

A Critical Study on the Literary Representations of Disability in R.J.Palacio's Wonder

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Abstract

Auggie, a twelve-year-old boy born with a genetic disorder, that affects proper growth of his body parts due to a rare craniofacial condition, which occurs in a ratio of 1: 50,000 among the children. This condition may cause severe malformations of the face and will affect its whole structure including, misplaced mouth and jaws, contorted ears and eyes. The protagonist, Auggie suffered from this kind of disorder named Treacher Collins Syndrome. Due to this, he was homeschooled from his birth in New York. As his mom, Isabel Pullman wants him to attend the regular classes in the school, she admitted him in Beecher Prep school. There he feels strange first, and to assist him, his teacher arranged some students to support him and to help him in order to practice him to the school environment. There, Auggie feels uncomfortable, as his own colleagues looked at him differently. Summer, a girl became a friend of him, on observing his characteristics, which are genuine. His own sister, Via feels uncomfortable to be with him and started to see him like others. Auggie's inner turmoil and his sufferings, his thirst to act as normal, like other children are sketched by Palacio in an exemplary way. After sometime, everyone apologizes their mistakes to Auggie and befriended with him back. The objective of this research paper is to critically analyze, how the disability affects Auggie's life and how it has been represented by Palacio. This research paper also attempts to create awareness among its readers, regarding the disability and to insists them not to involve in any activity of deriding and treating the disabled persons with contempt.

Keywords

Treacher Collins Syndrome, teasing, Auggie's inner turmoil, literary representation, treatments of disabled persons

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Disability is a condition of the body or the mind's impairment of a person, who struggles to accomplish their usual duties. This is a kind of difficulty where the person's participation in public forums and their interaction with the world are restricted and even in sometimes; there will be no interaction between them and the world. They may be forced to live alone or to keep certain distance from the world, as they are ill-treated for their disabilities. It is estimated that 1.3 billion people in the world experience significant disability. This accounts 16% of the world's population. According to World Health Organization, disability has three dimensions namely impairment, activity limitation and participation restrictions. Impairment refers to a problem with a structure or organ of the body. It also refers to the any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function. Disabilities not only affect the physical activities of a person, it also severely affects their mental well being as well.

R. J. Palacio's Wonder is a fictional story about a disabled boy named August pullman, also known as Auggie. He is affected by a very rare syndrome named Treacher Collins Syndrome, which drastically affects his physiological structure of the face. He got affected by this syndrome when he was in the womb itself and born with a malformed face, with tiny ears, misplaced eyes and an irregular mouth and jaw line. Auggie underwent twenty seven surgeries at the very young age of

twelve itself. This Wonder consists of eight parts, where the story is narrated through various characters like Auggie, Via, Summer, Jack, Justin, and Miranda. This research paper intends to illustrate the sufferings of Auggie as a disabled child through the literary representations of his disability in this novel, Wonder.

Part I of the novel, presents the point of view of Auggie. In the starting itself, he expresses his grief and inability to act as normal like other ordinary people. Although, he feels himself as a normal person, but the society is not ready to see him as a normal person, as he is different from others with a malformed face.

"I know I'm not an ordinary ten- year old kid. I mean, sure, I do ordinary things. I eat icecream. 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. 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 R.J 3)

As people stares at him, he pretend not to see their faces.

The only thing he needs is to be normal like others. Auggie is provided with extraordinary care and assistance by his mother, dad and his sister, Via. Although he doesn't like that, there is no option for him to deny it. He shares about his mom's experience on seeing him at first time, after giving birth to him. Although his mom prepared to see him with malformed face, she looked down into his tiny mushed-up face, all she could see was his pretty eyes. His mom never considered him as a disabled child. She treated him and Via as equal and never behaved rude with him.

After some time, His mom and dad decides to admit him in a school at Beecher Pep. Mr.Tushman, director of that school arranged Auggie and his mother to visit his school. He also called some children named Jack, Julian and Charlotte to assist Auggie and to interact with him. He encountered a question from Julian about his malformed face. Auggie remained calm to his question. When he disclosed this incident to his mom, she consoled him and also offered a choice of making his own decision regarding the school admission. Auggie decided to join that school at Beecher Pep. Previously his mom and dad were in discussion about his school admission. His dad commented with a phrase, 'lamb to the slaughter' about Auggie's school admission. Although Auggie couldn't understand it, he confused about that phrase. This phrase explains about the difficulties that Auggie may face in the school by other notorious kids, whom can disturb and question Auggie about his physiological differences.

When Auggie asked to speak up in the first day of his class, he spoke about his family and his dog, Daisy. After his speech, Julian questioned him, 'Why do you have that tiny braid in the back of your hair? Is that like a Padawan thing?' Auggie answered 'Yes' and explained about Padawan, which is a Jedi apprentice from Star Wars. No student in the class questioned Auggie about his malformed face and about his disabilities. This shows how they accepts Auggie as a student one among them.

