

Narrating Disability in Contemporary Fiction: Representations of Inclusion in *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

¹ Syeda Sakeena, ² Suhaib Rafiq Bhat, ³ Prof. Sabeha Mufti

¹Doctoral Scholar, Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir, J&K, India

²Doctoral Scholar, Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir, J&K, India

³Professor, Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir, J&K, India

Email - ¹syedasakeena03@gmail.com , ². suhaibrafiq66@gmail.com , ³. sabehamufti@uok.edu.in

Abstract: This paper explores the representation of disability in contemporary award-winning fiction, with a focus on *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon. These novels, celebrated globally for their humanistic narratives, center on young protagonists living with physical and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of disability studies and literary criticism, the research investigates how these works construct disability as a multifaceted experience shaped by identity, emotion, and social context. Rather than viewing disability through a lens of deficiency, the novels present it as a site of resilience, introspection, and relational complexity. The analysis foregrounds literary elements such as narrative voice, focalization, and characterization to assess how these texts challenge prevailing stereotypes and foster empathetic engagement among readers. This study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about the role of literature in advancing disability representation and promoting a more inclusive cultural consciousness.

Key Words: Disability Representation, Inclusive Literature, Contemporary Fiction, Narrative Voice, Neurodiversity, Characterization, Empathy in Literature, *Wonder*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Disability Studies.

1. INTRODUCTION: Disability representation in literature has increasingly gained scholarly attention, especially in the context of youth and young adult fiction, where portrayals can significantly influence cultural attitudes, reader empathy, and awareness. Historically, literary depictions of disability have often been limited to stereotypical tropes, such as the pitiable invalid, the inspirational hero, or the morally deviant figure (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). These reductive portrayals not only marginalize disabled characters but also shape public perception in ways that reinforce stigma and exclusion.

In contrast, recent literary works have begun to reflect more nuanced, empathetic, and humanizing portrayals of disability, offering readers deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals with physical and neurodevelopmental conditions (Garland-Thomson, 2005). Two notable examples are *Wonder* (2012) by R.J. Palacio and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) by Mark Haddon. Both novels center on adolescent protagonists—August Pullman, who has a craniofacial condition, and Christopher Boone, who exhibits characteristics consistent with autism spectrum disorder—navigating a world that often misunderstands or isolates them.

This study explores how these award-winning novels contribute to inclusive literary discourse by moving beyond stereotypes to present disability as an integral aspect of personal identity and social interaction. Drawing on disability studies and literary theory, this research investigates the narrative strategies these texts employ—particularly characterization, narrative perspective, and focalization—to challenge dominant cultural narratives and encourage more empathetic reader engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1. Disability in Literature: From Metaphor to Identity

Scholars such as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (2000) argue that disability has often functioned as a narrative prosthesis in literature—a device used to signal character flaws, evoke pity, or symbolize societal failure. This trend has historically rendered disabled characters as either passive victims or exceptional inspirations, stripping them of authentic voice and agency.

However, the emergence of disability studies as an academic discipline has brought a paradigm shift. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2005), disability must be understood as a culturally constructed category, much like race or gender, shaped by power structures and social expectations. Literature, therefore, holds the potential to either reinforce or resist ableist ideologies, depending on how disability is framed.

2.2. Narrative Voice and Focalization in Disability Fiction

Narrative perspective plays a crucial role in constructing reader empathy toward disabled characters. First-person narration, particularly from the perspective of a disabled protagonist, has been shown to effectively challenge reader assumptions and foreground the internal world of the character (Heilker, 2011). In *Wonder*, for example, the use of multiple narrators—including August himself—offers varied viewpoints that deconstruct one-dimensional understandings of his identity. Similarly, *The Curious Incident* employs Christopher's perspective, written in a distinctive and logical voice, to immerse the reader in his cognitive world, thereby demystifying autism and challenging stereotypes.

