

Decolonizing Disability: An Intersectional Critique of Western Paradigms in Anita Ghai's *Rethinking Disability in India*

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Abstract:

Anita Ghai's *Rethinking Disability in India* (2015) constitutes a pivotal intervention in the global corpus of Disability Studies. By reimagining the discourse through the lenses of postcolonial critique, feminist theory, and intersectional praxis, Ghai systematically dismantles the hegemonic authority of Western models—both medical and social—arguing for a more nuanced, culturally embedded understanding of disability in the Indian context. This article critically explores Ghai's interrogation of structural and symbolic violence, her incisive engagement with caste and gender, and her critique of dominant state and non-governmental frameworks that perpetuate paternalistic and charity-based models. Through comparative analysis with canonical theorists such as Michael Oliver, Tom Shakespeare, and Shelley Tremain, this paper affirms Ghai's seminal role in decolonizing Disability Studies and foregrounding the multiplicity of disabled experiences in the Global South.

Keywords: Anita Ghai, Disability Studies, Postcolonial Theory, Feminist Disability Theory, Caste, Gender, Intersectionality, Cultural Stigma, Medical Model, Social Model

1. Introduction

The global discourse surrounding disability has, for a considerable duration, been shaped and delimited by dominant Euro-American epistemological frameworks that tend to universalize the disabled experience, thereby effacing the multiplicity of lived realities emerging from the Global South. These Western paradigms—rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and liberal individualism—frequently obscure the cultural, historical, and political specificities that contour disability in non-Western contexts. In her seminal work *Rethinking Disability in India* (2015), Anita Ghai embarks upon a critical epistemic intervention that seeks to provincialize these hegemonic models. By excavating the socio-cultural, religious, and politico-economic substrata of the Indian experience, Ghai advances a reconceptualization of disability that is not merely oppositional but profoundly transformative.

Ghai's intellectual project moves beyond the mere identification of limitations within the medical and social models of disability. While acknowledging the partial insights of both—where the former medicalizes the disabled body and the latter reduces it to a question of structural inaccessibility—she argues for an intersectional and context-sensitive paradigm. Such a framework must account for the deeply enmeshed realities of caste-based oppression, patriarchal structures, endemic poverty, and pervasive cultural stigma that distinctly shape the lives of disabled individuals in India (Ghai 3–5). Her

intervention, therefore, does not simply augment the existing canon of Disability Studies but challenges its foundational ontological and methodological assumptions, insisting upon a decolonial reorientation that centres subaltern subjectivities and embodied specificities.

2. Problematizing the Medical and Social Models of Disability

A central pillar of Anita Ghai's intellectual endeavour is her incisive and methodical deconstruction of the medical model of disability—an entrenched paradigm that pathologizes the disabled body, casting it as a clinical aberration warranting correction through biomedical intervention. Within this framework, disability is constructed not as a relational or socially mediated phenomenon but as an intrinsic deficit residing within the individual—a departure from the normative corporeal ideal (Ghai 20). This reductionist and individualizing logic, Ghai argues, effectively obscures the systemic and structural forces that perpetuate exclusion, thereby depoliticizing the disabled condition. Her critique resonates with the foundational intervention of Michael Oliver in *Understanding Disability*, where he delineates the medical model's role in sustaining the marginalization of disabled subjects by medicalizing their experiences and silencing their agency (Oliver 32).

Yet, Ghai's analysis does not merely reiterate Oliver's oppositional stance; she advances the discourse by subjecting the Western social model itself to critical scrutiny. While this model shifts the locus of disability from the body to the environment—emphasizing architectural, attitudinal, and institutional barriers—Ghai contends that it nonetheless remains circumscribed by a Eurocentric imagination. It is insufficiently attentive to the layers of cultural sediment, symbolic violence, and socio-religious determinants that constitute the lived realities of disabled individuals in the Indian context (Ghai 42–45). In her view, the Western social model, though progressive in its structural orientation, operates within a conceptual vacuum that renders it incapable of fully grasping the culturally inscribed and historically situated nature of disability in postcolonial societies.

Within the Indian socio-cultural milieu, Anita Ghai identifies a profoundly intricate interplay of religious doctrines, kinship structures, and socio-normative attitudes that collectively engender a distinct and context-specific formulation of disability. Far from being a neutral or universally legible category, disability in India is inextricably woven into the hierarchized fabric of caste, the spiritual determinism of religious fatalism, and the deeply entrenched patriarchal codes that regulate everyday life. As Ghai astutely asserts, “Disability in India cannot be theorized in abstraction from the deeply entrenched hierarchies of caste, the omnipresence of religious fatalism, and the deeply gendered nature of everyday life” (Ghai 48). This statement encapsulates her broader contention: that any theorization of disability divorced from its cultural embeddedness is bound to remain reductive and epistemologically inadequate. In contrast to the Euro-American disability rights paradigm—which predominantly revolves around juridical entitlements, institutional accessibility, and the rhetoric of individual autonomy—India presents a landscape wherein informal support systems and familial caregiving regimes assume primacy. These arrangements, although vital in compensating for the chronic absence or inadequacy of state-sponsored welfare mechanisms, are not devoid of ambivalence. Ghai cautions against an uncritical valorisation of such structures, noting that they often operate within paternalistic logics that deny disabled individuals agency, reinforce dependence, and perpetuate asymmetrical power dynamics within the domestic sphere (Ghai 71). Thus, the very networks that sustain the disabled body may simultaneously constrain its subjectivity, scripting lives of acquiescence under the guise of care and protection.

