



## AN OVERVIEW ON THE EMERGENCE OF CRITICAL DISABILITY THEORY <sup>1</sup>

### Kritik Engellilik Teorisinin Ortaya Çıkışına Dair Genel Bir Bakış

Kanan AGHASIYEV<sup>2</sup>

#### Abstract

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is an emerging interdisciplinary framework that studies disability issues through literary, cultural, historical, social, and political lenses. Situated within Critical Disability Studies (CDS), it unites Critical Theory with Disability Theory, drawing on the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School to challenge mainstream perceptions and advocate for societal change. Unlike traditional approaches, which uphold objectivity, CDT acknowledges and seeks to dismantle societal oppressions, particularly those that impede the full realization of individuals with disabilities. As there has been limited opportunity for disabled individuals to express perspectives that challenge mainstream understandings of disability and societal expectations for those with disabilities, CDT changes this dynamic by giving precedence to the voices of disabled individuals. By drawing on the lived experiences of disabled individuals, Critical Disability Theory confronts and seeks to dismantle the pervasive negative stereotypes about disability, which are often propagated by non-disabled individuals and reinforced through diverse media and literature channels.

**Keywords:** Critical Disability Theory, Critical Disability Studies, Critical Theory, Traditional Theory

#### Öz

Kritik Engellilik Teorisi (KET), engellilik konularını edebi, kültürel, tarihi, sosyal ve politik mercekler aracılığıyla inceleyen, gelişmekte olan disiplinler arası bir çerçevedir. Kritik Engellilik Çalışmaları (KEÇ) içinde yer alan bu yaklaşım, ana akım algılara meydan okumak ve toplumsal değişimi savunmak için Frankfurt Okulu'nun eleştirel geleneğinden yararlanarak Kritik Teori ile Engellilik Teorisini birleştirir. Nesnelliği savunan geleneksel yaklaşımların aksine, KET toplumsal baskıları, özellikle de engelli bireylerin kendilerini tam olarak gerçekleştirmelerini engelleyen baskıları kabul eder ve ortadan kaldırmaya çalışır. Engelli bireylerin, engelliliğe ilişkin ana akım anlayışlara ve toplumun engellilere yönelik beklentilerine meydan okuyan bakış açılarını ifade etmeleri için sınırlı fırsat olduğundan, KET engelli bireylerin seslerine öncelik vererek bu dinamiği değiştirmektedir. Kritik Engellilik Teorisi (KET), engelli bireylerin yaşanmış deneyimlerinden yola çıkarak, engelli olmayan bireyler tarafından sıklıkla yayılan ve çeşitli medya ve edebiyat kanalları aracılığıyla pekiştirilen engellilikle ilgili yaygın olumsuz klişelerle yüzleşir ve bunları ortadan kaldırmaya çalışır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Kritik Engellilik Teorisi, Kritik Engellilik Çalışmaları, Kritik Teori, Geleneksel Teori

<sup>1</sup> This article is an extended version of the 'Theoretical Discussion' section from the article titled 'Critical Disability Analysis of Benjamin Lebert's Novel *Crazy* from Social and Psychological Perspectives,' authored by the same writer (mentioned in the bibliography section).

<sup>2</sup> PhD Candidate in English Language and Literature, Karabük University Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Faculty of Letters, Karabük, Türkiye, ORCID ID: 0009-0001-3969-1879, [kaasiyev@gmail.com](mailto:kaasiyev@gmail.com),

## INTRODUCTION

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is a newly emerging theory that focuses on the analysis of all disability issues (Hosking, 2008). It is a diverse and interdisciplinary theory, and it has a certain set of approaches when analysing the structure of disability as literary, cultural, historical, social, and political occurrence (Hall, 2019). CDT is seen as a branch of Critical Disability Studies (CDS), however, at the same time, it is claimed to be within Critical Disability Studies rather than being an independent or sub-theory. As a theory, CDT focuses on disability in broad types of fields as well as disability in philosophical fields (Hall, 2019).

CDT is made of two different theories: Critical Theory and Disability Theory (as well as Studies). Critical Theory came out from the thoughts of the members of Frankfurt School which was founded in 1923. The school had Western Marxist scholars, philosophers, and capitalists (Celikates, 2023). However, the origin of the term, Critical Theory, dates to 1937 when it was used by Max Horkheimer in his essay titled *Traditional and Critical Theory*.<sup>3</sup> Traditional Theory aims to describe the world with no critical interest and tries to show everything as it is by giving examples from what it observes (Ashley, 2020). Traditional Theory was limited with the methodology of positivism in everything with no intention to change the cycle (Hosking, 2008). However, Critical Theory does not stand on the side of objectivity, and it aims to illustrate the oppression within societies and change society (Hosking, 2008). Critical Theory tries to go to the depths of social interruptions and understand the barriers that hold humans from evolving into their full selves (Ashley, 2020).