Still Auggie encounters some strange behaviors from other students. He was left out alone and no one is ready to accompany him during the lunch break. When he tried to occupy a seat along with some new students, they denied his entry and stated that, 'that seat has been reserved for my friend'. He observes that, students belongs to other classes stares at him and especially a group of girls whispers something about him by bouncing at him. Auggie feels uncomfortable to be in that cafeteria. Auggie himself is not satisfied with his eating style and remembers an incident at a birthday party that he attended, a boy refused to sit along with Auggie as he messed with the food items and remained untidy. On hearing that boy's refusal to sit along with him, Auggie felt sad and got frustrated.

"I hate the way I eat. I know how weird it looks. I had a surgery to fix my cleft palate when I was a baby, and then a second cleft surgery when I was four, but I still have a hole in the roof of my mouth. And even though I had jaw alignment surgery of a few years ago, I have to chew food in the front of

my mouth, I didn't even realize how this looked until I was at a birthday party once, and one of the kids told the mom of the birthday boy he didn't want to sit next to me because I was too messy with all the food crumbs shooting out of my mouth." (Palacio R.J 50)

After sometime, Auggie befriended with a girl named Summer and started to have lunch together. Auggie used to spend time with Summer and considered her as a best friend. Summer is the only student who never shown any difference to Auggie like other students, who treated him differently due to his abnormal face structure. These continuous variation in treatments and staring by the fellow students affected his mental peace and he disclosed all his sufferings that he faces at the school and worried about his malformed face. His mom consoles him by kissing him. Her motherly affection acts as a medicine to the sufferings and dilemmas of Auggie. Through his words, it is inferred that he had been suffered mentally and still lies in a deep mental agony.

"Why do I have to be ugly, Mommy? I whispered.No, baby, you're not . . ."I know I am.She kissed me all over my face. She kissed my eyes that came down too far. She kissed my cheeks that looked punched in. She kissed my tortoise mouth. She said soft words that I know were meant to help me, but words can't change my face.' (Palacio R.J 60) Kids of Auggie's get used to see his face and after a week, they never stared at Auggie. They treated them as equal like other students. While describing about the students of the school, Auggie also insists his abnormality, which made him unique in look.

"These were the kids in all the other grades. They were big kids, some of them. Some of them had crazy haircuts. Some of them had earrings in their noses. Some of them had pimples. None of them looked like me." (Palacio R.J 62)

Jack and Auggie had a conversation about, hoe Auggie encounters the staring from people in the school and from outside as well. Being a naughty boy, Jack give funny advices like shooting the people who stares at Auggie with some green slime or something. Jack then questioned Auggie about his appearance and advised him to take plastic surgery to get a normal appearance. Auggie replied, the present appearance itself is achieved after many plastic surgeries. On hearing this, Jack fell into laughter and Auggie to laughed along with him.

Auggie had an aversion to take a photo of him. He never liked to be a part of the school picture, where all of his friends in the school would be. He thought that, he may spoil the group photo, if he stood one among the students. As to take part in the photograph is unavoidable, with a hesitation he stood along with other students. The photographer gave a strange look on seeing Auggie. This made him more uncomfortable.

"The photographer looked like he'd just sucked on a lemon when he saw me. I'm sure he thought I ruined the picture." (Palacio R.J 70) Halloween is a day, which is celebrated by everyone by dressing like ghosts, mummies and also some horrific characters in the Hollywood movies. All the students

of the school are asked to dress in horrifying manners just to celebrate the Halloween at the school. Auggie wished to dress like Boba Fett character from Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back. But he received costume of Jango Fett, which is the father character of Boba Fett, he accepted it.

“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 R.J 73)

When Auggie dressed like Jango Fett, he walked by posing his head up and liked to be seen by someone. One kid who dressed like Auggie waved him. This made Auggie to think that, ‘it is better to live with a mask, where the people can look at their mask rather than the original face hidden behind the mask’.

The friendly relationship between Auggie and Jack takes a sharp turn, when Auggie heard Jack’s about him and his face. Auggie never thought of encountering such bad and blithering comments from his best friend, Jack. Jack stated that he would die rather than being alive with a disgusting face of Auggie and also stated that, he roams with Auggie only because of Mr.Tushman’s advice to assist Auggie. “Actually”, said the mummy, “what he really looks like is one of those shrunken heads. Have you ever seen those? He looks exactly like that. “I think he looks like an orc.” “Oh yeah!” “If I looked like that,” said the Julian voice, kind of laughing, “I swear to God, I’d put a hood over my face every day.” “I’ve thought about this a lot,” said the second mummy, sounding serious, “and I really think. . . if I looked like him, seriously, I think that I’d kill myself.” (Palacio R.J 76, 77)

On hearing the voice, Auggie identified, Jack is the beholder of that voice. He totally got shattered and he expresses his agony by crying. When Jack questioned his friend, “He always follows me around. What am I supposed to do?” Julian answered as, “Just ditch him”. On hearing Julian’s reply, Auggie’s face felt like that it was on fire while exiting from the class. These words uttered by his friends affected him mentally and affected his hope level and made him to remain unnoticed by anyone.

