

Defying Limits: A Study of Disability and Resilience in Preeti Monga's Novels *The Other Senses* and *Flight Without Sight*

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Abstract: Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field of studies based on the grounds of humanities and social sciences rather than viewing disability through the prism of medicine or psychology. It is an academic discipline that surfaced in the late 20th century, emanating from the disability rights movement and critical theory. This paper tries to examine Preeti Monga's novels, *The Other Senses: An Inspiring True Story of a Visually Impaired* and *Flight Without Sight*, considering disability studies, marginalization, and oppression that disable the experience of people in private and public lives.

Keywords: Blind, Disability, Inequality, Injustice, Marginalisation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field of studies based on the grounds of humanities and social sciences rather than viewing disability through the prism of medicine or psychology. It is an academic discipline that surfaced in the late 20th century, emanating from the disability rights movement and critical theory. The forerunners of this discipline of study include Erving Goffman [1], Simi Linton [2], Irving Zola [3], Rosemarie Garland-Thomson [4], and Lennard J. Davis [5].

Disability studies challenge the traditional view of disability as merely a medical or individual issue, instead framing it as a social and cultural construct. This shift emphasizes the role of society in creating barriers for individuals with disabilities rather than focusing solely on their physical or mental limitations. By examining the social, political, and economic factors that contribute to the marginalization of disabled individuals, disability studies advocate for inclusivity and equal rights. Scholars like Erving Goffman [1] and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson [4] have significantly contributed to this reimagining of disability as a matter of social justice, highlighting the ways in which disabled people are systematically oppressed.

This paper builds on these theoretical foundations by exploring the life and works of Preeti Monga, a visually impaired woman whose autobiographies – *The Other Senses* [6] and *Flight Without Sight* [7] – offer an intimate perspective on the struggles and resilience of individuals with disabilities. Monga's experiences of marginalization, oppression, and ultimate empowerment reflect many of the key issues within disability studies, making her story a valuable case study for understanding how societal norms and structures disable people in both private and public life. Through the lens of her autobiographical works, this paper examines how disability is constructed and how individuals, particularly women, resist and challenge societal expectations.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DISABILITY STUDIES

Disability studies maintain their notions and concepts in the context of culture, civilization, norms, society, politics, and diplomacy. The term disability is used more often or frequently in other comparative and later fields to describe the gap and separation from the standard and to bring the disabled closer to the accepted norm and standards. This paddock area of research challenges that ideal pattern of constructed views and gives further an additional frame of reference on disability from modern society, several cultures, and historical periods.

Iris Marion Young was an American political philosopher and a prominent theorist of the field, well known for her work on marginalization, oppression, disability, and group differences [8]. As a political theorist and feminist philosopher, she wrote extensively on disability-related topics. Her thoughts about disability flowed from her more general political philosophy, centered on the necessity to acknowledge and work out societal inequalities and oppressions.

Persons with disabilities are looked upon as deviant or abnormal and, hence, are consistently marginalized and oppressed in society. This leads to social stratification, where people with disabilities are stigmatized, and all opportunities and resources are denied to them. According to Young, this oppression can only be crossed through political action directed towards changing the structures of societies that have created or maintained it. One of her well-known writings is *Justice and the Politics of Difference* [9], which provided a foundation on which scholars can understand the different forms of oppression that disabled women deal with in society.

3 PREETI MONGA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY

This paper tries to examine Preeti Monga's autobiographical works, *The Other Senses: An Inspiring True Story of a Visually Impaired* (2012) and *Flight Without Sight* (2018), considering disability studies, marginalization and oppression that disable the experience of people in private and public lives. It also analyses how the narrator of these autobiographies comes out of her disability and challenges society. It tries to demonstrate how female characters resist the patriarchal domineering structures by making them role models for female emancipation.

