

Article

Received: 12/10/2024; Accepted: 10/06/2025; Published: 11/06/2025

A Moral Perspective on Mental Health in Jessie Burton's *Medusa*

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Abstract

Mental health is a state of well-being that enables individuals to cope with stress, realize potential, learn, work well, and contribute to the community. Jessie Burton's novel "Medusa" depicts Medusa's struggle against trauma and anxiety triggered by a toxic environment, showing the impact of interpersonal relationships on mental health. This research will explore the moral perspectives on mental health issues depicted in "Medusa" and criticize the morality of society through literary representations. The method used in this research is a qualitative method by analyzing data from the novel "Medusa" by Jessie Burton. The theory used is moral criticism. The results of this study show that the novel represented the toxic environment as a critique to society with even showed the effect of it. This study indicates that Medusa's lack of confidence in social interaction and self-acceptance, triggered by fear and isolation, is a major factor in her mental disorder. Toxic environments, such as social pressure and unfair judgment, worsen one's mental health. Medusa's story reveals her trauma, loneliness, and struggle for self-acceptance, as well as the social and moral injustices that exacerbated her suffering. This novel also represented the ideal of the environment as a recommendation and example of the good morality of society should be. Family support and healthy relationships are essential for recovery from trauma and fear. The moral values of the novel include respect for one's personality rather than outward appearance, and the need for empathy and protection regardless of physicality.

Keywords: literary representation; society; mental health; moral criticism; moral value

1. Introduction

Mental health is a state of mental health well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships, and shape the world we live in. It is a complex continuum, varying in severity and social outcomes. Mental health conditions include mental disorders, psychosocial disabilities, and other mental states associated with distress or self-harm risk (World Health Organization). People with mental health conditions may experience lower levels of mental well-being. Nevertheless, in relation to reality today, mental health is often threatened by toxic environments such as the pressure we get in society, stigma, and discrimination. This negative environment can trigger or exacerbate mental conditions such as depression, anxiety, and other disorders. An increasingly visible phenomenon in society is an increased awareness about how importance of mental health, despite the strong stigma attached. A lot of people are starting to openly talk about their mental health conditions and looking for professional help, indicating a positive

change in the understanding and treatment of this issue. The relationship between mental health and morality also becomes a concern, because a toxic environment makes the morality of the people in that environment becomes questionable. Besides, the impact of a toxic environment itself, which is having a bad mental health condition can influence how we make a decision and behavior of a person, In order that influences their morality and ethics.

“Medusa”, one of the works that is written by Jessie Burton also talks about this issue. Jessie Burton, a famous actress and writer in London. She was born on August 17, 1982. She is known to the public because of her profound works, and full imagination, she often combines historical research and emotional narratives. Her works can be known from her attraction to mythology to give different views on classical stories. Besides that, Burton was inspired by feminist movements and different opinions about women’s representation in literature and pop culture. She tried to oppose views by giving other perspectives on women’s empowerment, especially in a mythology context that is often dominated by men’s perspectives. She represents how women are being treated and how unfair the societies are to women. This representation also shows the complexity of how the environment can affect women’s mental health.

“Medusa” released in 2021 a young adult fiction, this novel is a retelling of the classical Greek myth Medusa. In this book, the author gives a different view of the Medusa character itself. As we know, medusa is a character who is often considered a monster because of her frightening appearance. the most famous features of Medusa are her hair composed of snakes and her capacity to petrify anyone by turning them into stone (Glennon, 2017). But in this book, the author describes a complex and human figure. This novel tells the story of a main character named Medusa, she was exiled to a far-flung by the whims of the gods, she actually has no friends except the snakes that adorn her head instead hair. But her life changes when a charmed boy named Perseus arrives on the island. He is different, unlike others who see Medusa as a monster, Perseus is curious and empathetic. As time goes on, both of them have an unexpected bond, that makes Medusa anxious and the pain that she faces from her past.

The book “Medusa” explores the complexity of anxiety in revealing the facts of what happened to her full of fear and self-doubt. Its main conflict is Medusa’s journey to break free from the traumas or experiences that have shaped her current state. “Medusa” portrays the nature of anxiety and self-doubt. In the first chapter, she is depicted as a woman who is isolated and full of fear hiding in caves and shadows with her sisters Euryale and Stheno also her dog named Argentus after getting cursed by Athena who made her hair into snakes. Feeling lonely and powerlessness dominated her mind. Shutting herself away with fear of the outside world. Anxiety plays an important role in Medusa's life, influencing acts and her mind significantly. Fear of meeting other people and hurting them with her gaze makes Medusa aware and isolates herself. Past trauma she gets especially cursed by Athena shaping her mindset and behavior.

