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Foster Care, Trauma, and the Child Psyche: A Psychoanalytic Study of Jacqueline Wilson's *The Story of Tracy Beaker*

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Abstract

Over the course of time, children's literature has given representation and agency to children in foster care through the portrayal of their lives and experiences. *The Story of Tracy Beaker* by Jacqueline Wilson tells the quirky yet touching story of ten-year old Tracy who lives in a foster facility along with many other children. While focusing on the child characters set within the framework of foster care systems, there are two (among other) interdisciplinary ways in which one could look at *The Story of Tracy Beaker*. One approach would be to conduct a psychoanalytic exploration of the protagonist Tracy Beaker, her life, past trauma, experiences and relationships. The second approach calls for the psychosocial analysis of all the child characters in the novel, and how their time in foster care facilities comes to have a huge impact on their psychological growth, identity formation, mental well-being, experiences, relationships and life, in general. There is limited research done on these two facets of children's literature. By addressing these, the study aims to bridge the research gap existing in the limited application of psychoanalysis in children's literature, and attempts to theoretically contribute to this field by reiterating the integral role played by psychoanalysis across the spectrum of children's literature, as a powerful tool that can explore how the psyche of the child reader and the adult reader in a dual address, connects both emotionally and mentally with the text.

Keywords: Foster care; Child psyche; Psychoanalytic criticism; Trauma in childhood; Identity formation, Interdisciplinary.

INTRODUCTION

This study will analyse Jacqueline Wilson's *The Story of Tracy Beaker* in relation to the psychoanalytic theories propounded by Carl Jung and Anna Freud, while also setting the novel within the psychosocial framework of foster care systems. Theoretical perspectives including ideas and concepts revolving around the workings of the unconscious mind, distinct defence mechanisms, coping strategies, adolescent psychology, as well as the psychosocial aspects of children under foster care are adopted for the research. With a focus on the central character Tracy Beaker, the study explores her thoughts, actions, reactions and how they exhibit several psychoanalytic factors as propounded by Jung, Anna Freud, Vaillant and Folkman. Biomedical research findings too aid in the better analysis of Tracy's mental state and the detrimental consequences of her traumatic experiences. The study will further conduct a detailed examination of the various psychosocial adjustment and mental health problems endured by children and adolescents in the foster system. This is analyzed in association with Wilson's portrayal of foster children who have been through neglect and abuse while in the system, consequently developing psychological or behavioural disorders.

Written by one of the world's most popular children's book authors Jacqueline Wilson, *The Story of Tracy Beaker* was first published in 1991 and is considered to be her breakthrough novel. The English author is widely acclaimed for engaging with themes that were generally considered unconventional in the genre of children's literature. Questions revolving around divorce, alcoholism, dysfunctional families, abandonment, adoption, depression, death and abuse are the subject matter in a majority of Wilson's books. *The Story*

of *Tracy Beaker* too is set within the unconventional context of a foster care facility, and as Jacqueline Wilson herself states in the preface to her book, it is the "story about a tough feisty girl in a children's home" (Wilson 2).

Over the years, psychoanalysis has come to play a vital role in the study of mental and emotional troubles in both adults as well as children. Children's literature is now more broadly, often understood as creative psychological work that is undertaken on behalf of the young subject (Kidd 8). Psychoanalytic factors continue to mirror different aspects of life, and children's book authors play a vital role whereby they become their own psychologists in the process of reconstructing not just their own childhoods, but also that of the imaginary characters they create (Kidd 18). Be it race, sexuality, love or caste, it is crucial to give due attention to all the vastly diverse yet intersecting points between psychoanalysis and children's literature.

DISCUSSION

Delving Into Tracy Beaker's Psyche

There are innumerable children's books these days that allow both the child reader as well as the adult reader, in a double address, to connect with the characters and the story on a profoundly emotional level. Across the twentieth century and into the immediate present, children's literature and psychoanalysis have been dialectically constitutive (Kidd 204). Examining children's literature from a psychoanalytic angle has become a crucial way of understanding the dynamics between the psyche of the characters in the book and that of the young reader.

