QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

PITY CAPITALISM: BRANDING DISABILITY THROUGH INSPIRATION IN PALACIO'S *WONDER*

Ali Haider,
M Phil (English Literature) Scholar, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Email: alih07328@gmail.com
Muhammad Khakan Ajmal, Corresponding Author
Assistant Professor of English, Higher Education Department, Punjab. Email: khakanonline711@gmail.com

Abstract:
This paper explores that how disability is turned into an emotional commodity, packaged in heart-warming ads, viral videos, and charity campaigns that make audiences feel inspired but leave real change untouched. It shows how disabled people are often portrayed as symbols rather than active participants, with their stories used to boost brands, collect donations, and create feel-good moments for the public. While disability has never been more visible, this visibility often masks the absence of power, accessibility, and genuine inclusion. The piece traces this pattern from old charity telethons to modern social media trends, revealing how the cycle of emotion leading to engagement and then to profit sustains ableist systems under the appearance of compassion. Through different examples, it challenges audiences to move beyond applause and pity, and toward justice. Real inclusion, it argues, comes from centring disabled voices, making them decision-makers, and linking every story to concrete action such as policy reform, accessible infrastructure, and equal opportunity. Only then can representation become more than a performance and start to transform lives. This article also examines R. J. Palacio's novel Wonder (2012) *as a literary case study, showing how the narrative reinforces pity and inspiration rather than systemic change. Drawing on Lennard J. Davis's theory of ableism, it connects the cultural idea of "normalcy" to the ways pity capitalism continues to operate in media and literature today.*

Keywords: ableism, compassion, disability, inspiration, inclusion, representation.

Introduction

A boy with a disfigured face walks into a classroom. Some students gasp, others whisper, and a few braves one's smile. By the end of the story, the boy has "taught" them kindness, patience, and the beauty of inner strength. Audiences leave inspired, some teary-eyed, others hopeful. The disabled child? He disappears as a character and re-emerges as a symbol, an emotional checkpoint in the moral journey of the non-disabled viewer. This is not a plotline from a rare film. It is a recurring blueprint in modern storytelling from viral TikTok's to Oscar-winning films and bestselling novels like *Wonder*. But beneath the feel-good ending lies an uncomfortable question: *Why are we still celebrating disability as a spectacle of pity, rather than confronting the systems that marginalize disabled people every day?*

Despite growing public awareness, disabled individuals continue to be systemically excluded from education, employment, politics, and popular culture. Ironically, the visibility of disability has never been higher. Social media platforms flood our feeds with "inspirational" disability stories. Advertisers use wheelchairs, prosthetics, and sign language to check diversity boxes. Charity campaigns rely on emotionally charged visuals of suffering to generate donations. At first glance, it seems we are progressing. But a closer look reveals a disturbing contradiction*: disability is being seen but not heard; represented but not included; marketed but not empowered.* This contradiction is not accidental. It is part of a larger social and economic phenomenon that I propose to name *Pity Capitalism.*

Pity Capitalism refers to the commodification of disability-based emotions primarily pity and inspiration or social, emotional, financial gain without enacting meaningful systemic change

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

for the disabled community. It is the soft tyranny of well-meaning stories and viral hashtags that convert human suffering into marketable content. Unlike older forms of overt discrimination, Pity Capitalism hides behind moral appeal. It makes us feel like good people for crying at a viral video or donating a few rupees to a telethon, while sidestepping critical questions: *Where is the disabled person's voice in all this? Who profits from these stories? What justice has been delivered?* In today's economy, disability is marketable but only when it looks good on a poster. The media and corporate worlds have discovered something powerful: showcasing disabled people sells empathy, boosts brand credibility, and attracts applause *without* requiring any real structural change. Inclusion has become a commercial aesthetic. It looks like justice, but it's just good business.

What makes pity such a powerful currency is that it flatters everyone except the people who live with disability. For the viewer, it delivers an instant reward, a sense of moral goodness for shedding a tear or pressing "share." For the brand, it guarantees reach, likes, and loyalty without investing in accessibility or reform. For the charity, it brings in donations while avoiding uncomfortable political demands. In this cycle, pity works like emotional clickbait: it promises hope, delivers sentiment, and hides injustice. Yet the very people at the centre of these stories remain voiceless. Their presence is reduced to a backdrop against which others perform kindness. Imagine if those same stories ended not with applause but with a demand for ramps in schools, inclusive hiring policies, or the election of disabled leaders. The emotional impact would still be there, but the outcome would be transformation, not just entertainment. Until we change the terms of storytelling, pity will keep selling better than justice, and compassion will remain more profitable than equality.

