Global Humanities Review

ISSN 3108-1983
Vol. 1 No. 7, November 2026
Website: https://ghrf.org.in

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Construction of Normalcy in R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*

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Accepted version published on November 1, 2026

https://doi.org/10.26572/ghr2601705

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Raquel Jaramillo Palacio's *Wonder* (2012) and the social construction of Normalcy through the theoretical framework of Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995). This theoretical approach highlights constructed norms of society and its impact on people with disabilities. Through the character August Pullman in Palacio's *Wonder,* the paper centers on the constructed norms of society and the thought of how an average body should be, and if it takes even a slight deviation, people with disabilities are termed unfit, abnormal or disabled. The paper centers on the struggles faced by people with abnormalities under the rigid structures of society.

Keywords: Challenged people, constructed norms, average body, constructing normalcy

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FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Raquel Jaramillo Palacio's *Wonder* (2012) is based on a real-life experience of Palacio, who saw a girl at the ice cream shop with a severe facial deformity. Her three-year-old child panicked seeing the deformed girl's face. Based on the incident, Palacio creates a fictional character named August Pullman who is born with craniofacial abnormalities. The story is a sharp critique of society and its norms to marginalize people with disabilities. Society marginalizes people with disabilities by staring, bullying, or even throwing sympathy on them. This story focuses on the character's longing to be seen as ordinary in the eyes of society. But for society, being ordinary should fall under their constructed norms. In Lennard J. Davis's book called *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), he has given a theoretical framework of 'Constructing Normalcy' where he argues how society constructs normalcy as anything that goes beyond the constructed norms, which is termed abnormal. The problem is not with the person with disabilities, but the problem is associated with society's constructed norms that create problems for the disabled person.

In the book *Wonder,* the central character Auggie faces many problems with society. When he goes to school, people cause discomfort by staring at him or slandering him. The intense pain in Auggie's heart is shown when he says, "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." (*Wonder 11)* This quote strongly suggests that the problem is with society's view of the character. Auggie states that he does all the things like an ordinary kid, but nobody assumes him to be ordinary. As Davis states in his theoretical framework, the problem is not with the individual with abnormalities but with the society that makes it abnormal.

"Deviations more or less great from the mean have constituted (for artists) ugliness in body as well as vice in morals and a state of sickness with regard to the constitution" (Davis). With this, Davis argues that the idea of the average body has gradually become standard for judging human bodies and terms them abnormal if they take a deviation from that constructed standard form. Auggie, the character in *Wonder, has* facial abnormalities that will not fall under the average figure defined by society. Indeed, his face takes a deviation, and thus society does not accept the character. Julian is a character in the novel who pokes Auggie's feelings with sarcastic words about his facial deformity. Julian states that Auggie looks like Darth Sidious, a character who appears in Star Wars. When the human body fails to fall under the average category, then people with disabilities will be termed disabled in all places,

such as schools and other public places. Wherever the character goes, though they behave ordinarily and do things ordinarily, they are termed disabled.

In the pre-modern period, physical apathy existed, but after the rise of modernity, science, statistics, and medicine started to enhance. With these enhancements, society started to measure the human body and started to define how an average or an ideal body should be. Davis states that the social process of disabling arrived with the industrialisation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. People were categorised based on their efficiency and physical and mental consistency. All bodies could not work with the same speed and efficiency. Those who do not meet the expectations of society are termed as disabled. Thus, disability does not deal with the person, and indeed it is completely a society's framework of the human body.

Nineteenth-century statistics emerged to measure the human population in the beginning, and later it also started being used to measure human bodies. In *Wonder,* Auggie is often evaluated in all the places for his facial deformity. Children in school bullied him for his facial appearance, and the public often stared at him. Society often measures people with their disability, like differences in faces, structure, and visual impairment. At one point, we are all disabled. For example, when we cannot drive a car, we call ourselves unable, but why do we call people with challenges disabled? Society has structured everything, and when something happens beyond the constructed norms, then it is termed to be unusual, unfit and inappropriate.

Davis says that most of the population falls under the standard bell-shaped curve. This function is known as normal distribution, where most of the populace fall under the average category, but a few fall under extremes (ends of the curve). The average is normal, and the extremes are abnormal or nonstandard. This deviation is a socially constructed factor that considers challenging people as problems. Davis calls this bell curve a tyranny of the norm because it does not order people to confirm that people with disabilities are unfit or outside the standard. Instead, it appears in the form of science to justify the exclusion of people with disabilities as being outside the norm because of the deviation in the curve. Auggie's face in Palacio's *Wonder* does not use the statistical method of the bell curve, but symbolically his face appears in the extremes. Other figures like school students and the common public place him outside the standard. Therefore, he is treated with avoidance, fear or sympathy. The exclusion is not because of Auggie's facial deformity but because of the system that made the exclusion normal. But Palacio's *Wonder* has an inclusion of how society should view the person with disabilities as an ordinary one. It also pictures the constructed norms of society. However, with Auggie's family and friends, it shows how

one can be positive and courageous even though they have inconveniences in their body.