Preeti Monga was born into a typical family and later became visually impaired at the age of six. Initially, the cause of her blindness was a mystery, but the doctors diagnosed her deteriorating vision as a condition due to optic atrophy. Preeti Monga, in her autobiography, conveyed that disability is socially constructed, and her writings describe how she came across the disability title and opposing viewpoint of society to be successful in life. Her autobiography, *The Other Senses: An Inspiring True Story of a Visually Impaired* (2012) [6], focuses on Monga's early years. Despite having minor vision problems, she was a happy child, and by the time she was 13, she had entirely lost her sight.

In the work *Flight Without Sight* (2018) [7], Preeti Monga recounts being expelled from her school due to her blindness, highlighting the deep-seated inequality she faced. Afterward, she attended the only blind school in New Delhi, where the poor quality of education left students ill-prepared and uncomfortable in the competitive world.

I had no qualifications, no income, and nothing of value that could give me the power to call my own shots. I wish I had completed my education. I refused to study further after I was thrown out of school. I wish my parents hadn't listened to me then; I wish they would have found a school that wasn't terrible at teaching blind kids. It is not like they didn't exist.
(page 83 of [7])

4 MARGINALIZATION AND OVERCOMING SOCIETAL BARRIERS

Marginalization is a severe form of oppression where certain groups are excluded due to factors like gender, caste, or physical appearance. Those marginalized are often made to feel less important and respected, leading to increased stress and vulnerability. For Preeti Monga, this exclusion likely intensified her trauma and stress, resulting in feelings of paranoia and isolation from society. Self-doubt and dissatisfaction are frequent psychological reactions to marginalization. However, some oppressed groups are more likely to damage themselves or commit suicide. For instance, Monga, at one point, decides to end her life and even poison her little children because of her condition. "I was contemplating suicide; some days I would find myself planning to poison my little children and, thereafter, kill myself" page 83 of [7]).

Everything was working out fine with narrator Preeti Monga's life until the defect in her eyesight, along with the reaction from the smallpox inoculation, left her with skin blemishes. She was more apprehensive about societal acceptance since women are often judged based on their looks. People with disabilities are prone to insecurity arising out of narrow social standards over beauty that induce shame and self-doubt in them. Society must challenge these harmful stereotypes and promote inclusivity, valuing individuals for who they are rather than judging them by their disabilities or appearance. Preeti Monga, like anyone, wanted to be self-reliant, but her physical limitations as a child left her embarrassed and deeply wounded. She endured a monotonous life, hoping for relief from her condition. Her situation worsened when her ex-husband, Keith, repeatedly mistreated her and exploited her family for money. Despite his controlling behavior, her parents sided with him. Keith's actions reflect the male dominance prevalent in Indian society, where women, especially those with disabilities, face double oppression. Disabled women are often unfairly judged as worthless and incapable of motherhood, exacerbating their marginalization.

Disability can affect every aspect of life, including household chores, childcare, and social activities. An unsupportive husband may not understand the challenges, leading to frustration, isolation, and resentment for the disabled woman, who feels her needs are ignored. "What had I gotten myself into? Was it my fault? I had tried to caution my family about Keith and my unwillingness to marry him. But both my mother and brother persuaded me otherwise. There were things that were bothering me from the start" (page 36 of [7]).

Disability can vary widely in form and severity, making each person's experience unique. While some may need family support, excessive control by families can harm the disabled person's autonomy. In cases of safety concerns, authorities may need to be involved, but with sensitivity and respect for the person's independence. Preeti Monga lost control over her life and health, which made her feel powerless. To live under the dominant class is oppression, and such conditions have to be faced by the marginally placed lot that inflicts trauma mentally. One should respect the autonomy and agency of a disabled person and listen to their voices to know their needs and desires. This might include the provision of available means of communication, advocacy in the assertion of their rights, and the creation of an enabling environment that prioritizes their welfare. "I had never learned to oppose my mother and trusted her implicitly. I felt that I was already a huge source of anguish to my mother, so how could I bring her more disappointment and pain by refusing to marry this man? Despite a trembling heart, I kept quiet." (page 37 of [7])

Due to the societal and institutional constraints that disabled people must overcome, they may feel powerless in a variety of ways. These obstacles may make it more difficult for them to fully participate in society, access essential resources and services, and even exercise their constitutional rights. The feeling of being powerless, which disabled people often feel, can also result in a lack of agency in decisions that have an impact on their lives.