The interpersonal relationships of the main character in this story have a big impact on her mental health. This research will explore the moral perspective of mental issues as depicted in “Medusa” by Jessie Burton, by exploring Medusa’s struggle to survive the fears she faces. This research will show how morality in society can affect the mental health of someone, in this case, Medusa. Rather than focus on the feminist issue, which has been the big issue of Burton’s work, this research will focus on the moral value of the story and the representation of the character in literature can criticize the moral of the society.

There have been much research about moral criticism, one of them is the article entitled Analysis of the Moral Value in the Novel “Imperfect” Written by Meira Anastasia (Inayyah&Simanjuntak, 2022), while the research with the object “medusa” usually only talks about the representation of women such as Medusa: How the Mythological Monster became a Feminist Icon (Grill, 2019). The topic of the mental health also has been discussed in many research, such as Mental health condition

of the main character in every day Novel By David Le vithan” by (Tato, 2023), but this research only discussed the psychological elements that are related to the mental health. There is one article that talks about the character of a literary work that represents mental illness entitled “Mental illness representation in young adult literature” (Aberle, 2021), but this paper do not talk about the relation between mental health and morality.

2. Methods

In this research, the writer uses a qualitative method with the purpose of knowing the problems that happen in the mental health of the Medusa character. For this study, the text takes the form of a book, the novel “Medusa” by Jessie Burton itself. There are two data used in this study: primary data and secondary data. The primary data source of the data in this study is Medusa novel written by Jessie Burton. The primary data in this study are narrations related to moral values contained in Medusa by Jessie Burton. The secondary source of data in this study will be collected from literary works, journal articles, and information from websites to support the primary data. The steps of this research are conducted as follows: (1) reading the novel entitled “Medusa” (Burton, 2021) several times. (2) collecting the data from both primary and supporting sources (3) analyzing the data using moral criticism (4) serving the data into an article

In analyzing the data, the theory of moral criticism takes an important role in this research. Moral approach criticism sees a literary work chiefly, as reflected as critics who concentrate on the moral dimensions of the works by judging their works based on their ethical teaching and by their effects on readers (Guerin, 1992). Moral criticism approach is needed to completely explore the mental issue theme, as it reflects how society at Medusa treated her. Moreover, this approach will provide an overview of how Medusa's life reflects how a bad environment can affect a person mentally which encourages a shift from judgment and fear to empathy and support. Throughout this theory this research will show the representation of society's morality can be criticized through literary work.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Representation of a Toxic Environment as a Critique of Society's Morality

A mental disorder is a medical condition that impacts moods, thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In this study, the writer identifies the causes of mental health disorders such as loss of confidence to meet people or interact with society and self-acceptance due to her frightening in the novel “Medusa” by Jessie Burton. The researcher explores the mental health of the main character in this novel which is Medusa through moral criticism. By way of a detailed analysis, this study identifies critical factors contributing to Medusa’s mental health disorders, such as her deep loss of confidence in social interactions and her struggles with self-acceptance. These issues are provoked by her experiences of fear and isolation. This approach evaluates based on its moral and ethical implications, analyzing the psychological challenges of the main character in the context of a larger society. Medusa's story is not merely a retelling of myth it is a profound examination of trauma, loneliness, and the path to self-acceptance. This study explores Medusa’s inner life, showing her as a victim of circumstances that lead to her monstrous transformation. This perspective emphasizes the moral dimensions of her suffering, highlighting the societal judgments and injustices that exacerbate her mental issues.

This issue was developed not only from the inner side of the individual, in this case Medusa, but also from external influences. A toxic environment can significantly contribute to the emergence and inflaming of mental health issues. In this work, this toxic environment is vividly illustrated through Medusa’s reflections on how society treated her when she was still beautiful. The societal pressure and harsh judgments she faced created a hostile atmosphere that deeply affected her mental well-being. The analysis of moral values in this category as found in the novel Medusa, as follows:

Four years previously, everything had been different, and the very least of it was that I'd had lovely hair. But seeing as I've been accused of vanity enough times by people who nevertheless thought it their right to oggle me. (Burton, 2021)

Based on Guerin's theory of Moral values, the above quotation points to up deceptive hypocritical nature of societal judgments and the moral dilemmas faced by a person who is subjected to superficial evaluations. Medusa's reflection on her past beauty and the accusations of vanity she endured reveal a societal tendency to objectify the victims based on appearance, while together condemning them for their perceived flaws. This exposes a profound inconsistency to certain beauty ideals yet are harshly criticized when they do so.

