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Reclaiming the Narrative: Identity, Empowerment, and the Politics of Disability in Harilyn Rousso's *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back*

Saboor Ahmad Dar *and Rajeev Sinha

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Social Science & Humanities, Madyanchal Professional University, Ratibad-462044, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

*Corresponding author: darsaboar1819@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper examines Harilyn Rousso's seminal memoir *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back*, analyzing how the author chronicles her personal evolution from internalized social stigma to political consciousness and disability activism. By synthesizing core theoretical models including Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory, Charles Taylor's Politics of Recognition, Michael Oliver's Social Model of Disability, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's Feminist Disability Theory, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory this study explores the intricate dynamics of identity formation. Furthermore, it investigates structural empowerment through Paulo Freire's critical consciousness and frames disability as a fundamental matter of human rights, civil liberties, and social justice.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Harilyn Rousso, Intersectionality, Social Model of Disability, Critical Consciousness, Feminist Theory

Introduction: In her seminal memoir *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back*, Harilyn Rousso offers a piercing critique of how contemporary society constructs, marginalizes, and comprehends disability. Moving far beyond traditional auto-ethnographic reflections, Rousso charts her personal evolution from a life marked by internalized shame, social stigma, and concealment to one defined by political consciousness, pride, and active disability activism. Her narrative dismantles the conventional medical and philanthropic paradigms that frame physical impairment as an individual tragedy or a personal failing that requires overcoming. Instead, Rousso repositions disability as a dynamic social, cultural, and political identity forged through lived experience, feminist solidarity, and active resistance against systemic ableism. This research paper explores how Rousso's memoir actualizes core theoretical frameworks in disability studies, analyzing identity formation through stigma and intersectionality, structural empowerment through critical consciousness, and disability as a matter of civil rights and social justice.

One of the most vital thematic arcs in Rousso's memoir is the arduous process of identity formation. During her early years and adolescence, Rousso wrestled deeply with the societal demand for physical normalcy, frequently attempting to downplay her cerebral palsy to blend in and avoid being reduced solely to her impairment. This phase encapsulates the internalization of societal prejudices, wherein an individual absorbs external stigma and translates it into internal shame.

Rousso's early strategies of concealment and "passing" mirror Erving Goffman's foundational concepts in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). Goffman notes that individuals possessing a socially stigmatized attribute routinely face discrimination because they are labeled as "inferior" or "different," prompting many to adopt passing techniques to evade mistreatment. Furthermore, Rousso's narrative aligns closely with Charles Taylor's (1994) *Politics of Recognition*, which posits that individual self-worth is fundamentally tied to how society perceives and validates them. For much of her life, society offered a distorted reflection either treating Rousso with pity or reducing her to a hollow "inspiration" thereby denying her acknowledgment as a complete, autonomous human being.

Transitioning away from shame required adopting Michael Oliver's (1990) *Social Model of Disability*, which distinguishes between biological impairment and socially constructed disability. By recognizing that ableist structures and environmental barriers rather than cerebral palsy itself created the primary obstacles in her life, Rousso began to revalue her identity. This evolution is further illuminated by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (2002) *Feminist Disability Theory* and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) *Intersectionality Theory*. As a disabled woman, Rousso experiences a compounded oppression where ableism and sexism intersect, rendering her vulnerable to cultural myths of unattractiveness, hyper-dependency, and social incapacity. Her identity is thus not a singular category, but a complex matrix produced at the crossroads of gender, disability, and political awakening.

While identity focuses on self-definition and psychological alignment, empowerment in *Don't Call Me Inspirational* is characterized by action, agency, and collective mobilization. A foundational element of Rousso's empowerment is her rejection of the "inspirational" label. She contends that praising disabled individuals for performing routine, everyday tasks such as working, studying, or living independently perpetuates uneven power dynamics by framing basic participation as extraordinary. By refusing this patronizing moniker, Rousso reclaims her agency, choosing to define success by her own standards rather than by the condescending metrics of a non-disabled society.

This journey toward structural resistance directly reflects Paulo Freire's (1970) *Theory of Critical Consciousness* (conscientização). Freire argues that oppressed populations achieve emancipation only when they collaboratively identify the systemic roots of their subjugation. Rousso's shift from self-blame to political activism exemplifies this awakening, demonstrating how education, dialogue, and community involvement foster profound personal and political power.

Additionally, Julian Rappaport's (1987) *Empowerment Theory* and Albert Bandura's (1997) *Self-Efficacy Theory* provide lenses through which to view Rousso's growing confidence and leadership. Empowerment, as Rappaport suggests, transcends individual self-esteem; it requires expanding access to social resources and institutional influence. Bandura similarly highlights that belief in one's capacity to navigate obstacles generates resilience. Rousso builds this resilience through her professional career, public writing, and advocacy. Finally, her emphasis on collective solidarity aligns with Nancy Fraser's (2000) *Theory of Participatory Parity*, which asserts that true empowerment requires structural conditions enabling marginalized groups to participate equally in cultural, economic, and political life.

Beyond personal identity and individual empowerment, Rousso frames disability as a structural, political category that demands systemic reform. Rather than viewing her condition through a medical or charitable lens, she insists that disability is fundamentally a human rights and social justice issue.

This perspective anchors itself firmly in Michael Oliver's (1990) Social Model of Disability and Vic Finkelstein's (1980) disability rights perspective, both of which argue that exclusionary physical environments, discriminatory employment practices, and inaccessible educational institutions are the true architects of disability. Consequently, achieving equity requires structural transformation rather than medical interventions aimed at "fixing" disabled bodies. Tom Shakespeare's (2006) rights-based approach further supports this framework, emphasizing that disabled citizens are entitled to full participation through rigorous anti-discrimination legislation and inclusive public policy.

Furthermore, Rousso exposes how cultural narratives and media representations reinforce marginalization—an insight well-explained by Michel Foucault's (1977) theories on power and discourse. Foucault demonstrates how institutional language and cultural norms dictate what is established as "normal" versus "abnormal," thereby maintaining social control. By unmasking these pervasive ideologies, Rousso joins forces with collective movements that demand both the redistribution of resources and the cultural recognition of underprivileged groups, echoing Nancy Fraser's broader framework of social justice.

Harilyn Rousso's *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back* transcends standard memoir writing, emerging as a vital theoretical text within disability studies and feminist scholarship. By systematically dismantling the medical model of disability, rejecting the infantilizing tropes of inspiration and tragedy, and embracing intersectional solidarity, Rousso reframes disability as a proud social identity and a foundation for political resistance. Supported by the theoretical frameworks of Goffman, Oliver, Garland-Thomson, Crenshaw, Freire, and Foucault, the memoir illustrates that true inclusion requires much more than individual perseverance. Ultimately, Rousso advocates for a transformed society wherein individuals with disabilities are recognized not for "overcoming" their impairments, but for exercising the exact same rights, dignity, and opportunities afforded to all members of society.

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