For instance, they may not be included in discussions involving adaptations that may work in their favor or in talks concerning policies or programs that may benefit them. In such cases, they may end up helpless and without control over their lives. When Monga was torn inside because of her disability, her external inability started growing within her. She felt devastated and traumatized. She also makes a mention of how she was physically disturbed. This may even be connected to the perception that women with disabilities are not afforded the same rights as women without disabilities. Particularly, disabled women are excluded from society because so-called 'normal' people make blatant claims that they are unable to learn new skills or even carry out tasks in the same manner as others. However, even those who are physically challenged are equally capable of carrying out tasks in their unique manner.

An empty mind is the devil's workshop; thus, denying people opportunity makes them numb. The biggest sin committed by humankind throughout its lifetime is withholding them from those who deserve them. It is quite evident that the world prioritizes physical eligibility over a person's ability to perform a job effectively. Society is willing to hire someone who is not up to par but refuses to give a chance to a physically challenged candidate who is qualified, especially to a woman candidate who can perform the same work with full enthusiasm and dedication in a novel way. It is crucial to understand that to worship any God, a person's heart and soul must be pure. Disabled persons have more pure hearts and souls than other people; therefore, being denied access to the heavenly stone and having other devotees yell at them is not right. Public attitudes often make disabled individuals self-conscious, discouraging them from stepping out despite their courage. The stigma they face creates a fear of social interaction, leading to isolation.

Monga was afraid of facing the outer world and was taken aback by herself. She mentions that "The guard at last got a word in, informing them of my inability to see the pitcher without touching it due to my blindness" (page 2 of [6]). In the stigma theory by Erving Goffman [1], he explains how stigma arises when individuals deviate from social norms, which leads to exclusion and psychological distress. Stigmatized people may internalize negative stereotypes, causing shame and low self-esteem. This evidences the need for social change to fight the adverse impacts of stigma, in particular, the mental health effects on individuals with disabilities. Society perceives disability as one of tragedy or burden; thus, there are negative views that make disabled people feel degraded and undermine their self-esteem and participation in society. Discriminatory practices, such as harsh remarks or exclusion, can severely impact the mental health of disabled people. For example, a person in a wheelchair might face people talking over them or assuming they can't participate in activities. Physical barriers and limited access to public spaces can worsen feelings of social exclusion and loneliness.

Navigating the healthcare system, securing accommodations, and accessing essential services can also cause significant stress and anxiety for disabled individuals. While not all people with disabilities experience mental trauma, societal efforts to combat ableism, promote inclusiveness, and support mental health are crucial for fostering a just and inclusive society. Preeti Monga faced significant challenges, including prejudice and societal indifference. Despite these obstacles, she educated herself, learned aerobics, and overcame negative social norms to build her career. Monga's story highlights resilience and the importance of breaking down barriers for disabled individuals. In her book, she says, "Thus, to remain healthy, happy, and independent, constantly counted my blessings and escaped from my terrifying auto-immune disorder, and found pleasure during free moments, in reading and writing. Never before had I been able to spare time for these passions given my pains and worries, so now I was pleasantly surprised at the joy I derived from them." (page 174 of [6])

Inviting individuals with disabilities for motivational seminars to share their success stories can inspire others and foster inclusivity. Highlighting their achievements helps break stereotypes and promote a respectful image of disability, increasing understanding and empathy. Preeti Monga's motivational speeches are renowned for their empowering message. Her struggle and hard work acted as an inspiration for those going through adversities in their lives, telling people that persistence can get one over tough situations. As a social entrepreneur in the hospitality industry, Monga has created new opportunities for people with disabilities, raising awareness of inclusivity as a thought leader and the multiple barriers those with disabilities face. It all started with her powerful and impactful motivational speeches. "Then, one day, I was invited to conduct a motivation seminar for the employees of the corporate giant Nestle, the success of which propelled me to add corporate training to my professional skills. Ever since then, I have become a full-fledged corporate trainer and have been training professionals at leading Indian corporate houses." (page 175 of [1])

Preeti Monga proved that as far as disability is concerned, everybody is beautiful in their own way, and there is so much beauty around us to be celebrated and appreciated in several ways. One could embrace internal qualities of the self, such as kindness, empathy, and resilience, that may enable a movement toward a more inclusive, empowered society for all. "Each one of us is different, with our own set of strengths and weakness, and once you learn to ignore the noise outside, you will be able to listen to your inner self" (page 189 of [7]).