The emotional economy of Pity Capitalism operates on a simple formula: **emotion → engagement → capital**. A disabled child performs a dance; the clip goes viral; donations pour in; brands take note; a sponsorship deal follows. What remains absent is the child's autonomy, the family's long-term security, or policy-level inclusion. It is a cycle that rewards spectacle and sentiment, not justice or rights. This article argues that Pity Capitalism exploits disability to evoke sentiment, drive engagement, and turn a profit all while preserving the ableist structures that perpetuate exclusion in the first place. The feel-good stories it tells may warm hearts, but they rarely challenge minds. They make viewers feel better without making the world better for disabled people. In doing so, they shift focus away from accessibility, equity, and self-representation, replacing them with token gestures and sentimental performances.

The purpose of this article is not to demonize kindness or inspiration, but to ask: *Kindness for whom? Inspiration for what end?* Through a critical lens informed by disability studies, Ableism, and cultural critique, we will uncover how narratives of pity have been transformed into a lucrative industry one that sells hope while outsourcing justice.

Literature Review:

Disability has been written about, filmed, and campaigned for in countless ways, but the problem is that most of these stories have never truly been about disabled people themselves. Scholars, activists, and writers have long warned that visibility without power is just another performance. This review brings together the key ideas that help us understand why disability so often ends up packaged as pity, inspiration, or novelty rather than justice.

The foundation of modern disability studies is the social model of disability, introduced by Michael Oliver (2013)**.** Instead of blaming the body, the model shows that people are disabled by their environment by stairs instead of ramps, prejudice instead of opportunity, silence

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

instead of sign language. This idea flips the script: the "problem" isn't the individual, but the society that builds barriers.

Building on this, Australian activist Stella Young (2014) called out what she famously named "inspiration porn." The ideological roots of Pity Capitalism can be traced to what disability rights advocate *Stella Young* once called "inspiration porn". When someone is inspiring it is because they have achieved something brave or courageous, such as the completion of something physically challenging which has required hard work and discipline. Being called inspirational for going to the shop or for waking up in the morning and doing your daily activities, that would be unusual. However, across the world many disabled people are portrayed as inspirational for simply being able to live with their disability. The Images of disabled people performing activities are often circulated on social media with the intention to motivate the viewer. This insinuates that if a disabled person can 'overcome' their disability then a non-disabled person should appreciate their situation and overcome their own barrier, this is known as 'inspiration porn'.

Stella says: "We're objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people." She further says: "We need people to understand the social model of disability, we need societal leaders and influencers to treat us as equal. Disabled leaders have to speak out about the challenges and the ways society can be made more inclusive."

The inspiration porn was a critique of representation but Pity Capitalism critiques monetized representation where the visibility of disabled individuals is engineered to boost views, sales, or reputations, not inclusion or rights.

Literary scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2017) adds another layer with her analysis of how stories use disability as a symbol rather than a character. In novels, films, and ads, disabled figures often exist to teach a lesson, represent tragedy, or act as catalysts for other people's growth. The message is rarely, "Here is a full human being with agency." Instead, it's "Here is a metaphor." That tendency continues today in campaigns where a disabled child in a commercial becomes proof of a company's kindness, while the child's actual rights remain ignored. Other disability scholars expand this critique into contemporary contexts. Dan Goodley (2017) highlights how neoliberal culture celebrates visibility while sidestepping real equity. Diversity becomes a branding strategy: companies parade images of disabled employees in ads while their offices remain inaccessible.

Take a closer look at the entertainment industry. When was the last time you saw a disabled lead character in a Pakistani drama? If you did, odds are they were either tragic, helpless, or miraculously cured by the final episode. Disabled characters are rarely given full personalities, they're plot devices, meant to evoke emotion, not drive the story. Worse still, most of these characters are played by non-disabled actors. It's the equivalent of blackface, but for disability and somehow, we're still applauding. In Hollywood, it's no different. Films like *Wonder* (2012) and *Me Before You* (2016) package disability as either comedy or catastrophe. The disabled body becomes a lesson for the able-bodied character. The narrative isn't "What does the world look like through their eyes?" it's "Look how noble we are for including them." What happens with disability in media is not so different from how other causes get used without real commitment. In advertising, this is sometimes called tokenism**,** when a company or brand includes just one person from a minority group to look diverse, without changing anything else in their system.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

What unites them all is a warning: pity may stir emotions, but it does not build ramps, pass laws, or create jobs. Until disabled people are trusted as narrators of their own stories and architects of their futures, visibility will remain little more than performance.

