

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impact of Abuse and Effect of Trauma: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*

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Received- 11 July 2016, Revised- 21 September 2016, Accepted- 12 November 2016, Published- 12 December 2016

ABSTRACT

A child's behaviour is basically built upon the process of imitation it acquires from its parents. More than the role of the environment, parent's role in shaping their children behaviour is vital. When parents fail to acknowledge the behaviour of their children it leads to psychological disturbances in their mind resulting in several abuses. This research paper seeks to analyze the various types of abuses that are experienced by children and the resulting trauma through the eyes of psychological reasons. It analyzes the reasons behind those abuses, the causes and their cure.

Keywords: Imitation, Role of environment, Psychological behavior, Abuse, Trauma.

"One's dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked, but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered" -Michael J. Fox

Psychology which is said to be the scientific study of human psyche helps in analyzing the unconsciousness in human mind. When human behaviour is analyzed, signs of abnormalities can be traced. An individual's personality depends upon the variation level between normal and abnormal behaviour and if the abnormalities exceeds in a varied proportion it is said to be disintegrated personality. Abuse is an outcome of the unconscious mind and it is also because of a disintegration of personality. Stephen Chbosky's novel *The Perks of being a Wallflower* is one such novel which tells the life of a teenage protagonist Charlie and his high school friends. Through them, one can get to know the problems experienced by school going students in the form of abuses and the resulting trauma.

Charlie, the protagonist of the novel *The Perks of being a Wallflower*, writes his

experiences in the form of letters to an unknown person whom he calls his friend. He begins his letter by sharing about the suicide of his close friend Michael in the middle school. Suicide in children used to be very rare, but now there is an increase in the number of such suicides, especially between the ages of ten to fourteen. Jamison writes, "Children are at increased risk for suicide if they have lost a parent or have been abused" (112). When one of the teachers in the middle school had said that Michael killed himself because he had no one to talk to, Charlie screamed and cried. Michael had been the only close friend Charlie had had. Another reason for his outburst is revealed in the later part that Charlie's aunt, Helen, had also died when he was quiet young. Charlie had been very much attached to her. After her death, Charlie was traumatized and this repressed fear arose and made him emotionally unstable when he heard about deaths. Earlier Charlie had had his best friend Michael to share, that made him forget the tragic death of his aunt for some time, but soon after his friend's death, Charlie once again became emotionally disturbed. The death of his aunt Helen and the death of his close friend

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Double blind peer review under responsibility of DJ Publications

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18831/djeng.org/2016021001>

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Michael affect Charlie so much that it became a kind of emotional abuse. He experienced a strange feeling of loneliness that made him miss his friend and aunt. Beverley Engel defines emotional abuse as, "...any nonphysical behaviour that is designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish, or isolate another person through the use of degradation, humiliation, or fear" (10).

The thought that his aunt was dead disturbed him often that he felt isolated and wrote all of his thoughts in the form of letters. A few minutes before her death his aunt had told Charlie about the birthday gift she was going to get for him. Whenever Charlie remembered his aunt, he also remembered her last words saying, "I'm going to buy your birthday present"(PW 92) which echoed in him and created an imbalance in his mind. He felt that aunt Helen died on her way to buy his gift and so blames himself for her death. Charlie was much attached to his aunt than his parents, hence he framed his mind that his only relief to share his feeling is by writing down to his unknown friend.

After finishing middle school, Charlie joined high school where he befriends Sam and Patrick. Mr. Anderson, shortly called as 'Bill', was his advanced English teacher who gave him books to read and asked him to submit papers analyzing those books. Charlie also introduces his family members in his letter. His brother, who was at college and a football player for Steelers, rarely came home. His sister Candace loved Derek, nick named as 'Ponytail Derek' who presents her mix tapes every week. One night Charlie saw Derek hit her hard across her face. On seeing him, Candace asked Charlie to leave the place and not mention the abuse to anyone. However, Charlie mentioned it to Mr. Anderson and he in turn mentioned it to their parents. They discussed the matter with Derek's parents and told Candace never to see Derek again. Though Charlie had only tried to help her, he now earned enmity and lost the little affection he got from his sister. Even worse, Candace still dated Derek but now they did it in secret. Once, Charlie saw the boy and his sister having sex. His sister shouted at him to get away from that place: "He was on top of her, and her legs were draped over either side of couch. And she screamed at me in a whisper. 'Get out. You pervert'" (PW 12).