The author's work addressing South Asian and Indian perspectives on disability has significantly promoted awareness, inclusivity, and empowerment. Her achievements in becoming a trauma counselor, corporate trainer, writer, aerobics instructor, public speaker, and director of Silver Linings Human Resource Solution demonstrate her impact and commitment to creating a more accessible and equitable society. Monga quotes, "After all, we only have one life, so why not live it to the best of our ability? Challenges are always going to be around to remind us that we are alive, so welcome them as they are our best friends and teachers" (page 188 of [6]). Preeti Monga's message about turning disadvantages into advantages is a powerful call for individuals with disabilities. She encourages embracing uniqueness and using it to one's advantage rather than conforming to societal norms.

Whether dealing with a physical disability, learning difference, or unique personality trait, Monga advocates finding strength in these differences rather than letting them define or limit us. Monga quotes, “Use your creative juices to derive ways to turn your disadvantages into advantages and stop living life on each other people’s terms” (page 189 of [7]). Despite her physical challenges, Preeti Monga pursued new opportunities, though she initially struggled emotionally. Her parents and younger brother gave her the strength to overcome her limitations, while her spouse, Ashwani, inspired her to achieve greatness. Like a clock ticking away time, society’s marginalization of disabled individuals highlights the importance of a supportive environment. Such support systems are crucial for the achievements of those with physical challenges.

In the novel, *The Other Senses: An Inspiring True Story of a Visually Impaired*, Preeti Monga describes how she began earning from training programs through her organization, Silver Linings, focusing on motivation and personal development for disabled and underprivileged individuals. Her public workshops received positive feedback, boosting her confidence and prompting her to continue improving her work. Inspired by Hellen Keller and her aunt Frauke, who encouraged her to follow her inner voice and learn from successful figures, Monga learned to ignore negativity and focus on her achievements. Her experience underscores the value of resilience and the impact of positive influences in overcoming challenges.

It should be taken into account that people with disabilities aren't concerned about other people's disabilities; instead, they show them a lot of love rather than keeping them to themselves and offering moral support. Then, to pursue her love as a professional, she flew from place to place. She proved that she could pursue her passion despite being labeled a blind bat during her early adulthood. When she saw several blind people and injury victims and survivors in a new environment, she offered to help by providing them with guidance and encouragement. When she began to strictly follow her inner voice and pursue things she thoroughly enjoyed, she became more positive and enthusiastic than she had ever been before.

Preeti Monga moved forward in her life, disregarding negative comments from others. She believes that love transcends physical abilities and is about souls connecting, emphasizing that disability should not be trivialized. Initially, people who doubted her abilities began to praise her accomplishments, revealing how perceptions can change with success. Monga’s experience highlights how mentors and role models can positively influence self-identity and self-worth.

Beyond starting a successful business, Monga used her resources to educate and empower disabled individuals, particularly women, demonstrating that disability is not a barrier to education or capability. Since her childhood, Preeti Monga has been fascinated with aerobics and fitness. The discrimination against her and rejection in the fitness field did not deter her. She completed her aerobics training and tackled various hardships with resilience. Monga has also worked on international projects with the UN and IDA, advocated for better accessibility, and received the National Role Model Award and National Award in 2013. In 2005, she finally started her fitness center, Sai Aerobics, in New Delhi, where she designed her training routines and depended on the sound of movement to remember the steps. Soon, she won a lot of clients, once again proving the fact that often success breeds from one’s strengths rather than weaknesses.