Moreover, Ghai articulates a scathing indictment of the Indian state's approach to disability governance, as well as the modalities adopted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both of which she argues are firmly anchored in a paternalistic and ultimately disempowering charity paradigm. These interventions, far from cultivating the conditions necessary for autonomy, dignity, and self-determination, perpetuate a politics of dependency wherein the disabled subject is framed not as an active rights-bearing individual but as a passive recipient of philanthropic goodwill. Ghai conceptualizes this dynamic through the lens of the “beneficiary gaze”—a mode of relationality that constructs the disabled body as the object of care, sympathy, and institutional largesse, rather than as a citizen entitled to justice, equity, and recognition (Ghai 87).

This critique gains further critical traction when juxtaposed against the dominant currents of Western disability rights discourse, which foreground the juridico-political subjectivity of the disabled individual. In Euro-American contexts, disability activism is often articulated through legalistic vocabularies of entitlement, institutional accountability, and public accessibility, seeking to inscribe the disabled subject into the social contract as an equal and agential actor. By contrast, Ghai reveals how the Indian framework remains ensnared in archaic moral economies that valorise giving over enabling, and benevolence over empowerment, thus relegating the disabled to the margins of both state policy and civil society imaginaries.

3. Intersecting Axes: Caste, Gender, and the Politics of Embodiment

Arguably the most theoretically astute and politically potent dimension of Anita Ghai's scholarship lies in her rigorous deployment of an intersectional analytic to interrogate the complex entanglements of disability, caste, and gender within the Indian social imaginary. Drawing upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational articulation of intersectionality—a framework originally conceived to reveal the multidimensionality of Black women's oppression in legal and social structures—Ghai extends this critical lens to the Indian context, revealing how multiple axes of marginalization coalesce to produce distinct regimes of exclusion. Her analysis unveils how the lived experience of disabled Dalits cannot be adequately understood through single-variable frameworks, as their subjectivity is constituted at the interstices of ableism and caste-based ostracism.

Ghai theorizes this dynamic as a form of “layered marginalization,” wherein the historically sedimented stigma of untouchability collides with the corporeal devaluation associated with disability, resulting in deeply entrenched forms of social erasure (Ghai 99–103). In such contexts, disability is no longer merely a sign of bodily deviance; rather, it becomes a symbolic index of social inferiority, amplifying the effects of caste-based exclusion. The disabled Dalit subject thus occupies a doubly disenfranchised position within the Indian socio-political order—ostracized not only for bodily difference but also for genealogical impurity. Ghai's intervention here is not simply diagnostic but epistemologically subversive, as it destabilizes monolithic conceptions of disability and insists upon the necessity of theorizing embodiment in relation to caste hierarchies and gendered violence.

Within the contours of Anita Ghai's feminist intervention emerges a poignant critique of the compounded marginalization experienced by disabled women in the Indian patriarchal order—a critique that exposes an even more insidious form of social erasure. Disabled women, she argues, are subjected to systematic desexualisation, their reproductive rights curtailed, and their very existence rendered invisible across both private familial domains and public spheres of discourse and policy. Ghai incisively observes that “The disabled woman disrupts the normative imagination of womanhood, and is thus

excluded from both feminist and disability rights discourses” (Ghai 115). This simultaneous marginalization by virtue of intersecting axes of gender and ability exposes a profound and persistent lacuna within mainstream social justice movements, which too often replicate normative frameworks that exclude those who fall outside conventional categories of femininity or ability. By foregrounding this dual exclusion, Ghai compels a rethinking of feminist and disability paradigms alike, insisting on the necessity of inclusive frameworks that recognize the embodied complexities of disabled womanhood within socio-political struggles for equity and recognition.

Furthermore, Ghai critically interrogates the pervasive influence of Hindu metaphysical and religious doctrines that tacitly inscribe disability as an outcome of karmic retribution. These spiritual frameworks function to naturalize and sacralize suffering, effectively positioning disability not as a condition demanding redress but as a predestined moral consequence. Such theological rationalizations serve to delegitimize the disabled individual’s claims to rights, dignity, and social inclusion, thereby erecting formidable ideological barriers to emancipatory justice. As Ghai elucidates, the doctrine of karma, within this context, operates as a sophisticated apparatus of theological legitimation that normalizes social hierarchies and systemic inequality, effectively forestalling any substantive efforts toward transformative justice and equal citizenship (Ghai 121–123). This critique foregrounds the profound challenge posed by religious and cultural discourses to rights-based approaches, underscoring the necessity of a culturally nuanced yet critical engagement with indigenous epistemologies in Disability Studies.

