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The Ecology of Rebellion: Deconstructing Adolescent Identity in Robin Wasserman's Girls on Fire

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Abstract: *The article is based on the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner is used to comment on the psychological coming-of-age book Girls on Fire by Robin Wasserman, which addresses the nature of friendship between two teenage girls who are undergoing trauma, identity, and rebellion in a small American town in the 1990s. The novel describes the way individuals are formed through the complicated stratifications of their social and cultural world. Ecological Systems Theory, which introduces five interrelating systems the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem offers a useful perspective in the discussion of influences attributable to the external forces shaping the protagonists in the story, Dex and Lacey. In this paper, we can observe the role of their dysfunctional family, toxic school environment, society judgement, their gender role requirements, and the historical background of the time to include these factors that cause their emotional imbalance and violent behaviour. The progression of the characters traced in this paper is in the terms of Bronfenbrenner; in this system, the paper demonstrates the systemic change of adolescent disillusionment, traumatization and revolution. Not only does the analysis demonstrate the psychological depth of a characters developed by Wasserman but it also demonstrates that EST can be utilized as a theory in literary studies that research the adolescence stage and identity formation.*

Introduction

The Girls on Fire by Robin Wasserman (2016) is the novel of a violent and fanatical cult of two teenage girls, Hannah Dexter (then Dex) and Lacey Champlain, in the context of a conservative small town in the USA of the early 1990s. Fundamentally, this novel is an exploration of teenage years and the girl, social structures and nonconformity, and an analysis that is both emotional and psychological. Wasserman uses this dark story to develop a horrifying picture of two young women breaking all the norms and rules of the society, facing the aftermath of the trauma, and finding a sense of pacification in each other and also self-destruction.

Themes of identity, peer pressure, family dysfunction, and societal judgment run together in the novel, and the development of the characters cannot be viewed independently. Instead, they are influenced by

various intersecting environments to perform their actions and make decisions. Such complexity is open to interpretation in terms of Ecological Systems Theory (EST), proposed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, which characterizes the parameters of human development as comprising five interacting systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

Although EST is commonly applied in the field of psychology and education to analyze human behaviors in real-life scenarios, its use in literary studies, which will focus on aspects of adolescence, provides interesting applications of understanding how characters are influenced by their environment. The purpose of this paper is to examine Girls on Fire through the prism of Ecological Systems Theory to demonstrate how the immediate and systemic surroundings of Dex and Lacey influence their psychological and emotional development.

Significance of the Study

The interdisciplinary thrust to combine literary studies with developmental psychology can also be seen as significant to this study, as it aims to enable a deeper comprehension of how identity is formed and reconstructed among adolescents in Girls on Fire. The article is based on a systemic elucidation of the psychological issue of the characters by the application of the Ecological System Theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner in which the inclination and behaviors of these characters are generalize into the deduction of the influences of the family, school, neighborhood, culture and historical circumstance on the growth and development of these characters. It is not analyzed in facing single-pathology, but rather on the larger structural and societal contexts of what causes traumas, defiance and identity crises of teenage girls.

The present study adds to the existing body of literature that explores the application of psychological models to literature, and especially young adult fiction, in that it shows how this method can be used to understand the deep, multi-faceted nature of character growth. It, furthermore, enriches feminist literary criticism by uncovering the macro-level ideologies (such as patriarchy and gender binary) prohibiting female agency. Additionally, the study is also pertinent to any educator, psychologist, or scholar interested in learning the influence of cultural and environmental elements on youth behavior, whether in literature or in real life.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze psychological and emotional development of Dex and Lacey in Girls on Fire in terms of the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner.
2. To analyze the role of systematical failures at various levels of an ecological hierarchy (family level, school level, community, and cultural norms) and their implication in the identity formation, trauma, and rebellion of the characters.
3. To illustrate the cross-disciplinary significance of bringing forth analysis of feminist literary works using psychological theory, shedding light on how the literature illuminates and criticizes the social systems of an adolescent girl.

