

## **Not the Same Me: A Novella Exploring Self-acceptance from Experiencing Acquired Physical Disability**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This creative work aspires to discuss the impact of acquiring a physical disability on self-acceptance in our society. As a result of the changing in the physical body, this thesis highlights the drastic shift in attitude from positive to negative self-values to the process of regaining autonomy over one's life from ableism. These goals will be made into a story in a psychological realism novella supported by Michael Neenan's book, *Developing Resilience*, which explains resilience theory. Thomas is an acquired disabled man who struggles with his current life due to the pessimistic view and discrimination that control him. Seeing adversity with a negative mindset causes more severity to him and his family, together with self-rejection, which prevents the development of resilience. As his journey goes on, Thomas will have a chance to develop resilience by learning to accept his disability and helping him recover his self-value.

**Keywords:** acquired disability; psychological realism; resilience; self-acceptance

### **INTRODUCTION**

A story can be a powerful reflection of the world that tells humans more than they understand. It could make people realize things that have not or never happened in their life as an American writer, John Dufresne, said, "Life is stranger than fiction because fiction has to make sense" (TEDx Talks, 2014). A story helps humans have a deeper understanding of life since it can transcend the idea of things in their lives as they inhabit the wondrous world for both readers and writers. As a writer in the English for Creative Industry major, I have learned to perceive and narrate fiction about what I see from other perspectives. Eventually, those views motivate me to write stories about things that are happening surrounding me. Pursuing one of the problems in my society today, I would like to depict the struggles of a disabled man who faces widespread discrimination due to society's perception of disability at nearly every level of the community.

As is known, humans influence other humans. Unconsciously, what one believes today could be derived from what people around him hold. Even though it is one's choice to hold onto a positive or negative view, it is not easy to control the thing implanted in one's mind, for example, the stigma towards disability or ableism. Taking the definition from *Ableism: The Causes and Consequences of Disability Prejudice* by Michelle R. Nario-Redmond (2019), a Professor specializing in stereotyping, prejudice, and disability studies, ableism is "full of assumptions about what it means to be normal, whose lives are worthy of living, and why certain types of minds and bodies need to be controlled, protected, or improved". This notion prioritizes able-bodiedness while disregarding individuals with disabilities, which influences able-bodied and disabled people in responding to disabilities. Here, in the same book, Nario-Redmond explains several types of actions of ableism with examples, starting from social avoidance, stereotyping, condescension, blaming, violence, and ultimately internalization. As a

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response from able-bodied and general society, disabled people have taken disabilities as human weaknesses due to their dependence on others. Most assume that disabled people should not be treated as 'normal' humans as they insist that people with disability are suffering, which may indeed hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others, then act to construct a worldview in which existing as a disabled person is negative. It may lead disabled people to adopt negative beliefs about their disability and feel ashamed or embarrassed (Nario-Redmond, 2019).

Even though disabled people are still capable of having a role in society as able-bodied people do, it is difficult to resist the disability stigma that focuses exclusively on their infirmities rather than their capabilities. This confusion aggravates their living conditions. Based on the 2020 running data of the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), it has been estimated that the number of people with disabilities in Indonesia reached 22.5 million, or around five percent (Pradipta, December 17, 2022). Within those numbers, 80 percent are in the age range of 18 to 64 years as said by Indonesia's Minister of Manpower, Ida Fauziyah (Wel, January 27, 2022). The same article also says that even though the prevalence of this group in the productive age is higher, disabled people are more arduous in finding work, are more at risk of losing their jobs, and have more challenges returning to work after the economic recovery during the pandemic (Wel, January 27, 2022). As they cannot obtain a secure position, disabled people are deemed unable to protect themselves and the people surrounding them, especially their families.

Correspondingly, the negative beliefs towards their differences have reduced their willingness to adapt to social life and hinder the self-adjustment process, especially for those acquiring disabilities later in their lives. The fact that they encounter many new difficulties in many aspects of life due to their disabilities weakens them to accept their current conditions.