At school, Charlie liked a girl named Sam right from their first meeting. Once he had a dream of seeing Sam naked, but he felt ashamed of that. He was too honest that he shared his dream to Sam who genuinely admired his openness, and accepting curiously his sincerity, continued to be his friend. Though he knew quite a few people now, Charlie still spent more time in his room rather than with his friends. Thoughts of his Aunt's death occupied his mind often. Being influenced by seeing his sister's sexual exploits and his senior friends at school, Charlie had acquired a bad habit of masturbating and practiced it whenever he felt alone. Patrick was the one who initiated Charlie about the process of Masturbation and the pleasure it gave and made him practice it often in his loneliness. Charlie's environment had created him a platform for acquiring such a habit in him. Masturbation had been caused in him due to his environment, which abused him psychologically, leading him to it. To quote Robert Anton Wilson, "Masturbation is not the happiest form of sexuality, but the most advisable for him who wants to be alone and think" (118).

Sam and Patrick invited Charlie to attend a party and there they introduced him to all their friends. Charlie cried a little, thinking of his friend Michael, and Sam comforted him and gave him a milkshake to drink. After some time when Charlie was looking for the bathroom, he heard some murmuring sound in the nearby room. He opened the room and was surprised to see Patrick kissing the football star Brad: "When I got out of the bathroom, I heard a noise in the room where we left our coats. I opened the door, and I saw Patrick kissing Brad" (PW 36). Patrick stopped kissing Brad and went to Charlie and asked his assurance never to reveal the secret to anyone. Charlie promised him. Patrick and Brad had had this for quite some time then. Psychologists call this type of abnormal sexual behaviour as Homosexuality. The persons who practice this behavior show less interest with the opposite sex but are sexually attracted with the person of the same sex. During the next party Patrick had sex with Brad. Brad cried because of that, and was scared. Charlie observed this and felt sad for Patrick, "Brad started to cry really hard. He had been drinking a lot. And getting really really stoned" (PW 44).

Sam's boyfriend was Craig, who was much older than she was. In spite of this, Charlie always had love, affection and respect towards Sam. Soon it was Christmas time and the friend's gang – Sam, Patrick, Alice, Mary Elizabeth, Charlie – started playing Secret Santa. Charlie went to Patrick's house for the Christmas celebration as they all gathered there to handover gifts. Charlie got gifts for everyone and not just Patrick to whom he was the Secret Santa. Patrick told Charlie that he in turn was his secret Santa and presented him a suit. Sam had also got Charlie a gift – a typewriter. She wanted him to pursue his dreams as a writer. When they were alone, Sam asked whether Charlie had kissed anyone else before. He replied that other than his aunt he had never received such passion from anyone else. When Charlie asked her back, Sam felt depressed and started crying. She told him that her father's friend used to abuse her at the age of eleven. This behaviour of abuse is called as child sexual abuse. Fraser defines child sexual abuse as, "...the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult" (58)

When Sam kissed Charlie for the first time, he remembered his aunt Helen. The death of his aunt had created such an impact that Charlie was not able to overcome his childhood stress and had images of his aunt for any pleasant or sad situation. During that Christmas season Charlie's family visited Aunt Helen's grave, where Charlie's mother talked about her sister. The thing, which always made her feel sad, was that a friend of the family had sexually abused her sister. She was not able to share her difficult situation with her family members. Her father didn't believe in her because the man supported their family financially and helped their father in getting a job. This type of behavior is called as sexual assault or sexual abuse. Charlie personally writes in his letter, I will not say who. I will not say when. I will just say that my aunt Helen was molested. I hate that word. It was done by someone who was very close to her. It was not her dad. She finally told her dad. He didn't believe her because of who it was. A friend of the family. That just made it worse. My grandma never said anything either. And the man kept coming over for visits (PW 90).

When Charlie's aunt had died in an accident, the police officer who reported that

his aunt had passed away asked Charlie's mother to identify her sister's body. Charlie was very young that time, but he was able to remember the incident and write back in the letter even after so many years. His mother left him with his sister and went with the police. Charlie was so much affected by the death that as a result he acted oddly and was taken to consult a psychiatrist. Charlie was able to get over that after some time, but he was not completely cured and the madness attacked him now and then. His repressed thoughts disturbed him often and made him mentally unstable. The memories of his aunt disturbed him and haunted him for years. He felt, "I just want it all to stop spinning. If this gets any worse, I might have to go back to the doctor. It's getting that bad again" (PW 94).

