

Narrative Medicine Meets Fiction: Examining Caregiving Narratives in *Me Before You*

Bhavya Pandit

Abstract

This study explores the emotional, ethical, and gendered complexities of caregiving through the work of British novelist Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You* (2012). The novel follows Louisa Clark, a caregiver to Will Traynor, a quadriplegic man seeking to reclaim agency over his life through assisted death. Grounded in Emotional Labour Theory and Feminist Care Ethics, this research highlights Louisa's emotional labour, examining the invisible toll of caregiving and its intersection with societal gender expectations. The analysis delves into the ethical tensions Louisa faces as she balances her emotional investment in Will while respecting his autonomy. By centring on Louisa's perspective, the study sheds light on how caregiving is both a deeply personal experience and a reflection of larger social constructs. This work contributes to the growing discourse on caregiving, advocating for a nuanced understanding of caregivers' emotional and societal roles.

Keywords: Caregiving, emotional labour, ethical dilemmas, feminist care ethics, gendered care.

Introduction

Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that has rapidly risen to prominence since the latter half of the twentieth century, where the study of medicine, allied health, literature, philosophy, ethics and the social sciences overlap. "The term itself derives from medical historian George Sarton (1948) who used the phrase, "medical humanities," in an obituary crafted for *Isis*, the journal of the History of Science Society"

(Klugman & Jones, 2021, p. 517). It intends to humanize medical practice by drawing on narrative, empathy and critical reflection to shape a way of understanding illness, caregiving and patient experience. As Charon (2005) puts it,

With the rise of interest in the humanities in general and literary studies in particular among medical educators and practitioners, today's medicine is being fortified by a rigorous understanding of narrative theory, appreciation of narrative practice, and deepening respect for what great literary texts can contribute to the professional development... (p. 261)

Medical Humanities is a developing academic domain, focusing on the significance of storytelling and cultural scenarios in developing both clinical information and scientific attention. In this framework, caregiving is something more than a medical task, but a highly emotional and ethical experience. In this discourse, gender and caregiving intersect in an especially important way. Caregiving has been traditionally constructed as women's work and most of the time unrecognized and considered emotionally immature. Gender roles are shown by feminist theories to affect how care is provided, how care is valued and the amount of emotional labour placed on it. The social, moral and psychological dimensions that these intersections lend to caregiving narratives, then, become a critical vantage point for exploring caregiving discourse.

The issues of caregiving, autonomy and ethical decision-making, have found resonance in both literature and cinema. For instance, in the movie *The Theory of Everything* (2014), based on the memoir, *Travelling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen* (2007) by Jane Hawking, viewers see how Jane Hawking's responsibilities as a caregiver to Stephen Hawking became steadily more demanding. Jane faces isolation, exhaustion, and the difficulty of preserving agency in their relationship as his condition worsens. Similarly, the Hollywood movie, *Still Alice* (2014) showcases a family's experience in caring for an early-onset Alzheimer's patient. As Alice's independence decreases, her loved ones have to make very difficult decisions about her care, independence and dignity. These works point to the psychological impact of caregiving and do so in the larger context of more general issues of moral requirement, identity and social expectation.

Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You* (2012) is a novel that delicately balances themes of love, autonomy, and the intricacies of caregiving. At its heart is Louisa Clark, a young woman hired as a caregiver to Will Traynor, a

once vibrant man who becomes quadriplegic after a tragic accident. What begins as a professional relationship between Louisa and Will evolves into a deeply transformative bond, with both characters challenging each other's worldviews. The novel has gained international acclaim for its emotional depth and the ethical questions it raises, especially regarding autonomy, assisted death—euthanasia, and the emotional burden placed on caregivers. The British writer and journalist, Moyes is famous for her realistic characters and complex plots, successfully combining people's feelings in her works. Her first major novel, *Me Before You*, was later adapted into a film and is widely discussed for its blend of romance with ethically complex themes such as assisted death and autonomy. Although the book received acclaim for its touching realism about caregivers, there is still a controversy about its representation of disability and choice. This study aims to explore the emotional, ethical, and societal dimensions of caregiving as depicted in Moyes' work, with a particular focus on Louisa's journey. Two theoretical frameworks—Emotional Labor Theory and Feminist Care Ethics—have been applied to reveal the complex chemistry of personal, societal, and gendered expectations in caregiving. When discussing Louisa, it is possible to understand her unnoticeable and occasionally unrecognized attempts to control Will's environment through the framework of Arlie Hochschild's Emotional Labor Theory (1983). Hochschild in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983), defines emotional labour as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and has exchange value" (p. 7). She describes emotional labour as the management of feelings to meet the demands of a particular job description mostly to the detriment of the employee's well-being. This study undertakes a qualitative textual analysis of *Me Before You*. Close reading is employed to uncover the nuanced ways in which Moyes portrays caregiving as an emotionally taxing and ethically complex act, creating intersections between gender, disability and care ethics.