Since this issue has been rooted in Indonesian society, I decided to talk about this topic in my creative thesis. I want to make a story that aims to reduce the stigma and promote understanding of human values in life, as ableism has negatively influenced the way able-bodied and disabled individuals acknowledge disabilities. Although people live together in this community, society often neglects disabled people due to the misconceptions, such as thinking they are helpless, dependent, or unable to take responsibility for their own well-being and decisions, which will burden others. It makes disabled people suffer and hardly recognize their existence, specifically acquired disabled individuals since they face marginalization and discrimination. Based on research by Hendriani et al. (2011), the sudden occurrence of disability, not from birth or the early stages of development, will have a considerable psychological impact on individuals. It is because individuals will be faced with a series of significant changes, such as in family relationships, social relationships, and in carrying out various roles in society. Moreover, as their daily performance is increasingly impaired and limited, society discriminates against people with disabilities (2011). However, Nario-Redmond (2019) explains disability is a major aspect of human diversity. Differences in physical and other abilities, like skin color and gender, are merely the reflection of human variation that does not change humans' value in life. Ultimately, one's life does not depend only on the physical condition but also on other aspects such as talents, capability, mentality, and most importantly, joy. To challenge ableism that generates negative views, disabled people need to confront the physical and emotional barriers by developing resilience, which is the human's ability to thrive in adversity. Drawing from further research by Hendriani (2018) in *Positive Meaning: The Typical Coping of Resilient Person towards Changing Conditions Become Individual with Disability*, she describes that building this positive attitude helps them to build a sense of agency

and empower themselves as disabled people, especially those who having disability later in their life. Besides that, it can have an effect on society at large to realize that disabled people still have the same room as them and are capable of contributing significantly in various ways.

In this creative work, I will address the life crisis of individuals with an acquired disability: as those people have once been part of the majority and then become members of the minority due to a sudden situation, many newly disabled see acquiring a disability as a limitation to return to their old lives. As this story centers on the after-effects of a sudden tragedy experienced by a family, I choose the genre of psychological realism. I believe that digging into this problem using the psychological element will demonstrate the real fights that disabled people encounter in the world today. Psychological realism highlights an individual as a composition of motivations, interests, desires, and fears through a character's thoughts to reveal social or political issues (Jose, 2021). Rather than focusing on the action, this genre uses the connection between characters' feelings and personalities to force interaction and conflict. It also builds internal struggles for the main character through internal monologues (2021). As the characters in this creative work experience tremendous transformations, he will reveal many reactions that help readers understand and learn about their perspectives. One of the examples of this genre is a book by Emma Donoghue, *Room* (2010) that talks about the life of Ma, a mother with her son, named Jack, locked in a small room. It depicts people who lose freedom and how they try to free themselves psychologically. Another reason for using this genre is that readers do not only see 'real' representations of events and characters but also of 'real' fears, limitations, prejudices, and weaknesses. Like in *Room*, I will employ strong emotions so readers can feel the intense emotions, for example, when Ma and Jack from escaping the confinement to adapting to the outside world. Moreover, by dramatizing a family relationship undergoing hardship in their life, I will utilize each member's psychological responses to elicit strong and emotional reactions from the readers while delivering the message.

In this creative work, I write a novella to convey this idea because it has various advantages that will reinforce the narrative. First, in a novella, I can concentrate on a single main plot that has the biggest influence on the characters, especially the main character. Although it includes a similar narrative and elements of novel-length stories, a novella often focuses on a single point of view. According to Jane Smiley, a writer and a member of the American Academy of Arts, a novella author can follow a character or a small set of characters' changing emotions and situations from the beginning to the end without observing the larger world around them (Smith, 2022). Thus, the novella provides more complex and intense emotional impacts on the readers about the issue. Next, a novella tends to have fast pacing in the story so that readers will not get bored. Tara Deal, winning author of the 2016 novella prize from Miami University Press, explains that a novella does not have distractions or filler, allowing the writer to build up some resonances and reflections that might get lost in a longer format (Smith, 2022). People can easily immerse themselves in the story because it deals with a more compelling plot.

The story revolves around an ex-attorney named Thomas Hariyanto, who is a paraplegic from a sudden accident that makes him unable to live his 'normal' life. After his accident, Thomas and his family encounter the most formidable moment of their home. He was a 'normal' man, husband, and father, but now he is not the same person he lived. A sudden change in his life, being a handicapped man, also changed both his wife's and daughter's lives. Now, he must protect his family from threats in society while learning to accept his new condition.

## **CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK**

This section explains the concept of the novella, namely its theme, characters, plot, and conflict.

### **Theme**

The novella aims to show it is not the physical limitations but often self-doubt that sets the impenetrable boundaries, hindering people from moving forward. It will be conveyed through the main character's journey from acquiring a disability that makes him despise his state and himself, facing the consequences due to his negative perception, and learning to accept his life, focusing on things he can accomplish in his life rather than on what he loses.