The novel is written from the first-person point of view of the central character Tracy Beaker, who directly addresses the reader. Penned in an autobiographical style, Tracy

boldly states, "this is my own book and I can write whatever I want" (Wilson 28). In the preface to *Starring Tracy Beaker*, the sequel to *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, Jacqueline Wilson points out how Tracy has "such a strong personality, it's almost as if she takes over and writes the stories herself". A smart, outspoken and brave yet sensitive character, Tracy lives along with several other children of varying ages in a foster home, which she refers to as "the home" (Wilson 17) or the "dumping ground for difficult kids" (Wilson 104). Among all the children there, Tracy is depicted as quite a problematic girl with temper issues and a habitual tendency to break rules. She herself says, "I've done a bit of stomping and screaming in my time" (Wilson 23). In certain instances, Tracy's social worker Elaine, describes her as being a "difficult" child with certain "behaviour problems" (Wilson 27).

With regard to Tracy's family, it becomes obvious that her mother is an absent character who ironically has a strong presence throughout the novel. As Tracy narrates her story, the reader becomes aware of how she was first brought into the foster care system. She speaks of her past: "the people in my own family are my mum. I don't have a dad. I lived with my mum when I was little and we got on great but then she got this Monster Gorilla Boyfriend and I hated him and he hated me back and beat me up and so I had to be taken into care" (Wilson 13). It becomes painfully obvious to the reader that Tracy is neglected and seems to have been abandoned by her mother, who never even visits Tracy. Martin and Maheswari point out how elements such as emotional care and the quality of familial relationships are rather crucial in determining aspects of adolescent psychosocial health (1016). In a few of the rare moments in which Tracy reveals her vulnerable side, she recalls how she used to wait for hours for her mother to come visit her but knew deep down inside that "she almost definitely wouldn't be coming" (Wilson 136). In spite of this, Tracy does not let go of hope and we realise that her mother forever continues to occupy a

crucial space in all of Tracy's thoughts, actions, memories, and life as a whole.

The social conditions and personal experiences of a child invariably have a significant impact on their psychological growth and behaviour as individuals. "Children evolve developmentally along circuitous internal and external paths of interwoven cognitive, emotional, and social experience with strong emotions and acute perceptions" (Spitz 207). As the story progresses, the reader learns of how past experiences and memories have had a major mental and psychological influence on Tracy's character. Not only was she neglected and abandoned by her mother, she was also physically abused at a very young age by her mother's boyfriend. Psychologists have studied the most common types of maltreatment (physical, sexual or psychological abuse and neglect), and have deduced that these forms of abuse cause immediate harm and can result in numerous long-term as well as adverse effects on the victim (Thornberry et al.). It may be deduced that Tracy developed a number of defence mechanisms in order to protect herself from the pain of being neglected, abused and quite likely abandoned. Anna Freud talks about these mechanisms of defence as a "struggle against painful or unendurable ideas" as the individual attempts to "ward off unpleasure and anxiety, and exercise control over impulsive behaviour, affects, and instinctive urges" (42, 5).

Often, individuals tend to resort to the mental act of suppression as a means of avoiding the psychological distress or pain they might be going through. Suppression is the defence mechanism that is most often associated with mental health, by which individuals use stoicism as a means of dealing with emotional conflicts, internal or external stressors, and as well as by acknowledging but downplaying experiences, problems or feelings that disturb them (Vaillant 47). Throughout the book, Tracy can be seen putting up a brave and nonchalant front as she tells herself from time to time that she "didn't care" about anything and declares

that "words can't hurt" her in anyway (Wilson 95, 57). On many occasions, we see that Tracy is reluctant to think or even speak about her mother as she forcefully pushes these thoughts, even though her attempts are almost always in vain. Whenever she does think or speak of her mother, it is either just as a passing comment she makes or because someone triggers her to do so. Tracy herself says that she does not like talking about her mother, and that whatever she thinks about her mother is a private matter (Wilson 19). The facade she presents, as well as her refusal to think about her mother, may be Tracy's way of protecting herself from the hurt associated with her memories and current reality.

Literature consistently iterates that it is dangerous to suppress emotions as it can turn against the individual in a matter of time (Jung 268). It is possible to draw a connection between Tracy's defence strategy of repression and Jung's idea of archetypes. Repression as a defence mechanism is demonstrated in the repeated camouflage or dismissal of any distressing idea, thoughts or affect from one's conscious mind (Freud 51). While blocking out all the hurt with regard to her mother, Tracy also refuses to willingly express her emotions as she seems to consider vulnerability as a weakness of sorts. In one such instance, Tracy has a nightmare about her mother and wakes up crying in her bed. However, she denies that the incident even happened as she says, "I like to keep to myself in such moments as some stupid ignorant twits think my red eyes and runny nose are because I've been crying. And I never *ever* cry, no matter what" (Wilson 123). Tracy quite visibly and adamantly refuses to accept the fact that she cried, and instead refers to it each time as an attack of "hay fever" (Wilson 123). Besides the fact that Tracy tries hard to appear nonchalant and passive at times of emotional distress, she also seems to sometimes take on a different personality in order to please those around her. Tracy states that, "It's no use looking sad or sulky if you want people to like you. Mother always tells me to give her a big smile. Even