Literature Review

It is not a new concept that psychological theories have made significant contributions to the academic study of literature by helping to explain motivation, the construction of identity, and the effects of socio-cultural forces on narrative. Ecological Systems Theory (EST), proposed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979 as an effort to conceptualize real-world human development within a nested systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), has grown in popularity over the last 30 years in the fields of literature and interdisciplinary studies, due both to its detailed treatment of contextual factors and the flexibility of the systems model that Bronfenbrenner used to handle them.

Tudge et al. (2009) highlighted the need to properly utilize the theory of Bronfenbrenner in different contexts and to avoid oversimplification that can conceal the interconnection of environmental factors. Within the context of literature (particularly young adult (YA) fiction), EST offers an effective way of explaining the development of characters through reactions to coinciding systems (family, peers, school, media, cultural ideology and so on).

Scholars like Bullen and Parsons (2007) maintain that adolescent literature frequently parallels the young adult's genuine struggles, thereby leading to unique research. In their study, they demonstrate how YA fiction often performs the boundary between microsystems (e.g., relations with family or peers) and more pervasive social (e.g., media or religion) systems, therefore, reflecting the complexity of the process of identity construction during the adolescence period.

Trauma and memory as active productions in determining the behavior of adolescents are other prominent research focuses in the field of literary studies as well. Caruth (1996) argues that the literature of trauma frequently encodes some character of the unresolved psychological tension, which is quite beneficial to the EST as far as its concern of the system-level factors that affect the shaping of the individual. In Girls on Fire, the responses to trauma experienced by both main characters are directly connected to their microsystem (family) and mesosystem (school and peer relationships), which is also observed in Wilson's (2020) studies on trauma narrative in YA fiction.

In the meantime, feminists like Gilligan (1993) have claimed that girls experiences of being silenced in the social systems influence their developmental trajectories. This opinion is significantly backed by a portrayal of two characters, Dex and Lacey, by Wasserman, as people deprived of their complexity and even further punished on the basis of nonconformity to the norm. In turn, it outlines the concept of the macrosystem according to Bronfenbrenner, or societal standards defining the behaviour of individuals. Laudadio (2017) also examines how the contemporary YA literature expresses girlhood anger as an act of resistance to the patriarchal structure, which is pivotal in Girls on Fire.

Evans (2018) explains that toxic friendship in YA fiction is commonly developed as a survival strategy in an otherwise adverse landscape. This is consistent with the presentation of the relationship between Dex and Lacey found in the novel, which is a kind of protective microsystem created due to the neglect that occurs on a much larger systemic scale. In much the same vein, Flanagan (2011) has looked at how peer pressure, rebellion, and social alienation tend to be deployed as instruments of identity construction when it comes to the young adult characters confronting dissonance in the realm of culture.

The culture of the 1990s, especially the emergence of the grunge style and anti-establishment mood, also influenced the creation of the chronosystem of Girls on Fire. According to Bainbridge (2003), grunge aesthetics have been largely characterized by a loss of faith in the mainstream culture and an expression of personal authenticity, as is reflected in the appeal of Dex to Kurt Cobain and other alternative culture. This is also struck by Goncalves (2019), who explores the intersection of music, subculture, and temporality in identity construction among teenagers struggling against the forms of traditional gender norms, especially teenage girls who belong to the outsider femininity.

Lastly, Bronfenbrenner's theory can also be applied to literary criticism, offering a systemic interpretation of the behaviour of characters without resorting to reductionist and pathologising interpretations but focusing more on the causation within the structure. This approach, moreover, does not only humanise the fictional adolescents, Dex and Lacey, but also undermines the cultural institutions that betray them.

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis within the Ecological Systems Theory Framework

Through this framework of how to analyze a text using the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner, this paper presents a textual analysis on the novel Girls on Fire by Robin Wasserman. The passages were reviewed and codified under the five systems of micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, macro-system and chrono-system to establish the process of personal relations, social systems and cultural forces that influence the identity of the protagonists. The combination of this method of data gathering and analysis allows a multilayered understanding of the book about individual agency in the context of intersecting social realities.