### **Plot**

Thomas was an attorney who suddenly experienced an accident that left him paralyzed. His acquired disability changes his life as he cannot accept his current reality and loathes himself.

Although Thomas tries hard to live like before, he fails as he doubts his capability and focuses on negative views of his disability. A year after the incident, he has a different life, as he blames himself more and ruins his relationship with others. Even though he tries to look okay in front of his family, he gradually loses trust in himself and the people around him who help him, which produces a negative perception of all matters in his life.

When his wife, Andrea, gets an offer to return to work at her previous company, Thomas is against it, assuring her that it would be difficult for her to return. He is afraid that people will disparage him even more and harm Andrea because of his condition. However, he changes his mind after knowing her reason for refusing the job is because she thought Thomas needed her presence more than her life. Thinking that Andrea has truly deemed him incapable of living his own life and even gives her life for his makes him feel even more powerless, resentful of his situation, and terrified that the person he loves the most has regarded him as useless. With all conflicting emotions, he eventually chooses to support Andrea to work and live her life again. Although his guilt towards his wife prevents him from being honest and puts more pressure on him, he hides all those feelings as he does not want to burden people anymore, especially his family.

His inner turmoil elicits again as Julian comes unannounced to his house with his successful life, making Thomas feel even more devastated by his disability. However, things get more difficult as that same night, Andrea's coworker tells that Andrea accidentally injured her superior manager and left him with a severe injury. On his way to Andrea, he finds out his wife is sexually harassed by her superiors. Hearing this, Thomas cannot hold back his emotions anymore. As she is charged with grievous bodily harm, he insists on protecting her. Afraid of losing her job, Andrea initially disagrees to confront that man but then agrees with Thomas.

As they cannot find an attorney to defend her, he meets his friend, Kevin, who now is an attorney in a small and unknown firm, and asks him to help her, although he is not sure of Kevin's capability. With their past history, Kevin instantly agrees to help. As the first trial does not go according to plan, Thomas tries harder but his self-inferiority builds mistrust toward

others' support. Thomas thinks that Kevin wants to destroy his marriage and then accuses Andrea of seducing Kevin because she does not want to have a disabled husband. Feeling disappointed by Thomas' words, Andrea tells Thomas that it is not his disability that makes him worthless but his inability to believe in himself and others and leaves him. As he only focuses on his disability, he only sees the negative sides of his life even though someone gives him the kindest support. As he realizes his foolishness, he has lost her because he has made the biggest mistake.

With Andrea's leaving, Thomas feels stuck but still wants to fight for her case so he dares to apologize to Kevin and ask him to help him again. As they meet, Kevin understands and forgives him but cannot represent her in the next court. He tells Thomas about his conversation with Andrea about his father's health issues and that he needs to accompany his father, who will have surgery abroad before the day of Andrea's trial. Since he needs a new attorney, Kevin suggests Thomas stand beside her as her attorney. He also gives Thomas a chance to become an attorney again to take his place in his small firm. Thomas agrees to deal with Andrea's case, which will be the climax but rejects his offer as he still cannot believe in himself though he deeply wants it. He prepares to become an attorney again before Andrea's last trial with Kevin's help. On the day of the final hearing, Thomas waits for Andrea in the courtroom. When she arrives at the room, she is surprised by the presence of Thomas as her attorney. As the last court starts, his inner strength and capability are tested in facing his past again, which he thinks is not his right place anymore. As the pivotal moment ends, he gains the outcome that does not only free Andrea but also enlightens himself from all stigmas that confine him.

In the end, the case ends up being won by Thomas as he is able to prove Andrea's act as self-defense and charges her boss as the one who committed sexual violence, causing Andrea to push him and result in accidentally injuring him. At that moment, he can see himself having a zest for life when he stands up for his wife in court but his self-doubt traps him again. However, as he hears that Franda is proud of him after saving her mother and Andrea thanks him for being there with her, he realizes that all this time he only focuses on his disability. He never loses his core and capacity to live like before though he is now a disabled man. He then decides to learn to accept his situation with the help of the people around him. Now, he regains himself by focusing capabilities and his values as a human, learning it is not his disability but his belief in the bias and doubt toward disability that ruin his life and everyone in his surroundings. Finally, he is able to recognize and embrace his selfhood, which leads to positive change in his life and family.