Pity-based disability stories often flood our screens with emotional punchlines but what they rarely show is justice. These narratives may highlight kindness or resilience, but they consistently ignore the structural, political, and economic realities that marginalize disabled people. The result is a dangerous illusion: that visibility equals inclusion, and empathy substitutes for equality.

A glaring omission in such storytelling is political analysis. Feel-good ads and campaigns never ask: Why is public infrastructure still inaccessible? Why are disabled children in Pakistan frequently excluded from mainstream education? Why are disability benefits either tokenistic or non-existent? Instead, disability is reduced to a personal tragedy as something to be "overcome" through determination, not something created and sustained by systemic neglect. Consider the global success of *Wonder* (2012), a film about a boy with a facial difference. The narrative doesn't centre his empowerment but instead focuses on how he helps others become kinder. The film ends with a standing ovation, not a social reform.

Theoretical Framework

The central framework for this article is ableism(1995), supported by disability studies(2013), affect theory and political economy. Ableism refers to the system of ideas and practices that privilege non-disabled bodies and minds while casting disabled ones as abnormal, deficient, or in need of correction. One of the most influential scholars on this subject is Lennard J. Davis, whose work has been key in explaining how ableism is historically and culturally constructed. In *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Davis argues that ableism is tied to the modern invention of the "norm." Before the nineteenth century, people were described in terms of ideals or deviations, but the rise of statistics and industrial modernity introduced the concept of the "average" body. This made normality into a measurable standard, against which all people could be judged. Those who fell outside this statistical middle whether disabled, ill, or different in appearance were labeled abnormal and therefore less valuable. Davis shows that ableism is not just about prejudice but about the very structure of society, which is built around the expectation of normal bodies. Schools, workplaces, and media all function as if everyone were non-disabled, and those who do not fit are treated as problems.

By using Davis's theory, we can see that pity is not neutral. When disabled people are portrayed as tragic, inspirational, or miraculous, the audience is asked to measure them against the imagined "normal" life. Their bodies become symbols of lack or excess, rather than lives in their own right. Pity then operates as a tool that reinforces ableism: it confirms that disabled people are outside the norm, and it turns systemic barriers into individual misfortunes.

While ableism provides the main lens, other theories enrich the analysis. Disability studies, especially Michael Oliver's (2013) social model, emphasizes that people are excluded not because of their impairments but because of social barriers such as inaccessible spaces, discriminatory laws, and cultural stigmas. This perspective highlights why pity is so misplaced: it personalizes what is in fact a collective failure.

Affect theory (Tomkins, 1962) helps us understand how pity circulates as emotion. When a video of a disabled child goes viral, the emotions it generates hope, gratitude, or "faith in humanity" that travel across networks and produce clicks, likes, and shares. The individual disappears under layers of sentiment, while platforms and sponsors profit.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

Finally, the political economy of visibility (Debord,1967) situates pity capitalism within neoliberal consumer culture. Corporations and NGOs use disability as an aesthetic of inclusion to polish their image, while leaving deeper exclusions intact. Even softened hashtags such as "special souls" or "differently abled" remove the politics, offering comfort instead of justice.
Together, these perspectives reveal that pity capitalism is sustained by ableism. Pity generates feelings, feelings generate engagement, engagement generates capital, and capital upholds the very exclusions it claims to challenge. Until disabled people are positioned as narrators and decision-makers rather than symbols, representation will remain an exercise in marketing rather than a pathway to justice.

