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DISABILITY IN CHILDREN: THE DEVELOPMENTAL SPACE IN *WONDER*
BY R. J. PALACIO

S S Soundharya¹, Dr Sumathy K. Swamy²

¹Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore
Email:soundharyasiva07@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of English, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore

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ABSTRACT

A family is considered a unit consisting of adults and children, and it is the adult's responsibility to ensure the children's safety, health and well-being. The family holds the space where the child is given the utmost care, love and affection. This space is not constrained only within the family but also expands outwards to society as well. Since a family is a small unit within the largely proportionated society.

This paper aims to understand the necessity of fulfilling the basic needs for the development of a child in an emotional, physical and intellectual space through the novel *Wonder* (2012) by R. J. Palacio. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the emphasis on children's basic needs and the adversities faced, when the needs are not achieved resulting in the development of complexes within them. On addressing the importance of basic needs, the paper also delineates the complexes identified in each character and the process of understanding oneself as a path towards self-actualization. With the basic needs and complexes as the crux, it identifies the drawbacks of social space, and promote education in children about disability and its nuances.

Keywords: Hierarchy of Needs, Children, Environment, Developmental space, Inferiority complex

Introduction

An ideal environment guarantees the positive growth of a child and it consists of nature, knowledge, food and so on. All these elements aid a child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth; each individual has different outcomes. There is a tri-fold link between children, family and society. The steady flow of knowledge and values from the family and society has a major influence on the child's thoughts and behaviour. However, families, in particular, play a major role as it is their responsibility to provide their children with a safe and significant environment.

Considering the social environment, it encourages children to strengthen their social skills by establishing new relationships apart from their family circle providing an extensive view of the world. In the same way, in an

emotional environment, children's relationship with their parents is much stronger as it shows their range of perseverance and understanding through their development in values, feelings and confidence to overcome challenges. These values inspire children to fend for themselves and implement the lessons learnt and acquired from their parents.

In an intellectual space, mostly in schools, the teachers guide the children to identify and develop their abilities, and skills and also facilitate them in learning languages to communicate. They also play a crucial role in a child's life as they introduce them to their peers, establish relationships, compete with them, and discover and develop their unique skills. It is during the developmental phase, that the changes in their emotional and mental states take place making them prone to either adversity or receptiveness, in turn allowing them to be either traumatised or resilient.

Wonder (2012), a children's fiction, written by the American novelist and graphic designer, Raquel Jaramillo Palacio is about an eleven-year-old boy who has "single nucleotide deletion mutation" (Palacio 104), which is known as Treacher Collins syndrome, a genetic condition characterized by distinct abnormalities of the head and face. The novel addresses the everyday activities of children belonging to the developmental stage of age 10-16 and their experience and rapport with August Pullman or Auggie.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow in his book *Motivation and Personality* (1954) introduced the theory, Hierarchy of Needs which influenced the field of psychology. Maslow states that the "theory should stress and center itself upon ultimate or basic goals rather than partial or superficial ones, upon ends rather than means to these ends. Such a stress would imply a more central place for unconscious than for conscious motivations" (Introduction 370). Therefore, here, the character, Auggie's deformity is placed as the point of stress since he was never accepted within the agenda of 'norms'.

Maslow's theory is used to get a better insight into the importance of satisfying the needs or drive and the steps to undertake in order to fulfil the needs. He has classified it under five steps, each specifying a different function that remains important for the child's development. He has aligned the needs in the form of a pyramid, starting from the lower or the basic needs. The basic and foremost need is the physiological need, then the safety need, love and belongingness need, followed by the (self) esteem need and finally the self-actualization, a desire for self-fulfilment and holistic development. However, when the first or basic four needs are not satisfied, there is a lack of motivation and further evolves as insecurities, the feeling of being less competent to others.

Discussion

The protagonist of the novel, Auggie or August Pullman, has a genetic condition called Treacher Collins Syndrome. The awareness of his condition allowed him to learn and accept the dissatisfactions within reality and cope with the help of his family and the people around him. The physiological needs are satisfied by his parents, even though he had to undergo a bunch of surgeries and medications for his condition. He is cherished and loved by his parents, his sister and neighbours who have got used to Auggie. But when he was left in a different space which was incorporated with a different set of people, norms and values rather than his comfort zone, he felt threatened. Auggie who was home-schooled due to his condition felt strange and less confident to face new people who were the same age as himself. Indeed, this is the reason which affects the fourth need, the lack of self-esteem and self-respect. He understands the situation as: "I noticed that the seat next to me was the only one still empty, even though there were two kids sitting at one desk just a few seats away" (Palacio 39). Even though Auggie was not confronted about his appearance, the action passed out to be body shaming.

