

Overcoming disability barriers: The journey to social acceptance and self-fulfillment in R. J. Palacio's wonder

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Abstract: The main aim of this article is to provide a reading of R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*, tracing the journey of August Pullman, the protagonist of the novel, as he moves from exclusion and frustration to social acceptance and self-fulfillment. Despite being born with a severe facial deformity, the ten-year-old boy August, or "Auggie" as he is often called, demonstrates remarkable resilience in his efforts to integrate into his social environment. Though initially disappointed by the narrow-mindedness of those around him, who have treated him offensively because of his physical abnormality, Auggie insists on overcoming the barriers of disability till he succeeds in showing his talents as a distinguished person. While some of his school peers have received him with rejection and rudeness, he goes on, finding solace in the support of those who have embraced him with love, kindness, and care, helping him find his way in society. The researchers employ both the narrative approach and the analytical approach to recount and examine the unique life experiences of Auggie as presented in the novel. After a series of ups and downs, Auggie successfully fits into his community, fulfilling the goals he has long yearned for and gaining the respect and admiration of his family, teachers, and friends.

Keywords: Disability, Palacio, Self-fulfillment, Social acceptance, Wonder.

1. Introduction

Literature is the mirror of society. It is the essence of human experience. In their literary works, authors depict the hopes and woes, challenges and aspirations, triumphs and defeats of people. An important function of literature is to offer insights into the lives of marginalized groups, including those with disabilities who form a significant category in each community. Reading literary works that portray the life details of a disabled person and how it develops can be an effective means for us to know about individuals with disabilities who, according to the report issued by the World Health Organization in 2021, account for 15% of the world's population (Gulya & Fehervari, 2023, p. 1). These individuals seek acceptance from ordinary people, work hard to prove themselves in a society where they challenge obstacles and seek recognition and self-fulfillment. They strive to achieve their goals and work persistently to carve out their own space in a world that often presents barriers. Accordingly, writers depict the image of people with disabilities in their works and represent them as "the other" whom we should support, respect, and accept in society. Hence, literature aims to change the social attitude or, let us say, the collective opinion about people with disability who have found themselves excluded from society due to their physical or mental impairment. As Gutterman (2023) has observed,

In our society, people with disabilities are mostly on the margins. They are perceived as individuals with a problem, a "victim" who has "suffered" a "tragedy." Individuals with disabilities are considered objects of pity and charity, persons (barely) who cannot work or be expected to take a full role in society. They are a burden (often resented) to be carried by their families or on public welfare assistance (p. 8).

1.1. *Depiction of Disabled People in Literary Works*

The protagonist of *Wonder*, the work under discussion, experiences mistreatment at school and in his everyday life. People inside and outside school make cruel and hurtful comments toward him, which deeply affect his feelings. This is evident in the novel, where people use harsh and rude language, even telling him to leave school (Nurfajriani et al., 2021, p. 130).

Writers turn their attention to these disabled people who fall prey to frustration and disappointment due to their impairment that keeps people in society away from them. Literary studies about disability focus on those individuals with “physical or mental impairments that hinder their full inclusion into socially significant processes” (Kovzele & Laha, 2017, p. 627). These victims feel desperate and have the feeling that they are unable to comply with the established social norms or cope with the standards accepted in society.

Through their narratives, authors depict the struggles and triumphs of these individuals, representing them as integral members of society who deserve support, respect, and inclusion. The portrayal of individuals with disabilities in literature as valuable individuals who yearn for social acceptance and self-fulfillment raises society's awareness of those people. It helps us recognize the need for accepting and empowering them so that they can lead happy, fulfilling lives. This tendency aligns with Saudi Vision 2030, which calls for including individuals with disability in society and providing them with all the means that guarantee a satisfactory level of quality life for them.

Significantly, Saudi Vision 2030 reflects “the kingdom's commitment to securing the well-being of its citizens by providing them with the means to lead a dignified life, taking into consideration the needs of individuals with disabilities” (Nasser & Al-Gharaibeh, 2023, p. 3167). In fostering a social commitment to supporting disabled people, the authors of literary works argue that it is crucial to portray these individuals in literature as “the other,” to be embraced with love and acceptance, thereby providing society with a positive insight into how to engage with them. In this sense,

Representation of disability and the disabled has always found its way in literary texts (. . .), breaking of all stereotypes and unwanted norms from the past to broadening the horizon of a welcoming cultural mindset of people in the present so as to provide these disabled people with both moral and mental support in the society; where we can say that the beginning of modernity in literary text and cinematic pieces brought with it the scope of acceptance, understanding, rationality, consciousness and most importantly hospitality (as cited in Gupta and Anand, 2022, p.89).

