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Cinematic Representation of Quadriplegia in *Me Before You* (text/film)

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Abstract:

The research paper proposes to address the cinematic representation of *Me before You* (2012) as a novel authored by Jojo Moyes and a film adaptation by the same name released in 2016 directed by Thea Sharrock. “Disability the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities” (Oliver 11). The World Health Organization overviews disability as a part of being human. Almost everyone at some stage in their life experiences a temporary or permanent form of disability. As per the current statistics over one billion people which is around fifteen percent of the global population has experienced disability at some stage of their life. This number is always growing with the increase in population. Disability results due to medical, personal and environmental factors. It could also be a result of poor infrastructural facilities, an unhealthy environment, and a lack of social support. A person's environment has a direct impact on the experience and extent of disability. Inaccessible environments create barriers that often hinder the effective participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal footing with others. A step towards improving their social participation can be made by addressing these barriers and facilitating persons with disabilities in their day-to-day lives (*Disability*). A section of media has for a very long time represented the disabled minorities as pitiable, pathetic, evil, supernatural, unnatural and sexually abnormal beings. The disabled writer Louis Battye referred to this stereotype as the Chatterley syndrome following D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The book is about an heterosexual affair between an able-bodied couple; Lady Chatterley’s husband is a person with disability, and perceived by Lawrence as sexually inactive (Barns). The language used against the persons with

disability propagates a completely negative and problematic image of the disabled person. For instance, *My Left Foot: The Story of Christy Brown* (1989) another autobiographical account of Christy Brown (disabled writer and artist) referred to his story as ‘my plucky little cripple story’(Barnes). Words such as ‘mad’, ‘ugly’, ‘cripple’ are used very often through advertisements by the media. The advertisements also create a wrong narrative of the disabled community and hinders their equal participation in the society for instance, The Muscular Dystrophy Group, The Multiple Sclerosis Society, The Spastics Society etc. These organizations imply that they are run by the disabled for the disabled but it is clear through their advertisements that they are actually run by the able bodied majority which has a tendency to stereotype the individual identities of the disabled (Jeffress). *Me before You* as a novel and a film adaptation discourages all these stereotypes attached to the disabled and foregrounds a unique concept of euthanasia and the impact of caregiving. Euthanasia has not been presented as a fait accompli in the film. It is primarily the protagonist’s attitude towards his disability which occupies the central space in the film. The novelist and the director of the film assure the readers and the viewers that they do not share the attitude of the central character. If one examines through the cinematic angle then it sounds quite realistic. There are also other cinematic representations as well which have broken the stereotypical portrayal of the disabled community. For instance, feature films like, *Margarita with A Straw* (2014), *The Fundamentals of Caregiving* (2016) etc.

Keywords: Adaptation, Cinema representations, Disability, Quadriplegia.

This film/novel is a romantic drama based on quadriplegia, as a form of disability. Quadriplegia is a form of paralysis caused due to a spinal cord injury or damage to the brain. It affects all four limbs, parts of the chest, abdomen and back. At the later stage the patient is likely to face challenges related to performing daily activities, swallowing, breathing, speaking, pressure ulcers/bed sores and bone/muscle loss. The most strenuous part of paralysis is that it is not curable (Paraplegia vs. Quadriplegia: Definitions, Causes, and More). The film and the novel are both set in United Kingdom. Jojo Moyes (writer and screenplay writer) has published this novel as a part of a trilogy and wrote two sequels (*After You* in 2015 and *Still You* in 2018), after the success of the novel (Jojo Moyes). “Early in her career, Moyes wrote three manuscripts that were all initially rejected. Moyes became a full-time novelist in 2002, when her first book *Sheltering Rain* was published” (Jojo Moyes). She stated in one of her interviews on *Showbiz Shelly*; that to write this novel *Me before You*, her inspiration was an athlete’s life story being aired on the radio, while she was driving. This

man decides to perform euthanasia, as he was a quadriplegic. She confesses that initially she couldn't understand his parent's support in this decision (Menaker). But later when she herself experienced it through one of her close friends and two of her family members, who needed twenty four hours of care to stay alive, this decision eventually made sense. She also claims that this story turned her into a positive person (Emilia Clarke - Me before You Q&A).