Children have a consistent feeling of being incompetent or insecure throughout the stages of development. An individual can either overcome these insecurities or try to seek superiority and form a goal, which indeed becomes one's life. This can be understood by Alder's 'Individual Psychology' which was published in his work *Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Physical Compensation* (1917), where he discusses the insecurities and complexes. When Auggie was home-schooled, he was surrounded by his parents and people who knew

about his condition, but it was different when he started school. Auggie's weakness was his appearance and when he did not receive the expected outcome. As a result, his self-esteem and his desire for friends, their love and care are shattered: "I could tell I was being stared at without even looking up. I knew people were nudging each other, watching me out of the corner of their eyes. I thought I was used to those kinds of stares but guess I wasn't" (Palacio 50). Kenny Fries's in his *Staring Back: The Disability Experience From the Inside Out* (1997), an anthology of disability writing discusses the outlook of disability among the common people. "Throughout history, those who live with disabilities have been defined by the gaze and the needs of the nondisabled world. Many times, those who live with disabilities have been isolated in institutions, experimented upon, exterminate" (1).

However, Auggie understands that it was nobody's fault that he was born with the genetic condition and there is nothing wrong with enjoying his life like his peers. But he realizes this only when he befriends Summer and Jack. They help him to realize that his appearance is just a part of his entity and that doesn't make any difference. He indirectly helps Jack and Julian in their process of self-actualisation.

Jack, who along with Julian and Charlotte was assigned as Auggie's "Welcome Buddy" (Palacio 134). He was reluctant to meet Auggie as the previous encounter at a park was a disaster. He knew about Auggie and his condition, hence when Mr Tushman wanted him to help Auggie, Jack knew it was not negotiable. Even though Jack's parents were supportive and caring in all aspects, he was not happy about the financial status of their family. He acknowledges that his parents are not rich and they live on the "other side of Broadway" (Palacio 149) which is a code word for areas belonging to lower-middle-class people. In reference to Maslow's theory, Jack's self-esteem is bruised as he wants people to recognize him and not his financial status. He is also ignored by his peers and the reason was for befriending Auggie which makes him miserable and insecure. This insecurity is compensated by negative behavioural patterns i.e., anger and violence.

The inferiority complex is because Jack's family is not as rich as Julian and he is avoided by others, as he is a friend of Auggie. These insecurities push him to make regrettable decisions by criticizing and making fun of Auggie's appearance behind his back. Jack, who was consumed by his insecurities, wanted to satisfy his needs by hinting at Auggie's weakness. He was also not aware of the damage that he had caused to Auggie's mental and emotional development. This is much more intense as Jack was Auggie's best friend. In the novel, during the day of Halloween, Jack is dressed up like a mummy and Julian is Darth Sidious, a character from Star Wars and had a conversation about Auggie's appearance, "I can't imagine looking in the mirror every day and seeing myself like that. It would be awful. And getting stared at all the time" (Palacio 77).

Auggie felt betrayed as he witnessed Jack bad-mouthing about him behind his back. Jack was oblivious that Auggie knew about his shameful act and was confused over the reason for Auggie ignoring him. He realised the intensity of his mistake only when Julian confronted him about Auggie being his science partner and called Auggie a "freak" (Palacio 154). The insecurities intensify negative feelings, doubts and helplessness which forces him to conjure his feelings towards Auggie, as Jack feels superior to Auggie.

David Pfeiffer in an unpublished article "Similar and Different," states that "normal behavior is a statistical artefact which encourages people with power and resources to label people without power and resources as abnormal" (qtd. in Davis 504). Subsequently hinting at the power play happening within the people shrouded by an invisible cloak called normalcy, opens an account of the lack of awareness of body shaming among the kids and their ignorance towards their action of criticizing or making fun of them, which is denoted as bullying.

The feeling of being threatened or mistreated in an environment can create a space of anxiety leading to his desire to be respected and acknowledge being sabotaged; these can be termed as insecurities which is a projection of an inferiority complex. Here, Auggie's condition makes him insecure about his appearance when he is placed in an environment consisting of his peers. Jack tries to satisfy his inferiority complex by criticizing Auggie. Adler in his work *Menschenkenntnis* (1927) comments, "Inferiority and insecurity are thus built into the individual's constitution. Desire, will, understanding and speech have all grown up to assist the person who is inferior in nature to adapt in communal life" (qtd. in Taylor 7:160).