“I was looking for a little tiny spot to disappear into. I wanted to hole I could fall inside of: a little black hole that would eat me up” (Palacio R.J 78)

In Part II, Olivia shortly called as Via, sister of Auggie shares her point of view. In which, she addressed her sufferings and states that; it is nothing compared to what Auggie has experiencing throughout his life. Via remembers her first experience of seeing Auggie as a baby. She describes the appearance of Auggie.

“His eyes are about an inch below where they should be on his face, almost to halfway down his cheeks. They slant

downward at an extreme angle, almost like diagonal slits that someone cut into face, and the left one is noticeably lower than the right one. They bulge outward because his eye cavities are too shallow to accommodate them. The top eyelids are always halfway closed, like he’s on the verge of sleeping. He doesn’t have eyebrows or eyelashes. His nose is disproportionately big for his face, and kind of fleshy. His head is pinched in on the sides where the ears should be, like someone used giant pliers and crushed the middle part of his face.” (Palacio R.J 88)

Via expresses her confidence on Auggie that he can act independently without anyone’s assistance. She thinks, it is enough to assist and take decisions in the case of Auggie by others. As a grown up kid, he should be allowed to take decisions on his own.

After Auggie’s birth, his parents approached doctor and underwent a genetic counseling. They were told that Auggie had what seemed to be a “previously unknown type of mandibulofacial dysostosis caused by an autosomal recessive mutation in a gene called TCOF1 gene. Sometimes these mutations occur during pregnancy. Sometimes they’re inherited from one parent carrying the dominant gene. Sometime they’re caused by the interaction of many genes, possibly in combination with environmental factors. This is called multifactorial inheritance. In Auggie’s case, doctors were able to identify one of the “single nucleotide deletion mutations” that made war on his face. An interesting fact is, not only dad and mom of Auggie carries that mutant gene, even Via carries that mutant gene.

After knowing the bitter incident happened to Auggie by Jack, she insisted him to disclose this to their parents. But on thinking the sufferings that Jack may face, through complaining about his immature behavior, Auggie refused to complain about him. His gentility and care on Jack as a friend is inferred through his words.

In Part III Summer, Auggie’s friend narrates the story. As she wished to accompany him, she sits along with him during lunch time and befriended with him. She shares her insights about Auggie. Even an ordinary kid may face difficulties after getting into a new school. In the case of Auggie, the difficulty level is too high. On the first day, no one spoke with him, but spoke about him. He wasn’t the only new kid at Beecher Prep school, but he was the only one everyone was talking about.

“Julian had nicknamed him the Zombie kid, and that’s what everyone was calling him. “Did you see the Zombie Kid yet?” Stuff like that around fast” (Palacio R.J 119)

Playing games is usual in school. Students may choose either indoor game or outdoor game depends upon majority of the students choice. Likewise, Auggie’s friends planned to play a game called Four Square. It is a fun game played on a square court where the players can use their hands to hit the ball. Play is started by the player in the highest square bouncing the ball in his square once and then hitting it to another square. To stay in the game, a player must hit it after only one bounce to another square. The play continues until a player makes an error and is eliminated. On hearing the

participation of Auggie in the game, his classmates refused to play along with him. They say, they may be attacked by Plague, if they touch Auggie or an object touched by him. This behavior of students is condemnable and can be termed as a modern untouchability practiced against the disabled people.

“How I found out about this is that Maya Markowitz told me that the reason she won't play Four Square with us at recess is that she doesn't want to catch the Plague. I was like, “what's the Plague?” And she told me. I told Maya I thought that was really dumb and she agreed, but she still wouldn't touch a ball that August just touched, not if she could help it.” (Palacio R.J 120)

Summer encountered some situations where Auggie was slandered for his appearance. When Summer attended the Halloween party organized by Savanna, she welcomed her and asked about Auggie by calling him as Summer's boyfriend. And commented that, Auggie needs not to wear any mask to look horrified as already he looked like so due to appearance. “I guess he doesn't have to wear a mask at Halloween, right?” (Palacio R.J 122)

In Part IV Jack, Auggie's friend narrates the story. He shares his first experience with Auggie. On seeing Auggie, Jack shouted and ran away from him as he is scared. Jack's mom condemns his act and advised him not to repeat it again. Jack likes the accompaniment of Auggie and when he was asked to write about something that he did very brave. He thought of writing his friendship with Auggie and changed it later, as the writings have to be read out before all the students. Jack thinks about his conversation with Julian on the Halloween celebration day and got to know that Auggie heard all his speech. He acknowledges his mistakes and worried about the mistake that he committed.

