THE EVOLUTION OF DISABILITY THEORY: FROM MEDICAL TO SOCIAL MODEL

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Abstract

Disability is the physical or mental deficit of an individual which is often treated medically. The Civil Rights Movement of Disabled People gave birth to disability studies. It further transforms the perspective on disability. Many people started advocating basic rights and equality for disabled people among mass ableists. Disability Theory has shifted the perspective of disability from a medical to a social, cultural and political model. The key theorists are Michael Oliver, Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Tom Shakespeare and Simi Linton. This article aims to highlight the key factors of disability in the books of these theorists. It introduces the definition of disability and how it is perceived medically. Then it focuses on how it shifts slowly from the Medical Model to the Social Model, the term coined by Michael Oliver. Further, it highlights the key points of the given theorists.

Keywords: Disability studies, discrimination, equality, medical model, normalcy.

Introduction:

Disability is a medical condition that prevents a human from doing certain activities. It can be either physical or mental impairment. Cambridge Dictionary defines disability as “an illness, injury, or condition that makes it difficult for someone to do some things that other people do, and that is usually permanent or lasts for a long time.” World Health Organization defines disability as part of being human and states:

> Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression, with

personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support.

Disability can be of many types such as vision, hearing, movement, learning, thinking, remembering and communicating. It might occur either by birth or later develop over the years because of external environmental problems. Many studies have been done in this field medically. Medicines have been invented and vaccinated to the infants to prevent certain kinds of disability.

Evolution of Disability Studies and Theories:

Disability as a field of study emerged in the later part of the 20th century in the United States and the United Kingdom. The disability rights movement or the civil rights movement aimed to advocate basic civil rights to individuals regarding employment, transportation and education in the USA. In the UK, the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) was formed in 1972 which politicizes disability. The United Nations has passed various declarations to preserve the rights of disabled people such as the Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons in 1971. The Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH) was formulated by Canada in the 1970s. In 1994, it was renamed as Council of Canadians with Disabilities. The Society for Disability Studies (SDS) was inspired by UPIAS in 1982 by a group of academicians and activists such as Irving Zola and Michael Oliver respectively. Britannica describes Disability studies as:

> Disability studies, an interdisciplinary area of study based in the humanities and social sciences that views disability in the context of culture, society, and politics rather than through the lens of medicine or psychology.

Disability study is an interdisciplinary study. It can be studied and analysed in the light of law, media, arts, culture and literature. Being a flourishing discipline, disability studies is connected with various other disciplines such as history, religion, philosophy, theatre and literature. Literature focuses on the narratives and representations of disability in Poems, Novels, Plays, Biographies, and Autobiographies. There are many narratives in literature about Mental and Physical disability. Moreover, disability is often used as a metaphor rather than occupying the prime place in the literature. It is always associated with negativity. For example, in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is considered a ‘madwoman’ who brings misfortunes to the family in the novel. Similarly, there are many other characters in literature i.e. Crippled Boy in Dicken’s *Christmas Carol*, Count Dracula in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

In the modern era, the term disability has been extended to denote mental illness. It does not only signify a person's physical inability alone. A person with mental illness is also considered as a disabled person. A few widespread examples are Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dollaway*, Jack Barnes in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Lennie Small in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Sir Clifford in D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. All these characters have been represented and criticised from diverse points of view. There were no theories which highlighted and brought forth the pains, sufferings and impact of a disabled person on the normal person. The disabled person is tagged as abnormal in society. Their abilities were judged, treated as special, and never respected by others until the Civil War which led to the formation of UPIAS. Michael Oliver points out:

> On the experience of disability, history is largely silent, and when it is discussed at all, it is within the context of the history of medical advances. Just as women and black people have discovered that they must write their own histories, so too with disabled people. Only then will we have an adequate framework in which to locate our present discussions. (Oliver, 1990)

Disability as a theory emerged in the later part of the twentieth century. However, it focused only on the medical possibilities of impairing the disability. There is a greater shift from this medical perspective to the social perspective regarding disability. The medical approach gives importance to the treatments and hospitalization which never brings any changes in the lifestyle and position of disabled people in society. However, this medical approach became a failure because of its lack of a wider approach to disability. It focuses only on the physic of disabled people not their position and lifestyle in society. It never focuses on the betterment of their lifestyle.