Julian, the arch-enemy of Auggie, is a character who derives pleasure in exerting superiority over his friends and other kids. Julian was brought up being pampered by his parents as he was an only child and it is evident that his physiological, safety, love belongingness needs and esteem needs are fulfilled. However, Adler comments on this particular style of life where parents constantly hover over their children, solve problems and do not allow them to realize their duties and responsibilities. Due to these misconceptions, the child does not realize the need to interact with others appropriately, "under such circumstance the child develops like a parasite" (Adler 89). Despite this, Julian has an intense feeling of inferiority which is transfigured as the superiority complex. Julian's method of establishing superiority is by being arrogant, domineering and sticking around people important to him.

Julian's unacceptable treatment towards Auggie is because he felt threatened and all the attention he had was diverted towards Auggie. In addition to this, Julian's night terror and his anxiety synthesised to form his insecurities. Even though he treated Auggie terribly, he was not satisfied as it did not bother Auggie in any way. At this point, Julian failed to satisfy his complex i.e., imposing power over Auggie. Therefore he gathered a group to support him and went to the extent of inventing a game named "plague" (Palacio 27) which means when a person does not wash their hand immediately after touching Auggie they might die.

Julian's approach towards Auggie shows the lack of awareness in children about the intensity of their actions and the words that are spoken. When Julian was not able to deal with the conflict, he resolved to criticize Auggie by posting notes which openly spoke about his appearance: "Yo, Darth Hideous. You are so ugly you should wear a mask every day!" and hurtful comments like "I bet your mother wishes you'd never been born. You should do everybody a favour --- and die" (Palacio 40).

Julian's parents overlooked their son's mistake and instead, they were angry with the school management for suspending their son in spite of them being one of the trustees. The lack of emotional attachment can be observed, Julian addresses his mother as "super-mom moments and not-so-super-mom-moments" (Palacio 34). He receives love and care from his mother but fails as a person to guide him through his impediments.

All three characters: Auggie, Jack and Julian, had a different way of attaining the answers to the question on their insecurities. Being a child, Julian reflected on the meaning of "REMORSE" (Palacio 79) only when his grandmother explained her hardships during the World War. He was able to understand and accept his misconduct of being hostile towards Auggie. Julian assumed Auggie to be an enemy rather than a competitor or fellow-mate. Julian understood the meaning of the term Remorse and had apologised for being arrogant and rude towards Auggie.

In the same way, Jack was able to understand his fault only when Auggie reacted by ignoring Jack. During this period, he was able to realise and question himself about his actions. Jack understood the intensity of the harsh words that he had spoken only when he understood the importance of friendship and the downside of popularity and this was his moment of understanding and perseverance.

Auggie was not judged by his looks at his home, but when he was placed in a group, he stood out due to his medical condition. Auggie's struggle to fit into the "normal" (my emphasis) criterion forced him to mask himself. But he understood that even though people hesitated to look at him and talk to him, they were the same people who helped him when he was bullied by high schoolers. Auggie was able to embrace himself when his appearance was overlooked by Jack and the other kids. He felt true happiness when he was admired for his nature and not appearance.

Auggie, Jack and Julian share a commonality: their insecurities and the projection through their behaviours. Their realization of the origin and reason for the inferiority complex acts as a catalyst for the transition from their immature and indifferent behaviour to an intellectual and healthy mental state. The understating and motivation towards one's betterment is the path to the whole and Maslow addresses this as the fifth and final stage, self-actualisation. It is the stage where they realise the place they have reached and

highlight the path to improving themselves. This can be done when the children are linked with society and their surroundings.

Conclusion

A society that creates a norm is assimilated by the parents and further imposed on the children. When society forms conservative thinking, there exists an invisible pressure that forces the adults to perceive it and a child naturally learns or imitates the adults. Therefore, the society which binds the individuals as a community must take steps to educate themselves as well as the children about the importance of acceptance of people for who they are which may lead to holistic development. Adults must hold power over their thoughts as they influence the future generation's perception of life.

Therefore, this paper takes an effort to emphasise the importance of the developmental phase and the space a child grows. The lack of basic awareness in the areas of disability and its various facets such as the mental state, physical inability to perform certain actions, the insecurities, developmental trauma and quality of life is highlighted. The discourse of disability should be introduced to the children, starting with a smallest and essential unit of society: the family. The knowledge on its nuance and de-naturalization of body and mental state must be focused starting within a familiar space and gradually extending towards the societal framework, institutions and public space.

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