

Redefining Disability: Confronting Stereotypes and Ethical Dilemmas in Jojo Moyes’***Me Before You*****Pavithra E.**

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Abstract

Jojo Moyes’ novel *Me Before You*, explores disability representation and ethical dilemmas surrounding assisted suicide. Through diverse literary theories, the paper analyses how the novel challenges stereotypes, delves into multidimensional portrayals of disabled characters and fosters broader conversations about disability in contemporary literature. Disability studies lens reveals Will Traynor as a complex individual beyond his physical limitations, while Louisa Clark’s evolving perceptions challenge societal stigmas around disability. A feminist perspective uncovers gender dynamics in caregiving, highlighting the importance of agency for women beyond traditional roles. Postcolonial power dynamics subtly intersect with disability representation, adding depth to character interactions. Analysis of narrative techniques in the novel demonstrates how dual perspectives humanize characters and subvert one- dimensional portrayals of disability. Ethical criticism engages with assisted suicide dilemmas, exploring autonomy and end-of-life decisions. The concept of intersectionality underscores how multiple identities influence characters’ experiences. In conclusion, *Me Before You* becomes a powerful work that fosters empathy, challenges stereotypes, and raises ethical questions. The incorporation of literary theories enriches disability representation, contributing to wider societal dialogue about inclusivity and compassion.

Keywords: Disability representation, narrative techniques, intersectionality, stereotypes, caregiving, assisted suicide, autonomy.

Jojo Moyes is known for her ability to craft compelling and emotionally resonant stories. She often delves into complex themes such as love, loss, personal growth, and the intricacies of human relationships. Moyes’ writing style is characterized by its warmth, wit, and keen understanding of human emotions, which allows her to connect deeply with her

readers. *Me Before You* is a contemporary romance novel published in 2012. The story is set in the small English town of Stortford, where Louisa Clark, a quirky and ordinary young woman in her mid-twenties, finds herself unemployed after the local cafe where she worked closes down. Desperate for a job, she takes on the role of a caregiver for Will Traynor, a wealthy and adventurous young man who was left paralyzed from the neck down following a tragic accident two years prior. Will's disability has left him bitter and disenchanted with life, leading him to contemplate assisted suicide.

The novel presents a thought-provoking narrative that intertwines disability representation and ethical dilemmas surrounding assisted suicide. While the novel has garnered both acclaim and controversy, its portrayal of disability and its exploration of the right to make end-of-life decisions necessitate further critical examination. The research problem centres on understanding how the novel challenges disability stereotypes and addresses ethical considerations related to assisted suicide, seeking to explore the broader implications of disability representation in contemporary literature.

This paper aims to analyse the representations of disability in *Me Before You* and evaluate how the novel portrays the experiences and complexities of the disabled characters, particularly focusing on the character of Will Traynor, one of two protagonists in the novel as a multidimensional individual. To investigate Louisa Clark's evolving perceptions of disability and her caregiving role, exploring how gender dynamics intersect with disability representation in the novel. It will examine the postcolonial power dynamics between characters of different socioeconomic backgrounds assess how these dynamics shape the novel's commentary on privilege and disability representation and analyse the narrative techniques employed in the novel and their impact on readers' perceptions of disability, considering how storytelling influences the interpretation of disabled characters

At the beginning of the novel, Louisa Clark's perceptions about disability are limited by societal stereotypes and misconceptions. She feels uncomfortable and somewhat awkward in her role as Will's caregiver, unsure of how to interact with him and navigate his disability. As Louisa spends more time with Will, her perspective on disability evolves. She begins to see him not solely as a disabled individual but as a person with hopes, dreams, and

emotions. Their growing relationship challenges her preconceived notions, fostering a deeper understanding of disability and empathy for Will's struggles.

Through Will's interactions with others, the novel sheds light on ableist assumptions and the limitations placed upon individuals with disabilities by society. It opens up discussions about inclusivity, accessibility, and the importance of breaking down barriers for disabled individuals. The novel prompts readers to reflect on the limitations imposed by ableist assumptions and how they can perpetuate stigmas surrounding disability. Will's interactions with others shed light on the importance of creating a more inclusive and accessible society that accommodates the needs of disabled individuals. By humanizing the experiences of disabled characters, the novel encourages readers to empathize and advocate for a more understanding and supportive environment, fostering meaningful dialogue about the value of inclusivity and the significance of removing barriers for disabled individuals.

The novel also delves into the emotional and psychological impact of disability on both the individual and their loved ones. Will's character illustrates the struggle with depression and feelings of loss, which are common experiences for people living with disabilities. The exploration of Will's emotional journey humanizes him and challenges the notion that physical limitations define one's happiness and worth. Will's body is explained by Will himself to Louisa Clark when they are having a conversation at the beach of Mauritius Island. The conversation situation starts with Louisa as the main point of view:

And if you do love me, Clark, as you say you do, the thing that would make me happier than anything is if you would come with me.'

My head whipped back. 'What?'

It's not going to get any better than this. The odds are I'm only going to get increasingly unwell and my life, reduced as it is, is going to get smaller. The doctors have said as much. There are a host of conditions encroaching on me. I can feel it. I don't want to be in pain anymore, or trapped in this thing, or dependent on everyone, or afraid. So I'm asking you – if you feel the things you say you feel – then do it. Be with me. Give me the end I'm hoping for. (353)

The novel shows that disability involves complex emotional dimensions that require

understanding and support. Through Will's character, *Me Before You* challenges stereotypes that portray disabled individuals as helpless or devoid of agency. Will's intelligence, wit, and assertiveness challenge these assumptions and portray disabled characters as capable and deserving of respect. The novel empowers disabled characters by showcasing their resilience and determination to live life on their terms, asserting their right to make choices and decisions, even if they involve complex ethical dilemmas. By exploring these subunits of disability representation, *Me Before You* provides a rich and multifaceted portrayal of disability.

