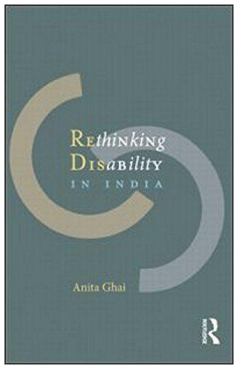
Book Reviews

Rethinking Disability in India, New Delhi: Routledge. (364 Pages). Anita Ghai (2015). ISBN: 978-1-138-02029-0



Reviewed by: Tanmoy Bhattacharya

"You can't judge a book by its cover", they say, but in case of the book under review, *Rethinking Disability in India*—henceforth referred to as *Rethinking*, exactly the opposite is true. There are at least two things on the minimalist cover that signify subversion and reframing. The first is the mixed style in the fonts used for the first part of the title of the book, namely, "R*e*th*i*N*k*iNg Disab*ili*t*y*", where small and capital letters have been mixed as well as italicized non-uniformly. Although this is not exactly novel[1], it does communicate the intended symbolization. I have been using a mixed font style for an easy understanding of the idea of "Integrative Difference" (Figure 1), using the autological style of representation, where the word itself, or in this case the fonts used in the word, denote the idea that the word captures:

Integrative D^{i}f$_{f}$eR*e*nce

Figure 1. An autological representation of the concept of "difference"

The second point refers to the graphic design of the two horseshoe shapes that are out of sync, that is, they do not meet at either end, symbolizing rethinking, but a rethinking that does not provide the succour of a complete circle. To subvert the notion of a *normate*, a socially determined concept of a normal individual first coined in Garland-Thomson (1997), often what is employed is disabilism—a set of assumptions to promote the practice of unequal treatment on the basis of actual or presumed disabilities (Campbell, 2009, p. 4). However, disabilism re-inscribes disability on the body of the disabled, thereby applying an able-bodied lens or voice towards disability. Instead, disability scholars are now moving towards the new concept of *ableism*—the normality which-is-to-be-assumed (Shakespeare, 1999). Thus the strategy should be to reverse/invert the traditional approach and study instead the production, operation and maintenance of ableism, which has been aptly termed studying the "pathologies of non-disablement" (Hughes, 2007). So the reframing that the out-of-sync horseshoe indicates is that of ontological reframing.

Overboe (1999) and Campbell (2001) also point to the phenomenon of compulsive—the compulsion to pass off as a non-disabled—and they attribute "ableistnormativity" as the concept that works behind this phenomenon. In *Rethinking*, Anita Ghai makes it absolutely clear that disability *is* the badge of honour for her, when she discusses in great detail her narrative of disability right in the first chapter, after the introduction. This strategy was also employed in Ghai's first book in 2003 *(Dis)embodied Forms: Issues of Disabled Women* and is reminiscent of the opening lines of Paul Hunt's celebrated essay of 1966 "A Critical Condition":

> All my adult life has been spent in institutions amongst people, who, like myself, have severe and often progressive disabilities. We

> are paralysed and deformed, most of us in wheelchairs, either as the result of accidents or of diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy and polio. So naturally this personal experience forms a background to the views on disability that follow.
>
> (Hunt, 1966, p. 145)

This approach is also the basis of disability-first terminology proffered by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation or UPIAS of the 1970's (UPIAS, 1976, p. 3). Ghai too adopts this approach in the present book when she states—"… I have used the term – disabled individual thus placing the disability as the first categorical representation of that person/ woman." (p. 84). Dan Goodley, a well-known disability scholar, expresses a similar thought in his rather precise foreword when he says: "As with earlier writing (Ghai, 2002) she is keen always to foreground her own personal, local and national context …" (page x).

