



DISABILITY AS A ROMANTIC ATTRACTION IN JOJO MOYES' NOVEL *ME BEFORE YOU* (2012)

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Abstract

This study is an analysis of Jojo Moyes' novel "Me Before You" (2012). The purpose of this study is to examine how disability is depicted as a romantic attraction in the novel. This study uses a descriptive-qualitative approach by utilizing feminist disability theory to analyze the novel, and is supported by feminist theory and patriarchal ideology. The result of the study show that the disability depicted in the novel actually becomes a romantic attraction, because physical limitations create a sense of dependence and strength in the relationship. This novel also illustrates that besides disability, there are other aspects that becomes romantic attractions, such as personality, emotional connections, feeling of being appreciated and needed, and sharing experiences. These findings indicate that disability is not a barrier for someone to feel romantic attraction in a relationship, even disability itself can be source of attraction.

Key words: Disability, Romantic attraction, Feminist disability, Me before you

A. INTRODUCTION

Disability is defined as a physical, mental, cognitive or developmental condition that impairs or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions in daily activities. These conditions can range from physical impairments such as; limited mobility, to mental or developmental disorders, such as autism or mental retardation. On the report of WHO (2011), disability is a conditions that interferes with or hinders a person from carrying out routine activities and interacting with their environment. Meanwhile, romantic attraction refers to the emotional and physical involvement between two individuals that creates an intimate and mutually supportive relationship. As maintained by Buss (1989), romantic attraction appeal refers to the qualities that make a person romantically attractive and potentially romantic compatible. In the context of disability, romantic attraction can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as; self-

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acceptance, self-confidence, and the ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships.

The relationships between disability and romantic attraction are in how a person's experience with a disability can influence the dynamics and interactions in romantic relationships. Several examples explain how a person's experience as a disabled can affect the dynamic and interaction in a romantic relationship. In the opinion of Gerlach (2018), couples who share the experience of disability can demonstrate a deeper understanding of each other, provide emotional and physical support that deepens their relationship, creates greater closeness, and fosters feelings of mutual support.

One of the literary works that raises the issue of disability and romantic relationships is the novel "Me Before You" by British author Jojo Moyes. This novel tells the story of Will Traynor, a young man who is completely paralyzed after an accident and how he ends up in a relationship with Louisa Clark, a young woman who becomes his caregiver. Through this novel, the author, Moyes, wants to explore how a disability experienced by an individual can affect romantic life. She also wants to challenge the common stereotype that people with disabilities cannot be considered romantically attractive. In the interview, as stated by Moyes (2012) she wants to show that people with disabilities still have the right to have a full life, including in romantic relationships.

There are three researches that discuss the novel "Me Before You" (2012). Ruth (Ruth, 2020) researched the analysis of Hierarchy of needs tiers and love and belonging needs. This analysis focused on using the theory of Abraham Maslov to find three needs for love and belonging needs. Banguis et al (2021) identified the novel's characters' use of affirming language, physical contact, quality time, acts of service, and receiving presents as examples of the language of love. The analysis focuses on the words and methods that the characters in the book use to convey their emotions. Yesa (2023) researched the forms of masculinity depicted and how the novel glorifies the notion of masculinity. The difference between this research analysis and the three previous analyses is about how disability can be a romantic attraction in the novel.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted as a literary research and used qualitative descriptive methods. According to Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative method are usually used to explore and understand social or human problems. This means that qualitative methods emphasize deep understanding, interpretation, and context of a phenomenon. In this study, qualitative approach that requires in – depth interpretation is used to reveal a better understanding of the influence of people with disabilities as a romantic attraction in Jojo Moyes's novel Me Before You.

