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**Disability and "the Oppressive Assumptions of  
Normalcy" in Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You*  
(2012)**

*A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English as Partial Fulfilment  
of the Master Degree in Literature and Civilization*

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## *Dedications*

*To my precious parents ; thank you for always having my back...*

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## Abstract

This work of research, explores within its folds, the issues surrounding the representations of disabled characters in literature, and the role of normalcy in forming and perpetuating the negative perceptions of disability in fiction and reality. It sheds the light on the societal attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices that might play into the authors' portrayals of disability and disabled characters, along with the readers' interpretations of such narratives. This dissertation, therefore, brings in new understandings of normalcy and disability, displaying the manner in which normality is privileged in society and literature. It further examines the way normalcy as a constructed phenomenon is reproduced as a hegemonic ideal through oppressive portrayals of disability in literature. Under the lens of Disability Studies, this research attempts to disturb normalcy's hold through a critical analysis of *Me Before You*, a popular contemporary novel that introduced the theme of disability in a very controversial way. This investigation will reveal the process of normative oppression in Jojo Moyes' representation of disability as a tragedy, life obstacle, and fate worse than death.

## **Table of Contents**

Dedication.....	I
Acknowledgements.....	II
Abstract .....	III
Table of Contents.....	IV
General Introduction:.....	1

### **Chapter one: Disability and Normalcy in Literature**

1.1. Introduction.....	04
1.2. Disability, Perceptions, and Representations.....	04
1.2.1. Defining Disability .....	04
1.2.2. The Perceptions of Disability in Society.....	06
1.2.2.1. Historical Perceptions.....	07
1.2.2.2. Modern Perceptions.....	09
1.2.3. The Representations of Disability in Literature.....	11
1.3. Constructing Normalcy.....	14
1.3.1. The Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy in Literature.....	15
1.4. Disability Studies: Coming up Against Normalcy.....	16
1.4.1. Literary Disability Studies .....	18
1.4.1.1. Realistic Portrayals .....	20
1.5. Conclusion.....	23

**Chapter Two:** Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in  
*Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

2.1. Introduction.....	25
2.2. About the Author (Biographical sketch).....	25
2.3. Abridgment of the novel.....	26
2.4. Quadriplegia.....	29
2.5. Stereotypes and Prejudices.....	30
2.6. The Normative Oppression of Disability.....	31
2.6.1. Disability as a Tragedy.....	31
2.6.2. Undiagnosed Depression.....	33
2.6.3. The Erasure of Disability: Euthanasia.....	35
2.6.4. Romanticizing the Assisted Suicide.....	37
2.7. The Controversy around <i>Me Before You</i> .....	38
2.5.1. Moyes’ Response.....	41
2.8. Conclusion.....	43
General conclusion.....	44
Bibliography.....	46

Throughout the history of fiction, writers have been invested with the theme of disability, to serve various purposes in the plot. As representatives of society, authors have tried to create space for stories with disabled characters in their narratives. However, the fictional room granted to such characters does not appear to be similar to the so called normal or standard characters. An obvious binary distinction has been made between disability and normalcy, in which the disabled characters are usually depicted antithetically to the non-disabled characters.

In the literary field, authors often stress the normality, regularity and correctness of the able-bodied characters by misrepresenting the disabled ones, thereby minimizing them to a collection of stereotypes instead of normal human beings. Such negative representations of disability and disabled characters in literature remain imprinted the reader's memory even long after forgetting the storyline. According to Bowe(1978): "our memories of these and other characters often become indelible, impervious to any experiences we may have with disabled individuals in real life. Somewhere in the back of our minds we associate disabilities with sin, evil, and danger" ( p.109).

Moreover, disability has not only been represented as the opposite of normalcy, but it is often depicted as a tragedy and misfortune. "In novel after novel, authors portray diverse health conditions as defects rather than natural variations in the human body" (Mcleod, 2014, p.II).Such pejorative Perceptions of disability are not only prevalent in fiction, but they are even more ingrained in reality.

According to Michalko, there is a struggle in constructing an acknowledged and worthy social identity out of disability. Sometimes, society celebrates diversity and in different times equality, but never the two at one time. In the world of the normal, social difference such as disability, gender, race is reduced to an individual difference, which falls aptly to one side of the equality/difference dichotomy (2002). While debates and discourses, over the years, have been concentrating on race and gender,

very little attention has been allowed to disability. Nonetheless, Disability Studies emerged as a strong field that combats this social and literary injustice, shedding the light on the issues surrounding the representations and perceptions of disability in fiction and reality.

Building on the existing scholarship in the field of Literary Disability Studies, this research attempts to explore the nature of the representations of disability in literature, by further investigating its portrayal in Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You*, uncovering the stereotypes, prejudices and biases of normalcy that surround disability, oppress disabled people, and encourage their ill treatment in society.

*Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes is one of the numerous contemporary literary works that addressed the theme of disability. It tells the story of Will Traynor, whose life completely transformed after a motorcycle accident that left him quadriplegic or paralyzed from the neck down. Normalcy and disability are the major themes in the novel and they reflect Will's life before and after the accident, in which normalcy is the ideal and happy life Will had before the accident while disability is the obstacle that hinders him from living a normal life.

The following questions are to be raised:

- To which extent are the societal and literary perceptions of disability influenced by normative assumptions?
- How do the representations of disability in literature reproduce oppression?
- Which examples of this oppression can be found in Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You*?

This investigation is going to be divided into two chapters. The first one will introduce disability from a societal and literary context, highlighting the impacts of normative assumptions on the representations of disabled characters in fiction.



Moreover, the multidisciplinary field of Literary Disability Studies will be brought forward as a strong scholarly base for the further examination of the selected novel.

The second chapter is basically, an extended examination of the portrayal of disability in Jojo Moyes' celebrated novel *Me Before You*. It will be displaying some of the major stereotypes and prejudices which surround the theme of disability, along with the forms of normative oppression in the representation of disability and the disabled character Will Traynor.

# **Chapter one:**

## **Disability and Normalcy in Literature**

## **1.1. Introduction**

The present chapter sheds the light on the pejorative, ableist and normative-based portrayals of disabled characters throughout the history of fiction. The chapter is divided into four essential sections. In the first segment; disability is defined from a medical and social perspective, its societal perceptions are to be explored from a historical to modern level. However, the second section deals with its literary portrayals; showing how literature has been representing disabled characters in specific and common ways over the time. The fourth segment brings forth the concept of normalcy; unveiling its impact and influence in shaping the oppressive social and literary perception of disability. Finally, the fourth and last section, under the title *Coming up against Normalcy*, introduces the field of Disability Studies, along with Literary Disability Studies, and describes, based on this latter, how a realistic or authentic representation of disability should be.

## **1.2. Disability, Perceptions, and Representations**

Disabled people are considered as the nation's largest minority, and the only one that any individual can join at any time. As Irving Zola indicates, disability is practically a global phenomenon; we will be all disabled at certain point of our lives unless we die abruptly. (Shakespeare, 2006). Nonetheless, disability is still not recognised as a normal part of society. It is rather perceived as an abnormality or defect. Such pejorative perception is deeply rooted in the world's history and fiction.

### **1.2.1. Defining disability**

The concept of disability is quite complicated, and its complexity lies in its different societal, historical, philosophical, and constitutional interpretations. Disabled persons do not experience disability similarly, due to various factors. For this reason, the definition of disability is relative and varies according to the different contexts. Whatsoever, there has been a growing need for some agreed and common definitions, mainly to preserve the rights of disabled citizens in having their legal admission to certain disability services and assistance programmes. For this reason, several

definitions of the term disability have been given by different organizations around the globe.

According to The Disability Discrimination Act, a disabled individual is the one who has a mental or physical detriment that has significant and long-term negative outcomes on his or her capacity to carry out normal daily activities (1955). The Americans with Disabilities Act also defined disability as a physical or mental damage that limits one or several life activities (1990).

Disability, under the definition of The World Health Organization, is an umbrella term that covers impairments, involvement restraints, and activity limitations, in which impairment is a corporal or mental damage that affects the structure or function of the body, involvement constraints are a set of difficulties that the disabled person may face in his or her attempt to participate in various life situations, while an activity limitation is a restriction that disabled individual might be exposed to in certain areas of engagement (2011).

The definition given by the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps, is based on three criteria: impairment, disability and handicap. Impairment is any damage or deformity of psychical or anatomical construction; it can befall an organ or a system function. Disability, on the other hand, is any limitation, deficiency or insufficiency in the normal human functional ability and performance; it is a result of impairment. The third dimension is Handicap, which is even a more complicated word, since it is highly concerned with the disabled individuals in their societal entourage; it is defined as an impediment that occurs to a person due to impairment or disability, which restraints or hinders the completion of what is considered to be a normal societal role (1980).

Usually, disability and handicap are used as synonyms; writers and readers use them interchangeably, while in reality, disability alludes to a medical circumstance while handicap implies a barricade. Handicap is thought to have been derived from the time when people with disabilities had no choice but to beg in streets with their caps in

hands. Moreover, this term is hardly ever used in academic or activist circles nowadays, mainly because of its negative connotations.