In fact this quote can be interpreted to also highlight that it is not only the presence of the personal identity that Ghai is interested in, but also the local and national, making this positioning quite different from that of the western scholars for whom the personal is supreme. Anita Ghai's activism too therefore takes a wider national and local form, placing it well within the framework of the struggles and movements in other spheres of oppression in India. The structure of the chapters within the book is also reflective of this journey from the personal (Chapter 1) to political (Chapter 7) and paradigm shifts (Chapter 8). This approach to disability is the chosen vantage point in the book as well, for example, when Ghai quotes work in other domains within India and admits that community is a hierarchically higher unit than the individual. However, almost immediately, Ghai point out that "such an understanding of disability needs to be problematized" (p. 25). This, I think, is an important point that needs to find a greater echo within the community of disability studies scholars in India; especially because it has a history which is specific to disability scholarship in general. Within the social model of disability, where disability is considered as a social construct, emerged as it has from the UPIAS positioning (as stated earlier), there were voices from women with disability about a total lack of the personal in such a social constructionist positioning. Being a feminist as well as a disability scholar/activist, Ghai therefore straddles both domains easily and can envision the shape of disability scholarship to come.

Ghai also expresses concern about the insufficient engagement of the discourse of disability with the diagnostic system, in the sense that the former does not reflect a concern with the latter (p. 78). She feels this very strongly for it is a thread or voice that resonates throughout the text. I think, this can be a very good example of disability writing and/or lives as sites of epistemology, because diagnosis in general has a very wide concern and cuts across at least age and gender, which too have a disability connection, for example, in dementia and fertility, respectively. The gendered nature of disability oppression comes out very clearly in her detailed discussions in Chapters 4 and 5 ("At the Periphery: Marginalized Disabled Lives" and "Mystifying Realities: Right to Life"). In these chapters, she presents a wide range of categories that intersect with disability, such as caste, class, and gender. According to Ghai, the impact of this essential intersective nature of disability can be seen, in education (p. 111), employment (p. 128), sexuality (p. 152), foetus selection (p. 167) and motherhood (p. 191), among others. Chapter 5 is especially very rich in issues that are often shoved under the carpet, as a result of which the emerging field of Bioethics is yet to take into consideration a disability perspective in India.

However, it is chapters 6-8 that define the core issue that the book as a whole reflects. Chapter 6 ("Theorizing Disability") especially is where Ghai slides into her academic persona effortlessly, and since Disability Studies (like Gender Studies) is a field where research and activism must constantly inspire each other, such a traffic between the two is welcome[2]. Theory here is seen as a healer, but the consequences of the metaphysical understanding of disability (p. 221) are wider, as it provides possibilities of emancipation for even those "who are unwittingly trapped in their 'normality'" (p. 222); the author is hoping, through these pages, for an identity construction where both the disabled and those trapped in their normality are involved. Her stance on "passing" (the attempt to "pass off" as non-disabled) is particularly educative in showing that *not* to assimilate with the mainstream is an option, the essence of that sentiment being captured in the opinion that 'masquerades' indicate an existing system of oppression. Though not highlighted enough, such crucial connections define a scholarly engagement, sometimes hidden in the overgrowth.

I will end this review first with a critique and then point out a philosophical issue that I would like to believe should concern us all in the near future. Knowing that Anita wears among her many hats, the hat of a psychologist—a hat that is her primary academic identity—I am a tad disappointed that more individual and group psychological issues in connection with disability have not been discussed with more academic rigour. For example, in discussing terminology, the dehumanizing and almost unethical effects of behaviourism do not find a place in her analysis; naming the enemy, as she knows very well, is equally important. Within the politics of disability concerning social justice that the book engenders, the discussion is mostly framed in the formative model, pointing out the inequity in access to opportunities, but not the distributive injustice, which would require a discussion of a larger socio-economic network of denial of social justice.