The data analysis in this research used Rosemary Garland Thomson's feminist disability and Sylvia Walby' patriarchy theory, the data collected using reading techniques in the novel Me Before You (2012) by Jojo Moyes as the main research subject. This research was carried out by paying attention to

disability male character that became a romantic attraction to female character in the novel

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

1.1 Disability as a Romantic Attraction

This portrays disability not as a barrier to love and intimacy but as a part of Will's identity that must be faced and understood. The novel explores how disability can reshape relationships and personal identity, but also how caring, empathy connections and shared experiences can foster profound romantic attraction. Garland-Thomson (1997) said that the importance of reframing the perception of disability from a condition of decline to one of diversity and human richness. So, this perspective explores the romantic relationship between Louisa Clark and Will Traynor because it is particularly relevant to the context of Jojo Moyes novel 'Me Before You'. In the novel, Will, who was an active and successful banker prior to his accident, believing that he isn't longer worthy of love or attraction because of his disability.

However, in Louisa's attention and acceptance of Will's condition shows how disability is not something that will hinder her to attraction to him but, because of his disability she has a chance to know and understand him more. Changing her mind that person with disability can has a chance to has relationship with other is like a normal couple. As a Garland-Thomson (1997) states how a normative ideal about the body and mind shape romantic interest in relationships' is apparent.

The first quote below shows the evidence that relevant about Will's disability becomes romantic attraction for Louisa.

“My arms looped around his neck, I pulled back a little to look at him, no longer self-conscious. He glanced down at my chest. To be fair, with me positioned where I was, there wasn't anywhere else he could look. He lifted his gaze from my cleavage and raised an eyebrow.

“You know, you would never have let those breasts get so close to me if I weren't in a wheelchair,” he murmured.

I looked back at him steadily. “You would never have looked at my breasts if you hadn't been in a wheelchair.”

“What? Of course I would.”

“Nope. You would have been far too busy looking at the tall blond girls with the endless legs and the big hair, the ones who can smell an expense account at forty paces. And anyway, I wouldn't have been here. I would have been

serving the drinks over there. One of the invisibles.” Chapter 15, pages 269.

In this quote, Will acknowledges that his disability has allowed for a physical intimacy that would not have been possible if he were not in a wheelchair. This shows that Will's disability has created an opportunity for them to have a physical intimacy that would not have been possible if Will did not have a disability. Louisa also acknowledges that if Will did not have a disability, she would not have been as attractive to him. She calls herself “one of the invisibles,” meaning that without Will's disability, Louisa would not have received Will's attention and interest. This shows that Will's disability has made him more “visible” and attractive to Louisa.

All of these things show that disability is not a barrier, but rather a factor that opens up opportunities for Louisa to establish closeness and get attention from Will. In line with the theory of Thomas (1999) who views disability not only as a physical condition, but also as an experience that affects social interaction and the perception of others. Will's disability has changed Louisa's perspective on him and has given rise to a romantic interest so that disability is no longer seen as a deficiency but as a strength that allows for a more intimate and personal relationship.

This quote below illustrates Louisa's deep thoughts about will, covering various aspects such as anger, sadness, humor, as well as intelligence and an interesting personality.

“I lay back and I thought about Will. I thought about his anger and his sadness. I thought about what his mother had said—that I was one of the only people able to get through to him. I thought about him trying not to laugh at the “Molahonkey Song” on a night when the snow drifted gold past the window. I thought about the warm skin and soft hair and hands of someone living, someone who was far cleverer and funnier than I would ever be and who still couldn't see a better future than to obliterate himself. And finally, my head pressed into the pillow, I cried, because my life suddenly seemed so much darker and more complicated than I could ever have imagined” Chapter 9, pages 131.

The first sentence, “I lay back and I thought about Will. I thought about his anger and his sadness” shows Louisa's empathy and concern for Will's emotional state. As Garland-Thomson (2002) said disability can create deep emotional connection between disabled people and their partners. Louisa connects with Will's anger and sadness, which are part of his lived experience as a disabled person. “I

thought about what his mother had said—that I was one of the only people able to get through to him” this express Louisa’s sense of special ability to understand and connect with Will. Will’s disability allows Louisa to feel trusted and valued for her ability to be a companion and caregiver to a man who is dependent on her. Also Louisa is being captivated by Will’s physical and intellectual aspects, which contrast with his disability. In the context of patriarchy, Louisa feels called to be Will’s companion and caregiver, a role that gives her a sense of appreciation and empowerment. Will’s disability becomes a romantic attraction for Louisa, both emotionally, intellectually, and physically. It gives Louisa a sense of being needed valued and empowered.