Vic Finkelstein, the co-founder of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) with Paul Hunt, sowed the seed of Michael Oliver's Social Model Theory of Disability. The fundamental principles of the social model of disability is created by UPIAS:

> In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. To understand this it is necessary to grasp the distinction between the physical impairment and the social situation, called "disability", of people with such impairment. Thus

> we define impairment as lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body and disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. Physical disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression. (Finkelstein, 1980)

Many key theorists bring changes in the perspective of disability. They are Michael Oliver, Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Tom Shakespeare and Simi Linton. This article aims to highlight the evolution of Disability Theory from a Medical perspective to a theoretical and social perspective by referring to these key theorists. It brings forth their fundamental ideas about disability from their books and articles on Disability.

Michael Oliver:

Michael Oliver is the pioneer of the theory called the social model of disability. He was the first professor of Disability in Britain. He coined the term "Social Model of Disability" in his book *The Politics of Disablement* in 1983.Oliver in his book analysed the theory of disability in three phases such as pre pre-capitalism, capitalism and post-capitalism. It changes the social, cultural and political perspectives of disability. In the introduction of his book, Oliver presents various definitions and theories on disability, focusing on the medical model of disability. He differentiates the terms "impairment" and "disability". He says:

> …the view that people who run organisations for rather than of disabled people operate within a medical rather than a social model of disability which locates then problems faced by disabled people within the individual rather than being contingent upon social organisation. (Oliver, 1990)

According to Michael Oliver, Disability is not owned by the people who are physically or mentally impaired. It is the impairment of the internal or external parts of the body. The term disability has been imposed on them by society which excluded them from participating in the competitive society. He further argues that disability should not be perceived as a personal tragedy or a medical problem but as a multifaceted interplay of social, economic and environmental factors that affects the individual's experience of disability. He mentions:

> The rise of the institution as a mechanism of both social provision and social control has played a key role in structuring both perceptions and experiences of disability, and facilitated the

> exclusion of disabled people from the mainstream of social life. Within this, the ideological dimension has been at least as important as the physical provision of segregated establishments and it is precisely this ideological dimension which is now being challenged with the development of community care. What needs to be considered next is the way the individualisation of life under capitalism has contributed to the individualisation of disability and the role of powerful. (Oliver, 1990)

Oliver calls disabled people an “Oppressed social group” because they are marginalized from the norms and normality of the capitalist society. He further says that the medical model of disability gives significance to the problems and issues faced by disabled people in their minds and health. However, it comfortably neglects the social and environmental factors that marginalized disabled people. He says:

> If disability is defined as social oppression, then disabled people will be seen as collective victims of an uncaring or unknowing society rather than as individual victims of circumstances. Such a view will be translated into social policies geared towards alleviating oppression rather than compensating individuals. (Oliver, 1990)

Oliver emphasizes the significance of acknowledging disabled individuals as “Ordinary people coping with extraordinary circumstances” (84). This perspective pushes social workers to acknowledge the material conditions such as housing, employment, and social support - that affect the lives of disabled individuals, fostering a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to social work practice. These perspectives on disability gave rise to the Disability movement which brought social, cultural and political changes to the Rights and lives of Disabled people.

Lennard J. Davis:

Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body is the major work of Lennard J. Davis on disability. He states, “Disability is not an object—a woman with a cane—but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body" (Davis, 1995). He argues that the way the concepts of class, race, and gender architect the lives of people who are not poor, black and women, the idea of disability also regulates the body which is considered ‘normal’. He argues, “We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavours to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state” (Davis, 1995). He further states that the study of disability should be deviated from the construction of disability to the construction of normalcy. A person with a disability should be treated as a normal human being.