There are three social spheres towards people with disabilities. The first sphere encompasses the role of family and friends towards challenging people. The next one emphasizes the role of doctors, teachers, and medical professionals in providing physiological and psychological support to people with disabilities. The third sphere focuses on the remaining people of society, in which the challenging people are often demotivated. The last sphere is closely related to Davis theory of *Enforced Normalcy,* which argues that disability is not a core defect in the challenging people but says that the real defect happens when society operates according to the constructed norms. In *Wonder,* Palacio portrays the positivity that Auggie's family has towards him, where he is encouraged by his parents to go to school by stopping his homeschooling. Auggie says, "They see me as extraordinary" (*Wonder* 10). This line signifies the support of his parents, which pushes him forward. His character development and self-esteem are further enhanced by the support of his teacher, Mr. Browne. He says, "When given a chance between being right or being kind, choose kind" (Wonder 41). This shows how school and teachers have shaped him. Though he receives abnormal treatment from society, his close circle, like his family, friends and teachers, deliberately supports and encourages him to shine in his life. (Jennita and Sena)

Kathy Boxall illustrates the difference between 'impairment' and 'disability'; impairment connotes a functional limitation; it can be a physical limitation, but disability connotes a socially imposed restriction. People with physical impairments are termed disabled because of the response given by society to the physical impairment. Dan Goodley argues in his book Disability Studies: an interdisciplinary introduction that disability is not a personal tragedy. He justifies that people with disabilities are successful, like Auggie in Wonder, because the problem is associated with society, and the tragic incidents are caused by society challenging people, as Auggie in Wonder faces tragic incidents from his schoolmates, friends and other people in society. (Abdelmonem 11)

Jasinta Pobi, Mister Gidion Maru, and Sabrina W. J. Husain, in their research article "An Analysis of Bullying in the Novel *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio", explore the social and psychological issues associated with bullying. They state that bullying is a social issue and thus explain how this social phenomenon influences an individual's experience. Through their analysis, it is obvious that bullying is a social problem. Auggie in Wonder experiences social stigma and alienation because of his facial abnormalities. His personal character is judged based on his facial appearance. Thus,

the construction is structured by society to isolate bodies that deviate from the normal body defined by society. Auggie becomes an emblem to denote how social exclusion can affect the psychological state of a person and how he accepts himself and overcomes all the obstacles that society poses to him. (Pobi et al. 170-172)

> "Being at school was awful in the beginning. Every new class I had was like a new chance for kids to "not stare" at me. They would sneak peeks at me from behind their notebooks or when they thought I wasn't looking. They would take the longest way around me to avoid bumping into me in any way, like I had some germ they could catch, like my face was contagious." (Wonder 36)

The quote defines the role of stare that society gives to people with physical impairments. Thomson brings out the difference between gaze and stare in her book *Staring: How We Look*. She states that the act of staring reflects the look of the oppressor towards the oppressed; the situation is reflected by the character Auggie during his school-going phase. The first reaction that Auggie gets is the stare from society for his facial deformity. Thus, the problem is not associated with the person with physical impairment but in society's heart, which is impaired by the thought of normalcy. (Abdelmonem 15)

The analysis of R. J. Palacio's *Wonder* through the theoretical framework of Lenard J. Davis reveals the problem associated with society's views and prejudices against people with physical impairment. Auggie does not represent only the individual experience, but it denotes the sufferings and oppression inflicted on all people with physical abnormalities. The key concept of this paper is not just to denote the upheavals faced by people with physical impairment but to represent the idea of disability in all human beings, even if they are hale and healthy. When we cannot perform a specific task, we term it 'I am unable to do', but we call the people who face the physical challenge that the body gives, and as society imposes on them the psychological challenge, they face a double burden. Despite all the challenges, many people with physical impairment have been successful, like Auggie in Wonder. He has faced a lot of trouble from society: the weird stares, ignorance of people, and hurtful words, but at last he receives ordinary acceptance. As he states at the beginning of the novel, he does ordinary things, but he is not accepted as an ordinary person. Society must change; the impairment of society's heart must change. The study further finds the difference between a normal and an abnormal body constructed by society. These norms and constructions are not brought by the person born with physical impairments but by society's view. They are also ordinary human beings existing in the world; they act and perform ordinarily; hence, they should be treated ordinarily

like an ordinary person. "When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind" (Wonder 41). The quote is powerful, and society must take this seriously in the context of treating people with physical impairments. The quote evokes a symbolic message in the context of constructing normalcy. The normal construction is observed right, but being one among many makes it easy to follow the patterns of right; being unique to hold kindness is different. Kindness does not mean being sympathetic towards them but being empathetic to treat them ordinarily.

Thus, this paper reads Palacio's *Wonder* through Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995)*, which* challenges the idea of disability as solely a socially constructed norm and reveals that social construction produces exclusion by measuring the bodies according to standards. This paper deliberately uses the phrase challenging people to question society's fixed point of view towards people with disabilities. This embodies the idea that change will take place only when society breaks its constructed norms and tyranny of normalcy and recognises the differences in the body as an ordinary condition of human life.

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