



Ambivalent Attitudes Towards Disability: A Study Of R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*

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ABSTRACT

Disability studies aims at figuring out the experiences of disabled people in society. They undergo several consequences for being different, such as otherness, social limitation, and inequality. R. J. Palacio's *Wonder* details the life of a 10-year-old boy named August Pullman, whose face is disfigured due to a genetic disorder called Treacher Collins syndrome. Auggie hesitates to step into the world of gaze. The perception of disability is essential to exile in life for disabled people. The attitudes towards PWDs differ according to people, which can be defined by the concept of three spheres of influence. How family, friends, doctors, teachers, and others from society view the disabled community with ambivalent studies and negative attitudes. Despite August's oddity, the author tries to portray him as a normal boy with the help of family, friends, teachers, and attributes. The article furthermore echoes society's ambivalent attitudes and negative attitudes towards impaired people..

Keywords: Attitude, Ambivalent, Positive, Negative Companionship, Family, impaired and disabled

Raquel Jaramillo Palacio is an American author who has penned a number of novels for children. She is super popular for her series called *Wonder*, which shares the story of her fictional character, August Pullman. Her bestselling novel *Wonder* depicts the lifestyle of a 10-year-old boy, August Pullman, who was diagnosed with Treacher Collins syndrome at birth. His face is terribly disfigured due to the genetic condition.

His disability causes various psychological and biological barriers for him. Society gazes at him with a sense of otherness and bullies at his creation. Fred Rogers discusses the real meaning of disability in *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*, which is given below.

Part of the problem with the word 'disabilities' is that it immediately suggests an inability to see or hear or walk or do other things that many of us take for granted. But what of people who can't feel? Or talk about their feelings? Or manage their feelings in constructive ways? What of people who aren't able to form close and strong relationships? And people who cannot find fulfilment in their lives, or those who have lost hope, who live in disappointment and bitterness and find in life no joy, no love? These, it seems to me, are the real disabilities.(130)

Despite all the negativities, August wants to be normal and be treated as normal with the help of his family and friends.

The perception of society towards the disabled community is one of negative and positive attitudes. The third social sphere is the analysis of how people's attitudes can turn a disability into an ability. The three social spheres have varied attitudes towards PWDs. The first sphere emphasizes the role of friends and family to motivate impaired people. The next one stresses the importance of doctors, teachers, and medical professionals in providing physiological and psychological support to PWDs. The third sphere comprises the remaining people in society who often demotivate disabled people for their functional restrictions.

The first sphere of attitudinal influence encompasses disabled people's relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and peers. This phase helps disabled people gain their self-confidence and self-esteem. The disabled community expects some special care to do daily activities and motivation to live a stress-free life despite their functional limitations. During times of catastrophe, the family becomes the trust-hold for mankind. Family is not only a place for love but also for guidance, protection, appreciation, stimulation, and consolation. The below words from Jodi Picoult's *House Rules* stress the positive mentality of the disabled's parents.

I've met so many parents of kids who are on the low end of the autism spectrum, kids who are diametrically opposed to Jacob, with his Asperger's. They tell me I'm lucky to have a son who's verbal, who is blisteringly intelligent, who can take apart the broken microwave and have it working again an hour later. They think there is no greater hell than having a son who is locked in his own world, unaware that there's a wider one to explore. But try having a son who is locked in his own world and still wants to make a connection. A son who tries to be like everyone else but truly doesn't know how (124)

The novel amplifies the significant function of family through August's mom, dad and sister to turn him into a wonder. His parents consider him as extraordinary "And Mom and Dad don't see me as ordinary, either. They see me as extraordinary" (3) and try to make him indulge in all activities. After August has been home-schooled for nine years, his parents have planned to let him mingle with his age group kids who are normal so he is sent to Beecher school. Though the world fails to treat August as a normal boy, his parents never would do that.