The moral value of the text is that as a human must learn to appreciate and respect people and their personalities, such as their character, intellect, and kindness, rather than merely their outward appearance. This change is essential to a more inclusive and compassionate society where respective are not reduced by their looks but are celebrated for their integrated being. This moral value can help to shoot out the harmful effects of societal judgments and support a culture that values and respects all of what they look, regardless of their physical appearance. The Suffering of being beautiful can exist in this world. Bullying does not only happen to people who have disadvantages, even people who have privileges also being victims, such as physical beauty can become victims of bullying. There are so many factors why it can happen, such as envy and hatred. Moreover, beauty can pose significant dangers, such as an increased risk of sexual harassment. It can lead to be sexual harassment. In this novel, Medusa illustrates got raped by Poseidon because of beauty. This tragic event underscores the vulnerabilities and injustices that can accompany physical attractiveness, highlighting the complex and often dangerous dynamics that beautiful respective may face in society. The moral value of being someone who has beauty privilege does not always bring happiness, it can even be the beginning of suffering. The analysis of moral values in this category as found in the novel Medusa as follows:

Poseidon didn't care whose temple he was entering. I said, my voice shaking.' He just pulled the pillars down. I screamed for him to leave me alone, I called out to Athena. I said, 'No, no, no!' But in the rubble of that night, Poseidon took what I had never wanted to give him. (Burton, 2021)

The action did by Poseidon in this story portrayed in the quotation is included as the moral value that power and privilege can be abused, causing misfortune to the innocent. Incidents like this are still related today, and many beautiful people still face bullying and harassment due to the jealousy and hatred that exists in society. It shows that beauty can be decisions that will help someone but also harm them. Then the importance of building empathy and protection for everyone, regardless of their physical appearance.

Blaming a victim refers to the tendency to hold the victim obliged for negative events, this is often happen in cases of sexual harassment. In this novel, Athena's reaction is related to today's society, where victims of sexual harassment are often blamed for what happened to them. In this story, Athena was angry with Medusa because she thought that Medusa had mesmerized Poseidon. Athena's anger caused Medusa and her sister to be cursed because her sister defended Medusa. This situation reflects society's tendency to blame the victim and ignore the real executioner, thus adding to the victim's suffering. In this case, society must learn not to rush to blame the victim without understanding the real situation, it is supposed to direct attention and action to the real executioner. Furthermore, this accident teaches us that unfair reactions to victims can provoke the trauma and suffering they experience, so a more fair and empathetic approach to handling sexual harassment cases is needed. The analysis of moral values in this category as found in the novel Medusa as follows:

But Athena had turned up, of course, ‘where is she?’ I remember her saying. ‘Where is the little slut? Where is Medusa? ‘How dare you!’ the goddess said ‘You desecrated my sanctuary. Carrying on like that in my sacred place.’ (Burton, 2021)

The moral value contained in the quotation above is the feeling caring for the victim should have been carried out. This novel illustrates how Athena, instead of providing support, blamed and insulted Medusa with demeaning names, and accused her of defiling the sanctuary. This reaction reflects society’s impulse to rush to blame the victim without understanding the real situation.

3.2 Representation of the Ideal Environment as a Recommendation for Society’s Morality

A toxic environment is a place or group that spreads bad influence to each individual (Goehner, 2024). One of the adverse effects of a toxic environment is stunted personal development. In this research toxic environment affects a person’s mental health. For instance, in Medusa’s case, the toxic environment she experienced had an impact on her mental health. Medusa became scared to meet people and isolated herself, negativity exposure made her fearful of social interactions, leading her to withdraw and isolate herself from others. This representation of a toxic environment in this novel can be a critique to the society that there will be always an effect of what people do to someone, and the effect can be mental health issues. In this novel, the researcher finds out how negative social interactions and environmental pressures can damage Medusa’s mental health by making a shut-in and fearful of meeting people. The constant humiliation and pressure she received created an unhealthy environment for Medusa, which eventually led to social isolation and anxiety. The analysis of moral values in this category as found in the novel Medusa as follows:

I sighed.’ some people thought so. Other not. When I was about eight, one day, Alekto, a woman in our village, said to my sister Stheno, right in front of me, “That one’s a beauty. She’s going to be a heartbreaker.” Her husband agreed. But another woman, passing by, turned to look. “Oh no,’ she said. “She’s nothing special.” “What are you talking about?” said Alekto. ‘She’s bewitching! Look at that lovely long hair. (Burton, 2021).