when she's saying goodbye to me. You can't look gloomy or it just upsets people and they don't want any more to do with you" (Wilson 66). Based on her mother's advice, Tracy represses her true emotions and attempts to act happy. This brings out what is referred to as the archetype of 'the persona' which one is not in reality, since it conceals the side of us that we never reveal to the world as we hide it with the persona, which functions like a mask worn by an actor (Jung 126, 36).

Tracy also adopts another major defence mechanism that is known as the 'denial' of external reality and 'distortion' of external reality (Vaillant 45). On the one hand Tracy says, "I expect my mum will come soon anyway", and on the other she claims, "I don't half want my mum" (Wilson 15, 50). Here it is evident that Tracy is adopting two contradicting stances in the scale of denial. Defence mechanisms involve far more than just a simple neglect or repression of reality, as it allows the individual to deal with sudden emotional distress by discrete styles of denial or self-deception (Vaillant 45). Denial may occur not just in words, but also in the act of creating an alternate reality. A child perceives herself or himself as supreme in the fantasies that they create, and nobody has a reason to interfere in them as long as the child doesn't reveal the fantasy to anyone (Freud 91). Tracy can quite often be seen to conjure up fantasies, as she creates a sort of distorted reality particularly in relation to her mother. Tracy stubbornly goes along with an assumption that her mother is a Hollywood actress since she is pretty. This is also used as an excuse whereby Tracy tries to convince herself that the reason her mother does not come to visit, is because she is busy (Wilson 85). In reality however, Tracy does not even know where her mother lives, let alone what she does in life. There is also the instance in which she lied to her previous foster mother, Auntie Peggy, that she met her mother in the back garden and they went shopping together (Wilson 23). The denial of reality in this sense, creates in the mind of the child, an

escapist yet reassuring fantasy that they have control of the world that they live in (Freud 85).

On quite a few occasions, Tracy visibly seems to project her emotions and fears onto Justine, another girl who lives in the children's home. The defence strategy of projection can be explained as an unconscious and reflexive mechanism by which an element that is unconscious to the subject shifts itself to an object, so that it appears to be part of the object (Jung 72). While waiting for her father who promised to meet her, Justine picks a fight with Tracy and they both get riled up. Tracy feels cornered when Justine taunts that her mother never once came to visit Tracy in the children's home. Almost immediately, Tracy takes a defensive stance as she projects her own fears, jealousy and insecurities onto Justine by telling her: "you were supposed to be going out with him (Justine's father) last Saturday. Only he never turned up" (Wilson 133). The strategy of projection is often used in the case of disagreeable or distressing things that can be evaded so long as one project all that is negative into the external world (Jung 36). It is a similar incident of projection that ruined the friendship between Tracy and Justine in the first place. This corroborates the idea that the defence of projection disrupts the human relations of an individual, when one's own jealousy or destructive actions are projected and ascribed to the people around them (Freud 123).

It is possible to examine an aspect of Tracy's character in terms of Jung's idea of the 'shadow' archetype that represents everything that the individual refuses to acknowledge or accept about oneself. Yet this suppressed content invariably thrusts itself upon the individual, either directly or indirectly in the form of characteristic traits or tendencies that can be identified as inferior or incompatible (Jung 265). The shadow aspect of an individual usually appears through projection on appropriate individuals, just as Tracy chooses Justine as the object to project her negative emotions upon (Jung 265). When the fight with

Justine reaches a peak, Tracy physically attacks and hits Justine in the face giving her a nosebleed (Wilson 134). Studies highlight how aggressive impulses are most often accompanied by dysregulated emotions such as hatred and rage (Freud 32). In this sense, the shadow aspect of Tracy's personality represents tendencies that are both disorderly as well as disruptive, as the chaotic side that is masked behind the self eventually breaks through in harmful ways (Jung 414). No matter how hard Tracy tries to suppress her pain and keep her feelings in check, at some point they manifest themselves in a negative and often destructive manner. This further points towards the fact that repressed contents and emotions are the very ones that are most likely to survive and resurface (Jung 246).