Companionship is a mutual connection between two people, despite any obstacles. It is a driving force in the lives of differently-abled people. In the process of becoming a normal kid at school, August is humiliated for his deformed face with bad titles and pulled down from class activities such as drama and science projects. Jack Will, Charlotte, and Summer are August's friends who take up the role of savoir at the school during the time of being bullied. They have witnessed the skilful side of August, as his family has noticed and handled him ordinarily. The following lines from Dana S. Dunn's *The Social Psychology of Disability* stress the acceptance of the disabled: "Acceptance of a disability as a means of coping requires the PWD to focus on what can now be functionally achieved rather than continually revisiting, even ruminating, on what can no longer be accomplished" (23). August has developed a healthy relationship with them and has done numerous naughty things that schoolboys do normally.

The second sphere focuses on the psychosocial process of adjustment for the disabled with the assistance of rehabilitation, medical, and related professionals such as doctors, social workers, nurses, therapists, and teachers. It shapes not only their body but also their thoughts. The teachers at school are the second mothers to the students. An ideal teacher does not judge students by their social background or inabilities but rather treats all with equality and provides opportunities to sharpen their skills. The novel emphasizes the significant role of teachers through Ms. Petosa and Mr. Brown. Ms Petosa, a student-friendly teacher, gives students the opportunity to speak on students favourite things on the first day of school. Despite August's weird facial figure, she chooses him as the first student to share his favourite things, which describes her sense of equality. Mr. Brown, an innovative teacher, comes up with a new task called "precept" (45), which means "know thyself" (47). Both of these teachers consider August a normal kid and let him indulge in all class activities.

Medical professionals motivate PWDs to lead a hopeful life. They do surgeries and therapies to repair the functional problems in disabled people's bodies. They let the disabled know about assistive and rehabilitative technology to meet their functional needs. Auggie's family has taken him to the hospital tirelessly to fix his face. He has had more than thirty surgeries to get a normal face. The following words describe the real meaning of surgeries in Auggie's life:

People think I haven't gone to school because of the way I look, but it's not that. It's because of all the surgeries. I have had twenty seven since I was born. The bigger ones happened before I was even four years old, so I don't remember those. But I have had two or three surgeries every year since then. And because I'm little for my age and I have some other medical mysteries that doctors never really figured out, I used to get sick a lot. (3)

He hides his face with the helmet as he hesitates to show his face after the surgeries. After insisting numerous times by friends and family, Auggie has unmasked himself and started mingle with others.

The third and largest sphere of attitudinal influence is from members of the general public. This phase seems to be negative, as people treat PWDs with prejudice and stereotypes. Normal people have ambivalent attitudes when they approach and handle disabled people. It leaves social perceivers with two minds. Auggie's friends, who are allotted to take him on a school tour, have duelling minds. They speak ill and weakly about Auggie at the back and behave nicely in front of his face.

According to ambivalence-amplification theory, normal people hold positive and negative reactions to PWDs. They treat disabled people with a state of empathy and a state of disgust. Julian is the one good friend from the Beecher school who has ambivalent attitudes towards Auggie. He starts to chat and hang up with him when he finds him to be a super funny character. On the other hand, he confesses in the presence of his fellow classmates during the Halloween celebration that Auggie is not his friend, which tears him up and makes him put an end to his school studies.

The family and friends turn out to be the motivators and supporters in the lives of PWDs, as they focus on the optimistic side of them. Society often wounds the disabled with words and actions as they have ambivalent attitudes and prejudices towards them. The following passage from Shane Clifton's *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life* describes the cruel society towards PWDs.

One problem of modern society, even with all its medical and technological wonders, is its implicit demand that we should live forever in perfect health. We keep our dead and dying out of sight; we abort babies that do not match our ideals of normalcy; we worship photoshopped images of beauty. In consequence, suffering, disability, and fragility come as a complete and utter shock. We just do not know what to do with them. In reality, however, there is no theological reason to assume that we should be immune to the consequences of biological existence. (156)

Auggie has received tremendous support from his family and close friends. He also gets hurt by Julian and undergoes both like and dislike from Jack as he is trapped with an ambivalent attitude. Therefore, Auggie gets rid of weak thoughts about his deformed face and starts to enjoy life with the assistance of motivating people. He has transformed as unstoppable by zooming in on the kind hearts of the people.

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