2.3. Children's and Young Adult Literature as a Site for Social Change

Literature for young readers is especially impactful in shaping societal attitudes, as children often internalize ideas about identity and difference through the books they read (Nikolajeva, 2014). Works like *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident* have been praised for not only centering disabled characters but also engaging mainstream audiences in conversations about empathy, bullying, and inclusion (Couser, 2009). According to Jaarsma and Welin (2012), such narratives can serve as powerful tools for disability advocacy, particularly when they avoid romanticizing or pathologizing difference.

2.4. Disability and Ethical Reading

Rita Charon (2006) and Martha Nussbaum (2010) advocate for "ethical reading"—an approach that emphasizes the role of literature in developing emotional intelligence and moral reasoning. By engaging deeply with narratives of disability, readers are invited to confront their own biases and develop a more inclusive worldview. Both *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident* exemplify this potential, offering readers an intimate encounter with the emotional landscapes of their protagonists and the societal challenges they face.

3. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK: This study is grounded in the interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies, which challenges traditional medicalized views of disability and instead frames it as a socially constructed and culturally mediated phenomenon. Central to this approach is the shift from the medical model—which views disability as an individual deficit—to the social model of disability, which situates the challenges faced by disabled individuals within broader social, cultural, and institutional barriers.

Drawing on the works of scholars such as Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Tobin Siebers, this framework emphasizes that disability is not merely a physical or cognitive impairment, but a category of identity and experience shaped by discourse, representation, and power relations. Garland-Thomson's concept of the "normate"—the imagined, able-bodied ideal—helps to illuminate how literature often reinforces or resists dominant narratives surrounding bodily and cognitive difference.

In addition, the study employs narratological tools from literary criticism to analyze how disability is constructed and communicated through narrative voice, perspective, characterization, and reader engagement. Concepts such as

focalization (from Gérard Genette) are useful in understanding how the narrative point of view influences the reader's perception of disability, while theories of embodiment and affect explore how characters' emotional and physical experiences are rendered to evoke empathy and challenge normative assumptions.

By integrating Disability Studies with literary analysis, this framework allows for a nuanced reading of *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, treating literature not only as a reflection of societal values but also as a medium capable of reshaping public understandings of disability. The goal is to examine how these texts participate in cultural dialogues around inclusion, and how they may either reinforce or subvert ableist ideologies through their storytelling techniques.

4. OBJECTIVES:

- To examine how disability is represented in selected contemporary award-winning novels, with a focus on *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.
- To analyze how literary strategies such as narration, characterization, and point of view contribute to disrupting stereotypical representations of disability and fostering inclusive reader engagement

5. METHODOLOGY: This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology grounded in textual analysis, with an emphasis on how disability is narratively constructed and ethically engaged in contemporary award-winning fiction. The study is situated within the frameworks of Disability Studies and Narrative Theory, employing close reading techniques to examine how the selected texts—*Wonder* by R.J. Palacio and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon—represent physical and neurodevelopmental disabilities through literary devices.

The primary methodological approach involves a thematic and narratological analysis of the novels, focusing on elements such as characterization, narrative voice, focalization, plot structure, and reader positioning. By dissecting these elements, the study aims to uncover the implicit and explicit messages the texts convey about disability, as well as the extent to which they affirm or disrupt conventional tropes. In particular, the analysis pays close attention to the use of first-person narration and multiple perspectives, which serve as tools to provide insight into the protagonists' inner worlds and challenge normative perceptions of disability.

The novels were selected based on their critical acclaim, international readership, and pedagogical relevance, particularly within the field of young adult literature. Both texts have been widely praised for their portrayal of marginalized voices and their ability to generate public discourse around inclusion and empathy. As such, they serve as ideal case studies for investigating the literary and social implications of disability representation in fiction.

To frame the analysis, the study draws on established scholarship in Disability Studies—particularly the social model of disability and the cultural concept of the “normate”—as well as literary theories of ethical reading and narrative empathy. The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical, seeking to engage with the texts on a symbolic, ideological, and affective level. While the focus remains textual, secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, critical essays, and theoretical works are integrated to support the analysis and contextualize the findings within broader academic discourse.