Dreams are describes as being involuntary and spontaneous in nature, and are manifestations of the unconscious psyche as they can unquestionably be traced back to repressed or forgotten memories and personal experiences (Jung 62, 152). The darkness that is a part of every individual's personality is the entry point into their unconscious psyche, the threshold to the realm of dreams, and these dreams most often emerge from repressed impulses that are naturally inclined to influence one's conscious psyche (Jung 126, 63). We see in Wilson's novel that Tracy often has nightmares resulting in problems such as insomnia and enuresis (bedwetting). She tells us: "there wasn't much point in getting to sleep, because when I did eventually nod off I just had these stupid nightmares", that sometimes revolved around her mother or other people she knew (Wilson 54). Children and adolescents who have been through some experience of maltreatment or neglect, are reported to have exhibited relatively higher symptoms of insomnia (Schønning et al. 8). After a point, Tracy seems to desperately yearn to rest as she hopes she could get at least some sleep instead of lying awake in the middle of the night, thinking about her mother. Tracy's mind continues to be plagued by sleepless

thoughts: "I wish she'd come and get me. I wish anyone would come and get me" (Wilson 43). Recurrent nightmares in children may cause not only considerable mental distress but may also be closely linked with psychopathological symptoms in children and adolescents, including emotional and behavioural issues (qtd. in Li et al.). Whenever Tracy dreams of water, or dreams of herself drowning, she ends up wetting her bed and refers to the enuresis as a 'night-time problem' and also seems to be ashamed of it (Wilson 56, 32). Research has shown a particularly heightened level of psychological problems in children who wet the bed (qtd. in Joinson et al.).

Coping is defined as the constantly evolving, dynamic cognitive and behavioural efforts taken by an individual in an attempt to manage certain demands which may be external or internal, and are considered as demanding or surpassing the individual's adaptive capacity (Folkman et al. 1993). Such coping methods employed by children or adolescents, contribute significantly to in their mental health and overall wellbeing (Abdelmageed et al.). In Wilson's novel, Tracy adopts a number of coping mechanisms as a means to deal with her particularly distressing emotions, thoughts, fears and insecurities. Distancing is one of the most common coping mechanisms that Tracy employs, and it describes the mental efforts taken by the individual to emotionally detach oneself from the matter of affliction (Folkman et al. 1995). There are several instances where Tracy downplays a situation and goes on as if nothing happened. At one point, Tracy practically pleads with Elaine to be her foster parent. When Elaine gently turns down the idea, Tracy immediately rebuffs her saying, "I was only joking ... I couldn't stand the thought of living with you" (Wilson 27). On another occasion, Louise, who used to be Tracy's best friend, cuts off their friendship after Tracy says something hurtful to Justine. Louise then becomes best friends with Justine. Here again, Tracy acts as if the incident didn't affect her at all and she

refuses to dwell on it saying, "I told myself I didn't care" (Wilson 95). Tracy, in this manner, copes by distancing herself from the problem and refusing to acknowledge its very existence. In this sense, it is possible to draw a parallel between Tracy's coping mechanism of distancing, and her defence strategy of repression as discussed earlier.

Mature defences are debatably identified as being more conscious and certainly more adaptive as coping mechanisms, with 'humour' and 'sublimation' particularly highlighted as the two most obvious mature defences that double over as coping mechanisms (Vaillant 47, 45). Throughout the book, we see innumerable instances where Tracy uses her humour, wit and cheeky attitude as a means of coping with stressful or hurtful situations. One such incident took place when one of Tracy's previous foster parents became pregnant, and Elaine tries to tell Tracy that the couple is no longer going to foster her. When Elaine opens and closes her mouth, finding it difficult to convey the sad news, Tracy immediately attempts to deflect by saying, "You look just like a fish when you do that, did you know?" (Wilson 46). Tracy admits to the reader that she acted dumb and responded in a cheeky manner "because my heart was starting to hammer hard against my chest and I knew that when Elaine eventually got the words out, I wouldn't like the sound of them" (Wilson 46). In this way, Tracy in one of her rare moments of open vulnerability, reveals how she uses her wit and feistiness as an armour to cope with the pain and hurt that she is often subjected to.