According to the Ecological System theory designed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), five environmental systems affect the development of Humans:

Microsystem: Close environments (home, friends, and family) Mesosystem: Linkages between microsystems

Exosystem: Outside variables that indirectly affect the person (e.g. parents who work in environments, media)

Macrosystem: Societal and cultural norms those are available to people for their use.

Chrono system: Time and historical factors (e.g. socio-political Situation, Biographical events)

This unifying technique introduces the role of individual behavior as a result of a complex combination of internalized systems of the environment.

Analysis and Discussion

Microsystem

In Girls on Fire, the microsystem—comprising immediate environments like family and close relationships—reveals emotional neglect and dysfunction that shape Dex and Lacey's psychological makeup. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem includes "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (p. 22). Dex's admission that she "did not want to talk about it" and that she lied to her parents about being fine (Wasserman, 2016, p. 12) highlights the emotional void in her household. She is also denied her tender environment since her parents are emotionally unavailable to provide guidance to her as she works out her trauma independently. Similarly, Lacey endures more overt neglect and trauma. She recalls, "Between waitressing and groupie-ing, boozing and fucking, Loretta didn't have much time left for mothering... Then the cat ran away; she didn't notice" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 25), painting an evocative picture of a childhood marked by desertion.

These conjugate deteriorations in their respective dominant environments propel Dex and Lacey into creating an alternative microsystem in one another. Their connection is instant and profound; Dex confesses to Lacey, "You're a total stranger, but it's like we already know each other. You feel that, too?" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 23). This relationship then develops into an adapted structure that acts as a substitute for emotional famine in the family that is failing to operate effectively. In Bronfenbrenner's words, their friendship now seems as a self-sufficient microsystem, which is closed space, in which, where they form identity, safety and rebellion against the failed world.

The way Dex changes under the influence of Lacey also demonstrated this psychological change. She acknowledges that "Dex was supposed to be our secret, a code name for the thing that was growing between us and the person she was shaping me to be" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 38), signifying the cessation of her old self and the formation of a new identity born from their shared revolt. The depth of their pain-based relationship serves as a means of escape and the source of devastation and is

dependent upon and reacts to their ineffective microsystems.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem in Girls on Fire shows that when there is a mismatch between two or more microsystems, like home and school, this increases emotional instability in Dex and Lacey. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the mesosystem consists of "the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group)" (p. 25). In the case of Dex, her family does not provide emotional support in the household, a problem that transfers into her school life to form a complete network of neglect. Her interaction with the school counsellor reveals this systemic failure: "My appointment came a few weeks after his death, in one of the slots reserved for nonentities, and was perfunctory... Was I happy. "No, no, no," I said, "and because there was no upshot to being honest, yes" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 12). Her instrumental reactions and the artificial interest of the counsellor show that the care by institutional systems is nothing more than an act of care without taking into account the true emotional needs of the trauma.

This home related traumatic experience also impacts on her establishment of positive relations at school. Her behavior and attitudes define that of a person who has gone through normalization and interiorization of pain and can barely trust. The very fact that Dex and Lacey are more or less connected in the first place, in homeroom, in fact, proves a rare and significant intersection of the mesosystems of the two types, of peer relations and the school setting. It is a school prayer when a subversive silent message, the raising of the middle fingers by Dex and Lacey in unison, launches a rebel alliance: "She watched me like she was waiting for a performance to begin... Then her middle finger ratcheted up... and when her eyes dropped to meet mine again, my finger rose of its own accord in identical salute" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 14). This is a point of convergence between the peer and school mesosystems to form a new, defiant mesosystem that defies institutional expectations.