Disability is often seen as an individual matter that only occurs to few people. As a response to such assumption, Titchkosky asserts: “We are never in our bodies alone” (2007, p. 5). She indicates in her *Disability, Self and Society* (2003) that the way disability is experienced by an individual in his or her society says a lot about its cultural meaning, therefore everyone who interacts with disability is engaged in producing its meaning and social identity.

### **1.2.2. The Perceptions of Disability in Society**

On a societal context, disability has proved to be a crucial phenomenon. According to the International Disability Foundation there are more than half a billion disabled people in the world and this number is increasing. Disability is quite complex because it is highly linked to the cause and effect relationship between features of both the body of an individual and the society he or she lives in.

The concept of disability can be comprehended from different patterns and prospects, with a sharp line between the medical and social model. On the medical or individual level, disability is associated with impairment, physical damage and bodily limitations. The social or collective model on the other hand, deals with it from a functional level, by focusing on the disabling entourage and social barricades (Oliver ,2009). According to Critical Realism<sup>1</sup>, disability cannot be defined as either biological or societal. Rather, it needs to be perceived as a multi-layered phenomenon that takes place on different platforms with different mediums.

Stiker indicates that the utmost significance of such social phenomenon exists in the quality of its social perception, and the way members of society treat the disabled minority (Titchkosky, 2003). This perception is demonstrated into positive

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<sup>1</sup> Critical realism is a philosophical approach associated with Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014), combines a general philosophy of science (transcendental realism) with a philosophy of social science (critical naturalism) to dance an interface between the natural and social worlds (Wikipedia).

and negative attitudes, which can denounce impaired persons, assess false obstructions upon them, deprive them from equal rights and opportunities, and declass them to a pitied second-class civilian.

### **1.2.2.1. Historical Perceptions**

The different societal perceptions of disability are deeply ingrained in the world's history and culture. People with disabilities, have usually been categorized and viewed in a negative way, or as Somdev Banik indicates: "surviving at the periphery of the world of the normal" (2016, p.198).

Disability was, as it is too often today, perceived negatively. The Greeks for instance, considered the ailing to be inferior. In ancient Greece, whenever a city is stricken by a crisis or catastrophe, the citizens would select an offering to placate the enraged Gods and to purify the city; the *scapegoat*, or *pharmakos*, would be either exiled eternally, or slaughtered. Disabled people, who were societally considered as worthless and outcast creators were considered as perfect scapegoats. (Compton,2006)

The surviving of the fittest ideology<sup>2</sup> was even adopted by the Greece's greatest and most respected philosophers. In Plato's *Republic*, he suggested that the disfigured and deformed progeny must be sent away to some mysterious unknown places (Goldberg , Lippman, 1974). In "Book Five" of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates meditates, "The offspring of the inferior, and any of the other sorts who are born defective, they will properly dispose of in secret, so that no one will know what has become of them". (1943, n.p). Aristotle agrees, saying in *The Politics*: "let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared" (Van, Viljoen, 1959). Plato's *Republic* and the *Utopis of Diodorus*, were places where disability and impairment were unaccepted. Plato not only said that offspring with disabilities must be executed, but that disabled clerics were severely forbidden. In *Utopis*, disabled citizens were even instructed to kill themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> The survival of the fittest ideology is the idea that certain people become powerful in society because they are innately better (History.com).

Disability was also considered as a stigma. According to the sociologist, Erving Goffman, the Greeks coined the term stigma to refer to physical signs that marked bad and unpleasant characteristics about the moral of their holders. Slaves, criminal and traitors were distinguished by such indications to be avoided when seen. Goffman divides stigma to three categories. Disability or what he names the “abomination of the body” is one of them ( 1963, p.23).

Even though the Romans dominated the territory after the decline of the Greek Empire, the antagonistic attitudes towards disability and impairment lasted. The abuse of disabled people was extended by the Romans. They too, saw disability as a stigma, put to death children with deformities, and offered sacrifices or scapegoats. They were fascinated with the *Freak Show*<sup>3</sup> spectacle, where disabled people were used as entertainers. According to Plutarch and Longinus, many deformed children were kept in boxes in order to be sold at the *Terator Agora*, or the freak market.

On the other hand, “Early Christian doctrine introduced the view that disease is neither a disgrace nor a punishment for sins but, on the contrary, a means of purification and a way of grace.”(Baker, 1953, p.40). During the sixteenth century, however, Christians such as Luther and John Calvin, believed that people with disabilities along with the mentally retarded persons, were possessed by demons and evil spirits, which can only be exorcised by subjugating the impaired individuals to mental or physical harm (Thomas ,1957).

In the nineteenth century, supporters of social Darwinism disapproved with the governmental support and assistance of the poor and infirm citizens. According to their reasoning, the maintenance of the unfit would hamper the process of natural selection and corrupt the selection of the fittest (Hobbs ,1973). Such belief persisted in the twenty century and after; according to Mitchell & Snyder, even countries who were in a military conflict at that time, culturally agreed on the menace of disability or what they called defect (Mitchell , Snyder, 2003).

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<sup>3</sup> A display of people or animals with unusual or grotesque physical features, as at a circus or carnival sideshow ( Dictionary.com).

Throughout history, disability has been perceived as a misfortune or defect that must be erased by the total elimination of the disabled elements or individuals, who were also considered as sinful and worthless creatures. Disability was a symbol of evilness and wretchedness. For this reason, disabled people were either killed or exiled.

### **1.2.2.2. Modern Perceptions**

Although the cultural and societal perception of disability has changed over the years, throughout the world, the remnants of past beliefs and traditions are still affecting the world's perception of disability. The social attitude towards disabled people on a cross-cultural level is a display of different elements that echo leniency, antipathy, affection, homage, pity, dread, avoidance, and antagonism (Thomas, 1957). In most societies, individuals with impairments are classified as deviants rather than inmates.

This alienation and isolation of people is due in high part to ignorance, superstition, and mere stereotypes that arose both from dearth of correct knowledge of disability and the transmitted thinking and old beliefs. People with disabilities are highly affected by these attitudes, prejudices and beliefs. Even though the incorporation of individuals with disabilities in society has been ameliorated in the last few years, the general public still perceives disabled individuals as unordinary, dependent and pitiful people. For this reason, they are still denied from properly engaging and contributing to society.

The social rejection of disabled citizens causes them, a sense of burdening, loneliness, unworthiness and uselessness. They may even face hindrances in doing the usual things other non-disabled people engage in. In addition, people with disabilities have very little access to information; in media for instance, there is a clear lack of



subtitles and sign language in TV programmes, along with a scarce number of publications in braille<sup>4</sup>.

Societal judgments are usually grounded on corporal and physical appearances. As Erving Goffman (1963) stated : “Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of these categories”(p.2). When one carries an unwanted trait, he or she is directly categorized within a specific devalued and discriminated category, where physical impairment is considered a decisive factor in the identification of the disabled person’s demeanour and character, and broadly responsible for his or her life’s complications. Such attitudes not only decide which treatment is best accorded to people with physical deviation but also his or her self-worth in society and life in general.

Nicholas Hobbs (1973), the American psychologist, believes that a child with a disability perceive an image about himself from his entourage that influences in a high degree the way he feels about himself, how he should act and operate in society. Beatrice Ann Wright (1960), on the other hand, views the notion of the self as a social looking glass, where thoughts and feelings about the self-develop principally as a consequence of interaction with others in society .Accordingly, the self-perception of disabled individuals is just a mirror of the societal prejudices and stereotypes made about them. The American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951) describes this process as the internalization of role expectancy. Hence, this attitude happens on both the individual and group level. In the large society, the minority of the able-bodied people who are interacting directly with disability and non- able bodied persons seem to act according to some societal stereotypes about disability.

People with disabilities are usually faced with avoidance, by other members of society. Richard Roessler and Barry Bolton (1978) summarised the reasons of such evasion in few points: “Non-disabled persons are fearful of disablement, disfigurement, loss of sensory capacity, loss of self-control, etc. Therefore, contact with afflicted persons causes intense discomfort and arouses anxiety; hence, disabled

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<sup>4</sup> A form of written language for blind people, in which characters are represented by patterns of raised dots that are felt with the fingertips ( Lexico.com).

persons are avoided and efforts are made to segregate them and isolate them” (p.12). According to Shirley Cohen “the well-bodied fear handicap germs.”(1977, p.151).Such antipathy signifies disability discrimination, or what has been termed ableism or handicappism, which is behaving with persons with disabilities in a less favourable way. Morgan Patipa wrote in the odysseyonline : “I am one of those people, one who has a physical disability and is often treated and talked to as though I am not equal to my nondisabled peers” (2019, para.4).

Since the first times people began being diagnosed and identified as disabled, nondisabled members of society have been taught to categorize the ones with disabilities as some inferior beings, which is totally injudicious and nescient. Despite it is somehow subtle; such attitude seems to still be common in nowadays ‘society. Nevertheless, some people may argue that things are changing in the context of societal vision of disability, and that the treatment of persons with disabilities has gotten better. While that might be true, the world has not really gotten to a stage of full social equality between the disabled citizens and the nondisabled ones.