Analysis:
Pity Capitalism is the soft currency of modern emotional marketing subtle, sentimental, and deeply profitable. At its heart, it refers to the commodification of disability-related emotions primarily pity and inspiration for personal, social, or corporate benefit. This is not necessarily done with malicious intent. In fact, that's what makes it more insidious. It hides beneath the language of empathy, behind smiling faces and CSR hashtags. Until disabled people are trusted to tell their own stories , both in front of the camera and behind it, the representation will remain shallow. Brands and media companies may continue to collect applause for showing disability, but without giving control, it's just another product they are selling. This is not inclusion. This is emotional outsourcing.
And then comes advertising the sleek, polished playground of Pity Capitalism. Brands know exactly how to use disability for viral effect: add a slow piano track, a child with a prosthetic, a moment of struggle followed by triumph. Cue applause. Companies in Pakistan run Ramadan or Independence Day campaigns with disabled children waving flags or distributing food. But visit their offices and you'll rarely find a ramp, a Braille menu, or a sign-language interpreter. These brands aren't lying they're storytelling. But their stories are missing the truth. While earlier sections have shown how pity capitalism operates in advertisements, campaigns, and public spectacles, similar patterns can also be traced in literature, especially in R. J. Palacio's novel *Wonder* (2012). The text has been celebrated worldwide for promoting kindness and empathy, yet beneath its emotional appeal lies the same cycle of visibility without power. Instead of dismantling systemic barriers, the novel transforms disability into a narrative device for teaching lessons, generating pity, and producing inspirational feelings for non-disabled audiences. The incidents within the story from Auggie's experiences at school to his graduation work much like marketing campaigns: they stir emotion, invite applause, and leave deeper exclusions unchallenged.
When Auggie first enters Beecher Prep, his presence is framed as something unusual, almost like a spectacle. The principal assigns a few classmates to welcome him, which looks like an act of kindness, but in reality it singles him out as someone who needs extra management. Students stare, whisper, and avoid him, making his body the centre of attention rather than his personality or abilities. What appears to be inclusion is in fact a performance of tolerance that leaves the deeper culture of exclusion untouched. Auggie is expected to endure pity and curiosity, while the school congratulates itself for allowing him in. This moment reflects how ableism operates by making the disabled child responsible for carrying the discomfort of others.
The Halloween scene further reveals this contradiction. Auggie enjoys the day because his costume finally allows him to blend in. He feels ordinary for once, until he overhears Jack, one of his supposed friends, mocking him behind his back. The scene exposes how quickly token friendship can collapse into cruelty. Later, the story moves toward reconciliation, but the larger

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

culture that allows such remarks is never truly addressed. Just like in pity-driven campaigns, the narrative finds comfort in forgiveness and inspiration rather than asking why Auggie's difference provokes such treatment in the first place. The system remains intact, while the emotional burden falls on the disabled child.

Another important moment is Auggie's participation in the school play. The event is framed less as recognition of his skills and more as an act of bravery simply for appearing on stage. Teachers, parents, and classmates applaud him, but the applause is not for his performance. It is for his courage in being visible. This transforms the stage into a site of emotional transaction, where the audience feels uplifted, and Auggie becomes the means to deliver that feeling. His agency is overshadowed by the satisfaction of the viewers, echoing how pity capitalism turns disability into content that benefits others more than the subject himself.

The graduation scene offers the clearest example of how the novel packages disability into inspiration. Auggie is awarded the Henry Ward Beecher medal for being an extraordinary student, and the room erupts in a standing ovation. While readers and characters alike may find the moment moving, the award is not for policy change, accessibility, or systemic fairness. It is for Auggie's endurance, for managing to live with difference in a world that made him suffer. The ovation becomes the emotional climax of the story, just like a viral video or charity appeal, giving audiences a sense of closure without challenging the structures that excluded him throughout the year. The medal transforms his struggle into a symbol for others' growth rather than recognition of his own rights.

Even Auggie's family relationships reveal how pity operates in the story. His sister Via often describes her life as living in his shadow, as though her own needs are sidelined because of his difference. While this perspective is understandable, it shifts the emotional focus once again away from Auggie and toward the experiences of non-disabled characters. Similarly, his parents sometimes worry about how others see him rather than confronting the structural barriers that make everyday life harder. These portrayals reproduce the common narrative where disability is framed as a burden on families, turning the struggles of non-disabled characters into the central emotional drama. Taken together, these incidents show that *Wonder* (2012)reproduces many of the same dynamics found in corporate campaigns and public spectacles. Disability is repeatedly staged as a source of pity, inspiration, or moral growth for others, rather than as a lived identity with its own political demands. The school welcomes Auggie but does not transform its culture. Friends apologize but do not question why mockery was acceptable in the first place. Audiences applaud, but the applause does not remove barriers. In this way, the novel mirrors pity capitalism: it gives readers a warm emotional experience, but it does not point toward structural justice or genuine inclusion

Disability is shown not as identity, agency, or activism but as a soft emotional moment. One that inspires the viewer, comforts the donor, or elevates the brand. These portrayals rarely ask hard questions about accessibility, justice, or structural change. They instead offer a warm, tidy answer: be kind, and everything will be okay.