This establishes a relationship that enables Dex and Lacey to start rebuilding their mesosystems and giving themselves a sense of purpose and an identity in defying subjection. The systems that are supposed to facilitate their development (home, school, counselling) are dissociated and helpless, which compels them to one another because they represent the only reliable source of approval and self-empowerment.

Exosystem

In the novel Girls on Fire, the exosystem, or the settings wherein the adolescent does not participate in the events and activities directly, yet affects her life pattern perceptively are crucial as it helps to shape the worldview of Dex and Lacey. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the exosystem includes "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (p. 25–26).

The response of the community to the suicide of Craig illustrates the way in which the opinion of the masses and the demands of the institutions triumph over the actual care about adolescent grief. Dex observes how the school transformed him into "martyr, wonder, victim, cautionary tale" and notes that "his locker was a clutter of paper hearts, teddy bears, and basketball pennants, at least until the janitorial staff were instructed to clear it all away amid fears that making too much of a fuss might inspire the trend chasers among us to follow" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 12). Instead of dealing with the emotional repercussions, the school system, under the pressure of panicked communities, covers up evidence of grieving and conveys a chilling message that the look is more important than the mental

well-being of its students.

This indirect system is further predisposed by the church and the moral panic that surrounds it. Dex recounts how "no one used the word suicide that year unless absolutely necessary" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 13), illustrating how silence and stigma dominate the cultural response to tragedy. In a session meant to assess her well-being, the counselor abruptly shifts focus from grief to moral surveillance, asking, "whether I knew anything about the three churches that had been vandalized on Halloween, blood-red upside-down crosses painted across their wooden doors" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 13). The passages illustrate Dex being not seen as a human in agony, but as a possible source of danger in a bigger ethical story. These outside systems simply strengthen alienation instead of healing. Within the structure presented by Bronfenbrenner, the role of the exosystem is evident: institutional fear, neighborhood judgment and cultural silence come to play to further isolate the girls and precipitate them into more rebelliousness and mistrust.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem of Girls on Fire presents the intertwining of more general values of culture, gender norms, and ideological arrangements within which Dex and Lacey live. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the macrosystem encompasses "the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social context" and includes "belief systems, bodies of knowledge, customs, lifestyles, opportunity structures, hazards, and life course options" (p. 26). This form of culture in the novel is characterized by strict expectations concerning femininity, morality, and obedience, especially in conservative, small-town America.

Wasserman (2016) criticizes this cultural programming with the defiance of Dex against the narrative of a good girl. The girls reject societal expectations outright: "Good girls were boring. We wanted to be anything but" (p. 101). This rejection is not mere adolescent rebellion – there is an intentional element of revolt against a culture that demands silence and purity and passivity of girls. The macrosystem is not a passive context, as Bronfenbrenner would put it, but a tyrannical force that places limitations on female agency.

This repressive ideology is most indubitably voiced through Lacey's reflection: "Girls had to believe in everything but their own power, because if girls knew what they could do, imagine what they might" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 267). The line discloses a tremendous fear of an empowered femininity in the society. The macrosystem attempts to achieve this as much as possible in order to create self-doubt, ensuring that the girls internalize the boundaries instead of pushing against them.

Moreover, the novel portrays the gendered binary connotations of enforcing what it means to be worthwhile as proofs of identity. Society demands that girls must choose: "They had to believe that they were the fairer, the weaker, and the vulnerable, that they could only be good girls or bad, and that the choice, once made, could never be revoked" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 267). Such a false dichotomy not only flattens the female identity, but also eliminates the possibility of complexity and change. The rebellion in this case is a strategy to survive and protest against a system where conformity is the only way to live and authenticity is not a concern.

Using the macrosystem lens, Girls on Fire demonstrates how a cultural script on gender and morality expands the emotional dichotomy to push Dex and Lacey to extreme limits of a society that does not acknowledge the room for compromise.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem in Girls on Fire indicates the time aspect of the phenomenon, both the historical background and the development of personal life experience, which affects the psychological and emotional growth of Dex and Lacey. Although Bronfenbrenner introduced the concept more fully in his later work, he defines the chronosystem as encompassing "change or consistency over time not only in the characteristics of the person but also of the environment in which that person lives" (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 730). This will involve the socio-historical changes, cultural movements and significant life passages that influence human growth over time.