Another quote below that describe how Will Traynor’s disability becomes a romantic attraction for Louisa and her efforts to take Will to various places and try to make him happy every day.

“I went to work each days thinking about other places I could take Will. I didn’t have any overall plan, I just focused each day on getting him out and about and trying to keep him happy.” Chapter 13, pages 178.

In the quote, Louisa actively tries to take Will to various places and maintain his happiness. This reflects how Louisa positions herself as a figure that cares for, supports, and accompanies Will in his disability. From a disability feminist perspective, Will’s disability can be seen as something that makes him vulnerable and powerless. Louisa sees this as something that attracts her and makes her want to protect him. Will’s disability gives Louisa a feeling of being needed, empowered, and that she has an important role in Will’s life. As Garland-Thomson (1997) stated that disability feminist view disability as a concept that can empower women. In this case, Louisa finds strength and satisfaction in her role as a companion and caregiver for Will, which makes her feel more empowered and needed than in previous relationships. Louisa’s attraction to Will lies not only in his disability itself, but also in the feeling of being needed, required and appreciated that Will gives Louisa.

This quotation below shows the intimate interactions and signs of romantic attraction between the two characters.

“At one point, when I started to feel properly awkward, I felt Will’s arm slide off the chair beside me, and his hand landed on my arm. I glanced up and he winked at me. I took his hand and squeezed it, grateful that he could see it. And

then he moved his chair back six inches, and brought me into the conversation with Mary Rawlinson”. Chapter 18, pages 263.

From the sentences, “when I started to feel properly awkward, I felt Will’s arm slide off the chair beside me, and his hand landed on my arm” this action shows that Will takes the initiative to build a physical connection with Louisa and he also tries to actively engage and build intimacy with Louisa despite his disability. She is also showing her appreciation for Will ability to engage and interact with her. It indicates that her attraction is not only in the physical or sexual aspect, but in Will’s ability to connect and empathize with her. Furthermore, “and brought me into the conversation with Mary Rawlinson” this quote shows Will’s concern to involve Louisa in social interaction. He not only focuses on the relationship between the two of them, but also tries to make Louisa as a part of his social circle. Will understand Louisa’s need to engage with the wider community and seeks to facilitate this. As Saxton (2006) said disability can open up space for women to build more inclusive and supportive relationships.

The quote below, Louisa expresses her feelings directly to Will and it shows that Will’s disability is not barrier for Louisa to attract in romantic relationships with him.

"I know this isn't a conventional love story. I know there are all sorts of reasons I shouldn't even be saying what I am. But I love you. I do. I knew it even when I left Patrick. And I think you might even love me a little bit."
Chapter 23, pages 325.

In this quote, Louisa acknowledges that her relationship with Will is not a typical love story. However, she states unequivocally that she loves Will, even after she left Patrick. This statement reveals the romantic attraction Louisa feels for Will, despite their non-conventional conditions. Walby (1990) also said women often feel powerless and constrained in male-dominated social structures. However, in her relationship with Will, Louisa seems to find a space where she feels valued and has more control. The quote shows that Louisa is aware of the “reasons” why she should not express her feelings. This suggest that there are pressure or social norms that usually limit women from expressing their love openly. Louisa chooses to ignore these limitations and boldly express her feelings to Will. It can be understood that Louisa’s romantic attraction to Will, who has disability, is rooted in the sense of respect, control and freedom of expression she finds in their relationship.

The next quote below shows how Will Traynor has motivated and changed Louisa's view of herself, which is one form of Louisa's romantic attraction to Will.

"Mum? I owe Will. I owe it to him to go. Who do you think got me to apply to college? Who do you think encouraged me to make something of myself, to travel places, to have ambitions? Who changed the way I think about everything? About myself even? Will did. I've done more, lived more, in the last six months than in the last twenty-seven years of my life." Chapter 26, pages 353.