Overall, the treatment of impaired citizens by the rest of community is such a complex and broad issue that cannot be simply narrowed down in few generalizations. For this reason, studies about disability perception must be specific enough in order for the results to be clear and context related. For example, the misrepresentations of disability and disabled individuals in both media and literature are one of the important issues that need more attention, and should be studied thoroughly.

### **1.2.3. The Representations of Disability in Literature:**

Another cause why people with disabilities are often victims of handicappism, is the fact that readers, whether young or adults, are exposed to books in which disabled characters are mostly represented in certain categories ; as wicked, evil, wrongdoer, pitiful, and dependent (Moore, 1984). Such representations foster negative beliefs, feelings, and behavioural tendencies toward disabled people.

Cynthia Shurtleff and Dianne Monson (1979), in their study of the effects of negative characterizations and representations of disabled characters, note that children have linked the prosthesis used by Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* with the evilness and viciousness of his character. Similarly, readers unconsciously swallow the exclusionary attitudes conveyed in this literature.

From Shakespeare's halting Richard to the sightless citizens of Well's *The Country of the Blind* (1904), from the mentally disabled Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), to McCullers's deaf John in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), from Chinua Achebe's faltering Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), to Sinha's bodily distorted narrator in *Animal's People* (1977), disability appears in every time and literary tradition (Mambrol, 2018). Whether in epic, classic or modern literature, it is not only represented as the opposite to normality, but it is often seen as a misfortune and life obstacle. Disabled characters are usually given either the villain, pitied, or inspirational roles, in the plot, unless the story is a biography.

Tales and stories of the past represent a harmony between beauty and value. However, they also imply that disabled persons are different, less than normal, and that disabilities are "punishments we bring upon ourselves by our sinful behaviour" (Cohen, 1977, p.151). This twisted mind in the twisted body conception is a favoured literary mechanism in depicting the malevolent and mischievous characters. In these narratives, physical correctness is equalized to goodness, whereas disability is associated with evil. The clash between normality and deformity is mirrored through the usual conflict between good and evil, where the sinister disabled characters are determined to harm the good ones, till the moment they die or get killed at the end of the story.

There are numerous examples of biased portrayals of disability in literature which enhance the reader's negative attitude towards it. One of the popular examples is Shakespeare's Richard III, who was not disabled in reality, but was made a disabled character to signify his evilness. Shakespeare portrayed Richard as a subtle, false, and treacherous hunchback guilty of ruthless murder even of children to achieve his mean end. The Grimm brothers' folk tales also contain evil characters with deformities such

as the witches who keep trying to harm innocent children. Robert Louis Stevenson, in *Treasure Island*, portrays the one-legged John Silver and the sightless cadgers as wretched and evil, suggesting that people with disabilities are not worth any trust.

As previously mentioned, non-disabled members of society at a large scale, usually view disability with a guilty complex, thereby they tend to avoid interaction with disabled people. Authors use this perception of fear and suspicion in literature to portray characters with disabilities as sinister and evil. Conclusively; their tragic fates are perceived by the readers as a kind of divine justice.

An example of this attitude from classic literature is Oedipus, Sophocles' character, whose disability symbolises the aberrant and divergent relationship he has with his parents, as well as, his corrupted and cursed reign of the kingdom of Thebes: Since the moment Oedipus climbs to the throne, the kingdom suffers from different calamities and catastrophes. In addition to that, he violates two of the binding cultural taboos: first, he assassinates his father and then commits adultery with his own mother. Oedipus blinds himself as an eternal punishment for his crimes and sins. Another example of disability's aversion in literature is Quasimodo, in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, who gets discarded by society because of his unsightliness. (Banik, 2016)

Disabled characters are also depicted as helpless and pitiable receivers, who are completely dependent on the able bodied people to survive. In the book, *Heidi*, Klara, Heidi's disabled friend, is described as an "invalid who never goes out, but who is seldom impatient" (Spyri, 1980, p.73). Disability's domesticity became one of the indispensable factors in the representations of disabled characters, promoting the stereotype that disabled people cannot have active and normal lives outside their homes.

Contemporary literature also includes many handicappist or ableist stereotypes. John Neufield, in *Twink* (1970, p.n), describes the former protagonist and her friend who have cerebral palsy as "twisted, scarecrow figures". In addition, Neufield portrayed Twink, as both extremely disabled, and intelligent, in an unrealistic way.

Literature can also encourage the attitude of avoidance toward disabled people by representing it in narratives as a natural response to impaired persons ; in *Winning* by Robin F. Brancato (1977), Gary Madden, a high school senior gets paralyzed, from the neck down, due to a football accident, he is forced to face the limitations of life as a disabled teenager. When his friends come to visit him at the hospital, they start joking around with each other instead of facing Gary , demonstrating perfectly the aforementioned irritation, uncertainty ,and avoidance described by Roessler and Bolton (1978) that take over people when interacting with disabled persons in real life.

The image of disability in both fiction and reality is usually shrouded with ignorance and misunderstanding, due to the already constructed cultural and societal stereotypes about disability. This mostly negative disability perception only impacts, restricts and limits the literary representations of disabled characters in literature.

### **1.3. Constructing Normalcy**

From the dawn of humanity, people have furnished a set of standards for the ideal or normal state of being. These constructed norms are deeply rooted in the world's cultures and they play a vital role in deciding the worth of a person in society. The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2004) explains that the human race has developed in different contexts, a conception of *us* versus *them* , in which the *us* is understood as being on the side of the creator, nature, and Science, while *them* signifies the others; those who are considered to be abnormal, inferior, parasites, and pests. According to these constructed social perspectives, the fear of abnormality equals the fear of *them*, and it is perceived as completely normal and natural.

According to the sociologist Robert Drake, normalcy is not a congenital destined condition, but rather, the set of acknowledged standards and values which predominate in a certain society or culture at any given time (1996). Normalcy is based on the normative theory, which defines normality as a social, cultural and ideological model of the complete and adequate human being (Bolt, 2014). The further one moves from the normative standard,

the more powerless and marginalized one becomes. Therefore, normalcy is profoundly associated with social categorizations (Loseke, 2003).

According to Tanya Titchkosky, and Rod Michalko: “normalcy matters because it is understood as the legitimate way of being in the world and the only version of the good life” (2009, p.5). Such perception of normalcy can be oppressive to various categories of people such as the ones with disabilities, who may not fully correspond to the bodily constructed normative standards offered by society or culture.

### **1.3.1. The Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy in Literature**

Literature is one of the mechanisms that are working furtively on the side of normative oppression. The emphasis in literary portrayals that some characters are more valuable than others indicates an oppression of normalcy that positions disability on the side of the unwanted other.

Oppressive portrayals of disabled characters are easy to notice throughout the book industry. In western dramatic and literary canon, disability is usually linked to the character's inner psychological or emotional state. It either signifies a denial of truth, viciousness, or a sign of disgrace. Disability is also portrayed and perceived as an extraordinary phenomenon and a misfortune that must be overcome or disappear, a depiction that includes an explicit “normative violence” (Titchkosky, 2007, p.178).

The normality genre further reinforces the fallacy of normalcy through erasing disability at the ends of narratives either by curing the disabled characters or completely ending their lives. Moreover, the death of these characters is usually romanticized and portrayed as a way of salvation from the unbearable torture of disability, which is highly exaggerated, unauthentic, and oppressive to a whole community of identified disabled people.

The depiction of disability as an obstacle to overcome is another example of normalcy's oppression. According to the normative and oppressive perceptions in

which disability is understood in the world, disability is just an inferior and terrible way of being, and an unimaginable life which is better be eradicated.

In *The Difference that Disability Makes* (2002), Rod Michalko has this to say about disability's rejection:

I focus on disability as a political act that is suffered by both disabled people and non-disabled ones, albeit differently. Suffering here does not refer to the conventional sense of suffering a disability but refers instead to the suffering of the multitude of interpretations of disability, the political acts that culturally organize and define disability, the suffering of our society's choices made in regard to the meaning of disability. (p.15)

Furthermore, the suffering from wrong perceptions of disability is made worse through its literary portrayals, which draw it as bad, feeble, inferior, hapless, piteous, tragic, evil, etc. Such images promote and justify the ill-treatment and marginalization of the disabled community in society.

Narratives, through history, have used disability and impairment as distinctive twists in the plot; however, such themes have been portrayed outside the ranks of the normal. The alienation, disqualification, dehumanization, and incapacitation of disability are common attitudes in literature. Yet, what is not so common is the possibility of a different conception of normality.

#### **1.4. Disability Studies: Coming up Against Normalcy**

Disability Studies is a sprouting multifaceted arena. Despite it is still relatively new to the scholarly field, it has steadfastly settled itself as an earnest domain in academic and literary research. This field came up with two projects; the first one is uncovering and resisting the domination and supremacy of normalcy in society and culture, while the second one is examining the way this normalcy has been sustained through disability's representations; whether in education, media, or literature.