The quotation above represents how the comments of people around Medusa about her appearance, both positive and negative, contributed to the formation of damaging self-perceptions and severe psychological distress. Since childhood, Medusa has been the subject of diverse judgments from those around her, highlighting how the words and actions of others can have a huge impact on one’s mental and emotional development.

The moral value of this event is the importance of empathy and caution in interacting with others. The society must be more aware that comments and treatment of people especially negative ones, can have serious consequences on their mental health. Furthermore, society should compete to create a supportive and positive environment, where each individual feels valued and accepted for who they are. By doing so, society can help prevent the adverse effects of toxic environments and negative social interactions, and support the mental well-being of all members of society. Seeing Medusa suffering from constant humiliation and social pressure, her sister felt moved to protect and support her. Medusa’s psychological mental state is characterized by fear of meeting others and a tendency to isolate herself, which made her brother more aware of the serious impact of the unhealthy environment. By seeing Medusa’s condition, her sister realized that the actions and attitudes of the people around them have a great influence on one’s emotional and mental health. According to van der Wal, et al. (2021), the environmental factors were strongly associated with each other and had a similar profile of influence across all networks. They also stated that environmental factors are related to population mental health through different and specific pathways.

This encourages her sisters to be more sensitive to Medusa’s condition and try to create a safer and more supportive environment for Medusa. This incident emphasizes the importance of family support in the face of social pressure and shows that awareness and empathy can help satisfy the burden

experienced by people suffering from toxic environments. The analysis of moral values in this category as found in the novel *Medusa* as follows:

‘Be reasonable, Athena,’ said Euryale with a grimace. Be wise. You of all immortals should understand that Medusa had nothing to do with what happened in your temple. We could have put her on a desert island and he’d still have come to find her.’ (Burton, 2021).

The moral values from the quotation above are that blaming the victim only adds to the suffering and people need to understand the true context to provide appropriate support. By understanding the true situation of their experiences, people can offer the applicable assistance and ensure that justice and healing are prioritized for the victim. This approach is not only for the recovery of victims but also contributes to a more compassionate and just society as a whole.

In the beginning, her interaction with her sisters was limited. Despite being full of affection, on the other side, she was trapped in fear and overprotective of herself. Yet, Perseus' arrival changes this dynamic, he gives space for Medusa to express her feelings without being afraid of rejected. The emotional support that Perseus shows helps Medusa to accept who herself. The positive interaction enables Medusa to lessen her fear, as well as see herself more positively. This analysis of moral values in this category as found in the novel *Medusa* as follows:

‘It’s a great honour that you told me this, said Perseus. ‘I won’t forget it. No one’s ever trusted me like you trust me. I wouldn’t even have mentioned his name if I’d known” (Burton, 2021).

The moral value from the quotation above is that trust, acceptance, and emotional support are essential in building healthy relationships and helping others overcome their trauma and fears. This shows how much of an impact trusting someone can have. Perseus was honored and appreciated Medusa’s trust, and helped Medusa feel more accepted and supported. By sharing the same struggle and hardship, Perseus and Medusa became close throughout the story. He gained Medusa’s trust by giving her support that helped her to open up about her past and her struggles. This can be seen through Perseus’ line when he says to her, “I understand that you and me are alike. We’re survivors” (Burton, 2021). Highlighting the notion that the action offered by Perseus gave Medusa comfort and made her open up with him which led to the process of healing her trauma.

5. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the current study of the moral value in *Medusa's* novel, this novel criticizes society for representing a bad example of morality, this bad example is shown by the representation of a toxic environment. This novel teaches us that a healthy society must be built on a foundation of support, empathy, and acceptance. By giving a positive example through the characters of the sisters Medusa and Perseus, this novel highlights the importance of a supportive environment in helping someone overcome trauma and develop into the best version of themselves. The novel’s critique of toxic environments serves as a reminder for people to create a better environment for the emotional and mental health of every representative of society.

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