6. FINDINGS:

Comparative Representation of Disability in the Two Novels:

Aspect	<i>Wonder</i> by R.J. Palacio	<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i> by Mark Haddon
Type of Disability	Craniofacial difference	Characteristics aligned with autism spectrum disorder
Narrative Perspective	Multiple narrators (including August)	First-person (Christopher)

Narrative Voice	Emotional, introspective, accessible	Logical, structured, emotionally detached
Character Agency	August shows emotional growth, makes choices	Christopher solves a mystery, makes independent decisions
Use of Stereotypes	Actively resists pity/inspiration tropes	Challenges pathologizing views of neurodivergence
Reader Engagement Strategy	Empathy through emotional connection	Empathy through immersion in cognitive perspective
Framing of Disability	Social and relational experience	Cognitive difference and social misunderstanding

Table 1.

Objective 1: To examine how disability is represented in selected contemporary award-winning novels, with a focus on *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

The representation of disability in *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* departs significantly from traditional literary tropes. Both novels foreground disability as an embodied, lived experience rather than a symbolic or metaphorical device. August Pullman's craniofacial condition in *Wonder* is not employed to evoke pity or serve as a metaphor for inner beauty; instead, it is intricately tied to his social experiences, personal growth, and emotional resilience. Palacio humanizes August through layered characterization and emphasizes the everyday challenges he faces, particularly in navigating school, friendship, and family relationships. The novel refuses to reduce August to his condition, instead offering multiple perspectives—his own and those of others around him—that show how disability intersects with relational identity and emotional depth.

Similarly, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident* presents Christopher Boone, a teenager with characteristics aligned with autism spectrum disorder, not as a puzzle to be solved or a burden, but as a subject with agency, intelligence, and emotional nuance. The novel's unique narrative structure—organized as a logical, often fragmented first-person account—offers readers direct access to Christopher's perception of the world. This mode of representation resists pathologization and instead affirms his cognitive difference as a legitimate and coherent worldview. The narrative neither romanticizes nor stigmatizes Christopher's condition but portrays it as a complex interplay of strengths and challenges.

Both texts frame disability not as an isolated or tragic circumstance but as part of a broader social fabric, where misunderstanding, exclusion, and ableist attitudes contribute significantly to the protagonists' difficulties. This aligns with the social model of disability, which underlines the role of societal structures in creating barriers, rather than the impairment itself being inherently disabling. Through their focus on the protagonists' inner worlds and interpersonal dynamics, both novels actively resist reductive stereotypes and offer more nuanced, authentic representations of disability.

Objective 2: To analyze how literary strategies such as narration, characterization, and point of view contribute to disrupting stereotypical representations of disability and fostering inclusive reader engagement

The literary techniques employed in both novels are central to their success in challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusion. In *Wonder*, R.J. Palacio uses multiple narrative voices, allowing readers to see August not only through his own eyes but also through those of his sister, friends, and classmates. This polyphonic structure prevents a single, monolithic representation of disability and instead presents a kaleidoscope of perspectives that reflect the social dynamics of inclusion, prejudice, and emotional growth. August's own voice is sincere, humorous, and reflective, allowing readers to empathize deeply with his experiences without reducing him to an object of sympathy.

In *The Curious Incident*, Mark Haddon's use of first-person narration is particularly significant. Christopher's narrative voice is logical, meticulous, and emotionally understated, providing insight into his cognitive framework and sensory processing. This stylistic choice immerses readers into Christopher's mind, allowing them to experience the world through his perception rather than from an external, possibly judgmental viewpoint. The novel's distinctive use of

diagrams, numbered chapters, and digressions into mathematics and logic further reinforce his cognitive identity and challenge normative storytelling conventions.

These literary strategies contribute to what scholars describe as “ethical reading”—a mode of engagement where readers are invited to question their own assumptions, confront their biases, and recognize the humanity of marginalized voices. Rather than invoking disability as an emotional spectacle or moral lesson, both novels center the disabled characters as full subjects with desires, fears, and agency. This positions the reader not as a passive observer but as an active participant in reimagining disability narratives.

