

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches

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Lecture - 11

Disability

Hello, student. I'm here, Professor Smita Jha, to discuss disability studies. We are doing a course on reading English novel with an interdisciplinary approach. And while dealing with interdisciplinarity, we need to know about the disability study or disability studies. As I use the word interdisciplinarity, well, we have various facets of the humanities and humanities comprises medical humanities, disability studies, digital humanities.

It is very important to know the word disabled; the significance, the relevance and the very meaning when we talk in terms of research or understanding this particular aspect. To understand the ways disability is represented in literature, it is first necessary to understand the ways disability is perceived and represented beyond literature. As many disability studies scholars have addressed, there are two dominant societal perspectives of disability, the medical model and the social model. And that is why I use the term medical humanities also because sometimes disability studies is considered to be the part of medical humanities. So, the medical model and the social model, we need to understand these two terms or phrases to know about disability studies.

The medical model as explained by Gail Ellis presents disability pathologically as something that must be cured or fixed and its focus is on impairments, medical interventions and possible cures. This model also typically discusses disability through a deficit lens, focusing on what a person with a disability cannot do rather than focusing on their strength and capabilities. In contrast, the social model primarily presents disabilities as a result of the environment in which someone resides. It shows how individuals are disabled by barriers erected in society not by their impairment or difference. When viewed through this model, an impairment only becomes a disability when someone's environment or society is not accommodating for them. For example, a mobility impairment may not be a disability in a navigable area free of stairs. For most disability studies scholars, the best model may be a hybrid of these approaches. While the medical model is often criticized for being ableist and restrictive, an entirely social approach is also criticized for minimizing the real challenges and experiences of people with disabilities and for minimizing the potential for individuals to consider disability an aspect of their identity. Each of these

approaches must be considered when evaluating literary representations of disability, as they influence the creation and reception of that literature.

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 behaviors that are generally accepted as essential components of everyday life. This includes disturbances in appropriate behavior, in personal care, such as excretory control, ability to wash and feed oneself, in the performance of other activities in daily life and in locomotor 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 social 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 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 remain with terms like impairment and others, which disabled people and their organization tend to avoid.

Disability is a major concern in literature, even at the dawn of its life. Disability has long been studied within the applied health sciences framed as a medical problem needing a medical solution. It is studied as a social problem, a negative form of being as it prevails 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. So, this is also part of cultural studies. Although 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. This study 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 inform so much detail about character and psychology. Disability studies was considered as an academic discipline that examines the meaning, nature, consequences of disability and its effect in the context of social, ethical, political, cultural factors.

The interdisciplinarity that characterizes 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, media, challenging the absence of research on disability in the academia and writing or rewriting histories of disability. During the late 20th century, disability studies emerged as part of a clustered, politicized, 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'. Disability study, as I said, is that interdisciplinary mode of inquiry that flourished beginning in the late 20th century. It challenges the singularity of dominant models of disability, particularly the medical model that would reduce disability to diagnosis, loss or lack, and would insist on cure as the only viable approach to apprehending disability. It pluralizes ways of thinking about disability and bodily, mental behaviour, atypicality in general. It simultaneously questions the ways in which able-bodiedness has been made to appear natural and universal. As it is an analytic that pertains to how disability and ability are represented in language and in a wide range of cultural text. And it is particularly attuned to the ways in which power relations in a culture of normalization have generally subordinated disabled people, particularly in capitalist systems that demand productive and efficient liberals.

Disability studies is actively intersectional, drawing on feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory and other analytics to consider how gender, race, sexuality and disability are co-constitutive, always implicated in each other. Crip theory, which is one of the very important theories when we talk of disability study, has emerged as a particular mode of doing disability studies that draws on the pride and defiance of crip culture, art and activism. With crip itself marking both a reclamation of a term designed to wound or demean and as a marker of the fact that bodies and minds do not fit neatly within or beneath a historical able-bodied disabled binary. 'To crip' as a critical process entails recognizing how certain bodily and mental experiences have been made pathological, deviant or perverse and how such experiences have subsequently been marginalized or invisibilized. Queer of color critique, which is arguably at the absolute center of the project of queer theory, shares a great deal with crip theory as it consistently points outward to the relations of power that constitute and reconstitute the social. Queer of color critique focuses on processes of racialization and gendering that make certain group perverse or pathological.