In this quote, Louisa stated that Will has changed the way she thinks about herself and her life. She acknowledges that Will has encouraged her to pursue her ambitions and do things she has never done before. Louisa's statement reveals the romantic attraction she feels for Will, despite his disability. According to Walby (1990) women are often encouraged to conform to the norms and expectations set by men. In her relationship with Will, Louisa seems to have found a space where she can develop herself freely. Will has given Louisa new perspective and opportunities to grow and develop outside.

Not only has Will supported Louisa to travel and develop her ambitions, but he has also helped her to accept and value herself. Will's disability is not a barrier for Louisa, but rather a part of the life experience they share together. However, in her relationship with Will, Louisa seems to find equality and mutual respect, where Will's disability is not a barrier for Louisa to grow and develop. The romantic attraction Louisa feels for Will, who has a disability, is rooted in the freedom of expression, self-development, and mutual respect she finds in their relationship. Will's disability is not a barrier, but rather a part of the experience that can create a deep and supportive connection between the two.

2. Discussion

The analysis of Jojo Moyes' novel *Me Before You* reveals complex interplay between disability and romantic attraction, highlighting how disability is not merely a barrier to love but can also serve as a catalyst for deep emotional connections and intimacy. By employing feminist disability theory, the research uncovers the nuances of characters' relationships, particularly the dynamics between Will Traynor and Louisa Clark. The findings indicate that Will's disability reshapes the understanding of romantic attraction, as Louisa's feeling for him reveals a shift in perception where disability transcends its traditional negative

connotations. Instead of viewing Will solely through the lens of his physical limitations, Louisa recognizes his emotional depth, intelligence and humor, aligning with Garland-Thomson (2002) that disability can be reframed as a source of diversity and richness in human experience.

Moreover the emotional bond between Louisa and Will is significantly influenced by their shared experiences and Louisa's role as a caregiver, emphasizing that the dynamics of care and dependence create a unique intimacy. This fosters a sense of mutual support, resonating with Gerlach's (2018) findings that couples with shared experiences of disability often develop deeper emotional connections. Moyes also challenges prevailing stereotypes about disability and romantic relationships, illustrating that individuals with disabilities have the right to pursue fulfilling romantic lives, thereby questioning societal norms that often render them invisible in such contexts.

Additionally, the research highlights how Will's disability empowers Louisa, providing her with a sense of agency and purpose. In contrast to traditional patriarchal structures, their relationship allows for a redefinition of power dynamics, where Louisa takes an active role in shaping her identity and ambitions. This challenges the notion that disability inherently diminishes one's capacity for agency in romantic contexts. In summary, the discussion underscores that disability in *Me Before You* serves not only as a narrative device but a profound element that enriches the characters' romantic journey. The novel invites readers to reconsider the stereotypes surrounding disability and highlights the potential for love and connection to flourish in diverse forms. Future research could further explore these themes in other literary works, enriching the discourse on disability as a romantic attraction.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This analysis attempts to find how disability can be a romantic attraction in the novel entitled *Me Before You* (2012) by Jojo Moyes. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the disability of the main character is not a barrier to feeling romantic attraction. On the contrary, disability is actually an attraction in itself. The limitations of the character with disabilities make their partner feel needed and have control in the relationship. This shows that dominant standards are not always the standards in viewing romantic attraction. In addition, character with disabilities are also able to prioritize and facilitate their partners to do things that have never been done before. Thus providing new and challenging experiences.

On the other hand, another things that is an attraction is the existence of mutual attention and relationships, where communication and dominance are not only centered on one party. Together with their partners, the characters get the opportunity to interact with quality people, thus broadening their views. This shows that disability is not always seen as a deficiency, but can be an added value in a romantic relationship. Thus, disability in this novel is actually a unique and

challenging romantic attraction. So, in conclusion, the attraction that the attraction female character feels towards male character is due to his disability and has power in the relationship because plays the role of the dominant partner. Also the in the attraction she felt comes from the personality, shared experienced, financial support from the male character.

The researcher hopes that this research can be useful and can provide a contribution to the world of literature. This research can help further researchers who are interested in conducting similar research or who will conduct research on other novels. Future researchers may want to explore disability as a romantic attraction in greater detail.

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