Candace soon discovered that she was pregnant and told Derek the news. To her shock he refused that, he had nothing to do with the baby and she gets to know about his true character only in that crucial situation. He was adamant saying that it was not his child: "...her boy friend said it wasn't his baby, but my sister knew that it was. And I do know that he broke up with her right there at the dance. My sister hasn't told anybody else about it because she doesn't want it to get around" (PW 116). She broke her relationship with the boy; she wanted to abort the child secretly without her parents' knowledge. So she asked Charlie to accompany her to the abortion centre and asked him not to tell their parents. Charlie readily agreed to come with her and his support and care renewed their closeness. Her break up with that boy and Charlie's willingness to help her created a true bond between the brother and sister.

Mary Elizabeth, a girl from Patrick, Sam and Charlie's gang approached Charlie to ask him out on a date with her for a dance. Even though Charlie was not much interested in Mary Elizabeth he agreed, as he did not know any reason to refuse. On the day of the dance, she came to his house and he introduced her to his family. That night she took him to her home and started showing signs of having sex. Charlie had no idea of such things and did not particularly like being involved with Mary Elizabeth. To his relief her parents came home and he became relaxed. After that, they seemed to be a couple in everyone's eyes. However, in reality Mary Elizabeth talked non-stop and

dominated Charlie, not allowing him to say anything. Due to his passive nature, Charlie never mentioned anything. One day when they were playing a game, Charlie's dare was to kiss the girl he thought the prettiest in the room. Without thinking anything, Charlie kissed Sam. This scandal lost him all his friends.

Peter Barry points out Freud's observation, "There is always a return of the repressed" (96). Charlie was not able to share his thoughts with his family and he now did not have close friends with whom he could share. The thought about his aunt's death and his close friend Michael's death now started dominating. To relieve his mind he started a bad habit of smoking cigarettes whenever he felt the loneliness. He writes in his letter, "I'm now up to about ten cigarettes a day" (PW 103). Sigmund Freud was the one who introduced the term called 'Displacement' or 'Sublimation' in Psychoanalysis. Hergenhenn and Olson quote Freud that, "...with displacement, what a person truly desires is repressed and is replaced by something safer" (36). Here Charlie did not use his repressed feeling to be displaced by a safer thing, but had acquired something bad to his health.

Patrick was now heartbroken, as Brad had started ignoring him. Once Brad's father had seen both of them together and he started beating Brad heavily with his belt. This form of abuse is referred to as physical abuse. Beverly Engel defines that, "The physical abuse of a child includes any non-accidental physical injury or pattern of injuries inflicted upon a child (under the age of eighteen) that may include beatings, burns, bites, bruises, fractures, shaking, or other physical harm" (27). After the incident, Brad came to school with an injury but his behaviour had changed completely. He was in the cafeteria, joking with his football friends when Patrick passed by with an angry and sad face. To his astonishment one of Brad's friends tripped Patrick and Brad verbally abused him in front of all others. Charlie saw this from a distance: "And then I heard it. It was just loud enough for a few tables to hear. The thing that Brad yelled at Patrick. 'Faggot!'" (PW 150). Psychologists call this kind of abuse as verbal abuse. To quote Beverly Engel, "...verbal abuse usually escalates over time and may include screaming at your partner and insulting

him or her in front of others" (35). The others who noticed it laughed at Patrick and he went near Brad and gave a heavy blow to his face. Brad's other friends physically hurt Patrick. Charlie went there to help Patrick and beat everyone else. This reconciled Charlie with his old group of friends.

Patrick now shared all his grief and feelings to Charlie. He took Charlie to many of his special places. He even took him to the places where gay men found partners. Patrick drank quite heavily and Charlie also gave him company: "Patrick and I have been spending a lot of time together. We drink a lot" (PW 161). This kind of behavior is associated with drug abuse and is also known as substance abuse. To quote Steven B. Karch, "...drug abuse is simply the use of any substance that is self-administered for its mood altering effects and is used for a non-therapeutic purpose" (290). He was always sad and every night after wandering and drinking together, he dropped Charlie home. Once he happened to watch Brad with some other guy in that park. Patrick got angry and started throwing bottles out of the window. Charlie writes in his letter about their drinking and getting high with drugs. He says, "Another night, Patrick took me to this place where they sell poppers, which is this drug you inhale" (PW 163).