Other critics such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993) have focused their attention on the relational aspect and ethics of care. Gilligan introduced the ethics of care as a framework that prioritizes empathy, interdependence, and the moral value of relationships, challenging dominant theories grounded in autonomy and justice. Tronto expanded this perspective by arguing that care is not only an ethical act but also a political and social one, influenced by systemic inequalities and

expectations. This idea is the exact opposite of what society convinces people of, namely, that femininity is a natural desire to contribute to the care for others, which results in the disregard for the mental and physical work that caregivers do. By examining Louisa's caregiving journey through these lenses, this study sheds light on how caregiving narratives intersect with broader societal constructs of gender and labour.

The novel also brings out concerns in understanding disability care. Breier highlights the systemic discrimination that happens in disability-based care and autonomy. According to Breier, "Individuals with disabilities can also face appalling bias in their quests to obtain appropriate care and live fulfilling lives" (p. 11). This study, in indirect ways, also focuses on this bias, showing how society's structures actively marginalise care recipients, and it is also in these same structural ways that care recipients burden the caregiver. Specific reference points in the study are those critical moments which demonstrate Louisa's emotional labour and ethical quandaries, particularly about regaining Will's agency, and Louisa's internal struggles with his desire to end his life. These instances instead expose the gendered and undervalued nature of care work and understand *Me Before You* as a narrative that centres care work in broader social and ethical contexts.

By centring on Louisa's perspective, the study offers insights into the often-overlooked experiences of caregivers, emphasizing the need for greater recognition of their labour, both in literary representations and in real-world contexts. Ultimately, this research argues that caregiving in *Me Before You* is not just a background detail but a central element that shapes the novel's emotional and ethical landscape. "...a perspective in which home-based care is defined in terms of the unpaid work of female relatives within the private domain of their family" (Graham, 1991, p. 67). This quotation aligns with gender stereotyping and the profession of Louisa Clark. Her unpaid emotional labour reflects Graham's analysis of care as intrinsically tied to the private sphere and the reinforcement of gendered identities. Clark's journey underscores the complexity of caregiving, where personal growth, relational interdependence, and societal expectations collide.

Me Before You: An Analysis

While Hochschild (1983) initially applied the theory of emotional labour to professional settings—such as flight attendants, bank clerks, and other

service workers—she emphasized that emotional labour serves a social function: “Emotional labor is potentially good. No customer wants to deal with a surly waitress, a crabby bank clerk, or a flight attendant who avoids eye contact to avoid getting a request” (p. 9). In one instance, Louisa mirrors on her awkwardness about attending a formal event in a subservient role, she says, “Will had no idea of the fear I felt at the thought of going to a society wedding, let alone as “the help” (Moyes, 2022, p. 330). Emotional labour is evident here as Louisa is constantly masking her concerns to keep the atmosphere easy for Will Traynor, putting in a concerted effort to hide her own discomfort, uncertainties, and emotional stress. Hochschild (1983) uses social language to argue that emotional labour entails “a coordination of mind and feeling” (p. 89) which is pertinent here as well. In her early days of caring for Will, for example, Louisa struggles with his scepticism and isolation, but she is determined to present a strong and positive image for his benefit. This supports Hochschild’s assertion that often emotional work entails the need to move from one emotional state to another to meet certain social or organizational demands.

The tenets of emotional labour theory can be seen in Louisa’s characterisation since her job entails her to attend to the wheel-chair bound Will Traynor whose emotional stability is entirely detached from reality. Will’s frustration and tone due to his quadriplegic condition is something that Louisa has to handle constantly. Even when Will resists her attempts, Louisa’s emotional labour is visibly masked in her hiding her own frustration and emotions. She continuously attempts to organize something or invite him to participate in activities, since the position requires her to respond actively to the situation. Using Hochschild’s approach, it would be possible to pay attention to Louisa’s internal conflicts. In this situation, Louisa struggles to manage her emotional well-being with the increasing demands of caregiving, often suppressing her own needs to support Will. That leads us to Hochschild’s Emotional Labor Theory which points out that while caregiving often goes unacknowledged, it still takes a lot of hard-to-notice emotional effort from the caregiver. Louisa’s efforts to help Will move forward even when he doesn’t want to, reflects the hard work she performs.

Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1982) revolutionized moral philosophy by introducing a relational and contextual approach to ethics. Gilligan argued that moral

reasoning in women often emphasizes care, empathy, and relationships rather than abstract principles of justice and autonomy. She writes, “The ethic of care rests on the premise of non-violence—that no one should be hurt. It reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 174). Since Louisa’s attempts are driven by empathy and interpersonal ties rather than just professional obligations, this framework is crucial to comprehend her caregiving. Her moral judgments are based on her emotional bond with Will and her wish to enhance his quality of life, not on inflexible ideals. For example, Louisa plans events and activities for Will because she truly wants to make him happy, not just because it is her responsibility as a caretaker. However, Louisa’s care ethics are tested when Will asserts his desire for assisted death. “Will Traynor’s life had been so far beyond the experiences of mine. Who was I to tell him how he should want to live it?” (Moyes, 2022, p. 214). Here, Gilligan’s premise of non-violence becomes significant, as Louisa must grapple with the ethical dilemma of supporting Will’s autonomy while also protecting him from harm. Gilligan’s work is relevant because it reframes caregiving as a morally significant act rooted in empathy and relational interdependence. Louisa’s caregiving is not portrayed as passive or self-sacrificial but as an active moral choice that challenges societal norms about dependency and autonomy.

Feminine care ethics offers a strong prism to view Louisa’s caregiving path, especially in terms of her relationships and gender roles. In the book, Louisa’s caring is influenced by societal norms about women as natural caregivers. Louisa’s position, at first under-appreciated and seen as a way to financial stability rather than a major emotional and ethical labour, clearly reflects Tronto’s critique of caregiving as “women’s work.” According to Breier (2021), “Caregiving often falls to women in both literature and life” (p. 10). And as Noddings (2010) puts it, “It seems reasonable to trace the caring tendencies of women to many centuries of caregiving practice”(p. 22). Highlighting conventional gender expectations, Kaur (2023) observes about Louisa that, “Her dedication to her caregiving responsibilities reflects the selflessness often expected of women in traditional caregiving roles, and the novel explores how this selflessness may impact her desires and aspirations” (p. 57). In the novel, Louisa’s role reflects these gendered assumptions while also serving as a transformative experience that challenges her own identity and boundaries.

Joan Tronto, in *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993) expands on Gilligan's care ethics by critiquing the societal undervaluation of caregiving labour. Tronto (1993) argues, "Care is not simply a kind of labour; it is also a species of moral action" (p. 104). This moral aspect is brought out in *Me Before You* when Louisa transitions from performing the role of a carer since she was paid to do so, to developing a very personal interest in her client. Tronto's framework highlights the components of care, which Louisa exemplifies as she strives to enhance Will's quality of life with "attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness" (Tronto, 1993, p. 127). Also, Tronto is equally right in the argument that society undervalues women's care work as a sign of femininity but fails to recognize it as competent work: "'Sorry, mate,' Nathan said. 'But Lou and I are not going to be able to manage this alone. Here, Lou, you're prettier than I am. Go and collar a few extra pairs of arms, will you?'" (Moyes, 2022, p. 194). This line replicates the casual sexism Louisa deals with, where her appearance is prioritized over her caregiving capabilities.

Louisa faces continuous emotional challenges as a caregiver yet she remains committed to her role. Her realization of Will's vulnerability is encapsulated when she overhears a private conversation: "Look, Daddy and I didn't tell you. We didn't want to upset you. But he tried ... she struggled over the words. 'Will tried to ... he tried to kill himself'" (Moyes, 2022, p. 132). This frames Louisa's role as both a caregiver and a guardian against Will's possible self-harm. To satisfy Will's and his family's emotional demands, Louisa represses her suffering, "I had been babysitting. I hadn't known it, but Will had, and he had hated me for it" (Moyes, 2022, p. 133). When she suggests small outings to widen his horizons, Will counters with biting wit:

If you'd bothered to ask me, Clark, if you'd bothered to consult me just once about this so-called fun outing of ours, I could have told you. I hate horses, and horse racing. Always have. But you didn't bother to ask me. You decided what you thought you'd like me to do, and you went ahead and did it. You did what everyone else does. You decided for me. (Moyes, 2022, pp. 199-200)

His sarcasm highlights the ethical complexity in narrative ethics, where the patient's autonomy and the caregiver's goals can conflict, and it also shows his disgust with feeble attempts to "fix" his life.