Sublimation is discussed as another mature defence or coping strategy which denotes the displacement that happens in a person's instinctive aim, in alignment with higher social values (Freud 52). This could also mean a sort of positive and adaptive reappraisal where the negative emotions and impulses of the individual go through a constructive transformation and they are inspired or driven to engage in something creative or productive (Folkman et al. 1996). In Tracy's case, she frankly

admits to the reader, "I like story-writing ... I've written heaps of stories and I do pictures for them too. I also like art" (Wilson 17). Wilson even projects all the illustrations depicted in the novel, as having been drawn by Tracy herself. At one point, Tracy also seriously considers becoming a writer when she grows up: "I reckon I could write books too" (Wilson 58). As the story progresses, it becomes evident to the reader that Tracy seems to have found a creative outlet for all her pent-up emotions and thoughts. She seems to visibly spill herself in words all over the pages as she puts everything into penning her autobiography, "The Story of Tracy Beaker".

The psyches of child characters in books are affected by the various experiences the children face as they grow up, and their interactions with the society around them.

Psychosocial Aspects of the Children in Foster Care

In *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, Jacqueline Wilson gives us an insight into the foster care system in England by portraying the life and experiences of Tracy as well as other child characters within the context of foster homes. A foster care facility refers to a 24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes, and this includes settings ranging from family foster homes to childcare institutions or children's homes (Racusin et al. 199). The principal objective of a foster care establishment is to provide children and adolescents a substitute family life on a short or long-term basis, enabling and providing the setting for them to thrive in a way similar to that of most children in their own families (Narey and Owers 69). There is a certain 'heterogeneity' about the children taken in by the system, as neither the children themselves nor their experiences are homogeneous, as is evident in Wilson's novel too (Racusin et al. 203).

Tracy and the other child characters in the novel such as Peter, Louise and Justine, are all of varying ages and they represent a broad

spectrum of foster care children with diverse backgrounds of adversity and disrupted attachment (Wilson 11). The central character Tracy is taken into foster care as a consequence of being neglected by her mother and abused by her mother's boyfriend. Wilson further gives us a brief history of a few other child characters in the novel, in order to convey how they became a part of the foster system. Peter is younger than Tracy, and he was taken into care after the death of his nan, who looked after him when he lost his parents (Wilson 53). It is quite clear that the incident has had a strong impact on him, as the loss of a parent or guardian tends to leave a damaging effect on a child, most commonly because of the level of attachment involved (Farrington 646). Foster children reportedly experienced separation pain that sometimes pervaded the entirety of their life as a consequence of losing their birth parents, and as in Tracy's case, another way in which children are introduced to the foster care system, is as a result of abuse or neglect (Nicoleau 46; Jones and Morris 130). Wilson tells us how Justine and her siblings were all put into different foster care facilities after her father failed to take care of them once his wife "cleared off with some bloke" (83). Like Tracy, in Justine's case too we see how children in foster care tend to feel neglected, guilty, anxious, and craving love after they have been removed from their parents or guardians (Nicoleau 39). Tracy speaks of how both she and Justine used to sit and wait for hours by the window of the children's home, hoping their parents would come for them (Wilson 83). Both the children are mentally and emotionally affected by the neglect and lack of care they are subjected to. Depressive disorders in adolescence have often been associated with factors such as conflict in family, lack of warmth in familial relationships, parental neglect or rejection, and past and co-occurring maltreatment or abuse (Graber 611).

A large majority of the children in care in England, and many of them who are fostered, are in these institutions because of the abuse or

neglect, they were subjected to (Narey and Owers 9). As the story progresses, we read that besides being physically abused by her mother's boyfriend, Tracy was also subjected to maltreatment after being put into foster care. Children living in foster or residential care constitute a group that is at high risk for maltreatment as studies show that the level of child harm and abuse taking place in foster care and children's homes are rather high (Hobbs et al.). Tracy speaks of how she used to be abused and maltreated in her first foster home, recalling an incident where she was locked up all day and night when she threw a fit because she missed her mother so much: "I was just little then but they still locked me up" (Wilson 23). Besides this, one of her previous foster mothers, Auntie Peggy, would also physically abuse her on many occasions: "her smacks really hurt...right on the back of your leg where it stings the most" (Wilson 22). Foster care children who have survived neglect or abuse, incurred adjustment difficulties including social, behavioural, and psychological problems (Jones and Morris 130). Auntie Peggy even makes an appearance in the nightmares that keep Tracy awake at night, resulting in a bad case of insomnia as well as frequent episodes of enuresis (Wilson 55). This is proof of the deep-seated emotional and psychological repercussions of trauma, indicating even towards the impossibility of recovery (Kidd 182).