Soon it was time for the school year to end, and Sam, Patrick and Charlie's sister were packing up to go to their various colleges. On the day before Sam vacated her home, she told Charlie about her breaking up with Craig. She was also happy that Charlie accepted her just as she was, and knowing everything about her. Charlie writes in his letter about his romantic involvement with Sam that they, ... lay down on the floor and kept kissing. And it was soft. And we made quiet noises. And kept silent. And still. We went over to the bed and lay down on all the things that weren't put in suitcases. And we touched each other from the waist up over our clothes (PW 202).

When Sam's touch moved down, Charlie suddenly remembered something. Flashes of remembrance came as he remembered that he had been touched in the same way before. It had been his Aunt Helen. He could not take in this realization and he suddenly stopped Sam. Now the truth behind Charlie's trauma is revealed. It had been because his aunt had sexually abused him and

had told him to keep it a “secret” (PW 91). Jeff Fowler says, “Children who are sexually abused have their physical and emotional health compromised in a way which, in many cases, affects them throughout their entire adult life” (10). It had been like a vicious circle – his aunt had been abused as a child and now as an adult, she had abused another child because of the trauma from her childhood. He was not able to continue and said goodbye to Sam who just thought that he was shy. The next morning he went to Sam’s house to send off her and Patrick as they were leaving for their colleges.

After he came home, the images kept replaying in Charlie’s mind and disturbed him so much. He had no one to share - not Sam not Patrick not even his sister. He remembered his Aunt’s words, “little secrets” (PW 206) which she used often to hide many things that it had got ingrained in little Charlie’s mind. He was not able to think clearly and his mind was becoming unstable. He was not sure what to believe and did not know what was true and if it was true, how to accept it. Therefore, Charlie decided to commit suicide. “There is no behaviour that more effectively terminates individual evolutionary fitness than suicide” (387) says Hergenbahn and Olson. However, he was saved and later admitted in the hospital where he woke up. The doctor asked questions and Charlie’s repressions slowly vanished from him, as he was able to tell everything that had disturbed him for such long years. It slowly helped him to realize the truth and to accept it. The doctor also informed his family and friends who visited him and stayed with him. They were very supportive. With their love, care and support Charlie was finally able to fully recover from the past as for the first time he accepted the truth and revealed his secrets. This cheered him up and helped him to move on in life. After all these years of being a mere spectator, a wallflower, he now felt the need for living and participating in the world, rather than just watching silently. He finishes his letter saying that he would start the sophomore year of high school differently. The result of therapy and his facing the past boldly had helped him to come out of his trauma. He had come out of his utter passivity and decided to actively participate in everything and mingle sociably. This he hints to the reader friend by saying that he was okay and would write no

more letters: “I’m not sure if I will have the time to write any more letters because I might be too busy trying to ‘participate’”(PW 213).

Though the culture differs and the novel portrays a western way of life, it depicts the real situation of the school-going children. The parents in the novel seem to be standing aloft and do not realize that their children are in desperate need for their love, affection and care. There is no place in the novel that portrays children mingling with their parents. In one sense, it can be argued that the characters Sam and Patrick have been abused in different forms because of their parents and family members’ negligence and indifference. Patrick’s father married Sam’s mother, and the children who grew up amongst divorces and remarriages would indeed be psychologically abused. Without their parents being a role model, they lead their life in irresponsible ways that create the route cause for all problems and traumas. *The Perks of being a Wallflower* shows how children should be brought up in love and care by their parents. They should spend time with their children and let them share their thoughts and feelings with them. Especially children who undergo different abuses at a young age should be given special care and helped to overcome their trauma and not be left out. They should be emotionally nurtured and psychologically boosted to overcome those troubled times. The cure for any psychological and mental disorder is love. Parents should love their children in all aspects, trust them, and try to guide them, helping them to differentiate the positives and negatives, the right path from the wrong. The novel ends after informing that the protagonist recovered by accepting the past through the love, care and support showed by his parents, siblings and friends. His fear of being alone vanished slowly from him as he felt that he is loved by everyone. His willingness to “participate” (PW 213) and mingle with other people by developing an outgoing personality would resolve his emotional abuse. He will no more be a spectator but will be a participator all through the affection of his loved ones: “Love is above wisdom, just as the Virgin is above the snake” (Paulo Coelho, 184).

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