This interdisciplinary field of inquiry emerged in the western world, specifically in the United States, and United Kingdom, in the late nineteenth century following of the success of the disability rights movements, and the spread of various scholarly works like the ones of Ervin Goffman, besides to the emergence of influential multidisciplinary identity based approaches such as critical race, feminist and queer theory that produced new ideas and understandings in the humanities. Such interfacial approaches guided disability studies to come forth as a significant oriented activist quest (Mambrol ,2018).

One of the marking characteristics of Disability Studies is its approach to disability as a social and political phenomenon, instead of an individual and a medical problem, as it has usually been perceived. Disability studies' scholars believe that the medical model produces negative meanings of disability through the stigmatization of people with disabilities as flawed, inferior, and in need of help. Therefore, they contend that disability is constructed as much by the cultural and societal norms as by the physical status.

These scholars have adopted a social model that emphasises on the way disabled people are perceived and treated in society and even in fiction .Such approach resembles to the other rights-based identity fields as feminism for example; the distinguished feminist Simone the Beauvoir once wrote that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, indicting that society and culture, not biology, are the factors which decide what it means to be a woman (1652, p.283).

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson once said that she wanted to move disability from the medical sphere into that of political minorities, and to remold it from a pathological to an ethnical type, because she realized that the richness of the disability experience is much more than the oppressive way it is understood in society (1997).

Disability Studies, like many other fields has had fissures and gaps. However, it succeeded in allowing the disabled minority a voice in the scholarly space, and it is working to change society's understandings and perceptions of disability .It permits



the disabled people to gaze back at those who have stared at them for a long time, to bend society's view back on itself, and reveal the points that nondisabled people seem to not be aware of. It also attempts to highlight disability as a social phenomenon and to show how interrelated human beings are and how their visions get minimized when assuming that a certain life is invaluable.

### **1.4.1. Literary Disability Studies**

The field of Literary Disability Studies appeared substantially, as a response to the constant erasure and misrepresentation of disability in fiction. In a sense, it is a therapeutic and reformatory attempt to redress the falsifications in the perception and understanding of disability in the traditional canon.

Literature, as mentioned previously, is one of the conventional mechanisms that are contributing heavily in producing these misrepresentations. Nevertheless, it is still an important tool in the inquiry of Literary Disability Studies, since; it provides the researchers with the materials needed for their analyses, that aim to point out the issues surrounding disability's perceptions and representations.

Scholars and critics in Literary Disability Studies have put into examination literary texts written by non-disabled authors, exactly the same way feminist scholars have investigated females' characterizations in male-authored works, or orientalist have looked into western representations of eastern characters.

There are many problems concerning the portrayals of disability whether in literature or media: they usually individualize disability and promote it as an individual or hardly a familial issue, depicting it as an isolable phenomenon, that relates only to itself and the persons who have specific conditions. Furthermore, disability is usually seen and presented as a problem and an obstacle which clearly interposes with viewing it as an idea or a cultural phenomenon. Another issue is the absence of subjectivity, or in other words; the voice and perspective of disabled people. There is also the objectification of disabled characters; the idea that disabled people are there only to

inspire others, to make them feel better about themselves and their conditions, and it hardly ever exists a story about a disability without the inspiration factor .

When the interest of literary critics and scholars grow towards disability, they discovered it around them, just like gender and race ( Thompson, 2013). They started recognizing the manners in which disability is perceived in literary works, society, and culture. Yet, one of the first matters they gave attention to was not primarily disability, but normalcy, being socially constructed and heavily influential.

In *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Lennard J. Davis set normalcy on the list of critical examinations, just like the way researchers in Critical Race Studies investigate the notion of whiteness. Davis linked the concept of normalcy with the Eugenics; a movement that was influenced by Darwin's theories of natural selection, it arose in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and endeavoured to reduce the number of those who were classified within the unfit category, which included disabled people along with other ethnic minorities.

Moreover, Davis indicated that a binary distinction between the normality and abnormality has traced the development of the novel. In this context, he wrote, "the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her" (2006, p.3 ).

Many other scholars in the field of Literary Disability Studies have further investigated the enforcement of normalcy in literature, and most of them have come up with a conclusion; that the western culture and literature often buttress the norm, which has serious impact on the disabled community. Influenced by Ervin Goffman's ideas in *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson invented the term 'normate' to represent an idealistic status that has power and supremacy in society (1997). Furthermore, drawing on Robert Bodgan's 1988 analysis of the *Freak Show*, she explained how this latter helped in spreading and developing the

normative thinking through presenting people with special bodies and the ones with disabilities as public entertainers.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder contend in *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000) that writers usually use the theme of disability to serve certain purposes in the plot and to eventually reassert normalcy in their narratives. They summarised this process into various steps. First of all, they give a story or an explanation to disability. Secondly, they propose the outcomes and struggles of disability, and in the end they erase disability; either by some medical treatment or the total elimination of the disabled character, to bring back a sense of normative order in the novel.

Furthermore, Literary Disability Studies emphasises on reconsidering the language used in alluding to people with disabilities, for some terms, phrases and metaphors can debase them such as gimp, spastic, retarded, lame, invalid and even handicapped . This field has given the chance to the disabled community to speak for themselves, express their concerns and thoughts about their representations in fiction, and to finally come up with some guidelines of realistic portrayals of disability .

#### **1.4.1.1. Realistic portrayals**

Although the majority of disabled characters' portrayals in contemporary "literature ... are bad" (Cohen, 1977, p.151), scholars in field of Literary Disability Studies have high hopes in the possibility of change; they are actively working to promote positive representations of disabled characters in fiction. Readers need to acquire the ability to differentiate between literature in which disabled characters signify prejudice and stereotypes and the literature that represents them authentically (Baskin and Harris, 1977).

Accurate portrayals of disability can be identified through certain guidelines, composed by the National Center on Educational Media and Materials for the Handicapped (1977): disabled characters should be depicted engaging in various activities instead of being isolated in a domestic environment due to their disabilities,

discriminatory Terms such as miserable, lame, pitiful should not be included in the description of characters with disabilities; the materials in which only vague words describe disabling conditions may indicate that the authors lack the credentials essential for conveying accurate messages. Moreover, literature should present characters with disabilities and the non-disabled ones in a reciprocal beneficial interaction, since the disabled characters are often depicted as receivers of generous acts by the non-disabled, and should include realistic stories about characters who adapt to their disabilities, thus, representing examples and role models which disabled readers can look up to. Furthermore, literature should not stress any binary distinctions between those with disabilities and those without, only if it is indispensable, and must not involve pity, nor other negative emotions and attitudes.

Donna E. Norton, in *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature* (1995), describes how disability should ideally be depicted in literature through three guidelines: Firstly, authors must handle the physical, functional, and emotional status of the disabled character authentically but not didactically. Secondly, non-disabled characters' behaviours with disabled characters should be portrayed realistically, and finally, accurate information about the disabling conditions and the physical capacities of disabled individuals must be included in the texts.

It is quite impossible not to notice that the above guidelines are not fully established in literature, which is, on one hand, supposed to be an empowering medium for disabled people around the world, and on the other hand, a crucial tool in teaching able-bodied persons about the disabled others, in which their perception of this category of people as the brave ones who are overcoming great odds, only perpetuates stigma about disability, and carries it further, since it deals with it as a tragedy and an individual misfortune. It is also very important to note that genuine and accurate endings to disability stories are considered as unhappy ones, this belief is due to the oppressive normative aspects that are still prominent in literature.

The disability scholar, Hugh Gregory Gallagher describes what he calls the land of the crippled as a place that is surrounded by a huge wall, in which whatever happens inside stays completely unknown to those who are outside. He further explains that it is the mission of writers to explore such ambiguous places, destroy the wall, and dig for knowledge (1999). Nevertheless, disability's representation in literature is reduced to a specific type of "overcoming stories" (Titchkosky, 2007, p.181). The only purpose allowed to disability, whereas in real life or fiction seems to be an individual phenomenon that must be overcome. Accordingly, there is no such comprehension of disability as a social phenomenon.

Nevertheless, Literary Disability Studies' scholars believe that the same narrative that are sustaining norms and reproducing normative oppression can still be written with new visions and understandings of disability, which further disturb these norms by producing new signs, and offering new readings of texts.

Realistic portrayals of disability do not only depict the characters' physical weaknesses, but, also, their power and stability in adapting to their physical conditions. These characters are not described as evil or vicious human beings; they are rather portrayed as dynamic, energetic and independent individuals. Not necessarily joyous and happy all the time or fully accepted by the non-disabled people, thus an accurate representation of such characters is the one which is free of exaggeration and the usual consumed stereotypes about disability.

The writing of such literature that captures disability in a different and unfamiliar way leads people to reconsider their social perceptions and attitudes towards disabled people, and to conclusively, form new conceptions about them. For this reason, Disability Studies and Disability Activism are constantly operating to deracinate normalcy from its pre-established erroneous social and literary supremacy.

