

REIMAGINING DISABILITY: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN JOJO MOYES' *ME BEFORE YOU*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper critically examines Jojo Moyes' novel *Me Before You*, exploring 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, ethical dilemmas, feminist perspective, postcolonial power dynamics, narrative techniques, intersectionality, stereotypes, caregiving, assisted suicide, autonomy, inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

Jojo Moyes began her career as a journalist, working for various publications, including *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Sunday Times*. Her journalism background provided her with a strong foundation in storytelling and a keen eye for observing human behaviour and emotions. As an author, 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 Stotfold, 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.

As Louisa and Will spend time together, their initial awkwardness turns into a deep and meaningful connection. Louisa's compassionate and vivacious personality challenges Will's cynicism, and he begins to see life from a different perspective. The novel delves into their evolving relationship, tackling themes of disability, love, personal autonomy, and the value of life.

Me Before You received critical acclaim for its emotionally charged narrative, authentic characters, and thought-provoking exploration of disability and ethical dilemmas. The novel's success led to a film adaptation in 2016, further cementing its place as a significant work in contemporary literature. However, the novel also faced some criticism, particularly regarding its portrayal of disability and the ethical questions raised by the plot. The novel remains one of Jojo Moyes' most iconic and enduring works, continuing to spark discussions and debates about disability representation, personal choices, and the power of love and compassion.

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.

The current research 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 socio-economic backgrounds assess how these dynamics shape the novel's commentary on privilege and disability representation and analyze the narrative techniques employed in the novel and their impact on readers' perceptions of disability, considering how storytelling influences the interpretation of disabled characters.

The research will also critically evaluate the ethical dilemmas raised in the novel surrounding Will Traynor's desire for assisted suicide, delving into the moral implications and ethical considerations related to autonomy and the right to make end-of-life decisions. The role of 'intersectionality' in shaping characters' experiences, identities, and representations in the context of disability and other social categories such as gender, race, and class will be an important aspect of the current study and provide insights into the novel's contributions to challenging disability stereotypes and fostering broader conversations about disability representation in contemporary literature.

By addressing these research objectives, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding disability representation and ethical considerations in *Me Before You*. The research findings may provide valuable insights into the novel's impact on readers' perceptions of disability and contribute to broader discussions on the representation of disability in literature and the arts. As Louisa and Will spend time together, their initial awkwardness turns into a deep and meaningful connection. Louisa's compassionate and vivacious personality challenges Will's cynicism, and he begins to see life from a different perspective. The

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The novel offers insights into the attitudes of the broader society towards disability. It highlights the challenges and stigmas faced by people with disabilities, as well as the lack of understanding and support they often encounter. Rosemarie Thomson while explaining Disability in her work

“a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. The ability/disability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Although this comparison of bodies is ideological rather than biological, it nevertheless penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment” (Rosemarie, 17).

Jojo Moyes offers a nuanced representation of disability through its central character, Will Traynor, and the evolving perceptions of Louisa Clark. The novel delves into various subunits that explore the complexities of disability representation. The novel portrays Will Traynor as a vibrant and adventurous man who becomes paralyzed from the neck down after a tragic accident. This disability leads him to experience profound physical and emotional challenges, which significantly impact his outlook on life. Will's character is not reduced to his disability; he is presented as a multifaceted individual with dreams, desires, and struggles beyond his physical limitations. In a conversation with Louisa Clark, he shared that he “wanted to learn new languages for places [he] thought he might visit one day”. (Moyes, 264) Moyes humanizes him, allowing readers to empathize with his emotional turmoil as he adjusts to his new reality.

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. Karen Elizabeth Jung in *Chronicle Illness and Educational Equity: The Politics of Visibility* talks about the idea of accessibility and social justice.

Accessibility and inclusiveness also disrupt the existing institutional order of the university, which is an intrinsic part of those generalized and generalizing social relations that continue to disadvantage and exclude people on the basis of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability. (Karen, 2002)

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. 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.

The novel examines the traditional gendered roles and expectations surrounding caregiving. 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 novel explores how 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. Her 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?" (Moyes,78). The novel raises feminist questions about autonomy and personal choices. 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. A feminist lens can be employed through which one examines the concept of disability and caregiving in the novel.

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?" (Louisa, 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 working-class Louisa become spaces for exploring how individuals navigate their identities within contexts marred by power imbalances, contributing to the depth of their relationship.

Edward Said's theories on 'Orientalism' and colonial representation offer an insightful framework for scrutinizing the novel's portrayal of disability within the framework of colonial power structures. Said's notions illuminate the influence of cultural stereotypes on the depiction of marginalized groups, rendering it pertinent to examine how disability intersects with power dynamics in the narrative. In the midst of Louisa's evolving role as a caregiver and her emotional journey, the novel weaves a tapestry of themes encompassing feminism.