Wasserman (2016) takes the example of the fall of the grunge movement to describe lost potential and killing the alternative in capitalism. Dex observes, "Seattle was a commercial. Seattle was a movie set and a Gap ad. Grunge was ascendant; the revolution was televised. Seattle took over the world; all its possibility and promise were made manifest, and it didn't survive it" (p. 272). The previously comprehensive expression of untamed, anti-establishment identities evolves into one more supportable image that sums up the lack of genuine resistance to pressures of systems that describe the era.

This dissatisfaction is transferred to the personal life of Dex. Her immersion into the grunge culture is both a style as well as a psyche coping: "Dex knew about grunge and Seattle and Kurt and Courtney, and what she didn't know, she could fake. Dex cut class, drank wine coolers, and ignored homework in favour of Lacey-work—studying guitar riffs and deciphering philosophy and poetry…" (Wasserman, 2016, p. 30). Through this subculture, Dex is not just escaping, she is also acquiring a language, a tool with which she is able to rebuild herself in resistance to the dysfunctions of the world she is living in at the moment.

More diffused alterations in this chronosystem of the 1990s were to encompass augmented suicidal conduct amid teenagers, the augmented significance of media, and the moral panic that lie under the surface of the novel and instruct the character of mental and emotional mood. Dex and Lacey are not only reacting to their personal traumas but they are also living through a cultural moment where teenage suffering is being romanticized in the silence of adolescent suffering as it is being muted.

Lastly, the chronosystem is a new beginning of Girls on Fire: not a book of experience, but a book of soul and contradictions of a period in which rebellion was packaged and marketed and in which the crisis of emotion was frighteningly disregarded or misunderstood.

Discussion

In applying the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) to Girls on Fire, this paper sheds a new level at which the behavior of adolescents, particularly young girls, is not conditioned in isolation but as a response to the multilayered systems in which they live. The personal turmoil, rebelliousness, and divided identity that Dex and Lacey perceive are not mere products of individual trauma – it is a bigger ecological failure that is coming to bear. This is in line with the perspective of Bronfenbrenner, who said that development should be seen in the light of the interaction between the person and a succession of enveloping environments.

The microsystem, which is traditionally thought to be the nurture and direct contact, turns into the place of neglect and maltreatment in the novel. Neither of the two people, Dex and Lacey, is supported by their own families, and are instead harm by them (at least passively) through apathy or even violence. Their super strong friendship which initially makes them strong turns out to be unhealthy and toxic as it starts to bear the burden of covering up the flaws of various systems.

The mesosystem that is supposed to mediate between various spheres of support (home, school, peer relationship) is also fragmented. A lack of communication between parents and school authorities and trauma being brushed off as shallow by institutional representatives (such as counselors) cannot have the emergence of holistic care. It leaves Dex and Lacey alone to deal with their emotional meltdowns

and further isolates them from both adults and the institutions.

The ecosystem demonstrates how peripheral forces, including community rumors, media narratives, and institutional fear, may have a strong impact on the psychologies of adolescents. Berger demonstrates the culture of discouraging discomfort in the response that people publicly have shown to the suicide of Craig and to the rumors of Satanism. Although these reactions are not directly part of the immediate lives of Dex and Lacey, they add to the feeling that they are not safe or understood anywhere in their world.

At the level of macrosystem, the novel criticizes the cultural value that accommodates patriarchy, gendered expectations, and binary moral standards. Both Dex and Lacey individualistically reject the ideal of the good girl; they embrace rage and rebellion, and this is an open challenge to the script that society has given them. This confirms the feminist interpretations of the text, which view the falling of the girls not as moral deficiency but as the revolt against the culture that deprives girls of their complexity of emotions and actions.