## **Characters**

1. Thomas Hariyanto, 39 years old

Thomas was able-bodied but is paralyzed after an accident a year ago. He cannot accept the disability which changes his personality and behavior. Embedding his negative beliefs as an incompetent disabled man, he tried hard to be normal again but then decided to withdraw from his surroundings as nothing improved. The mental distress makes him have no desire to live but keep living for the sake of his wife and child. His self-inferiority causes anger in him and conflicts with those around him. However, after facing problems that let him see his capability, in this story is Andrea, he will finally be able to see the real issues within himself and learn to trust people and himself back.

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2. Andrea Verdiana, 35 years old.

Andrea is a loyal and reliable wife who accompanies Thomas during his hardship but influences Thomas' negative perception by limiting him to doing things himself as a disabled man. After quitting her job years ago, she decides to work again in a lower position, believing it is the best decision for the family, but it is all to hide her doubt and negative feelings. However, she experiences more problems in her workplace due to Thomas' sudden disability.

3. Kevin Susanto, 37 years old

Kevin is Thomas's rich junior from senior high school who becomes a high-spirited attorney. As he respects Thomas as someone who helped him fight bullying, he instantly agrees to help Andrea as her attorney.

4. Julian Liman, 39 years old

Julian is a famous but materialistic lawyer at the same firm as Thomas. He has known Thomas since his college days but is always jealous of Thomas' life. After Thomas's disability, he begins to manipulate Thomas by evoking his negative perspective on his adversity.

### **Conflict**

This creative work uses three types of conflicts. First, man vs. self is an inner moral conflict when a character battles with an inner demon or strives to become a better person. (Edward, 2020) As Thomas undergoes a major change in his life, his inner turmoil becomes the biggest problem in the story as he cannot deal with his sudden tragedy. As he fights against his negative belief about his disability, he undergoes a painful self-realization which eventually aids him to live his life again.

Second, man vs. society conflict sets a character against a tradition, an institution, a law, or other societal construct. (Edwards, 2020) In this novella, Thomas will fight against the misconception that society has built toward people with disabilities. Initially, this bias hinders him from controlling himself, but he begins to learn the truth and prove that what society holds is wrong by proving his capability as an attorney despite his current situation.

Third, man vs. man conflict involves two characters with opposing outlooks, opinions, or goals. Thomas will go up against the perpetrator of sexual harassment against his wife, who is the supervisor where she works. It will be a turning point that helps Thomas solve the problem. He also will have several arguments with people in his surrounding as his self-inferiority holds him.

### **CONCLUSION**

This creative thesis, I intend to explore the hardship of self-acceptance for people with disabilities due to a discriminative perspective in society. This story depicts the negative impacts of self-hatred and the strategies to deal with them using resilience theory. With the genre of psychological realism, I created a novella with a character named Thomas who faces new struggles in his life due to a sudden disability. Thomas does not embrace his new condition easily because he grows up believing that disability hinders humans from having a meaningful

life. However, he will learn to have a positive outlook on his disability while recovering his faith in life.

To show the devastating impact of the issue, Thomas will create a negative perception of his life. As a man with a successful life, he never imagined himself sitting in a wheelchair at the age of thirty and giving up on his life. However, once that happens, he begins to experience setbacks in his life. In line with the theory, he would experience a drastic change in mindset and attitude to become a person who considers himself incapable in all situations and isolates himself from social life because he is trapped in fear and resentment that limits him from developing his resilience. Using the connection between his adversity and hopelessness, Thomas will face internal barriers that cause him to lose autonomy over his life. In addition, he will experience more problems in his life, even severely affecting those around him, especially his family, without him realizing it.

After focusing on the effects, I delve deeper into how Thomas retrieves his autonomy. First, I use Andrea's misfortune as an activating event that helps him realize his wrong choices have harmed and even threatened the lives of people he cares about. Thomas must ultimately force himself to confront the problem he has created by protecting Andrea from that threat, which affects the development of resilience. As the story progresses, he appears to be stronger than before as he believes that he is able to do it with his ability with support from Kevin and Andrea. Although he seems to be better, the blocks keep arising and destroying everything he has achieved so far, as the self-denial of his disability still plagues his confidence in handling problems. Nevertheless, his strong desire to protect Andrea from behind bars keeps him going and solves the problems. Eventually, he realizes he can still live with what he has now despite his physical limitations. Thomas learns that what he experiences does not change his value as a human being and understands that his priority in life is to be happy with his loved ones and grateful for what he has by doing what he can to help others.

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