As stated by Linda Hutcheon in her *Theory of Adaptation* "Adaptation is a form of repetition without replication" (Hutcheon Preface XVI). It is not something which can be copied as an inferior entity since it is a process of appropriation. "A film has to convey its message by images and relatively few words" (Hutcheon 1). Hence, a film cannot present the story in as much detail as a novel. That's why in this adaptation there are a few important incidents which have not been discussed in the film. For instance, Louisa's sexual harassment at a very young age. The impact it has on her life as a whole. She under estimates her own self and carries a very low self- esteem throughout the story because of this incident in her life. The glimpses of this insecurity can be seen in the film when she goes to a party with Will. She feels extremely unworthy of being a part of a crowd full of high-class rich ladies. This very important part of the narrative could not be included in the cinematic representation of the text, because as a team they didn't want to turn the entire story around Louisa's sexual assault incident. The entire focus of the story would transfer to this incident. Jojo Moyes wants to focus on the aspect of euthanasia more dominantly in the film representation. The author has also been criticised for not depicting the necessary sibling rivalry between Louisa and her younger sister (Katrina). Also, the sibling rivalry between Georgiana and Will. His sister Georgiana has been completely omitted from the film narrative. Her opinion on Will's decision to end his life, has not been included in the film. Although, her opinion as a sister has been very clearly mentioned in the text. Another pertinent scene which couldn't make it to the screen is the difficult relationship between Steven and Camilla Traynor (Will's parents). In the film they are shown as extremely supportive and caring towards each other, struggling to accept their son's decision of euthanasia. But, in the text their relationship is not as straight forward. By the end of the story we as readers discover the actual truth about their relationship. It is revealed that Steven is having an extra marital affair with a woman. Her opinion on Will's decision of ending his life has also been discussed in the text. The impact this situation has on Will as a son and on his mother has also been explained elaborately.

There is another adaptation of the novel directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali in the Hindi Language called *Guzaarish* (2010), with good performances by Hritik Roshan and Aishwarya Rai Bachhan. This film claims to be based on *Me before You* since it addresses the life of a quadriplegic magician but the story has been portrayed with a lot of variations.

Me before You is a story about a banker named Will Traynor, the role played by Sam Claflin in the film. He is portrayed as an extremely fit and adventurous rich man living a happy and fulfilling life. As a result of a spinal cord injury in an accident, Will suffers from quadriplegia. “He has some movement in his fingers, although he finds it hard to grip” (Moyes 39). Irrespective of belonging to a rich family he is fighting his disability to stay alive each day. On the other hand Louisa (Lou) Clarke role played by Emilia Clarke in the film. She is a twenty – six year old girl with a very limited exposure in life. She works in a restaurant (The Buttered Bun), has a boy friend named Patrick (Matthew Lewis) and is quite content in her life. However, she is in dire need of money because of her middle class background, as she has been fired from her job at the restaurant and her father becomes unemployed. These circumstances contribute to Louisa being employed by Camilla Traynor (Will’s mother) as Will’s new caregiver. The colour scheme has been very carefully employed in the film. Mostly Will’s character is always seen wearing darker clothes. On the hand Louisa’s choice of colourful clothes depicts her vibrant personality. It also shows a contrast in their personality as a whole. The setting of the film has also been very thoughtfully selected by Jojo Moyes. She has spoken to *BookBrowse* about the same:

“I tried all sorts of settings for this book. I drove all over Scotland, trying to find a castle and a small town that would fit. It was essential that Lou came from a small town, rather than a city, because I live in one myself and I’m fascinated by the way that growing up in one can be the greatest comfort- also incredibly stifling. I wanted a castle because it was the purest example of old money rubbing up against ordinary people.... I needed the class difference between Will and Lou to be clear” (BookBrowse).

Will prefers to stay in the annexe at the Granta house in the Storfold castle. He is by no means a pitiable character, rather behaves as a very rude rich brat. So, the portrayal of his character is not seeking sympathy from the audience. He is a rich man with all the facilities to keep him comfortable. The reason behind his harshness is probably because he doesn’t want people to sympathise with him and feel pity on him for his condition. The first few days of Louisa as a caregiver are quite tough considering Will’s harsh behaviour. This job becomes

even more difficult for her when she realises the exact reason behind her employment. Will decides to go for euthanasia to end his prolonged suffering without a cure. Louisa is basically employed to change Will's mind and show him the brighter side of life. So, this story highlights the importance of caregiving. Till the end of story she tries to change his mind even though she proves unsuccessful in achieving that. The film and the novel emphasises certain unsuitable premises for the disabled and also people's negative perception of them.