## **6. Conclusion**

The previous chapter explored, under the lens of disability studies, the societal and literary perceptions of disability, and the role of normalcy in fashioning these perceptions. It started first, by defining disability from different perspectives, most commonly the medical model that views it as an impairment, and the social model which treats it as a social and cultural phenomenon. The chapter's main focus was on disability's negative portrayals in fiction, however, for the sake of clarifying the real sources of such unique and common representations in literature, there was a need to investigate deeper in its societal and cultural backgrounds. For this reason, the chapter first brought to light the negative ways it has been perceived by societies from a historical to a modern level to subsequently introduce the unfair and ableist portrayals of disabled characters throughout the history of fiction, showing afterwards the role of normalcy in shaping and sustaining these oppressive representations. Last but not least, the chapter introduced the field of Disability Studies, and the subfield of Literary Disability Studies, and provided certain guidelines for authors and even readers to recognize the ways in which disability can be portrayed realistically.

**Chapter Two:**

**Disability and “the  
Oppressive Assumptions of  
Normalcy” in *Me Before You*  
by Jojo Moyes.**

## 2.1. Introduction

The chapter in hand, based on what has been thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter, explores the way disability is portrayed in Jojo Moyes’s novel *Me Before you*, and investigates the influence of normalcy on its representation of a disabled character. The chapter opens up with a brief biographical sketch of the author. Followed by a summary of the selected novel, which includes the most important events needed for this examination. Through a systematic analysis of the text, a set of disability stereotypes and prejudices are to be revealed, along with the oppressive assumptions of normalcy that surround Moyes’ depiction of the disabled character Will Traynor. Finally, at the end of this segment, the controversy that *Me Before You* has provoked within the disability community and activists is displayed.

## 2.2. About the Author (Biographical Sketch)

Jojo Moyes is an English journalist, a romance novelist, a screenwriter, and one of the few authors who had won the Romantic Novel of the Year Award<sup>5</sup> twice. She lives in England, near Saffron Walden with her journalist husband, Charles Arthur, and their three children.

Pauline Sara-Jo was born on the fourth of August 1969 in London, England where she grew up. She had worked in various jobs before obtaining a diploma from The Royal Holloway and Bedford New College. She was a typist of braille texts for blind people at NatWest, and a brochure writer for Club 18-30. In 1992, she got a scholarship supported by *The Independent* newspaper to join the postgraduate newspaper journalism course at City University.

Pauline had a career of ten years in journalism; after a whole year working for *The South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong, she moved to *The Independent*, where she spent nine years of her life. She worked as a general news reporter, until 1998

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<sup>5</sup> The Romantic Novel of the Year Award is an award for romance novels since 1960, presented by Romantic Novelists' Association ( Wikipedia)



## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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when she became Assistant News Editor. In January 2000, she returned to writing as the Arts and Media Correspondent. She has become a full time author since publishing her first novel *Sheltering Rain* in 2002 under the pen name Jojo Moyes. Subsequently, she has accomplished more than eleven novels, all of which have been broadly admired.

In 2012, Jojo published *Me Before You* which is one of her most popular novels. The book was a bestseller for weeks and sold over eight million copies over the world. It has also been nominated for Book of the Year at the UK Galaxy Book Awards. In June 2016, a very successful film adaptation of *Me Before* was released, and Jojo Moyes was the screenwriter.

### **2.3. Abridgement of the Novel**

*Me Before You* turns around Will Traynor, a vigorous and affluent British young man, who had a very exceptional life; being a successful business executive and an extravagant sports enthusiast. He enjoyed exploring the world to the extreme, travelling to exotic places, and climbing highlands, until one rainy day, he accidentally got hit by a motorcycle while crossing the street. The accident left him quadriplegic (almost completely paralyzed) for two years. Will had to go through innumerable doctors' appointments and endure regular pain. In addition, the accident cost him his girlfriend, his home which was not wheelchair accessible, and his old life.

The story opens up with Louisa Clark, a twenty six years old girl who lives an exceedingly ordinary life in a small town in England. She had a very comfortable job at a tea shop until its owner suddenly decided to shut the place down, leaving her idle. Lou, who is supposed to help Treena ;her single mother sister supporting their working class family financially, starts searching up for another job. After several fruitless visits to the Job Centre, she gets a unique employment opportunity as a caregiver of Will Traynor. Despite Louisa's obvious lack of experience, Camilla, Will's mother hires her believing that she can enliven his mood. She informs Lou that her job

Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in  
*Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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requires her to watch Will during hours of the day, although he already has a professional who cares for his medical needs, Nathan, besides to his own father, Steven, an amiable upper-class businessman whose marriage to Camilla is unstable.

Louisa and Will's relationship was quite stony and unsteady at the beginning owing to his acerbity, harshness and constant anger over being disabled. The tension between the two exacerbated, especially when Will's ex-girlfriend, Alicia, and his best friend Rupert informed him that they were getting married. However, with time and Louisa's constant care, Will slowly warms up to Lou, becoming more conversational and outgoing. They both start sharing their experiences, and their relationship grows closer and closer. Through their usual chats, Will tells Lou about his distinctive adventures and travels, and that his favourite place is a café in Paris. He also tries to motivate Louisa to get out of her comfort zone and seek for change. The personalities of both Will and Louisa are parables of the Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle characters in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Lou is the uncultured, though not senseless, aide and Will is the cultivated and experienced educator who enlightens her about life, and has a tremendous influence on her self-perception and potentials.

One day, however, Louisa remarks a scar in Will's wrists. Afterward, she knows by accident that he tried to commit suicide when his mother Camilla dismissed his demand to end his life through Dignitas, a Swiss-based assisted suicide institution. Terrified by his essay, Camilla felt obliged to accept her son's request, however, with one condition; to keep living for six more months, hoping that, by time, he will change his mind and be able to see that his life is worth living. Moreover, Lou learns about the real reason behind her employment, which is assuring he doesn't hurt himself before the assisted suicide appointment.

Although Lou is agitated by the discovery, she conceals her knowledge of Will and Camilla's agreement and instead sets a plan to help him out; with the help of her sister Treena, she organizes a series of journeys to show him that life is still worth living. Some of these treks don't go very well, such as one ill-advised trip to a horses

## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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‘race. But others are truly astonishing, like a romantic classic music concert that Lou accompanies will to as his date. Meanwhile, Louisa breaks up with her athletic boyfriend Patrick, after a relationship of six years, because of her growing feelings towards Will. In addition, her family’s financial situation gets worse when her father loses his job. However, Will intervenes, by offering Mr Clark a suitable job.

Moreover, the two attend Alicia and Rupert's wedding where they have exceptional moments; dancing and laughing all the time. Will tells Louisa that she is the only reason he wakes every day. Louisa seizes the chance to convince Will to go with her on a vacation, he accepts, however, his sudden near-fatal pneumonia, prevents the whole thing. Louisa abolishes her previous plans. Alternatively, she takes Will to the island of Mauritius (a small coastal African island). They both get overwhelmed by this magical and exotic place, not to bring their growing sentiments for each other.

In the night prior to returning home, Louisa confesses her love to Will, while that latter declares that there is something important that she needs to know about. Louisa can sense what he is about to say, so she confronts him admitting that she already knows about his assisted suicide decision. Will tells Lou that the moments he spent with her are precious and very special; however he is still going through with his plan, because he cannot endure living in a wheelchair saying: “I can't be the kind of man who just accepts this” (Moyes,2012). Furious and ached, Louisa runs away crying and refuses to speak to him again. When they get back home, Will's parents are amazed by his good physical condition. While Louisa, resigns from her job as his caregiver. Steven and Camilia automatically grasp that their son did not change his mind about Euthanasia.

On the night of Will's flight to Switzerland, Louisa capitulates and decides to be with him during his last instants. She makes it in time to Dignitas, where they express their love for each other and share some emotional moments, shortly before he dies in the clinic.

Before his death, Will writes Lou a letter with one remark on; to be only opened while she is in the Paris café he told her about previously. Lou relents to his will and

goes to that place in Paris and starts reading the letter; she knows from it that Will has left her a considerable heritage so that she can continue her education and be able to fully experience life. Besides, Will expressed through these words his sorrow over hurting her and causing her pain, nonetheless, he was hoping that she will emerge from the other end of her sadness as a better person to start a bold new chapter in her life.

## 2.4. Quadriplegia

*Me Before You* is a romance novel, it is mainly about love and family; it portrays the budding romance between these two evidently mismatched characters, but above all it is a story about disability. While Louisa has full use of her body, Will has been quadriplegic since a traffic accident several years ago. He has been diagnosed with a C5-6 quadriplegia with a limited movement in one arm only, requiring twenty-four-hour care.

Quadriplegia or Tetraplegia is basically a partial or complete disability of all four extremities as well as the torso. It is generated by spinal cord damage, in which the quadriplegic persons lose sensation and control in most of their upper and lower parts, usually starting from the shoulder area or the neck down. Moreover, their motor control on the bowel and bladder circulation can be affected as well. Subsequently, they may develop other health problems such as infections, diabetes, digestive problems, breathing complications, along with depression. Besides, their life expectancy might be lower than the non-disabled people and the ones with different disabilities.