4. Comparative Dialogues: Oliver, Shakespeare, and Tremain

In dialoguing with canonical Western scholars, Ghai simultaneously aligns with and diverges from their positions, thereby carving out a space for a distinctly postcolonial Disability Studies:

- **Michael Oliver:** Anita Ghai’s theoretical engagement with Michael Oliver’s foundational work is marked by both consonance and critical divergence. Aligning with Oliver’s seminal repudiation of the medical model and his advocacy for the social model of disability, Ghai endorses the shift from individual pathology to societal barriers as the locus of analysis (Oliver 45). However, she advances a trenchant critique of Oliver’s framework for its implicit Eurocentric bias, particularly its relative insensitivity to the cultural specificities and symbolic violences that profoundly shape disability experiences outside the Western context. Whereas Oliver conceptualizes disability primarily in terms of “structure” understood as social, economic, and political barriers, Ghai insists on a more nuanced conception of “structure embedded in culture,” emphasizing that in the Indian milieu, disability cannot be disentangled from cultural meanings, religious idioms, and caste hierarchies that interpenetrate and compound structural oppression (Oliver 45; Ghai 55). Thus, Ghai’s intervention seeks to expand and decolonize the social model by incorporating the hermeneutic complexities of cultural context and symbolic power.
- **Tom Shakespeare:** Shakespeare’s incisive critique of the social model’s conceptual rigidity and its occasional failure to capture the fluidity of disabled identities finds a significant echo within Anita Ghai’s scholarship (Shakespeare 61). Yet, Ghai elaborates upon and extends Shakespeare’s critique by foregrounding the distinctive ways in which familial, caste-based, and religious institutions in India actively mediate and construct the lived realities of disability. While Shakespeare’s analysis largely remains within the purview of state-centred and structural paradigms, Ghai insists on the centrality of non-state actors—especially kinship networks and community norms—that exert

profound influence over the negotiation of disabled subjectivity in the Indian context (Ghai 74–76). This emphasis reveals the culturally embedded and relational nature of disability, highlighting how intimate social institutions reproduce, resist, and redefine disabling practices, an aspect notably underexplored in Shakespeare’s framework.

- **Shelley Tremain:** Anita Ghai demonstrates a nuanced sympathy toward Shelley Tremain’s Foucauldian-inspired skepticism regarding the fixity of categories and her critical focus on the discursive production of disability. Tremain’s poststructuralist interrogation of how disabled identities are constituted through language and power relations offers valuable insights into the fluidity and contingency of subject formation (Tremain 18). However, Ghai problematizes the tendency of such theoretical frameworks to remain insufficiently anchored in the tangible materialities of disabled lived experience, particularly within the contexts of the Global South. As she poignantly observes, “While Tremain critiques the production of the disabled subject through discourse, she remains distant from the corporeal suffering and institutional violence faced by disabled individuals in the Global South” (Ghai 131). Ghai’s intervention thus calls for an analytic praxis that bridges poststructuralist critique with an acute sensitivity to the embodied, socioeconomic, and political violences that shape disability in contexts marked by colonial histories, poverty, and social stratification.

5. Conclusion

Rethinking Disability in India transcends the boundaries of regional scholarship to emerge as a profound and radical act of epistemic disobedience within Disability Studies. Through the strategic provincialization of Eurocentric paradigms and the rigorous centring of the intricate, often harrowing realities experienced by disabled individuals in India, Anita Ghai compels scholars to fundamentally reconsider and revise the foundational ontologies and epistemologies that have long undergirded the discipline. Her work exemplifies the painstaking intellectual labour necessary to decolonize academic discourse, disrupting hegemonic narratives that have historically marginalized Global South perspectives. In so doing, Ghai forges a transformative, justice-oriented, and contextually nuanced framework that insists upon the recognition of disability as a culturally embedded, intersectional phenomenon, thereby advancing Disability Studies toward greater inclusivity and socio-political relevance.

Anita Ghai’s clarion call transcends mere demands for recognition; it beckons a profound transformation within Disability Studies itself—one that genuinely listens to marginalized voices, rigorously interrogates entrenched epistemic assumptions, and critically engages with the rich pluralities of human embodiment. Her seminal work thereby transcends the confines of critique, offering instead a visionary roadmap toward an ethical, equitable, and context-sensitive engagement with disability. Through this transformative lens, Ghai envisions a Disability Studies praxis that is not only inclusive but also deeply responsive to the lived complexities and sociocultural specificities that define disabled existence in diverse global contexts.

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