Tracy develops a number of behavioural problems that can be connected to the neglect and abuse she was subjected to, both at home and in foster care. Maltreatment can lead to a variety of serious consequences, including both the internalisation as well as externalisation of problems where internalising refers to disturbances in an individual's emotion, mood or temperament, and externalising problems generally refers to character and behavioural dysregulations (Thornberry et al.; Graber 587). One of the major internalisation problems exhibited by Tracy in Wilson's novel, is the development of low self-esteem. When her

details are advertised in order that she be fostered by families, Tracy seems to have no hope as she says, "I'm not pretty ... so people won't take one look at my photo" (Wilson 119). Low self-esteem has been identified as a stable and enduring factor that makes adolescents vulnerable to the symptoms of depression (Masselink et al.). In this sense, it can be deduced that Tracy's internalisation of problems seems to have a detrimental impact on her identity formation as she adopts a negative perception about herself. As discussed previously, this may eventually give way to a tendency to focus on avoidance as a strategy to protect the self from any possible hurt or harm, through the development of destructive defence strategies (Masselink et al.). Foster children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to numerous high-risk behaviours and destructive coping strategies as a means to navigate personal problems (Nicoleau 29). Justine too in quite a few instances, seems to project her insecurities and fears on others in an attempt to protect herself from getting hurt. On one such occasion, we see Justine accusing Tracy's mother of never visiting her child, when in reality, Justine's father rarely comes to visit her. Studies have also shown that foster children who are visited regularly, tend to exhibit fewer problems of internalising behaviour (Nicoleau 46).

With regard to the externalisation of problems, Wilson clearly portrays how Tracy, as well as Justine, develops a range of behavioural issues of aggression. Several distinct kinds of aggression have been identified, including physical violence and verbal aggression (Farrington 630). We see Justine and Tracy picking fights with each other quite often, as they deliberately try to cause hurt by bringing up sensitive topics such as their neglectful parents. Another demonstrated long-term consequence of maltreatment is the heightened likelihood of causing harm to others (qtd. in Thornberry et al.). In the instances where the fights between Justine and Tracy turn physical, we observe that Tracy is always the one to strike

out first: "I hit her. And I kept on hitting her. And I don't care. I've made her nose bleed again. She's hurt me a bit too, but I don't care" (Wilson 134). Tracy also tells us how she gets "a bit hazy" when she fights and does not seem to be able to recall the event sometimes (Wilson 79). Empirical studies highlight how patterns of physiological and behavioural dysregulation are often seen in children with abusive backgrounds (Racusin et al. 210).

Tracy tells us that she has been in and out of care nearly all her life (Wilson 53). She speaks of how she had been put in two foster homes before she got "dumped in a rotten children's home" (Wilson 32). Besides having to go through traumatic experiences such as child maltreatment and neglect, children placed in foster systems often have to go through multiple different placements which makes it more likely for them to be affected by behavioural or adjustment problems (Jones and Morris 129). Tracy talks about Louise, another girl in the children's home, who used to be her best friend. We are told that Louise had had around three or four foster placements and none of them worked out (Wilson 75). Children who have gone through several placements, had a significantly higher occurrence of behavioural and emotional concerns that included feelings of unhappiness, anxiety, worry, and lower social adjustment (qtd. in Nicoleau 39). In a few instances, Tracy's words reflect a sense of feeling objectified and dehumanised as she had been assigned many social workers who kept leaving her behind, and she "got passed on like a parcel" (Wilson 45). At one point, a dejected Tracy asks her social worker Elaine, "how come no-one wants me?" (Wilson 26). At the same time, for a ten-year old, Tracy seems to be intelligently aware of the workings of the foster care system as she says, "I've gone past my sell-by date already. It gets hopeless when you get older than five or six. You've stopped being a cute little toddler and started to be difficult" (Wilson 119). A sense of despair can be detected in Tracy's statement as she seems to objectify

herself by comparing her situation to that of expired goods. When an old couple decides to foster Peter, Tracy is upset and jealous: "It's not fair. He's hardly been here any time. I've been here ages and ages and no-one ever wants to foster me" (Wilson 126). The inability for foster children and foster parents to develop a connection is often due to frequent placement changes, or because the foster parents have negative preconceived notions about foster youth (Nicoleau 38). In a similar occasion, we see that when Tracy's second foster parents Julie and Ted get pregnant, they decide to stop fostering Tracy as they feel that she may be a threat to their baby's safety (Wilson 48).