Injuries of the spinal cord usually demand constant medical treatment, especially quadriplegia, in order to avoid higher risks to the normal life span. However, despite the seriousness and the hardness of this specific disability, many quadriplegic people around the world managed to create and maintain comfortable and happy lives.

## 2.5. Stereotypes and Prejudices

As previously mentioned in the previous chapter, non-disabled people usually build a set of stereotypes and prejudices around the disabled community, and these misunderstandings are often sustained and promoted through the fictional representations of disabled characters.

In the first pages of the *Me Before You*, when Louisa is about to encounter Will Traynor, she is portrayed as being horrified of meeting him and the whole idea of interacting with a disabled man: “I pictured myself wiping the drool from the old man’s mouth, maybe asking loudly, did he want a cup of tea ?”(Moyes, 2012, p. 24), “What if he just stared at me, head lolling, all day? Would I be freaked out?”(Moyes,2012, p.35). Louisa’s thoughts are just a glimpse of the usual fear and uncertainty that takes over non-disabled people when interacting with disabled ones, which is also a result of people’s lack of knowledge about disability and disabled population in general.

Furthermore, When Will Traynor is introduced to his newly caretaker Louisa ,for the first time, he mimics the facial expressions of someone with cerebral palsy to scare her off. Yet, what is even more irritating is Lou’s reaction, when she describes the whole situation she is witnessing as something out of a horror story: “after a pause, he let out a bloodcurdling groan. Then his mouth twisted, and he let out another unearthly cry....another prehistoric sound emerged from somewhere near his chest. It was a terrible, agonising noise. I tried not to flinch. The man was grimacing, his head tilted and sunk into his shoulders as he stared at me through contorted features” (Moyes,2012, P.29). Evidently, Lou is convinced that Will has a cerebral palsy, which means that she consciously describes someone with such a sensitive medical condition as completely inhuman. It is with no doubts that a definite degree of stress and disquietude would have been comprehensible, especially when it is the first time

working with a disabled person. Nevertheless, her description is extremely dramatic and exaggerated; she literally makes Will sound like some monster. Assuredly, her dismay was included early in the novel in order to demolish her prejudices about Will later on, when she gets to know him better in person. However, such literary method might not be on point, since it implants in the reader’s psyche that it is totally fine and natural to be frightened of someone with a disability, at the time, the world is inveighing against discrimination with the slogans of acceptance and diversity.

Literature and other fictional productions can work as powerful tools in clarifying the perceived misunderstandings of disability; yet, authors seem to be more interested in sustaining and promoting these stereotypes rather than fixing them. *Me Before You* is surely unclean from these misconceptions, in which the disabled character is feared at the beginning, and described as inhuman.

## **2.6. Normalcy’s Oppression**

As previously explained in the first chapter; authors usually use the theme of disability to serve certain purposes in the plot, and to eventually reassert normalcy in their narratives. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000) summarised this process into three steps; first of all, writers provide a story or an explanation to disability; which is for instance Will’s accident in *Me Before You*. Secondly, they propose the outcomes and struggles of the tragedy of disability; which are portrayed in Moyes’ novel through a radical change in Will’s life, from an active, successful, and happy life to a domestic, monotonous and depressive one. Finally, they erase disability; either by some medical treatment or the total elimination of the disabled character to bring back a sense of normative order to the novel; which is also done at the end of *Me Before You* by ending Will’s life through the assisted suicide in Switzerland.

### **2.6.1. Disability as a Tragedy**

Disabled characters remain an exception and anomaly in literature; they are usually either portrayed as tragic victims, in order to gain the reader’s sympathy,

## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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sources of inspiration who overcome their disabilities in a heroic way, or as villains, such as the mentally ill criminals.

Will’s life prior to the accident is presented as energetic, adventurous, and joyous whereas his post-accident life is portrayed as very depressive, tragic isolated and domestic. When Louisa starts working as his caretaker two years later, his life has been fully constricted to a homely life; he spends the most of his time being depressed and angry over his disability, listening to vociferous and wrathful music in the annex of his parent’s house that has been reformed to be wheelchair-accessible. His life from a wheelchair is assuredly still full of promise. He has so much to live for; a loving family and all the financial resources to do things that many able-bodied people could not even dream of. He could have even managed to continue his career rather than wasting most of his days at home, floundering in self-pity. Nonetheless, he seems to be disinterested in any life except the one he formerly had.

Will’s rage over his new physical condition is very clear throughout the whole novel. However, it is more intense in the beginning, especially after the visit of his ex-girlfriend and friend Rupert who come to invite him to their wedding; he furiously smashes the frames photographs in his bedroom and warns Louisa from repairing them. These pictures are to Will, symbols of the life he used to have and the life, he believes, he can no longer be part of. They are also a symbol of the way, the friends he is photographed with, have moved on with their lives without him.

According to Carly Findlay, the majority of people have only known disability through its fictional depictions whether in literature, media or movies, mainly because it is more comfortable for both readers and viewers. As a member of the disability community, she expresses her concerns about the way disability is often depicted saying: “I’m concerned the only exposure to disability people will have is through a schmaltzy, fictional depiction of us. They see us through the movies, and they cry. They see us in real life and they pity us, or other us, and never get to know that our lives are worth living” (para.16, 2016)

Many readers will get their perception of disability from this novel, without even interacting with disabled people, and since disability is only portrayed as a tragedy and misfortune, readers may not see that disabled persons can have joyous, pride-filled lives.

### **2.6.2. Undiagnosed Depression**

When Will starts expressing his intentions to kill himself, he does not receive the proper mental health treatment, which would have been automatically done in the case of any person with similar suicidal thoughts. Instead, his parents ironically see that it is preferable and completely sufficient to hire a talkative colloquial girl who wears colourful clothes to brighten his mood.

According to the Medical Journal of Australia, people with neurological impairments like Will’s, experience a 20 to 55 percent rate of depression. Yet, in Moyes’s novel, mental illness is never addressed or treated because it is simply considered as a secondary symptom to disability. (Camino, 2016)

There are many indications of Will’s poor mental health in the book, not only through his own utterances, but the other characters’ descriptions and expressions; Louisa expresses,

I got to study Will Traynor up close, in those first couple of weeks. I saw that he seemed determined not to look anything like the man he had been; he had let his light-brown hair grow into a shapeless mess, his stubble crawl across his jaw. His gray eyes were lined with exhaustion..... They bore the hollow look of someone who was always a few steps removed from the world around him. Sometimes I wondered if it was a defense mechanism, whether the only way to cope with his life was to pretend it wasn’t him it was happening to. (Moyes, 2012, p.37)

Furthermore, she affirms that Will’s problem is beyond disability saying: “as the days went by ... I realized that his condition was not just a matter of being stuck in



## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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that chair...but a never-ending litany of indignities.”(Moyes,2012, p.38). Will is convinced that his personality and individuality are discordant with his new corporal state, so he completely detached himself from living a different life, saying he does not want to make joyous memories “erased by the struggle.”(Moyes, 2012, p.130).

In her memoir, the paraplegic scholar Simi Linton recounts how distressed and depressed she was after the accident, not because she felt stuck as Louisa describes Will previously, but because she faced difficulties in adjusting to a wheelchair and a new type of mobility and ability. However, she further clarifies that in anytime she felt lonely or powerless; it was not because of her chair or disability, but rather her mental health ( Camino, 2016)

The quadriplegic Lili Radloff, clarified some of the major ambiguities and stereotypes about disability. When asked if she had ever contemplated suicide, she confirmed, saying: “I thought many times of driving my wheelchair in front of a truck or a bus”. She explained how mentally difficult it was in the beginning: “The most difficult part of being paralysed from the neck down is not the immobility; it is the relentless battle that goes on in my head”. She further indicated that she will never be able to fully accept her disability; yet, she will sustain her efforts in making peace with such situation. “Thankfully, I have learned that nothing is worth taking one's own life. I make a conscious decision, everyday, to put a smile on my face and to be positive, in order to get on with life, as is. If not for me, then for my loved ones” (2015 ,para.19).

Will’s outlook and behaviour, showed all signs of major depression: sadness, anger, hopelessness, alienation, loss of pleasure, poor appetite and sleep, along with suicidal thoughts. Nevertheless, his desire to end his life has not been discussed even once from the mental health context, and was directly perceived and presented as some understandable and conscious decision for someone with similar disability.

### 2.6.3. The Erasure of Disability: Euthanasia

The full meaning of the name *Will* becomes clear only after he fulfils his will to end his life through the assisted suicide at the end of the novel, which turns out to be another story of overcoming disabilities, not through the usual curing of the disabled character, but rather, the complete erasure of disability through Euthanasia.

The leitmotif of Suicide has been the elephant in the room since the beginning of the story; for instance, when Lou notices the abstruse cicatrize of Will’s former suicide attempt on his wrist, she, Will, and Nathan remain silent as if she has never seen it. In addition, suicide is the main reason behind hiring a caretaker; Camellia employs Louisa, in the first place, for the very purpose of suicide prevention, she asks her to keep her eyes on Will during the day, to avoid any suicide attempt during the six months they agree he should live.