1.2. *Disability: An Overview*

According to the World Health Organization, disability is defined as “an umbrella term for impairments, activity, limitations, and participation restrictions,” Bianquin and Bulgarelli (2017) cite, stating that disability “denotes the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and the individual's contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)” (p.72). Obviously, this definition highlights the complex relationship between the person's health condition and the different social and individual barriers s/he may encounter in life.

Ginsburg & Rapp (2013) Classify disability as physical and mental. As they explain, “physical disability is capable of limiting physical movement while mental disability is capable of affecting the cognitive activities carried out by a person's brain (as cited in Gupta and Anand, 2022, p.90). Providing a more comprehensive perspective, Fialkowski (2024) divides disability into four types: cognitive disabilities, physical disabilities, chronic diseases and illnesses, and visible body differences:

[D]isability is broadly inclusive of (1) cognitive disabilities, born or acquired, including specific diagnoses such as Down syndrome, Autism, epilepsy, and traumatic brain injury, and is also inclusive of mental and behavioral disorders such as 89 schizophrenia or alcoholism; (2) physical disabilities such as blindness or low vision, deafness or hard of hearing, congenital or acquired

mobility differences; (3) chronic diseases and illnesses such as arthritis and diabetes; (4) visible body differences such as limb differences, albinism, and cleft palate. Despite the differences in type, the defining characteristic is the actual substantial limitation on one or more life activities, or the perception of such incapacity by others (Fialkowski, 2024, pp. 88-89)

Rohwerder (2015) identifies five different models of disability: a charity model, a medical model, a social model, a human rights model, and an interactional model. She elucidates these models as follows:

- Charity Model focuses on the individual and tends to view people with disabilities as passive victims.
- Medical Model considers disability to be an individual problem directly caused by a disease, an injury or some other health condition and thus requires medical care.
- Social Model sees disability as created by the social environment, in contrast to the individualist focuses of the charity and medical models, which excludes people with “impairments” (rather than disabilities) from full participation in society.
- Human Rights Model is based on the social model and takes the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (...) as its main reference point and recognizes persons with disabilities as rights holders and central actors in their own lives.
- Interactional Model is based on the belief that disability should not be seen as purely medical or social, but instead should be based on the recognition that people with disabilities experience problems as a result of the interaction between their health condition (i.e., their “impairments”) and the context (i.e., environmental factors, such as products and technology, the natural and build environment, support and relationships, attitudes, services, systems and policies; and personal factors, such as age, sex, motivation and self-esteem). (Rohwerder, 2015, pp.4-6).

As seen above, this categorization of disability models provides a comprehensive insight into how disability can be approached and understood. It stresses the great importance of a broader perspective that moves beyond personal limitations to consider the wider environmental, social, and rights-based factors that shape the experience of disability. In this way, such a comprehensive framework inspires a shift to more inclusive, empowering visions that recognize people with disabilities as individuals who actively enrich their lives and positively contribute to their community.

1.3. R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*

The present paper examines the children's novel *Wonder*, written by the American novelist. J. Palacio and published in 2012, exploring the protagonist's journey toward social acceptance and self-fulfillment in a society that often views disability as sad, tragic, shameful, and burdensome. As Gupta and Anand (2022) note, disabled individuals are frequently seen as "a menace, or like an evil stalking beast that would devour society" (p. 91). The paper, accordingly, aims to illuminate the challenges and triumphs confronted by the protagonist, a disabled child, as he navigates these social perceptions and narrow-mindedness. Through his journey of self-assertion, he achieves success and reaches a sense of uniqueness, ultimately transforming people's attitudes toward individuals with disabilities from negative to positive. This transformation promotes understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity within society.