Davis pictures the origin and development of normalcy from the 19th century. He states that the words ‘norm’, ‘normalcy’, ‘normality’, ‘abnormal’, and ‘average’ were added to English in the 1840s to 1850s. He traces the words ‘norm’ and ‘average’ were used in statistics earlier. The French statistician Adolphe Quetelet plays a key role in generalizing the word ‘normal’. Later the term average took different definitions according to the situation and theorists. Marx used this term to explain his notion of labour value and average wages. Unlike average, the term ‘norm’ influenced millions of people. He says:

> The norm pins down that majority of the population that falls under the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve. This curve, the graph of an exponential function, that was known variously as the astronomer’s ‘error law’, the normal distribution, the ‘Gaussian density function’ or simply ‘the bell curve,’ became in its own way a symbol of the tyranny of the norm. (Davis, 1995)

Davis used Gaussian’s bell-shaped curve to denote the two extreme concepts like concept of norm and the concept of extreme or deviation. Disabled people are considered as deviations. This is the impact of Industrialization. In the world of literature during the 19th and 20thcenturies, the plot and characters were pulled toward normative i.e. ordinary characters were put under abnormal environments to prove their normalcy. No disabled characters were significant or played a central role. They were designed to arouse pity alone and are not always marked with ideological differences but physical differences alone. Davis stressed that the perseverance of disabled characters in the novel would bring an enormous transformation in the perseverance of disabled people in reality. He believed that literature can construct, deconstruct, and create the notion and the image of normalcy and abnormal.

Davis further pointed out the study of disability must be included in the multicultural curriculum which should be excluded from the issues of race, gender and class, because of its complex and invisible nature. The disablist view of the culture, position and events would be unique from the traditional ableist view. Then Davis threw light on the issue of abortion and screening of a fetus. This screening of fetus for birth defects and aborting them was not a simple issue regarding the rights of disabilities. He says:

> Even the language involved in this choice – ‘birth defect’ or physical ‘deformity’ – must alert us that we are very much in a world of opinion, of ideology, rather than a cool, scientific world of

> fact. One person's defect is another person's strength. (Davis, 1995)

Davis wanted to end this notion of disability because the greater population is the 'ableist'. Thus, he asserted that this prejudice over disability as they are the object of pity and leading a miserable life, should be marked with a period. The ableist society should broadly accept and understand disabilities as a whole and "fully developed humans whose impairments place them within a continuum of ability of which everyone is part" (Davis, 1995).

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson:

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is one of the key figures advocating justice for disability. She is a bioethicist, author, educator, and activist in disability justice and culture. She is a professor emeritus at Emory University who teaches English Literature, bioethics, and Disability studies. Her famous book on disability, *Extraordinary Bodies,* was published in 1997. The ultimate aim of this book was to expand the "understanding of the cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing "disability" as another cultural bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality" (Garland-Thomson, 1997). It is often stigmatized that disabled individuals are "not only different but deviant" (Garland-Thomson, 1997). She said that the identity of physically disabled persons is created by medical, legal, political, cultural, and literary narratives. She described 'disability' as:

> I show that disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions. Disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance-not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do. (Garland-Thomson, 1997)

Moreover, she clearly differentiated the representation of disability in literature from disability in real life. She intertwined both feminism and disability because she believed that both are related to the discourse of "Otherness". She focused on three sociocultural theories to uncover the process involved in constructing disability. They are Erving Goffman's Notion of Stigma, Mary Douglas' Concept of Dirt, Michele Foucault's ideas on particularity and identity and Irv Zola's theory on Disability. The contributions of these scholars to the field of disability helped to establish itself as a field of inquiry that emphasized the requirement for a critical and nuanced understanding of disability in society.

According to Thomson, the American Freak Shows offer a key perspective for comprehending the societal processes around disability. She mentions that freak shows are cultural spectacles that showcase disabled bodies for the general public to view. The "seer" and the "seen," as well as the audience's attraction and disgust with the remarkable bodies on exhibit, are complicatedly portrayed in this spectacle. Social conventions around what makes a "normal" physique might be strengthened by this dynamic. She further talks about the representation of disability in literature in the 19th century as well as in the modern period. In the literature of the 20th century, she says:

> …women-centered African-American liberatory novels that use the disabled figure and other extraordinary bodies to elaborate an identity that insists upon and celebrates physical difference. In these texts, the extraordinary body invokes a principle of difference over sameness that serves a postmodern politics that is nationalist rather than assimilationist. Whereas the nineteenth-century sentimental novels of the previous chapter cast the disabled figure as antithetical to the female role they sought to delineate, these black nationalist texts incorporate such a figure into their vision of oppositional identity. (Garland-Thomson, 1997)

Tom Shakespeare:

Tom Shakespeare is a social scientist and bioethicist who researches disability. His doctorate research was about ways of conceptualising disability. He worked in the World Health Organization and helped to prepare the World Report on Disability in 2011 and International Perspectives on Spinal Cord Injury. He worked on disability and helped to prepare research projects on Disability around the world. He has written so many books. His most famous book on Disability is *Disability Rights and Wrongs* in 2006. He rejected the social model approach to disability because he felt that it was not the only progressive way of understanding disability. He mentions:

> Again, in his seminal 1990 text, *The Politics of Disablement*, Oliver rarely usesthe terms medical model and social model. Instead, he distinguishes 'personal tragedy theory' from 'social oppression theory.' (Shakespeare, 2006)

He deeply analysed the works of Locker, Townsend, Walker, Shearer on disability and said, "Disability, for all of these authors, is not simply a matter of biology, nor is it an objective departure from norms. Instead, attention is paid to the meaning, expectations, roles and relationships which operate in society" (Shakespeare, 2006). He focused on the social-contextual approach to disability, which is rooted in normalisation theory which focuses on rights. He considers the social model of disability as politically dangerous, so advocates various other ways to conceptualize disability which retains equality and justice for disabled people. There are three major points that he stresses in this book. They are:

> However, I want to stress three points. First, I accept that social and environmental barriers constitute major problems for many disabled people, and that removing such obstacles is the main priority for disability politics. Second, I agree that disabled people should have choices over their lives, and should be supported to live in the community. Third, I have no doubt that the medicalisation of disability and the persistent assumption that disabled people are defined by their incapacity are cultural barriers to the emancipation of disabled people which must be challenged. (Shakespeare, 2006)

Further, he wanted the disability studies to be studied empirically inclusive of both qualitative and quantitative study which focuses primarily on the way in which disabled people experience barriers and their impairments bringing importance to both differences as well as similarities. He says that focusing and giving significance to the rights of disabled people would be the solution to all their problems. They require medical assistance and attention to their impairment. He concludes that there should be a social relationship between disabled and non-disabled people.

Simi Linton:

Simi Linton, one of the great advocates of disability, is an author, art consultant and activist. She is the founder of Disability/Arts Consultancy. *Claiming Disability*, and *My Body Politic* are her books on Disability. She claimed that disability should be a part of liberal arts, humanities and general education. As a specific field, disability should be a part of social debate, social construction, public policy law. Disability studies and disability movements together brought a paradigm shift in understanding disability. She says:

> Disability study has emerged as a logical base for examination of the construction and function of "disability." These scholarly explorations and the initiatives undertaken by the disability rights movement have resulted in new paradigms used to understand disability as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. (Linton, 1998)

Simi Linton discusses how the language and terms used by society to address disabled people are socially and economically constructed according to society's convenience. She calls the terms "*physically challenged, the able-disabled, handicapable, and special people/children*" (Linton, 1998) nice words to denote a person's disability. She also says that these terms have been used in different places and times. She feels, “They are personally and politically useful as a means to comment on oppression because they assert our right to name experience” (Linton, 1998). So, she, as a part of disability group, wants to reassign the meaning of these terms rather than adopting a new name.

Further, she examines the differences in social arrangements that have existed throughout history as well as in the modern period. She mentions,

> Representations of disability and the representations of disabled people's place in society are largely in the hands of people schooled in a particular vision of disability, one that is saturated with deterministic thinking and characterized by maudlin and morbid sentiments projected onto disabled people's experience. (Linton, 1998)

Additionally, she highlights the similarities and differences between disability, racism, and gender discrimination. Disability studies should be designed to bring the understanding of disability as a social, political and cultural phenomenon. The core strength of this book is that Simi Linton lays stress on the voluntary participation of disabled people in all spheres of their lives so that, the abled people will not look down on them as marginalized. This would happen when everyone worked together to bring changes in the society.

Conclusion:

This research article focuses on the evolution of Disability Theory from the Medical model to the social model by referring to the key figures of the proponents who brought forth this theory in disability studies. Initially, Disability was treated as a physical or mental impairment that happened to anyone by birth or in the course of their life. The Civil Rights Movement of Disabled people brought changes in the perspective of disability among common people. Theorists who advocate for disabled people confront that disability should not be focused only on the medical perspective but also be understood from socio-cultural and political perspectives. They advocate the basic rights and position of disabled people who should be treated on par with the abled people in society.

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