To explore the narrative techniques employed in *Me Before You* for representing disability, one can draw upon the insights of narrative theorists such as Wayne C. Booth and Gerard Genette. The concept of the unreliable narrator, as expounded by Wayne C. Booth, offers a lens through which the novel's dual perspectives can be examined. This approach delves into how these alternating viewpoints shape readers' interpretations of both characters and the representation of disability. The alternating perspectives provide a distinct vantage point into the characters' inner thoughts and emotions, effectively challenging preconceived notions and fostering empathetic engagement. Booth's notion of unreliability, as introduced in his work, highlights the intentional incorporation of unreliability in fiction. Booth's discourse extends to the implied author and narrative distance, where he proposes that a narrator is deemed "reliable" when aligned with the norms set by the implied author, and "unreliable" when diverging from those norms (Booth,

158–59). Gerard Genette's theory of focalization can also be employed to examine the way the novel mediates readers' access to the characters' experiences. By controlling the narrative focus, Moyes guides readers in understanding disability from the characters' perspectives, potentially subverting stereotypes and fostering a more immersive reading experience

Ethical critics like Peter Singer and Martha Nussbaum have engaged in discussions about assisted suicide and the right to make end-of-life decisions. Peter Singer's utilitarian ethics may be referenced to explore the ethical implications of Will Traynor's desire for assisted suicide. Singer's consequentialist approach weighs the overall well-being and suffering, raising questions about the moral choices faced by individuals with disabilities. Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach provides an alternative ethical framework for considering issues of disability and autonomy. Nussbaum argues that society should aim to promote the capabilities necessary for individuals to lead dignified lives. This perspective may inform discussions about the right to self-determination and personal agency in the context of disability and end-of-life decisions.

Martha Nussbaum's work that discusses her capabilities approach and how it relates to ethical considerations surrounding disability is titled *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. In this book, Nussbaum expands on her capabilities approach and addresses issues related to social justice, including disability rights and the ethical treatment of individuals with disabilities. Nussbaum argues for a holistic approach to justice that focuses on promoting human capabilities, ensuring that all individuals have the necessary opportunities and resources to lead a flourishing life. Nussbaum's capabilities approach emphasizes the importance of enhancing people's capabilities, which include not just basic needs but also opportunities for personal development and self-determination.

Throughout the book, Nussbaum engages with various aspects of disability, exploring how society can better accommodate the needs of disabled individuals and provide them with equal opportunities and dignified lives. She discusses the challenges faced by people with disabilities, the barriers they encounter in society, and the importance of recognizing and valuing their capabilities. Nussbaum's work is influential in the field of ethics and disability studies, and her capabilities approach has been widely discussed and applied in various contexts. *Frontiers of Justice* provides valuable insights into how ethical considerations can shape policies and societal attitudes towards disability, advocating for a more inclusive and just society for all individuals, regardless of their abilities. Nussbaum's capabilities approach emphasizes the importance of enhancing people's capabilities, which include not just basic needs but also opportunities for personal development and self-determination. Throughout the book, Nussbaum engages with various aspects of disability, exploring how society can better accommodate the needs of disabled individuals and provide them with equal opportunities and dignified lives. She discusses the challenges faced by people with disabilities, the barriers they encounter in society, and the importance of recognizing and valuing their capabilities.

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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.

The study holds implications for future investigations in the subsequent domains. Subsequent research endeavours could delve into the following dimensions within the context of *Me Before You*:

Intersectional Analysis: A more in-depth intersectional analysis of the characters in the novel to understand how disability intersects with other social categories and how these intersections inform the characters' experiences can be conducted.

Comparative Studies: Comparing *Me Before You* with other literary works or media representations to explore similarities and differences in disability portrayal and ethical dilemmas, contributing to a broader understanding of disability representation in popular culture.

Reader Reception Studies: Conducting reader reception studies to analyse how different audiences interpret the novel's themes and characters, exploring how readers' diverse backgrounds and perspectives influence their understanding of disability representation.

Ethical Discourse: Engaging with ethical philosophers and scholars to examine the novel's ethical dilemmas within broader ethical frameworks, fostering conversations about autonomy, consent, and the representation of disability in media.

Incorporating views from literary critics and scholars, such as those mentioned earlier, can enrich these research recommendations. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory can provide a valuable framework for analysing the characters' multiple identities, while ethical critics like Peter Singer and Martha Nussbaum can contribute to discussions about the novel's ethical dilemmas.

By combining these scholarly perspectives, future research can deepen the understanding of *Me Before You* and its contributions to disability representation, ethical discussions, and the power of literature to challenge stereotypes and foster empathy.

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