Historically, there has been minimal space for the perspectives of disabled individuals who question mainstream notions of disability and the appropriate societal roles for people with disabilities. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) prioritizes the voices of disabled individuals, leveraging their experiences to confront the prevalent negative perceptions of disability frequently perpetuated by non-disabled individuals, which are frequently reinforced in various forms of media (as well as literature), including print and visual platforms (Hosking, 2008).

## DISCUSSION

Since CDT is a newly emerging theory, it gets support from other newly emerging theories to strengthen its theoretical approaches. One of those theories that CDT supports and gets supported by is Crip Theory, which is a combination of Queer and Critical Disability theories. Both Queer and Disability theories face common challenges that forces these two to unite under the same umbrella (Hall, 2019). Furthermore, it could be added that disabled queer individuals can find themselves within Crip Theory, since the theory unites both disability and non-heteronormativity. Yogesh Kashikar puts the supporting point regarding disability and sexuality in the following line: “[...] Disability Studies are focused on the literary context where the authors create characters who are both gay and disabled” (Kashikar, 2021).

Another theory that CDT supports is Disability Critical Race Theory<sup>4</sup> which is also known as DisCrit Theory. In this theory, disability and race share the same shade of DisCrit Theory. Since both disabled and Coloured people face marginalization and discrimination in different phases of their lives, the theory aims to support the challenges of both peoples by getting its strength via Critical Disability Theory. Furthermore, DisCrit is advocated by Critical Race Theory (CRT)<sup>5</sup>, which is another theory in Critical Studies, however, since CRT does not share any space for disability, it cannot fully strengthen DisCrit without the help of CDT. The theory argues that White-disabled body is centred in disability scholarship while the issue of race is ignored (Sabnis & Martinez, 2021). David L. Hosking furthers in the matter of DisCrit and gives examples from the concept of Intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw in which she demonstrates the discrimination that Black women face due to their class, sex, and race.<sup>6</sup> However, Intersectionality is not enough to cover the issues of Coloured disabled people. That is why, a new theory Hybrid Intersectionality by Nancy Ehrenreich was emerged, in which privileged and subordinated are discussed (Ehrenreich, 2002). Hybrid Intersectionality argues that the single burdened (the Men of Colour) will always be privileged thanks to his sex. However, double burdened (the Women of Colour) will always face multiple discrimination due to her sex (Hosking, 2008). Now, a marginalized Woman of Colour who is disabled has always faced more discrimination than single burned Men of Colour who is disabled. In this case, single burdened Coloured men double their burden while Disabled Women of Colour always face

<sup>3</sup> M. Horkheimer “Traditional and Critical Theory” in M Horkheimer (ed) *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (Herder and Herder, Toronto 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Disability Critical Race or DisCrit Theory.

<sup>5</sup> CRT (Critical Race Theory).

<sup>6</sup> K. Crenshaw “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” 1989 University of Chicago Legal Forum. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ucfl>

more oppression. However, the case gets even worse when any of them do not see themselves as a part of the heteronormative world. Hosking writes the following:

[Non-heterosexual] man is said to be singly burdened whilst the [homosexual women] is burdened on 2 axes. This concept is particularly relevant for critical disability theory because a large proportion of disabled people developed their impairment after they became adults. Their formative years were not influenced by disability. Suddenly the privileged white, young adult, heterosexual man might experience the subordination of disability, but he may well experience a relative privilege over a person disabled from birth or who has another axis of subordination (Hosking, 2008, p: 10).

Disability (both CDS and CDT) has also been related/mixed with identity studies and has been claimed to be a matter of identity issue rather than being a separate field on its own. In her 2006 paper named “Critical Disability Theory”, a Canadian scholar Chloe G.K. Atkins writes that her mentor warned her that it would be wise to publish disability-oriented articles under the title of *identity politics* rather than showing it as it is: “If you put ‘disability’ in the title of a paper, there is no way it will be accepted [...]. The only way to slip something through is to pen it as a piece about ‘identity’ politics” (Atkins, 2006, p: 145). Atkin tries to show the ignorance of academy in the field of disability. While identity and disability are two different subjects, the academic scholarship had no room for papers under the title of disability. Another scholar that relates CDT to identity studies is David Hosking. In his 2008 same-titled article “Critical Disability Theory”, Hosking gives certain elements of CDT. One of the elements Hosking shows is multidimensionality of CDT and under the umbrella of multidimensionality, he relates CDT to the “family of identity jurisprudences” (Hosking, 2008, p: 8). Years later, in a recent study by Yogesh Kashikar named “Critical Disability Theory or Theory of Disability—an Introduction of Ability in Disability” writes the following sentence in his abstract for the mentioned article: “It [*Critical Disability Theory*] is an identity-based theory strongly arguing for the equality and betterment of disables” (Kashikar, 2021, p: 1).