Although his life seems to be getting better, Will insists on ending it through the assisted suicide promoting the ableist idea that life with palsy is not a life worth living very long. The book reviewer Elinor Caiman Sands has this to say about *Me Before You*: “This book perpetuates a really unfortunate stereotype which needs to be highlighted; the idea that life with a disability is so terrible and not worth living” (2016 ,para.1). Caiman explains that she can completely understand the wish of assisted suicide in certain medical conditions. However, she believes that Will Traynor’s disability is not included within this category, simply because his condition is not worth to end a whole life for; especially one that is portentous and brimful with hopes and potentials like his (2016).

Will still has a partial control of his hands, along with a full functioning mind and senses. He can comfortably converse and express himself, and that clearly appears in his multiple conversations with Lou throughout the book. He is financially secured being a former successful business man and the son of an affluent family. He is a charming and cultivated man who is loved deeply by a beautiful woman, one who is ready to be with him in all circumstances. Now, most of the disabled people around the

## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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world are not provided with the financial means afforded to Will, does this mean that their lives are even less worth it?

Will's choice is not necessarily what perpetuates stigma and normative oppression around disability in the first place, but the dearth of possible options and potentialities along with the one-dimensional treatment of disability in his story. In essence, *Me Before You* deals with the very controversial theme of assisted suicide in a very narrowed way, in which it represents it through an exceptional and singular case, without highlighting the broader aspects of such complicated theme.

Although the book briefly shows Louisa asking different quadriplegic people, on internet, about their disability experiences, including some who are grateful and happy with their lives. Yet, the major emphasis throughout the whole novel is on Will's situation, in which the assisted dying is portrayed as the only way to find peace and salvation from the constant torture of disability.

Moreover, Will has a strong character with solid and intractable convictions. Through his words, he can make the readers, unconsciously, perceive his decision as the most appropriate and noble one for anyone in his case, instead of discerning it as an exceptional and personal choice. In this context Sarah Camino notes:

*Me Before You* hides its assumption that the disabled body is useless and contemptible behind the apparent personal strength of the disabled character to leave it behind.....When able-bodied people commit suicide, no one emphasizes their choice or their dignity. However, by treating the body of a disabled person as a villain, an obstacle or a worthless shell that the normal person inside should overcome, our culture fails to see his death as an equally profound loss. (2016, para.3)

Furthermore, Will is not portrayed, even once, thinking of the very possibility of a decent life with disability and he immediately rejects the idea when Lou proposes it to him with high hopes, saying that he cannot be the sort of man who accepts this. Clearly enough, with the word “this”, he refers to his disability, or the misfortune that he prefers to be dead than having to live with.

Moyes explains to *the Irish Times* that she hopes the story of *Me Before You* can “make people think twice before judging other people’s choices.” Yet, ironically, she is the one who made Will seem as a desperate disabled man who has no choice but death. Brooke Holman indicates in an article of Screenprism.com that, “*Me Before You* does not make people think twice, it tries to cut off the conversation entirely” (2016 ,para.10). Besides, it has successfully contributed in perpetuating the oppressive idea that disabled people are worthy of pity and patronization.

Substantially, the real problem is not only in this particular novel’s implication that life with disability is worthless, but rather in the perceived societal and normative stereotypes about disabled people. The assisted suicide of the disabled character Will Traynor is a conscious erasure of disability by the author, which results from the social construction of normality and abnormality.

#### **2.6.4. Romanticizing Suicide**

The last segments of the novel have explicitly marginalized the painful experience and results of assisted suicide, by narrowing down such an unfortunate occurrence to a romantic goodbye between Will and Louisa; who are portrayed embracing each other in the assisted suicide facility in Switzerland, in a room which Louisa describes as nice, airy and lighted, with a garden view. They remain in the former state for a while, until Will decides that it is time to die, asking Lou to call his parents in. Will’s part in the story ends peacefully without even capturing the painful part of his death, and all its consequences are carelessly swept aside.

After Will’s insinuated death, the story jumps in time, directly to the Epilogue, where Louisa, is portrayed in Paris café, reading a note from Will, who left her a considerable amount of money to live boldly as he stated in his letter. The previous clip clearly shows that Louisa’s life is improved because of Will’s death, and this discloses another conspicuous issue with the novel’s treatment of disability; in which

the death of a disabled character is represented as a tool to ameliorate another character’s life on a moral, social, financial and intellectual level.

Jojo Moyes attached popular romantic fantasy to such a grievous issue as assisted suicide, possibly expecting it to be more approachable and agreeable for the readers. Nonetheless, the assisted suicide is undoubtedly a serious issue that is better to be discussed beyond the scope of teary romantic fiction.

## **2.7. The Controversy around *Me Before You***

Jojo Moyes’s depiction of Will’s character has provoked a worldwide criticism by various disability scholars and activists, who argued that Moyes has completely failed in representing the disabled community they belong to. However, other reviewers, who are also identified disabled, have perceived the novel’s depiction of disability from a more positive light.

*Me Before You* has been highly criticized for its oppressive portrayal of disability, by many members within the disability community, in different parts of the world; including Canada, Australia, and the United States. They believed that the story has minimised their right to live, by endorsing the assisted suicide as a justified response to anyone faced with severe disability. They also expressed that they have already been living boldly, and that their lives are not that distinct from the non-disabled people’s, except from the novel’s normative and ableist perspective.

In her commentary of *Me Before You*, the writer and disability rights activist Emily Ladau, stated: “I understand that... it's just one story but when this is the predominant narrative .. then I think we need to start having a conversation about it”. Ms Ladau, who has long been addressing discrimination against disabled people and promoting new understandings of disability from a positive light, expressed in an article by *Salon*, that the story of *Me Before you* is unfair to the minority of people she belongs to, who completely believe that life on a wheelchair is still worth living. She

## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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indicated that "the book overflows with dehumanizing stereotypes about disability, from implications that disabled people are things no more active than houseplants, to assumptions that disability is a fate worse than death". (2016, para.1)

Ellen Clifford, a disability activist and member of Not Dead Yet, an organization against assisted suicide, expressed in an interview with BuzzFeed, that *Me Before You* sends the oppressive message “that disability is a tragedy and disabled people are better off dead”, which “comes from a dominant narrative carried by society and the mainstream media that says it is a terrible thing to be disabled.” (2016, para.4)

The novel has been deeply criticized for its representation of disability and assisted suicide. Tim Robey, for instance, wrote in *The Telegraph* that “the biggest problem is the ending”. She indicated that many disabled readers would find it insurmountable (2016 ,para.9).Charlotte O’Sullivan wrote *The Evening Standard*’s: “Will’s reasons for wanting to die are all connected to the fact that he’s no longer a prize physical specimen” (2016, para.4).

Michaela Hollywood, a member of the disabled community and Muscular Dystrophy UK’s Trailblazers, expressed her concerns about the premise of *Me Before You* in *The Independent* You saying : “We are of course keen for disabled storylines to enter mainstream culture, but *Me Before You* is misleading and inaccurate. It spreads jarring messages about life as a disabled person to the public” (2016, para.5). Michaela argued that the ending of the novel was completely offensive and hurtful to the disabled population and even more damaging to the public perception of disability. (2016).

Despite the protests and criticism, several positive reviews of *Me Before You* were published, highlighting the different perspectives and perceptions readers built upon the story, many of those reviewers, though being parts of the disability community, had different opinion about the message of the novel .

## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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Richard Lawson, a Vanity Fair’s reviewer, for instance has responded to the story positively, appreciating the honourable and mature way it approaches a spiny topic such as the assisted suicide (2016).

Holly Warland, on the other hand, declared, in an article about *Me Before You* on Daily Life, her total support to Will’s decision in ending his life, expressing her respect to all the other opinions:

I see the character’s decision to end his life on his own terms empowering. I’m in a very unpopular section of disabled society who believes in the right to assisted suicide for those competent enough to make the decision for themselves. For full disclosure, I will reveal that as a 24-year-old woman with Muscular Dystrophy (this involves the deterioration of my muscles from the chin down over time and means that I rely on 24-hour care), I plan on taking my own life once my disability causes me more grief and anguish than I feel is worth living for. (2016, para.3).

Nevertheless, Warland conveyed her concerns about the wrong message that can be perceived from the story, which can make people with disabilities, think that they are better off dead.

Sarah Jane, a YouTube book reviewer and a member of the disability community, also expressed her positive opinion about the novel in the Telegraph saying that “it’s good that *Me Before You* has provoked such conversation about disability, because I do think we need to tell more disabled stories...We need to see more characters with disabilities”. She also pointed out that her personal perception of Will’s character had nothing to do with pity or inspiration; she rather viewed him as a deep and multi-layered character. She added: “Fiction isn’t always about telling stories that represent everyone; it’s about telling stories about complex individuals... I honestly don’t believe that a book showing one man’s story, one man’s decision, represents the entire disability community as a whole. I don’t think there’s any story out there that can do that” (2016).

## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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Jennifer Mcshane, as someone with mild Cerebral Palsy (CP), expressed her opinion about the story of *Me Before You* in *Image*, saying:

Though I fall into the disability group, I feel it isn't that black and white; I'm partially disabled, yes, but I have fairly good mobility and almost total independence so my situation is unique to me and unlike the struggle of Traynor or indeed anyone in his situation. I've always had my CP, and thus, my life has always been with its challenges; to be thrust into a similar situation via an accident is different entirely and the leap and adjustment one has to make is significant. I can't imagine how tough it would be. And though I'd never condone Traynor's decision, I find it shocking and heart-breaking beyond words. (2016, para.7)

She further explained that she had read the novel as a depiction of one man's story without feeling that it is relatable or reflective in any way. At the same time, she pointed out that her vision of the story is just one of the different personal perceptions, this former, might have.

Moreover, she declared her total understanding of the protests, indicating that the novel had missed a great chance to address disability from a more positive light, and probably help ending the stereotypes and prejudices, usually produced about disability. Still, she was convinced that the real problem is not in this particular story alone; but in the plentiful of disability portrayals that fail to grasp the uniqueness of the different disability experiences beyond the usual standards. (2016).

### **2.7.1. Moyes's Response**

Moyes responded to the backlash, telling *Stylist* in a video interview, that she was surprised from the protest at the beginning. She defended her novel saying that Will's story is a representation of one man's situation that does not necessarily reflect a whole community. She also argued that no character in *Me Before You* approves or supports Will's assisted suicide decision at any given time. ( 2016)



## Chapter Two: Disability and “the Oppressive Assumptions of Normalcy” in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes.

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Emily Ladau responded: “In spite of each of the characters in Will’s life trying to persuade him otherwise, the fact remains that Moyes imagines a world in which disability is synonymous with misery and assisted suicide is the only solution.”( 2016, para.5)

Moyes inspired the plot of *Me Before You* from the real story of Daniel James, a rugby player who had been disabled after an accident on the field, and went with his parents to Dignitas in Switzerland, to end his life. Moyes indicated that she was shocked the moment she read in the news about James. She said: “I found that deeply shocking...I couldn't understand his thinking; I couldn't understand his parents' thinking...and I guess, as an ex-journalist, I decided to read around as much as I could... It wouldn't leave my head”. She concluded from her exploration that this 23-year-old man “just refused to adapt to his new life”. She further explained: “As a writer I looked at the unusual circumstances of that, because most people do adapt, and I thought what would it be like to be him? What would it be like to be his mother? And what would it be like to be someone trying to change his mind?” (2016, para.9).

Nonetheless, activists argue that producing such a grisly end as an outcome of disability is highly detrimental, especially to the newly disabled people. According to Carley Findlay, the disability community is angry about the novel, but even angrier about the fact that they are constantly being told what to feel about such stories and to be grateful that disability is even addressed (2016).

In this context, Mik Scarlet wrote for the Huffington Post: “The key message from the recent protest around *Me Before You* is disabled people should just be happy that good intentioned people are trying to do something for us, with no experience of what it means to be us, and without really talking to us”( 2016, para.6).

Scarlet further emphasised on the necessity of consulting any represented category before representing it, even in fiction. She added that novels such as *Me Before You*, are more than just oppressive fictional stories, but a reflection of the societal negative perception of disability.

## **2.8. Conclusion**

The previous chapter has shed light on the oppressive and normative assumptions in the portrayal of disability in Jojo Moyes’ novel *Me Before You*, exploring the major stereotypes and prejudices which surround the theme of disability. From a disability studies perspective, the novel is proven to be oppressive in representing disability as a tragedy and fate worse than death, without even addressing one of the crucial factors in the depiction of any suicidal character; which is mental health, besides to its abusive romanticized ending. Moreover, this chapter has brought to light the voice of the disability community and activists, by introducing a collection of different perspectives, disabled reviewers, activists, and scholars had about Jojo Moyes’ *Me Before You*, along with the author’s response to the controversy.

The notion of diversity includes acceptance, recognition and tolerance. In other words; acknowledging the uniqueness of each individual, embracing and celebrating the physical, gender, racial, ethnical, religious, socio-economical, political, and moral differences among people, in a positive and secured atmosphere. Unfortunately, there are some specific body standards that still contribute in deciding the significance given to an individual in society, along with other criteria such as language, religion and race.

Societal and literary perceptions of disability and disabled people have been, for a long time, misted with several constructed negative stereotypes and prejudices, which are completely unfair to the disability community, and only limit their opportunities in living happy, comfortable and successful lives. In effect, the ableist attitudes towards this unique category of society, whether in reality or fiction, are not only damaging to both sides, but the whole diverse society.

Through investigating Jojo Moyes' portrayal of disability in *Me Before You*, the work of research in hands has attempted to capture a glimpse of normalcy's impact on the fictional representations of disability and the readers' perceptions of disabled people as well.

*Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes is one of the numerous literary works that addressed disability from a negative position, depicting it as a tragedy and life obstacle rather than just an incidental part of a character's life. It has even fostered the belief that death is a better option for people with severe disabilities.

Moreover, Will's decision to end his life is represented as a reasonable response to disability, with the extra romanticized Euthanasia at the end of the novel as the only refuge from the torture of paralysis. Besides, the prospect of poor mental health, which is one of the most important elements in the depiction of suicidal characters, has been ignored, insinuating that the desire of someone with a disability to kill himself is completely normal. Such constructed negative and normative response assists in perpetuating the common antagonistic perception of life with disability as the life that

no conscious human being would want. Even disabled people may share the same normative belief with their societies by rejecting disability believing that it contrasts with normalcy.

In the light of what has been thoroughly discussed under the lens of Literary Disability Studies, *Me Before You* proved to be unclean from the normative assumptions which are highly oppressive to the identified disabled community, along with various socially constructed stereotypes and prejudices about disability.

People with disabilities certainly do not need pity or similar negative feelings. What they do really need, is comprehension, respect and appreciation of their distinctive talents and capacities. Every person who interacts and interfaces with disability is automatically involved in forming and producing both its meaning and social identity. For this specific reason, authors need to be more careful when dealing with the theme of disability and portraying disabled character, for any wrong representation can be highly detrimental to a whole community of identified disabled people.

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## Abstract:

This work of research explores the issues surrounding the representations of disabled characters in literature, and the role of normalcy in forming and perpetuating the negative perceptions of disability in fiction and reality. It sheds the light on the societal attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices that might play into the authors' portrayals of disability and disabled characters, along with the readers' interpretations of such narratives. Under the lens of Disability Studies, this research attempts to disturb normalcy's hold through a critical analysis of *Me Before You*, a popular contemporary novel that introduced the theme of disability in a very controversial way. This investigation will reveal the process of normative oppression in Jojo Moyes' representation of disability as a tragedy, life obstacle, and fate worse than death.

## Résume :

Ce travail de recherche explore les problèmes entourant les représentations des personnages handicapés dans la littérature et le rôle de la normalité dans la formation et la perpétuation des perceptions négatives du handicap dans la fiction et la réalité. Il met en lumière les attitudes, les croyances et les préjugés de la société qui pourraient jouer dans la description par les auteurs du handicap et des personnages handicapés, ainsi que des interprétations de ces récits par les lecteurs. Sous le prisme de Disability Studies, cette recherche tente de perturber la normalité en analysant de manière critique *Me Before You*, un roman populaire et contemporain qui a introduit le thème du handicap de manière très controversée. Cette enquête révélera le processus d'oppression normative dans la représentation par Jojo Moyes de l'invalidité en tant que tragédie, obstacle de la vie, et destin pire que la mort.

## ملخص :

يتناول موضوع هذا البحث القضايا المحيطة بتقديم الشخصيات المعاقة في الأدب ، ودور معايير الحياة الطبيعية في تشكيل وإدامة التصورات السلبية للإعاقة في الخيال والواقع. ومنه فإن هذه الأطروحة تلقي الضوء على المواقف ،المعتقدات ، والتحييزات الاجتماعية التي يمكن أن تلعب دورًا في تصوير المؤلفين للإعاقة وشخصيات المعاقين ، إلى جانب تفسيرات القراء لهذه الروايات. وبالتالي ، فهي تجلب فهمًا جديدًا للحياة الطبيعية والإعاقة ، مع توضيح الطريقة أو المعايير التي يتم بها تمييز الحياة الطبيعية في المجتمع والأدب. تحت عدسة دراسات الإعاقة ،يحاول هذا البحث الإخلال بمعايير الحياة الطبيعية المهيمنة في الأدب من خلال تحليل نقدي ل *انا قبلك* و هي رواية انجليزية معاصرة لاقت رواجًا شديدًا لتقديمها للإعاقة بطريقة مثيرة للجدل. انطلاقًا من هذه الدراسة ، سيتم الكشف عن عملية الإضطهاد المعياري في تمثيل كاتبة الرواية جوجو موييز للإعاقة كمأساة ،عقبة في الحياة و مصير أسوأ من الموت .