The novel challenges stereotypes, fosters empathy, and encourages readers to reflect on their own perceptions and attitudes toward disability and the value of life. It also provides a compelling platform to explore the intersection of disability and caregiving from a feminist perspective. The novel delves into the complex dynamics between Louisa Clark, the female protagonist, and Will Traynor, her disabled employer, shedding light on gendered roles and societal expectations in the context of disability.

Louisa Clark assumes the role of a caregiver for Will Traynor, reflecting the historical association of caregiving with women in society. This portrayal underscores the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities based on gender. Louisa's role as a caregiver also intersects with her position as a woman in a patriarchal society. Her dedication to her caregiving responsibilities reflects the selflessness often expected of women in traditional caregiving roles, and the novel explores how this selflessness may impact her own desires and aspirations.

Me Before You delves into the challenges and complexities of caregiving for a disabled person. Louisa faces various emotional and practical challenges, grappling with her feelings of inadequacy, and navigating the power dynamics inherent in her relationship with Will. The novel highlights the power imbalance between Louisa and Will, with Will initially possessing economic privilege and authority as her employer. This power dynamic adds complexity to their relationship, and it is further complicated by Will's disability, which creates dependency on Louisa's care.

The exploration on the caregiving impacts Louisa's identity and sense of agency. Her identity becomes intertwined with her role as a caregiver, raising questions about the importance of self-fulfilment and personal growth outside of her caregiving responsibilities. Louisa's journey involves redefining her sense of agency and asserting her desires beyond the confines of societal expectations.

Louisa's evolving understanding of disability challenges her preconceived notions and leads to a feminist re-evaluation of her role as a caregiver. Through Louisa's character, the novel also showcases her journey of empowerment and self-discovery. Louisa challenges patriarchal norms that limit women to traditional caregiving roles and discovers her own worth beyond her caregiving duties. Will's character, in turn, confronts his assumptions about women and caregiving. His interactions with Louisa challenge his preconceived notions and reveal the complexity of women's lives, strengths, and desires beyond societal expectations. Louisa says, "I could well imagine Will pushing her away. But surely if you loved someone it was your job to stick with him? To help him through the depression? In sickness and in health, and all that?" (78).

Feminist questions about autonomy and personal choices are examined in the novel *Me Before You*. It engages with debates about women's agency in making decisions, including Will's desire for assisted suicide, and how societal norms may influence or limit these choices. Within this contemplation of autonomy, the narrative resonates with a nuanced feminist lens. Louisa's introspections regarding her caregiving role further enrich the broader discourse on feminism. The novel intertwines her grappling with societal expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and women's rights, amplifying the complexities inherent in choices and roles.

The novel challenges traditional gendered roles and expectations, highlighting the complexities and power dynamics inherent in caregiving relationships. The characters in the novel encourage readers to question patriarchal norms, re-evaluate personal agency, and advocate for greater gender equality within the context of caregiving and disability representation. The dynamic between characters Will Traynor and Louisa Clark serves as a canvas for exploring feminist and postcolonial themes. As Louisa grapples with her

caregiving role and contemplates her commitment to Will, the novel subtly raises feminist questions regarding autonomy and societal expectations placed on women's roles. This sentiment is encapsulated in Louisa's reflection: "But surely if you loved someone it was your job to stick with him? To help him through the depression? In sickness and in health, and all that?" (243).

This introspection underscores the gendered complexities of caregiving and personal agency within relationships. Moreover, delving into the narrative from a postcolonial lens unveils intricate power dynamics. Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of 'hybridity' and 'third space' provide a lens through which the interactions between characters of varying socio-economic backgrounds can be analysed. The contrasting worlds of the affluent Will and the workingclass Louisa become spaces for exploring how individuals navigate their identities within contexts marred by power imbalances, contributing to the depth of their relationship.

Me Before You also delves into the concept of intersectionality, recognizing that individuals possess multiple identities that interact and influence their experiences. Intersectionality considers how various social categories, such as disability, gender, race, and class, intersect and shape an individual's lived reality. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term 'intersectionality,' have contributed significantly to this field. Crenshaw's work emphasizes the importance of understanding how overlapping identities can create unique and compounded forms of discrimination and privilege. In the novel, intersectionality is evident through the complex identities of the characters.

Will Traynor's disability intersect with his privileged background, influencing his experiences and societal perceptions. Louisa Clark's gender, class, and caregiving role intersect with her understanding of disability and caregiving. The novel invites readers to recognize how these multiple identities shape the characters' lives and experiences. By acknowledging intersectionality, the novel encourages a more nuanced understanding of disability representation, challenging simplistic and one-dimensional portrayals of disabled individuals and emphasizing the significance of considering the interconnectedness of social identities.

The novel's multidimensional representation of disability, nuanced exploration of



caregiving dynamics, and ethical dilemmas surrounding assisted suicide contribute to its enduring impact on readers. The incorporation of postcolonial perspectives, narrative techniques, and ethical considerations elevates the novel's thematic depth, making it a significant work in contemporary Literature.

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