleege, Georgina. "Reflections on Writing and Teaching Disability Autobiography." *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2005, pp. 606-610. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25486193.

McRuer, Robert, and Merri Lisa Johnson, editors. *Cripistemologies: Theorizing Disability and Ableism*. NYU Press, 2014.

Meekosha, Helen, and Russell Shuttleworth. "What's so 'Critical' about Critical Disability Studies?" *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2009, pp. 47-75. doi:10.1080/1323238X.2009.11910861.

Miles, M. "Disability in Eastern Religious Context: Historical Perspectives." *Disability and Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1995, pp. 49-69.

Miles, M. "Studying Responses to Disability in South Asian Histories: Approaches Personal, Prakrital and Pragmatical." *Disability and Society*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2001, pp. 143-160.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Newman, Sara. *Writing Disability: A Critical History*. First Forum Press, 2013.

Oliver, Michael. *Social Work with Disabled People*. Macmillan, 1983.

Olkin, Rhoda. *What Psychotherapists Should Know about Disability*. Guilford Press, 1999.

Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia University Press, 2007.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024

- Sati, Someshwar, et al., editors. *Reclaiming the Disabled Subject: Representing Disability in Short Fiction (Volume 1)*. Bloomsbury, 2022. New Delhi.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Sleeter, Christine. "Building Counter-Theory about Disability." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2010, doi:10.18061/dsq.v30i2.1244.
- Snyder, Sharon L., and David T. Mitchell, editors. *The Body and Physical Differences: Discourses of Disability*. University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Snyder, Sharon L., and David T. Mitchell. *Cultural Locations of Disability*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Snyder, Sharon L., Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, editors. *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Modern Language Association of America, 2002.
- Wilson, Daniel J. "Covenants of Work and Grace: Themes of Recovery and Redemption in Polio Narratives." *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 13, 1994, pp. 22-41.
- Wilson, James C., and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, editors. *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.9, No.2, June, 2024