“Me before You (Book) hit the *New York Times* bestseller Top Ten Chart in 2016 and spent 19 weeks on the chart”. The book “was nominated For Book of the Year at the UK Galaxy Book Awards” (Jojo Moyes). *Me Before You* (Film) won *People's Choice Awards* in the category of favourite dramatic movie and was nominated for *Teen Choice Awards* and *MTV Movie and TV Awards* (*Me before You* (Film)). As reviewed by Liesl Schillinger (*New York Times*): “When I finished this novel, I didn't want to review it: I wanted to reread it. Which might seem perverse if you know that for most of the last hundred pages I was dissolved in tears. Jojo Moyes, the writer who produced this emotional typhoon, knows very well that *Me Before You...* is a ‘real weepy’. Moyes’ story provokes tears that are redemptive, the opposite of gratuitous. Some situations, she forces the reader to recognise, really are worth crying over... An affair to remember” (Schillinger 13). Despite the appreciation the film sparked criticism especially from the disability rights activists. They perceived the film promoting an underlying message that people with disabilities are a burden on their families and carers. They claimed that the film advocates that disabled are better off dead than disabled. They also questioned the tag associated with the film i.e “live boldly”. “Others found the film exploitative of the disability community by stirring the emotions of viewers without actually aiding disabled people by accurate representation or employment in acting roles, while pointing out the casting of non- disabled actors as disabled characters. The backlash #MeBeforeEuthanasia was led by disabled celebrities like Liz Carr, Mik Scarlet, Dominick Evans etc (*Me before You* (Film)). The depiction and reality of disability is the central motif of the film as well as the text. Euthanasia has not been as an end to suffering but as a reality of life. The film in fact focuses on the concept of euthanasia itself the purpose of the writer is to shock the viewer to eventually think about the impact of disability on the disabled and the caregiver.

Jojo Moyes as a response to the backlash stated in one of her interviews with *Stylist Magazine*: “In the book nobody else agrees with what he (Will Traynor) decides to do. It is not by any means sending out a message, this is saying, what do you do in a particular human

circumstance and it's about autonomy and choice and the fact is, I guess, you know, not everybody's going to agree with Will's decision. Everybody is fighting their own particular battle but certainly it has no message beyond his own particular story" (Jojo Moyes Responds to Controversy over the Portrayal of Disability in *Me before You* 2:15-2:35). In fact the unique element of the story lies in Will's character to make an unconventional choice. The transformation of Louisa from a 'chatty' young girl to a mature woman because of this decision. As rightly pointed by Moyes: "I just felt that I had a story to tell about ordinary people in extraordinary situation. I think it's just a human story" (Jojo Moyes Responds to Controversy over the Portrayal of Disability in *Me before You* 3:31-3:38). She also says that it has not been very difficult creating these characters.

A film critic Yasin Amirah has shared her review on the film:

"I felt the movie did an excellent job of portraying her character- a family girl, content, with fewer horizons" (Yasin). Moyes's characters also strongly depict a contrast in their voices and dialogues. It shows her inveterate observation of people's habits belonging to different fields and professions. There is an exercise which she practises before creating her characters. She elaborates on that and says, "I try to take half an hour to clear my mind before writing different characters and 'think' my way into their heads. Then hopefully, if I've done my homework, their voices will come naturally.... This- more than any of my books (and I've written 11) - was a book where the characters fell into my lap fully formed". (*Me before You* by Jojo Moyes Delivers Emotional Punch –2013 Release).

This film is a directorial debut of Thea Sharrock as a director. She says in one of her interviews with *The Movie Times*, that it was very hard to achieve the intimate chemistry between the actors (Emilia Clarke and Sam Claflin). She chose this script because in her view the audience could relate themselves to the characters. The character of Lou (caregiver) stands out in the story and goes through a complete transformation (Thea Sharrock: *Me before You*).

The plot of the text revolves around Will and her caregiver's efforts to keep the latter alive. This character (Will) is not in any way seeking attention or sympathy. Although he is amongst the privileged sections of the society, he prefers to stay away from the public eye. The film primarily focuses on the gradual love between the two characters which breaks the false notion of the society, who treat disabled as incapable of having love, happiness and

wealth. Will is not a weak character but actually he fails to accept himself, which ultimately leads to this decision of euthanasia.

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