“I don't even know why. I'm not even sure what I said, but it was bad. It was only a minute or two. It's just that I knew Julian and everybody thought I was so weird for hanging out with August all the time, and I felt stupid. And I don't know why I said that stuff. I just was going along. I was stupid. I am stupid. Oh God” (Palacio R.J 152)

In Part v Justin, boyfriend of Via, shares his insights about Auggie. Although Olivia told about her brother's anomalous condition, Justin shocked on seeing Auggie at first time.

“... I guess I assumed he'd be more normal-looking by now. Like when a kid is born with a cleft lip and has plastic surgery to fix it sometimes you can't even tell except for the little scar above the lip. I guess I thought her brother would have some scars here and there. But not this.” (Palacio R.J 187)

Justin also acknowledges that, the universe is not kind to Auggie. What did that little kid can do to be treated as normal like others? What is his parents' role in this? Via explained about the syndrome that affected Auggie and its root cause as the mutant genes carried by her parents. This kind of physiological changes takes place one in four million births, where both the mother and father possess a mutant

gene. Justin addresses this as something which may not be controlled and changed, as everything is about luck.

In Part VI Auggie's narrative is back. Now he shares his new experience of wearing a hearing aid called Lobot. People are acting very nicely with him, which he never thought it would happen.

In Part VII Miranda, friend of Via shares her insights about Auggie. After Via, Miranda is the one who liked the most as a sister. She used to enquire about Auggie to Via and wished to spend time with him too.

“I loved Auggie. I was never afraid of him: even when I was little. I had friends that couldn't believe I'd ever go over to Via's house. “His face creeps me out,” they'd say. “You're stupid,” I'd tell them. Auggie's face isn't so bad once you get used to it. His parents have always been so protective of him.” (Palacio R.J 241)

In Part VIII Auggie starts to narrate again. He felt too good to have a hearing aid, Lobot. It made him to hear better than everyone. Because Auggie is the first person to hear a new bird call. Later, Auggie missed his hearing aid and worried for that. His mom consoled him. Then Auggie started to concentrate in his studies. As a result, the most precious award of the school was awarded to Auggie. Henry Ward Beecher award is about recognizing greatness. More than academic excellence, Auggie excelled as a good and an exemplary student of the school.

“ ‘He is the greatest,’ he finally continued, ‘whose strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own.’ Without further ado, this year I am very proud to award the Henry Ward Beecher Medal to the student whose quiet strength has carried up the most hearts. So will August Pullman please come up here to receive this award?” (Palacio 304)

Jack encouraged him by signaling for him to keep going. And finally Auggie achieve his goal to be viewed alike everyone and to achieve something great. The novel highlights the kindness, care and acceptance of individuals with disabilities through the fictional character, Auggie. Children, being less matured are very receptive and psychologically and sociologically malleable. They are prone to any mental attacks, as they can't encounter bad comments regarding them. Especially a disabled kid, who depends upon others to fulfill its needs, may have its own sufferings and inner turmoil. It is a million dollar question whether a disabled child can have a peaceful learning environment at a general school. For disabled kids, it is difficult for them to come out of home to any public place, as they are prone to critics and ill-treatment. Although it is expected that Auggie may face sufferings after joining in a public school like Beecher Pep, his parents and even him decided to go to school. This acts as a crucial step in fostering the inclusive education to all kind of children, irrespective of their gender, structure and disabilities. Beecher Pep too portrayed as a school which aimed to assist children in all sorts.

When Auggie's mom approached Mr. Tushman, Director of that school, he immediately arranged three children to assist Auggie, when he supposed to visit the school. Summer, being

a friend of Auggie, glitters as an icon of friendship. She is the one who befriended with Auggie on liking his characters and funny attitudes, which always make her happy. Julian mom's act of removing Auggie from the school group photo is a condemnable act. Students' refusal to play Four Square game along with Auggie is the peak of modern untouchability. They must be given proper awareness about Plague and guidance to behave in a dignified way with disabled kids, as their act may affect the mental state of a disabled student. This research paper insists its readers to treat and value disabled people, especially disabled kids with proper respect and attention. R.J. Palacio's literary representation of disability through Auggie's life creates a great impact on its readers. People should not bully or tease disabled students. This study advocates to establish a society where disabled people to be treated like ordinary people with utmost respect. Rights of them, their emotions and their privacy should be ensured and valued as equal to the other people in the society.

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