With regard to the bigger philosophical issue, I believe that any work on categories will have to deal with the issue of categories in our minds, and not just in our various cultures. Aristotle had said that if the wind picks you up and blows you somewhere you don't want to go, your going there shouldn't be praised or blamed as it was involuntary[3]. But is it really? As I have argued recently, "Extended Denial is also true of the potential perpetrator—every equalist is in denial, inside their minds they are constantly fighting off the shadow and keeping it at bay" (Bhattacharya, 2016). Are we not blameworthy for spontaneous, uncontrolled, unnoticeable ableism? In this connection, let me end with a part of the popular song from 1969 by Peter Sarstedt:

But where do you go to my lovely

When you're alone in your bed

Tell me the thoughts that surround you

I want to look inside your head …

The book is otherwise flawless and should find a place in every library. However, the copy-editing and proofreading of the book leave much to be desired; I have spotted at least 50 glaring mistakes in it. There are typographic and other errors that are simply not expected from a reputed publisher such as Routledge. I hope the publishers will take steps to remove all these errors in any future editions of the book.

References

Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. (2016, March). *Returning to the site of degradation*. Paper read at "Cognition Matters" symposium held at IIIT, Guwahati.

Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. (forthcoming). Are We All Alike? Questioning the Pathologies of the *Normate.* In Rama Kant Agnihotri, Vikas Gupta & Minati Panda (Eds.), *Modern Transformation and the Challenges of Inequalities of Education in India.*

Campbell, Fiona-Kumari. (2001). Inciting legal fictions: Disability's date with ontology and the ableist body of the law. *Griffith Law Review*, *10*, 42-62.

Campbell, Fiona-Kumari. (2009). *Contours of ableism: The production of disability and abledness*. Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. (1997). *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ghai, Anita. (2002). Disability in the Indian context: Post-colonial perspectives. In M. Corker, & T. Shakespeare (Eds.), *Disability and postmodernity: Embodying disability theory* (pp. 62-75). London and New York: Continuum.

Ghai, Anita. (2003). *(Dis)Embodied form: Issues of disabled women*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd.

Hughes, B. (2007). Being disabled: Toward a critical social ontology for disability studies. *Disability & Society*, *22*(7), 673-684.

Hunt, Paul. (1966). *Stigma: The experience of disability*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.

Overboe, J. (1999). Difference in itself: Validating disabled people's lived experience. *Body and Society*, *5*, 17-29.

Shakespeare, Tom. (1999). Losing the plot? Medical and activist discourses of contemporary genetics and disability. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *21*(5), 669-688.

UPIAS. (1976). *The fundamental principles of disability*. London: UPIAS.

Endnotes

[1]This stylistic device was first used in the disability context in India in the presentation "Are We All Alike? Questioning the Pathologies of the *Normate"* made at the "Inequalities in India" conference held at the University of Delhi on 28 November 2014.

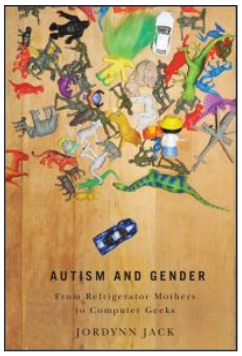
[2] Although in a discussion following a book launch event for Anita Ghai's present book on 14 May 2015 at the India International Centre, New Delhi (see a report of the event in the Reports this issue), I had sounded a critical note about the activist/scholar mix not being ideal. I have grown to appreciate it in disability writing by scholars who are themselves disabled.

[3] From Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1 retrieved web-version from http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.3.iii.html

Tanmoy Bhattacharya teaches Linguistics at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Linguistics, University of Delhi. Within the field of disability, he works on sign language, inclusive education, and disability studies.

tanmoy1@gmail.com

Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geek. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois, pp 320.



Jordynn Jack (2014).

ISBN: 978-0-252-03837-2 (Hardback)

Reviewed by: Santosh Kumar

Autism and Gender is the outcome of a workshop on "Science and its Publics" at the Rhetoric Society of American Summer Institute at Pennsylvania State University. The discourse on autism has so far been dominated by a medical perspective. The medical model of disability situates disability in the individual and suggests medical intervention, which leaves not only a gap between the knowledge of autism and the experience of individuals and people around them, "but stories as well: stories about children affected, about parents struggling to come to terms with a diagnosis, about autistic individuals and their lives" (pp. 1-2).

This book offers an engaging account of how gender intersects with other discursively