5 REFLECTIONS AND EMPOWERMENT

People with disabilities are resilient and ingenious at surmounting physical, social, and economic barriers. Their ability to adapt and innovate through means such as assistive technologies, creative problem-solving, or robust supportive networks is adequate testimony of the strength and potential they possess in realizing their aspirations.

People with disabilities have also expressed exceptional determination and perseverance toward their goals, ambitions, and pursuits in the interest of education, labor, or other spheres of their individual lives. Many people with disabilities, though threatened by various limitations, have excelled exceptionally in commerce, politics, athletics, arts, and practically all levels of undertaking. Overcoming barriers for a person with disabilities is a declaration of testimonial to a person's capability, creativity, and toughness. The disabled have shown that with determination, support, and a sense of community, all is possible in the light of so many obstacles they face.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this revival movement of disabled persons through resistance is so significant. It contributes a great deal towards the removal of barriers and furthers greater inclusion and acceptance of persons with disabilities. Persons with disability have shown that they can do fantastic things, too, and participate in all areas of life by righting their contention of their rights and challenging conventional standards. Of the many amazing things in Preeti Monga's story, strength and optimism top the list. Ostracised and rejected by several employers, Monga just would not give up on her dream of being a successful aerobics teacher. She persevered and eventually set up her fitness outlet, which was soon thronged by New Delhi's fitness enthusiasts. Indeed, the success story of Preeti Monga stands as a testimony to the strength of fortitude, perseverance, and a positive outlook. Her success required her to struggle through many abreast obstacles and disappointments. Her experience speaks volumes about how everything is achievable with effort and persistence. “Your inner self knows what is good for you, and once you are happy, the whole world will see you exactly as you are”. (page 189 of [7]). Preeti Monga is yet another spokesperson for the social model of disability, which orients itself toward looking at disability not as an individual medical condition but as a product of societal attitudes and barriers. She sees the social exclusion as typical of disability discrimination. She believes that it is the responsibility of society to tear down the barriers and create an enabling environment for the person with a disability.

In addition to that, Monga further emphasizes the need to mainstream sensitization of the population towards rights and issues of persons with disabilities. A positive attitude toward persons with disabilities promotes inclusion and helps tear down barriers. In her views regarding disabled people's rights, the author has emphasized providing deserving opportunities and participation to people with disabilities and overcoming the attitudes and physical barriers set by society for the same objective. She also commented that a sign of a civilized society is not in how it treats big, strong people with privileges but in how it cares for vulnerable ones. As she says, "People with disabilities are not broken or incomplete. They are whole and complete human beings who simply experience the world differently" (page 77 of [7]).

Ultimately, the accomplishments of those with disabilities can have significant positive effects on society, such as eradicating prejudice, fostering inclusiveness, motivating others, highlighting the importance of variety, and fostering progress. A more inclusive and supportive society for all must be worked for while also honoring and celebrating the accomplishments of people with disabilities. Therefore, they won't discover all their skills and interests if one doesn't explore new things. Like Preeti Monga, people should stop worrying about their difficulties and constantly work on things to provide something fresh. Finding knowledge about a well-known individual might motivate or stimulate the brain favorably. Preeti Monga, for instance, was motivated by Hellen Keller, who had three of her five senses impaired. Whatever happened, Keller nevertheless succeeded in her objectives. One must grow a garden, master a musical instrument, create art, compose poetry, join a club, learn to sew, organize a party, and explore the unexplored to identify where one can excel and prove to society that nothing is impossible in this universe.

Thus, Preeti Monga has proved that disability is just a socially constructed stigma. She has undoubtedly destroyed all the dominating structures that came her way, and she has also rebuilt all these structures to build a better society, one in which everyone is treated equally. She made her success through all her difficulties and discouragement, leading her life through resistance. This emphasizes the fact that, at times, fighting against oneself and one's aggressive situations is the best way to combat all hardships. Preeti Monga's accomplishments demonstrate the strength of willpower and perseverance in facing difficulty. She has demonstrated that anyone can achieve their goals and go through any challenges in their way if they have the correct attitude and a strong work ethic.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve any human or animal subjects and, therefore, did not require ethical approval.

STATEMENT OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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