

Breaking the Attitudinal Barriers: A Study on R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*

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Abstract: This article explores the theme of attitudinal barriers in *Wonder*, focusing on how societal perceptions shape the experiences of individuals with visible differences. The novel centers on August Pullman, a young boy with a facial deformity, whose entry into mainstream schooling exposes him to prejudice, fear, avoidance, and stereotyping. These negative attitudes, particularly reflected through characters like Julian Albans, function as significant social barriers that hinder inclusion and emotional well-being. The study highlights how attitudinal barriers are not only expressed through bullying but also through subtle behaviours such as pity, discomfort, and social exclusion. At the same time, the narrative presents the possibility of transformation, as characters like Summer Dawson and Jack Will move toward empathy and acceptance. Drawing attention to the socio-cultural construction of disability, the article argues that attitudinal change is crucial for fostering inclusive environments. Ultimately, R. J. Palacio emphasizes that kindness and understanding can dismantle prejudice and promote social inclusion.

Keywords: Prejudice, Bullying, Stereotype, Acceptance, Inclusion and Stigma

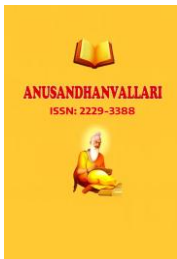
One of the biggest obstacles to improve the lives of physically challenged persons in developing nations is attitude about disabilities. The society has different attitudes towards the disabled children including stigma, prejudice, stereotype, pity eyes and bias. The public attitude spoils the impaired children's emotional state so they hide their feelings inside their heart. Research has indicated that there is a general public attitude that is both hostile and paternalistic towards people with impairments. Scriptures, folklore, myths, and legends are all components of the cultural belief system that influence these kinds of attitudes. The prejudices of society often cause the physically challenged more suffering than their incapacitating physical ailments. These people with physical disabilities frequently live in social and physical environments that are not well thought out in relation to their unique needs.

The attitudinal challenges in the life of differently abled children are the route of the rest of the challenges. Colin Barnes' *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* discusses the meaning of attitudinal barrier in the following manner.

Discriminatory attitudes toward disabled people are not random or accidental. They are produced and reinforced by economic structures, professional ideologies, and cultural representations. The widespread assumption that disabled people are inferior, dependent, or passive is a key factor in their exclusion. Attitudinal barriers shape the design of services, the allocation of resources, and the nature of professional-client interactions. Overcoming these attitudes is not simply a matter of goodwill or tolerance. It requires structural change and a redefinition of what it means to be human. (43)

The public see the disabled as introvert because of their unamiable nature and defenseless state. The disabled avoid social gatherings due to people's strange behavior and they find limited comrades as many are not willing to speak with them. The following lines describe the unwillingness of August's classmates to sit next to him as he is deformed, "As the desks started to fill up, I did notice that no one sat down next to me. A couple of times someone was about to sit next to me then changed his or her mind at the last minute and sat somewhere else" (WO 37). When disabled appears in a new ambience, they barely speak, make eye contact and move.

Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion about an individual or group that lacks a basis in reason, experience, or factual evidence. The prejudice towards the people with disability is having false opinion about the



disabled people due to the lack of the awareness which leads to emotional breakdowns to the disabled. The following lines from Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer's *Exploring Disability* explain the prejudice that disabled people face in the society.

The pervasive prejudice faced by disabled people is often based on deeply held myths and stereotypes. These include the notions that disabled people are incapable of leading productive lives, that they are asexual, dependent, and passive. These prejudices are not simply inaccurate but they are harmful. They serve to justify exclusion from education, employment, and social life. Overcoming these misconceptions requires not just legal reform but a fundamental shift in how society conceptualizes disability—as a natural part of human diversity rather than a defect to be fixed. (90)

Bullying is a manifestation of attitudinal barriers. Verbal abuse is humiliating someone with words, gestures and written language. It includes insult, emotional breakdown and manipulation. Disability harassment can take the form of insulting or derogatory comments made regarding a person's handicap or the need for changes in the workplace, as well as other verbal or physical acts motivated by a person's disability. The victory against verbal abuse is possibly explained by Patricia Evans in *Victory Over Verbal Abuse: A Healing Guide to Renewing Your Spirit and Reclaiming Your Life*:

You have experienced verbal abuse; you must know clearly that you are not responsible for anyone's abuse of you. You cannot make it happen to you. You may not be able to tell when it is happening to you. In a relationship, you know perpetrator does not recognize you as a separate person. The perpetrator defines your inner world as if he or she were living within you. Your victory also means clarity about who you are, what you like, what brings you satisfaction, along with awareness of your talents and gifts. Your victory is the journey you take to create what you want in your life — a life that gives you meaning and purpose and is most fulfilling. Your victory is fully realized when any fears, self-doubts, and confusing perceptions disappear. (46)

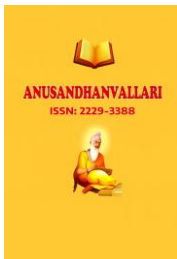
The author R.J. Palacio has penned down how the public tease at disabled kids in a realistic manner. Her disabled protagonist August wears an astronaut helmet, gifted by his sister's friend, to hide his real face during the outdoor visits as the people often make fun of him. During the processes of assimilation, adopting a new environment, he faces verbal abuse. His classmates bully him with the words such as freak, lizard, alien and monster. He has listed the harmful nicknames as, "Rat Boy. Freak. Monster. Freddy Krueger. E.T. Gross-out. Lizard Face. Mutant. I know the names they call me. I have been enough playgrounds to know kids can be mean. I know, I know, I know" (WO 79).

Attitudinal barriers result in discrimination, marginalization, untouchability, isolation, exclusion and sense of otherness. The term 'discrimination' refers to treating unfairly for being different in the terms of race, religion, caste, body and gender.

Society deals the impaired with discriminatory actions which leave a permanent scare in their hearts. Due to their inability, they rarely get a chance to mingle with normal people and be a part in the group activity. As a result of August's scary face, his class mates are not ready to dine with him which gives him a sense of otherness. The following paragraph explains how August is neglected:

One of the lunch room teachers said something about no seat saving allowed but I didn't know what she meant and maybe no one else did, either, because just about everybody was saving seat for the friends. I tried to sit down at one table but the kid in the next I said "Oh, sorry, but somebody else is sitting here." so I moved to an empty table and just waited for everyone to finish stampeding and the lunch room teacher to tell us what to do next. (WO 49)

The social and cultural practice of considering people with disabilities as 'untouchables' or 'impure' which results in their marginalization, exclusion, and segregation. This kind of practice is known as 'untouchability in



disability.’ According to Arundhati Roy in *Annihilation of Caste*, the meaning of untouchability is described in the following lines:

While his audience, his constituency and his chief concern were untouchables, Ambedkar believed that it was not just the stigma, the pollution– purity issues around untouchability, but caste itself that had to be dismantled. Practice of untouchability, cruel as it was— the broom tied to the waist, the pot hung around the neck— was the performative, ritualistic end of the practice of caste. The real violence of the caste was the denial of entitlement: to land, to wealth, to knowledge, to equal opportunity. (72)

Julian and a few of his friends have come up with a game called ‘The Plague’ which is a hurting thing to August. Since August’s fellow mates feel disgusted and scared to touch him, the game plague is come into existence. According to the new game, if the classmates touch him, they will also get a deformed face. When Melody is in the Elementary School, people are ready to touch her wheelchair and lift her up as they are frightened to touch her “a lot of my parents’ friends had been scared to even touch me” (WO 40).

August Pullman overcomes attitudinal barriers in *Wonder* through a combination of inner strength, supportive relationships, and gradual social acceptance. Despite facing prejudice, fear, and avoidance from classmates, Auggie does not withdraw completely; instead, he continues attending school and tries to engage with others. His resilience and sense of humor help him cope with negative attitudes, while his academic ability and kindness allow others to see beyond his appearance.

Support from his family, especially his parents, and friendships with characters like Jack Will and Summer Dawson play a crucial role in building his confidence. Over time, even those who initially judged him begin to change their perceptions as they recognize his true character. By the end of the novel, Auggie earns respect and acceptance from his peers, showing that attitudinal barriers can be overcome through courage, empathy, and meaningful social interaction.

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