To this analysis is further depth provided by the chronosystem, or the temporal and historical viewpoint. The novel is set in the timeframe of 1990s, when teenage mental well-being was often discredited and the act of rebellion was commodified in the form of music and media, leaving the people of the generation felt disheartened by it. Grunge style and the countercultural ethos that Dex and Lacey try to imitate are not trends as such but a struggle to discover something deeper and more genuine in a world that one way or another, seems more plasticized and aggressive.

This discussion reiterates the fact that Girls on Fire is not merely a narration of the story of two problematic teens but also a narrative of institutional failure. It also has in common with Bronfenbrenner the central assumption: development is an outcome of interaction between man and changing environment. The emotional intensity of the novel is not caused by the personal nonconformity but by systemic incompetence, by ideological dominance, and by an enforced silence.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that the use of EST in criticism of literature is a sound concept. It gives a great model of realizing that character behavior is affected by various systems interacting with one another and encourages its readers to avoid the approach of personal blame but rather rely on a more general accusation of how institutions make young people helpless.

Conclusion

The Girls on Fire interpretation premised on the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory emphasized the fact that rebellion in teens, trauma, and identity crisis involve a deeper dysfunction in the systems that cannot be reduced to personal decision. The social, familial, cultural and historical systems that are similar, yet at the same time contrasting, demonstrate how the experiences of both Dex and Lacey can be both limiting and changing adolescent development.

The spirit of the novel is that it is highly critical of the microsystem the family, a place of trauma and emotional neglect. The two main characters have poor nurturing relationships in their homes, and therefore must rely on one another to survive emotionally. It creates the second microsystem as they both become affectionate to each other. This, though mainly enabling, turns out to be a phone that is seriously isolating. The deterioration of the mesosystem contributed to this emotional deficit which, in this instance, is the lack of communication and direction between the school and the home, added further alienation of the girls to serious adult intervention.

The ecosystem has institutions like the media, school policies and community morals that play a very indirect but central role in influencing the outlook of the main characters. Instead of being conducive, these buildings contribute to the shame, silence, and fear particularly in the case of suicide, rebellion

and female independence. This stress is also enhanced by the macrosystem that creates rigid gender identities and a patriarchal value system that marginalizes the multi-dimensionality of the girls and suppresses their strength by forcing any girl to become a mother. The rejection of the girls to lead the life of the good girl turns out to be a sort of resistance- the attempt to find some identity in the world which needs some obedience.

The sense of disillusionment in the culture is announced in the novel, though it is set in the chronosystem of the 1990s, the era of the subversive culture, moral panic, and increased awareness of the issue of adolescent mental health. The very fact that Dex and Lacey have already identified with grunge and anti-establishment appearance ought not to be merely a statement of fashion but a panicked statement by two people who have gotten disillusioned with the established establishment.

The given research shows that it is impossible to perceive such literary works as Girls on Fire as purely fictional accounts of emotional turmoil of teenagers. They are images of the actual psychological and cultural adolescent situation. The Ecological Systems Theory in a holistic and multidimensional approach would allow the reader, the teacher, and the researcher to realize the complexity of adolescent suffering and shift the discussion out of the ethical analysis or action to a more positive and empathetic of the roots and system.

Lastly, the paper highlights the need to take into consideration environmental frameworks when describing the behavior of the adolescents in literature. Girls on Fire open our eyes to the fact that the rebellious action, as well as the trauma connected to it, is no accident but rather it is the language of the ecology, which in this case is deaf ear.

Recommendations for Future Research

The interdisciplinary approach may be further developed in a latter study by using the Ecological Systems Theory when applied to other novels of young adults, which are pertinent to female identity; the author may pick a novel, such as Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson or The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides. The usage of the theory can be supported by the comparative analysis as it can be used to bring the strands of similarity in cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, intersectionality (race, class and sexuality) added to EST based theories of literature analysis could offer a deeper account of how the structural system is submissive to the experiences of various adolescents.

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