Raquel Jaramillo Palacio, a contemporary American novelist and graphic designer, was born in New York City in 1963. She is known for her numerous books for children, including the widely celebrated *Wonder* (2012). Palacio started her writing career as an illustrator, designing book covers. Throughout her professional journey, she designed hundreds of covers for both fiction and non-fiction works. In addition to her design work, she also illustrated several children's books that she authored herself.

Following the international success of *Wonder*, Palacio has published several works for children. Her significant works include *Ride, Baby, Ride* (1998), *Dream, Baby, Dream!* (1998), *Last Summer: A Little Book*

for Dads (2004), *The Extraordinary* (2012), *Auggie & Me: Three Wonder Stories* (2014), *365 Days of Wonder: Mr. Browne's Book of Precepts* (2014), *We're All Wonders* (2017), *White Bird* (2019), and *Pony* (2021).

Wonder by R.J. Palacio was published in July, 2012. Receiving widespread acclaim from both readers and critics, it was adapted into a movie in 2014. Palacio was inspired to write the book after an incident on the street when her son started to cry as a girl with congenital defects approached him. Inspired by the situation, "she then proceeded to write a story based on that encounter, with the explicit goal to redress the situation and educate her readers." (Lancrenon, 2021, p. 15). The title of the novel refers to the famous song "Wonder" by Natalie Merchant, which tells the story of a persistent woman who, despite her disability, perseveres through the challenges of life.

The novel narrates the tale of August Pullman, a ten-year-old boy born with a terrible facial deformity that affected the structure of facial tissues and bones. Because of this abnormality, the poor child underwent twenty-seven surgeries on his face in an attempt to reconstruct it. Due to his disability, August, or Auggie, has been homeschooled by his parents his entire life. Now, for the first time, he is being sent to a real school and anxious about it. Initially, he resisted the idea because he was worried that children his age wouldn't grasp his condition. However, with the encouragement of his parents and his older sister, Via, he decided to give it a chance. He wants to be accepted, but can he convince his new classmates that he's just like them? As Auggie explores his new environment, he has mixed feelings of hope and fear. He hopes to be treated like any other kid, but at the same time he is afraid of his peers' reactions.

1.4. *Auggie's Journey to Social Acceptance and Self-Fulfillment*

Auggie, the novel's main character, is the narrator of his own story. He begins his tale as follows,

I know I'm not an ordinary ten-year-old kid. I mean, sure, I do ordinary things. I eat ice cream. I ride my bike. I play ball. I have an Xbox. Stuff like that makes me ordinary. I guess. And I feel ordinary. Inside. But I know ordinary kids don't make other ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds. I know ordinary kids don't get stared at wherever they go. (Palacio, 2012, p. 3).

His only wish is that no one mocks his facial deformity and that he is treated by society as an ordinary child, experiencing the same acceptance and simplicity that so many other children take for granted. He yearns to fit in, to feel the warmth of social intimacy, and to be welcomed by others. As he reflects,

If I found a magic lamp and I could have one wish, I would wish that I had a normal face that no one ever noticed at all. I would wish that I could walk down the street without people seeing me and then doing that look-away thing. Here's what I think: the only reason I'm not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way. (Palacio, 2012, p. 3).

Mr. Tushman, the principal of Beecher Prep, introduces Auggie to three children from his grade before the school year begins, telling Auggie they are very friendly and polite. Thus, they take him on a tour of the school. As they visit the classrooms, science labs, music room, and theater, they share their names, interests, and some stories about school life. Charlotte and Jack, the two children leading the tour, are kind and pleasant. However, Julian, the third child, is vulgar and rude, particularly when he offensively asks Auggie, "What's the deal with your face? I mean, were you in a fire or something" (Palacio, 2012, p. 34). At once, Charlotte interferences, telling Julian that what he has said is very rude. However, Auggie feels embarrassed and uncomfortable, overcome by a deep sense of hurt and sorrow. Another incident occurred on Halloween, which Auggie often regards as his favorite holiday. He tells us,

For me, Halloween is the best holiday in the world. It even beats Christmas. I get to dress up in a costume. I get to wear a mask. I get to go around like every other kid with a mask and nobody thinks I look weird. Nobody takes a second look. Nobody notices me. Nobody knows me. I wish every day could be Halloween. We could all wear masks

all the time. Then we could walk around and get to know each other before we got to see what we looked like under the masks. (Palacio, 2012, p. 73)

Enthusiastically, he went to school dressed as the Bleeding Scream, hoping for a nice and calm day since the mask hid his disfigured face. However, he shortly discovered that the other children were making inappropriate comments about him behind his back. Jack was one of them, unaware that Auggie could hear every word they said, as his face was masked, and thus, they could not know him.