Although the ways in which this queer of colour project overlaps significantly with disability studies and crip theory have not always been acknowledged, vibrant modes of crip of colour critique have emerged in the 21st century making explicit the connections. The disability literature and representation of disability is backed by numerous theories, statements, ideas.

The social model is a theory that draws a fine line between being impaired and being disabled. According to this theory, being impaired refers to having a physical limitation, whereas being disabled defines social exclusion or isolation of a person from society. The social model theory stresses upon the fact that this problem doesn't lie with disabled people but with the society that fails to understand these deformed bodies. It is a fight between social versus physical discrimination and those with prejudiced mindsets largely contribute to this discrimination.

The Normate theory, yet another important theory to understand disability. Under this, literature, to some extent has defined the idea of being a normal person. And the word normate works just right to justify the idea. The word refers to a normal man, which is the one who is unmarked by the social stigmas of any forms of deformities and highlights the difference of body types. Medical or medical mental issue, more than a theory, is an observation. People tend to distinguish the disabled based on their appearance. That is, whether they look ugly or hunched and why they do not fit within society. What people do not realize is that it's more than a medical issue. Deformity is a mental problem. It is the mindset of a society that disguises a person, secluding him or her from the other altogether. The exclusion and disgust towards a disabled person harm the mental health of a person, making him or her extremely conscious of his medical deformity. And this is called a kind of complexity, that is, suffering from complex.

Stigma theory: having a trait that doesn't fall under the category of normals in the society makes one stranger having an alien attribute. This attribute was denoted as a stigma by Goffman. However, certain attributes such as handicap, shortcoming, having and falling as portrayed by the character of Manthra from Ramayana, you must be aware of Manthra, Ramayana and Shakuni from Mahabharata were also considered as stigma. Thus, categorizing the normals from the stigmatized people profoundly in the society. Historical and mythological representation impairment was viewed as the punishment, for the sins committed by the disabled in their past lives, usually denoted as *karma*. The people were considered demonic or sinful and were a subject of disrespect and hatred. Even in the ancient drama, we have such kind of character. Children with anonymous disabilities were

either killed after birth or expelled from the kingdom. They were represented as someone who lacked morals and the ability to communicate with the society in a standard manner. So, disability in literature is a form of art as well as entertainment and is capable of effectively transforming the mental ideology of a society. It plays a powerful role in influencing the minds of people to a large extent. The disabled were always considered a menace or like an evil, a stalking beast that would devour the society. Disability doesn't really disable a person, but discrimination does. The issues of poverty and social stigma have always existed in the society, marginalizing the disabled people and thus preventing them from fully participating in the mainstream of society.

With these, I am concluding the discussion, but as I discussed that this is the part of medical humanities, healthcare humanities and disability studies. We generally feel that disability means some kind of shortcoming in the body. But as I discussed in my lecture, that it is mental and on top of all, it is a kind of discrimination that can be held on the basis of color, on the basis of certain peculiar habits you have. So, disability is a term that does not mean that you are having a medical issue. That is why in the beginning of my lecture, I discussed with medical issue and the social issue. And in social issue I have already analyzed that colour of skin, some peculiarities, irrespective of physical deformities, peculiarities, in terms of speech, in terms of walk can be considered as part of disability. So, this is the important part of the interdisciplinary approach and research. And in my opinion, the researcher and the student of English literature should work in this area because the term disability has been taken as taboo. So, to remove such effect like taboo or limitations, researchers should go on to normalize, to neutralize the very effect of the word disabled. With this, I wrap up the discussion. I will meet you in my next lecture. Thank you.