Will's internal conflict is poignantly expressed during a conversation which Will's father has with Georgina, Will's sister, about the hopelessness of his life: "He's been like that since the start, George. I think it's just that you didn't see him apart from when you flew home. Back then, I think he was still...determined. Back then, he was sure that something would change" (Moyes, 2022, p. 132). This line directly interferes with Louisa's endeavour to change Will's perception of life and underlines the importance of recognizing his freedom. This also highlights the effort that Louisa makes emotionally as a caregiver and a believer in the power of change. Her determination to change Will's life for the better is displayed when she asserts to Mrs Traynor, "I can't sit by and just quietly wait out the time until... Will... well..." (Moyes, 2022, p. 165). Her hesitation in completing the sentence shows an internal conflict, an emotional commitment to do something life-changing for Will, contradicting his idea of euthanasia and the limitations of receiving care.

Another revealing exchange occurs when Louisa reflects on the growing connection between herself and Will. She acknowledges that, despite their differences, she cannot allow him to be euthanized. "'I know,' I said. 'I'm not meant to, but I do. That's what...that's what the holiday was meant to be about. That's what the outings were all about. Me trying to change his mind'" (Moyes, 2022, p. 399). This line captures the evolving dynamic between the caregiver and patient, where she puts her best efforts into saving Will's life, bringing back hope, and where humour and honesty pave the way for mutual respect and understanding. These scenes also highlight the complex bond between the carer and the care recipient, showing how moral dilemmas and emotional labour collide in the story of caregiving.

There are moving moments that capture Louisa's realization of her role not merely as a caregiver but also as a companion trying to 'extend Will's horizons.' This shows that she has the ambition for Will to tackle his problem with self-sufficiency. Autonomy is one of the principal themes, and a discussion of it shows how Louisa's care ethics are opposed to Will's assertiveness. Will remarks, "This is the first thing I've been in control of since the accident" (Moyes, 2022, p. 469). This statement highlights the main tension in the book, which is the struggle between Louisa's wish to give Will a new lease on life and his right to self-determination. It also resonates deeply with the feminist ethics of care,

which emphasise relational dynamics and the emotional investments caregivers undertake.

Nathan offers a different viewpoint on the emotional toll of caregiving as a secondary caregiver. He tells Louisa, "He's been dealt the shittiest hand of cards you can imagine... and it's his choice. It should be his choice" (Moyes, 2022, p. 400). Nathan brings out the clash of values which the caregiver often undergoes while serving his/her clients' desires. This corresponds with Tronto's (1993) care ethic of attentiveness and responsive care. Steven, Will Traynor's father, accepts the fact that, "Louisa Clark had become, although neither of us said it, our only chance of keeping him alive" (Moyes, 2022, p. 385). Will's previous suicide attempt and his desire for assisted death forces his family, especially his mother into a life revolving around the constant fear of losing him. On an occasion, Louisa overhears Mrs. Traynor exclaim, "Our lives had to shrink to fit around the potential for that one act" (Moyes, 2022, p. 143). Both diffident and assertive, self-effacing and forceful, Louisa embodies precisely the mixed blessing of transformative but strenuous caregiving about which ethicists write approvingly but with acknowledgement of the various dilemmas.

Conclusion

Analyzing Louisa's experiences in the context of Emotional Labour Theory and Feminist Care Ethics, the study draws attention to the hidden suffering and essential work of caregivers. Moyes' narrative invites readers to empathize with caregivers, challenging traditional narratives that prioritize the patient's perspective while undervaluing the labour and emotions of those who provide care. By focusing on the caregiver's voice, this research not only deepens the understanding of Moyes' work but also advocates for greater recognition of caregiving as a vital and complex form of labour in both literature and society.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has limitations, such as its focus on Louisa's perspective, which may overlook Will's experiences and societal attitudes towards disability. Upcoming research could look into caregiving in other settings or even look into the difference between fiction and reality. Finally, *Me Before You* tells the rich, emotional, ethical, and social experience of the essence of caregiving, and demands a greater appreciation of the struggles, values and challenges that define caregivers.

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Bhavya Pandit is a PhD scholar in English Literature at Karnavati University, Gandhinagar. Her research focuses on health humanities and narrative medicine, with a specific interest in narratives of illness and trauma studies, focusing on the intersection of literature and medicine.

bhvyapndt@gmail.com