But kindness is not justice. Awareness is not policy. Representation is not power.

Pity Capitalism thrives precisely because it is difficult to critique. Who would speak against a seemingly inclusive ad? Who would question a smiling rider on a billboard? But unless those smiles come with rights, respect, and autonomy, they are just another part of the show.

The show must go on but perhaps it's time we stop clapping.

Intersectionality and the Erasure of Complexity

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

Disability does not exist in isolation. A person's experience is shaped by where they live, their gender, their income level, and, in some cases, their religion or ethnicity. This layering of identities is known as intersectionality, this changes the nature of the barriers people face. A girl with a disability in rural Sindh might never attend school because there is no accessible transport and her family prioritises boys' education. By contrast, a male wheelchair user in Islamabad may have access to higher education but still encounter workplace discrimination when seeking a promotion. For some, these challenges are compounded by religious or ethnic prejudice, as in the case of a Christian man with a visual disability in a small Punjab town who is denied opportunities not only because of his disability but also because of bias against his faith. When media depictions ignore such intersections, they flatten lived experiences into a one-size-fits-all narrative that fails to reflect reality.

Pity-driven storytelling often erases this complexity altogether. A disabled girl from rural Sindh faces fundamentally different challenges than a male wheelchair user in Islamabad, yet both are often portrayed in the same sentimental light.

This homogenisation is exactly what the *Sins Invalid project* (2005), led by disabled artists of colour critiques. Their work shows that justice must address far more than ramps and hiring quotas; it must also grapple with race, gender, queerness, and economic liberation. Yet even well-meaning efforts in Pakistan can fall into the same trap. Charity telethons, for example, appeal for donations but rarely for votes to push through policy reform. Social media posts praising "brave" disabled workers focus on the individual while ignoring the structural inaccessibility that surrounds them. Even language plays a role in this erasure: phrases like "confined to a wheelchair" cast disability as tragedy, when in truth it is the stairs and the silence of others that confine.

Justice-based storytelling offers a different model. The documentary *Crip Camp* (2020*)*, created by disabled activists, presents disability as a civil rights movement rather than a personal tragedy. Netflix's *Special* (2019)*,* developed by a disabled man, rejects pity in favour of messy, flawed, funny humanity. In the novel *Wonder* (2012) this erasure of complexity is also visible. Auggie's story is told with great emotional depth, yet his disability is portrayed in isolation from other social factors that could shape his life. He belongs to a financially stable, supportive, and educated family, which gives him access to advanced medical care and private schooling. These advantages are rarely acknowledged, and his struggles are framed almost entirely as a matter of appearance. The narrative also sidelines how gender, class, or ethnicity might intersect with disability, offering instead a universal lesson in kindness. This simplification mirrors the way pity-driven stories flatten lived experiences into one-size-fits-all narratives, erasing the role of structural privilege in shaping opportunities.

If pity says, "Be kind to them," justice says, "Stand with them, learn from them, and fight alongside them." The shift from emotion to empowerment is what most disability narratives lack, and it is the shift that true inclusion demands.

True intersectional inclusion also requires shifting the centre of storytelling power. Disabled people, especially those from marginalised communities must be decision-makers, not just subjects, in media, policy, and activism. This means inviting them into editorial boards, legislative committees, and leadership roles where they can shape agendas rather than react to them. When representation is coupled with authority, disability narratives can finally move beyond sentimentality to become blueprints for structural reform. Without this redistribution of power, even the most heartfelt portrayals risk becoming another chapter in the long history of commodified compassion.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

The Psychological & Social Impact

Pity-based stories don't just shape how the public sees disability. They also shape how disabled people see themselves. For many children with disabilities, the first time they see someone "like them" on TV or online, it is in a sad or "brave" story. These portrayals send an early message: *your value is in how you make others feel*. Over time, this can sink in, making them feel like they have to smile, be extra polite, or "inspire" just to be accepted.

Psychologists call this internalised ableism. This happens when disabled people start believing the stereotypes about themselves. It can lead to low self-confidence, hesitation to speak up for their rights, and even shame about asking for accessibility.