As Chloe G.K. Atkins was advised by her mentor that writing her papers under the title of disability would not end good for academic success, her teachers, instructors, and institution might had wanted to close their eyes to Atkins’ disabled condition. She writes the following in the same 2006 article:

When I attended academic and/or social justice meetings in my wheelchair, their locales were largely inaccessible. I inevitably had to be carried into sessions or, had to be re-routed through the conference centre’s loading zone, picking my way through piled plastic bags of garbage and recycling (Atkins, 2006, p: 145).

As evident, Atkins' condition was readily apparent. The act of preventing her from documenting her own experiences and shedding light on her struggles, which could potentially lead to better conditions for all individuals, reflects an instance of academic hegemony. In this dynamic, certain “able” individual purposefully overlook the challenges faced by disabled people. This quote also highlights the injustice faced by Atkins and others in similar situations, especially in navigating with a wheelchair. It underscores the failure of local authorities and municipalities to fulfil their responsibilities in ensuring accessible infrastructure, disregarding the existence of disabled individuals who may rely on wheelchairs for mobility. Additionally, Atkins raises serious questions about the democracy of developed nations like Canada concerning disability, examining it through the lens of liberal citizenship constructs and perspectives on justice (Atkins, 2006).

Some critics and activists believe that disability is a universal condition, and everyone faces disability in a certain period of their lives. However, David L. Hosking gives the following understanding to this conception:

[...] a ‘universalist’ conception of disability, which proposes that everyone may be placed on a continuum from disabled to not disabled and argues that disability is universal since everyone is disabled at some time in their lives, is an insufficient basis upon which to analyse the social condition of disabled people and develop social policy which is responsive to the interests of this very diverse population (Hosking, 2008, p: 6).

The given quote above clarifies that universal conception is not accurate when it comes to social conditions of disabled people. To this context, we can add sex, gender, race, single oppressed (burdened), double oppressed (burdened) in which Intersectional and Hybrid Intersectional theories claim to focus on. Because not all the disabled people of the globe are in the same geography or society, they all face different challenges. As Chloe G.K. Atkins talks about her experience with her mentor regarding her papers about disability and how she faces certain challenges with her wheelchair when moving around in Canada, in a First World country, one may understand that the situation might be even worse in a developing or a Third World country.

CDT unites two main and one archaic model: Medical Model, Social Model, and Ancient Symbolic Model. Those models are used to understand the concept of disability used in literature and social spheres. Medical Model is a very common model that is known almost by everyone. In Medical Model, the diagnosis given by the doctor, or the medical condition that affects the body or mind of the individual is taken into account. However, Social model is seen as a construction that focuses on the society rather than the individual who is assumed to be disabled. The Social Model says that disability is not a medical condition, but a social understanding. The response of the society towards the assumed-disabled-individual is considered and CDT embraces Social Model when analysing a literary work or social conceptions about the assumed-disabled. However, Disability Activism rejects the Medical Model by saying that disability is only a social construction. Kashikar writes the following:

Disability Activism has a complicated relationship with medicine. Surprisingly a disabled person needs medical examination for certification. But it rejects the idea of medical mentality. It rejects the overwhelming or overriding medical definitions of disability. They do not want a doctor to define who they are. They want to define by themselves. They think- 'once a patient is not always a patient.' [...]. They reject the finalization of medical approach for them (Kashikar, 2021, p: 141).

Hosking suggests that during the early stages of the Social Model's development, disabled activists strongly argued that no impairment inherently equated to disability. He further suggests that embracing such extreme assertions might provoke drastic responses that the Medical Model, particularly as enforced by governmental bodies or non-governmental organizations, might never be inclined to reconsider the case of disabled individuals (Hosking, 2008).

The last model which is an archaic model and mostly used in literature is Ancient Symbolic Model. Ancient Model seeks to focus on the old Greek and Roman mythology. In Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, disability was seen as a "divine wrath" of the Gods as a punishment (Kashikar, 2021). Furthermore, in Ancient Greece, disability was linked with ugliness while beauty was linked with goodness based on the concept of "beautiful and good" (Graham, 2019).