Moreover, the novels encourage inclusive reader engagement by normalizing difference and highlighting shared human experiences such as fear, love, ambition, and belonging. They reject the binaries of “normal” versus “abnormal” and instead present a spectrum of identities and interactions. In doing so, they disrupt ableist ideologies and contribute to a literary discourse that values neurodiversity and bodily diversity as integral parts of the human condition.

Synthesis of Findings

The analysis demonstrates that *Wonder* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* serve as transformative texts within contemporary youth literature. Their nuanced portrayal of disability not only deconstructs harmful stereotypes but also offers alternative frameworks for understanding difference—emphasizing agency, dignity, and relational complexity. Through carefully constructed narrative voices and literary structures, these novels expand the ethical and emotional capacity of their readers, making them valuable contributions to both literature and social discourse on disability.

By integrating Disability Studies with close literary reading, this study reveals the critical potential of fiction to foster empathy, challenge exclusionary norms, and contribute to more inclusive representations. The findings support the view that literature, particularly in educational and developmental contexts, can play a significant role in reshaping cultural narratives around disability and promoting social justice.

7. CONCLUSION: This study has examined how *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon reconfigure the representation of disability in contemporary fiction. Situated within the interdisciplinary frameworks of Disability Studies and literary narratology, the analysis demonstrates that both texts challenge traditional, often reductive, portrayals of disability by foregrounding it as an integral dimension of human identity, shaped by social relations, emotional experiences, and cultural narratives. Rather than reinforcing the deficit-based logic of the medical model, these novels adopt a social and relational approach, highlighting the systemic and attitudinal barriers that constitute the true sources of marginalization.

Through distinct narrative strategies—Palacio’s use of polyphonic narration and Haddon’s immersive first-person perspective—the novels dismantle stereotypes such as the “tragic victim” or the “inspirational other,” and instead construct multidimensional protagonists with agency, intellect, and emotional complexity. These storytelling techniques not only deepen the reader’s engagement with the characters but also function as tools for cultivating narrative empathy and ethical responsiveness. In this way, both texts contribute to a literary discourse that values inclusivity, neurodiversity, and the broad spectrum of human embodiment.

Importantly, this study affirms literature’s capacity to act as a transformative medium, shaping cultural understandings of disability and fostering more inclusive imaginaries. Within the domain of youth and young adult literature—genres with significant influence over developing minds—these novels serve as critical interventions. They not only inform but also model how narratives can resist ableist ideologies and reframe disability as a site of meaning, complexity, and shared humanity.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of integrating Disability Studies into literary analysis to critically interrogate how texts represent marginalized identities and influence cultural perceptions. As the demand for diverse and equitable representation in literature continues to grow, studies like this play a vital role in both academic inquiry and social advocacy. Further research might extend this conversation by examining additional genres, global

perspectives, or the reception of such narratives among readers with disabilities themselves, thereby broadening the scope of inclusive literary studies.

REFERENCES:

1. Charon, R. (2006). *Narrative medicine: Honoring the stories of illness*. Oxford University Press.
2. Couser, G. T. (2009). *Signifying bodies: Disability in contemporary life writing*. University of Michigan Press.
3. Davis, L. J. (Ed.). (2013). *The disability studies reader* (4th ed.). Routledge.
4. Garland-Thomson, R. (2005). Disability and representation. *PMLA*, 120(2), 522–527. <https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X63822>
5. Heilker, P. (2011). Autism, rhetoric, and whiteness. In P. Heilker & M. Yergeau (Eds.), *Autism and the rhetorical tradition: Critical perspectives on voice, identity, and writing* (pp. 27–36). Utah State University Press.
6. Haddon, M. (2003). *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time*. Jonathan Cape.
7. Jaarsma, P., & Welin, S. (2012). Autism as a natural human variation: Reflections on the claims of the neurodiversity movement. *Health Care Analysis*, 20(1), 20–30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-011-0169-9>
8. Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (2000). *Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse*. University of Michigan Press.
9. Nikolajeva, M. (2014). *Reading for learning: Cognitive approaches to children's literature*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
10. Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.
11. Palacio, R. J. (2012). *Wonder*. Knopf Books for Young Readers.
12. Siebers, T. (2008). *Disability theory*. University of Michigan Press.