In *Wonder* (2012) Auggie's own feelings throughout the novel reveal how internalized ableism shapes his self-image. He often describes himself as ugly and admits that he avoids mirrors or crowds because he does not want to see his face or catch the reactions of others. On Halloween, he feels happiest not because he is celebrated but because his mask allows him to move through the world without being stared at. This moment shows how deeply he has absorbed society's message that his difference is something to hide. Rather than being encouraged to see himself as equal, Auggie learns to measure his worth against the imagined standard of normalcy, a direct reflection of how ableism becomes internalized.

Another example appears in the way Auggie downplays his own pain to protect others. He constantly reassures his parents, teachers, and even classmates that he is "okay," even when he is hurt by comments or exclusion. By taking responsibility for other people's comfort, he accepts the idea that his difference is a burden. This is a subtle but powerful sign of internalized ableism, where the disabled person feels they must adapt, endure, or inspire rather than demand change. Instead of challenging the structures that isolate him, the narrative often presents Auggie's resilience as the solution. This framing places the weight of adjustment on the individual rather than on the society that marginalizes him.

Pity capitalism also has a social cost. When the focus is always on emotion, friends, relatives, and even strangers may treat disabled people as charity cases instead of equals. This makes it harder to have normal relationships or to be seen as a colleague, leader, or decision-maker. But there is a different picture when representation is done right. Studies show that when disabled people are shown in everyday situations, making choices, leading projects, and being part of the community, it boosts self-esteem and encourages others to demand inclusion. Campaigns that feature disabled people speaking in their own words or leading initiatives can inspire change without turning them into objects of pity.

The truth is, dignity does not come from applause. It comes from respect, opportunity, and being treated as a full human being, on and off the screen. And that is something no viral video alone can give.

Conclusion:

Pity capitalism works because it hides behind good intentions. It takes stories of disabled people and turns them into emotional performances that audiences can consume, share, and applaud. These stories make people feel kind, generous, or inspired, but they do little to question the systems that exclude disabled people in the first place. The pattern is repeated across different spaces. In advertisements and charity campaigns, disability is packaged as hope or tragedy to sell products and collect donations. In literature like *Wonder*, it is staged as a moral lesson for others, where Auggie's difference becomes a tool for teaching empathy rather than a call to address structural barriers. In both cases, disability is visible, but real inclusion is absent.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 02 Issue No: 03 (2025)

The danger of this cycle is that it replaces justice with sentiment. People leave with warm emotions rather than critical awareness. They clap for Auggie at graduation or share a viral video online, but they are not asked to demand accessible schools, fair workplaces, or better policies. Visibility without power becomes the rule, and pity becomes the currency that sustains ableist structures. By turning exclusion into inspiration, pity capitalism makes inequality appear natural and unchangeable.

Real inclusion looks very different. It centres disabled voices not as symbols but as decision-makers. It asks difficult questions about why barriers exist and who benefits from keeping them in place. It measures success not in applause or hashtags but in ramps built, jobs secured, and policies reformed. To move beyond pity capitalism, media, literature, and culture must stop treating disability as a spectacle and start treating it as a site of rights and justice. Only then can representation move from being a performance of kindness to becoming a pathway toward equality.

References:

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Barnes, C. (2019). Disability and the myth of the independent researcher. *Disability & Society, 34*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1515724

Barbarin, I. (2021). Disability justice is more than ramps and legislation. *Disability Visibility Project*. Retrieved from https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Debord, G. (1967). *The society of the spectacle*. Paris, France: Buchet-Chastel.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2017). *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature* (20th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Goodley, D. (2017). *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction* (2nd ed.). London, UK: SAGE.

Oliver, M. (2013). The social model of disability: Thirty years on. *Disability & Society, 28*(7), 1024–1026. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.818773

Palacio, R. J. (2012). *Wonder*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Shakespeare, T. (2018). *Disability: The basics*. London, UK: Routledge.

Sins Invalid. (2016). *Skin, tooth, and bone: The basis of movement is our people*. San Francisco, CA: Author.

Thompson, J. B. (2005). The new visibility. *Theory, Culture & Society, 22*(6), 31–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405059413

Tomkins, S. (1962). *Affect imagery consciousness: Vol. 1. The positive affects*. New York, NY: Springer.

Wong, A. (2020). *Disability visibility: First-person stories from the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Vintage.