Another problem that Kashikar shows in his research is the treatment of disabled people. According to him, disabled people are marginalized. Kashikar uses the term *Other* to show the treatment of society towards disabled people. He states:

The actual experience of disability and how able-bodied people look on disabled people as 'Other' as different from them and not as an individual. The disabled people are always treated in different way, either people go out of the way in being nasty towards the people with disability or go out of the way to be nice to them (Kashikar, 2021, p: 140).

The Concept of Other (or known as Othering, Otherness, Otherization, and the Other) is a major term used in Postcolonial Studies. The people who are seen as the Other are marginalized, seen inferior, and oppressed by the colonizers. The Others are seen as less important, more fragile, less civilized, and more vulnerable. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said, a Palestinian postcolonial critic talks about the concept of Otherness and the methods that the West applies to strengthen the imaginary barrier between the West and the East (Orient) (Said, 1978). Though Said's concept of Otherness was aimed to apply in Postcolonial Studies, the same methodology that the colonizers used to apply on the colonized is used in the world of able bodies where disabled people are Othered just like colonized people.

CDT is closely connected with Postcolonial and Indigenous Theories (as well as Studies) since all of them face challenges in society due to their differences. All of them are marginalized, seen subaltern, and othered. Literature in which disabled indigenous people are represented is growing as Melinda C. Hall states in her 2019 review paper. Furthermore, by referring to a previous research, Hall states the following statement.

She [Lavonna Lovern]<sup>7</sup> argues that theorists and activists must address differences between the dominant culture and Native American cultures; otherwise, a choice to identify as disabled may further oppress those within Native American cultures. Addressing differences includes paying critical attention to the ontology and epistemology in Native American communities when theorizing about indigenous disability or working in solidarity with those communities (2008) (Hall, 2019, p: 12).

As we may see, the quote above states the importance of differentiation between the indigenous Native American cultures and the dominant Western culture since both of them are different and use different cultural, traditional

<sup>7</sup> Check the article for more information: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability-critical/#IndiTheoPostTheo>

techniques within the society. However, the dominant Western culture, oppresses the indigenous native cultures (which has been going on for centuries). It is essential to analyse the nature of the indigenous communities and how their own cultures want them to represent disabled individuals in their own communities. Bringing Western cultural approaches to the indigenous communities would weaken the existing standards of the community and weaken their position withing themselves while not understanding properly the dominant culture and struggling to accept it. Hall states that Western understanding of body and mind is different than the Native American conception of mind and body. And the centuries of colonization have worsened the case (Hall, 2019). Thus, applying Western disability conceptions on Native American disabled individuals and expecting that they would accept the Western notions easily would be a challenging issue.

To a greater extent, it is possible to say that the case of Native Americans is not the only case around the world in which local or indigenous disabled people struggle to choose between their own cultures and the Western ones. The questions could be asked: What kind of approaches are used in analysing any postcolonial worlds' disabled members? Are the local conceptions taken into account? Or what kind of bettering conceptions could be given to the postcolonial worlds without hurting their local conceptions?

When we say problems, we need to focus on the recent history of colonization. Centuries of oppression, othering, sub-altering, and marginalization has created a lack of self confidence in societies and decreased the motivation to prove themselves. Now, the question could be asked, in such communities, how difficult it is to fight the stereotypes against disabled people? How difficult is it to better the living conditions of disabled people in postcolonial communities? And, eventually, how difficult is it to overcome the problems and discrimination towards disabled people in postcolonial societies amid tremendous amount of poverty and famine after colonization. If the Western professionals want to help the disabled individuals in postcolonial societies, they need to take all these factors into consideration. In the simplest case, I could explain it in the following way: A person with wheelchair might not be able to walk freely on the streets of the Global South (not in all countries) while a person with wheelchair can move around easily in the Global North (not in all countries).

Going back to the treatment of disabled people, it is essential to observe the way people see disabled people. It is important to analyse the approaches people use towards disabled people when trying to help them or ignore them. Kashikar writes the following lines in his paper:

The disabled people are always treated in different way, either people go out of the way in being nasty towards the people with disability or go out of the way to be nice to them. [...]. It is based on the claim that 'disability is not a question of medicine or health; nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and powerlessness (Kashikar, 2021, pp: 140-141).