The children's savage remarks hurt Auggie more than he expected, reminding him that even while disguised, he could not escape the abuse and sarcasm of others. However, to Auggie's astonishment, Jack came to him and confessed that he had said those rude remarks behind his back to attract the attention of the other kids and to fit in, mainly to maintain his relationship with Julian, who intensely hated Auggie. However, after revealing his true motives, Jack and Auggie reconciled and again became friends.

Though disappointed by the rude remarks of some of his peers, Auggie was determined to continue his pursuit of social connection and self-fulfillment. One day at school, he attempted to remain in the shadow, unnoticed by others, but during lunch, a girl came closer and sat at his empty table because all the others were crowded. The girl introduced herself to him as Summer. Her gentle manner towards Auggie deeply affected the boy, greatly touching him with the warmth and kindness she showed. It was a gentleness he rarely experienced, at least at school. This situation provided him with a glimpse of hope that not everyone would treat him harshly. The kind girl made him forget all the insults he had encountered at school.

Auggie felt at ease as he talked to Summer. They connected so well that they agreed to name their lunch table the "Summery" table. They also began to think of other students with cheerful names like theirs. "By the end of lunch," Auggie narrates, "we had come up with a whole list of names of kids and teachers who could sit at our table if they wanted" (Palacio, 2012, p. 52). Thus, Auggie began to fit in, conquering his anxiety and establishing social relationships in the school environment he had long feared.

As the story progressed, Auggie learned about the lives of those around him, including Miranda, his sister Via's friend, and Justin, her boyfriend. Miranda and Justin treated Auggie very kindly, especially after hearing about his condition from Via. These experiences enriched Auggie's social life and encouraged him to build new relationships, allowing him to fit in more comfortably within society.

By the end of the narrative, after a series of ups and downs, Auggie could find his way in society. At school, he became more popular among his peers, who were no longer intimidated by him. On graduation day, he received the school's Henry Ward Beecher Medal, which is given to students who excel in specific areas. Auggie was recognized for his kindness, gentleness, perseverance, and courage. His family and friends admired him and were pleased with his outstanding accomplishments. Afterward, Jack's and Summer's families joined the Pullmans for a celebration. Everyone was proud of Auggie, the boy with disability who could overcome all obstacles and achieve the goals he had long yearned for.

2. Conclusion

To conclude, *Wonder* provides new insights for us to contemplate how the strength and perseverance of the human spirit when supported by social love and kindness, can help a person triumph over the barriers of disability. Through Auggie's inspiring journey from rejection and failure to acceptance and self-fulfillment, we see not only the challenges confronted by disabled people but also the significant effect and transformative power of the care and compassion we extend to others in society, especially those like Auggie, who, despite their physical disabilities, possess a strong will and strive for success. Remarkably, "their bodily imperfection has given them a deeper vision which is a more important talent of life" (Kovzele & Laha, 2017, p. 631).

Throughout the novel, Palacio calls us to foster a collective obligation and a shared responsibility in order to accept one another, allowing a space for love and understanding to mend our broken reality and make it more beautiful, more tolerant, more sympathetic, and more accepting of others. This noble mindset becomes even more crucial and compelling when those others are disabled individuals who have been deprived of many of the blessings that we, as ordinary people, enjoy, yet still pursue their dreams

and yearn for accomplishment and self-affirmation. As the book closes, depicting Auggie's accomplishments at school, his mother gazes at him and softly says, "You truly are a wonder, Auggie. You are a wonder" (Palacio, 2012, p. 220). This is how Auggie describes this eternal moment of triumph,

She hugged me close and leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"Thank *you*, Auggie," she answered softly.

"For what?"

"For everything you've given us," she said. "For coming into our lives. For being you."

She bent down and whispered in my ear. "You really are a wonder, Auggie. You are a wonder." (Palacio, 2012, p. 220)

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