As it could be understood from Kashikar's words, disabled people are always forced to accept the concept of difference in their lives. Being good or being bad; both are uniquely different and non-disabled people do not face such different approaches like disabled people do. So, those who are being nice with disabled people could because of the fact that they feel pity but not genuinely good. Their help comes as a result of their pity. Furthermore, the depiction of disabled people is another matter that shows the issue of treatment of disabled people in daily life. The language and imagery utilized to represent individuals with disabilities, a central theme within CDT, significantly influence societal perceptions of disabled individuals. Throughout history and in contemporary contexts, across various forms of media—be it print or visual, within both mainstream and niche cultural spheres—disabled individuals have often been depicted as lacking, deserving of pity, morally flawed or malevolent, threatening, or lacking in value (Hosking, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is an emerging framework dedicated to examining all aspects of disability issues. It is characterized by its diversity and interdisciplinary nature, employing specific approaches to analyse disability as a literary, cultural, historical, social, and political phenomenon. While CDT is often viewed as a branch of Critical Disability Studies (CDS), some argue that it constitutes the entirety of CDS rather than being an independent or subsidiary theory. As a theoretical framework, CDT addresses disability across various fields, including literary and philosophical domains. Furthermore, there has been limited opportunity for disabled individuals to express perspectives that challenge mainstream understandings of disability and societal expectations for those with disabilities. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) changes this dynamic by giving precedence to the voices of disabled individuals. By drawing on their lived experiences, CDT confronts the pervasive negative stereotypes about disability often propagated by non-disabled individuals, which are commonly reinforced through diverse literature and media channels such as print and visual medias, as Hosking states:

Traditionally there has been very little room for the voices of disabled people who contested mainstream conceptions of disability and the proper social position of disabled people. CDT privileges the voices of disabled people and relies on their voices to challenge the negative attitudes toward disability commonly expressed by able bodied people and so often reiterated in print and visual media (Hosking, 2008, p: 17).

CDT comprises two distinct theories: Critical Theory and Disability Theory (as well as studies). Critical Theory emerged from the intellectual contributions of members of the Frankfurt School, established in 1923. This school consisted of Western Marxist scholars, philosophers, and thinkers. The term Critical Theory was coined in 1937 by Max Horkheimer in his essay titled "Traditional and Critical Theory". Traditional theory seeks to portray the world without critical examination, presenting things as they are based on observable examples. Rooted in the methodology of positivism, Traditional Theory is constrained by its lack of intention to disrupt established patterns. In contrast, Critical Theory rejects objectivity and aims to uncover societal oppressions while striving for societal change. It delves into the depths of social disruptions to understand the barriers hindering individuals from reaching their full potential.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author/authors of the article have no personal or financial conflicts of interest within the scope of the study.

#### REFERENCES

- Ağasıyev, K. (2024). Critical Disability Analysis of Benjamin Lebert's Novel *Crazy* from Social and Psychological Perspectives. In H. Tekin & L. Coşan (Eds.), *Behinderung in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (pp. 13-32). Peter Lang Group AG.
- Celikates, R., & Flynn, J. (2023). Critical theory (Frankfurt School). In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/critical-theory/>
- Crossman, A. (2019, October 15). Understanding critical theory. ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/critical-theory-3026623>
- G. K. Atkins, C. (2007). Critical Disability Theory (Review). *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, 145–148.
- Hall, M. C. (2019). Critical disability theory. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 ed.). Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/disability-critical/>
- Harris, A., & Leonardo, Z. (2018). Intersectionality, Race-Gender Subordination, and Education. *Review of Research in Education*, 42, 1–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44668711>
- Horkheimer, M. (1972). *Critical theory: selected essays*. <https://philpapers.org/rec/HORCTS>
- Hosking, D. (2008). The Theory of Critical Disability Theory. Disability Studies Conference, United Kingdom, [https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference\\_archive/2008/abstracts/hosking.htm](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference_archive/2008/abstracts/hosking.htm)
- Kashikar, Y. S. (2021). "Critical disability theory or theory of disability" – An introduction of ability in disability. *LangLit: An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal*.
- Levit, N. (1998). Introduction: Theorizing the connections among systems of subordination. UMKC School of Law Institutional Repository. [https://irlaw.umkc.edu/faculty\\_works/328](https://irlaw.umkc.edu/faculty_works/328)
- N, Ehrenreich, (2002). Subordination and Symbiosis: Mechanisms of Mutual Support Between Subordinating Systems, 71 *UMKC L. REV.* 251 (2002).
- R. Graham, H. (n.d.). Disabled Gods: A Critical Disability Studies analysis of ancient Greek myths. In <https://irl.umsl.edu/urs/8/>. Undergraduate Research Symposium.
- S. Chang, R., & McCristal Culp Jr., J. (2000). After Intersectionality. *UMKC Law Review*, 485–492. [https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/2905](https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/faculty_scholarship/2905)
- Sabnis, S., & Martinez, C. B. (2021). *DisCrit*. In Routledge eBooks (pp. 33–47). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367815325-4>
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.