By portraying the life, experiences, and challenges faced by Tracy and other characters in the children's home, Wilson provides an insight into the mental health matters of children in foster homes, who succumb to frequent episodes of mental or emotional breakdowns. Tracy tells us, "Nearly all children in care have a roaring session once in a while. I have them more than once, actually. And I usually just let rip" (Wilson 80). The release of bottled-up thoughts and feelings can occur through involuntary yet cathartic acts such as crying as a means of ventilation of emotions, or through a more controlled and creative medium such as writing (Compas 276). Tracy, in Wilson's novel, finds a healthy coping mechanism in writing as she uses it as an outlet for the repressed emotions and pain of her past trauma. However, this may not be the case for every child as there is always a higher possibility of succumbing to more negative and destructive coping strategies.

In *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, Wilson takes us through the tumultuous experiences and identity formation of Tracy and the other foster children. The focus of the novel echoes research backed observations that a majority of adolescent fiction deals with how notions of the self and identity are constructed within specific contexts and shaped by larger social processes and societal structures (Rudd 141). In this sense,

family, peer groups, and other social and interpersonal relations come to play a crucial role in the growth and development of adolescents, particularly those in foster care. The significance of mental health in shaping the overall well-being and value of adolescent life has become more evident in recent years, making it a critical global issue (Anbarasu and Bhuvanewari 475). For this reason, it is important to study certain aspects of the relationships between different characters in Wilson's novel in order to understand how it influences their behaviour and perceptions. Adjustment difficulties in foster care children are not restricted to behavioural issues as it involves many specific aspects of peer deficits including the lack of friends, having much younger friends, possessing relationships that contain heightened levels of conflict and comparatively low levels of intimacy (Jones and Morris 133). Tracy's relationship with Justine can be taken as an ideal example of how adjustment problems among foster care children are reflected in peer groups. Although they start out as friends, Tracy and Justine's misdirected insecurities and personal fears become the destructive factor in their relationship, as it takes an aggressive turn. On the other hand, we see that Tracy finds a kindred spirit in the much younger Peter, as they become each other's companions at times of emotional distress. In one such instance when they were both suffering from nightmares at the same time, Tracy confesses to the reader saying, "I knew Peter wouldn't tease me so I huddled down beside him for a bit and when I felt him shivering, I put my arm around him and told him he was quite possibly my best friend ever" (Wilson 124). This points out how greater peer acceptance among young adolescents, is associated with being able to empathise and understand the feelings or thoughts of others like them (Graber 608).

Ultimately, foster children and adolescents predominantly want to experience the feeling that they too are part of a family,

because a family life that is grounded in strong, meaningful relationships provides these children with both stability as well as a sense of belonging (Narey and Owers 8). Similarly, in Wilson's novel, we see that one of the few things common between the heterogeneous group of foster children, is their earnest longing and constant search for a place, a family or a home that they could identify with. The quality of relational bonds assumes heightened significance with the amount of time that a child spends between multiple placements and longer years in foster systems (Jones and Morris 144). Right in the beginning of the book, Tracy reveals to the reader that she loves being with her mother, and she also dreams of buying a house for herself. Similar to the idea of mother and home, the concept of mother and family are recurrently associated in literature, and even though the 'family' in many of Wilson's novels such as *Lily Alone*, *Secrets and Best Friends*, are constructed as the deviant and socially transgressive 'other', the conventional ideal of the family continues to be very much apparent in her works (Alston 78, 64). In *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, the 'proper family' and home that Tracy yearns for, symbolises a space of love, a sense of belonging, identity or solace, and this may be the reason why homecomings are portrayed as a typical part of happy endings in many children's literature (Alston 73). Although Tracy begins her story by declaring: "I can't stand fairy tales" (Wilson 22), Wilson makes sure to end the novel on a note of hope as Tracy says, "This started like a fairy story. And it's going to finish like one too. Happily, Ever After" (Wilson 156).

CONCLUSION

This study, by focusing on Jacqueline Wilson's groundbreaking novel *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, has explored the psychoanalytic and psychosocial aspects of children in foster systems as portrayed in children's literature. The life, experiences and psychological well-being of a child under foster care systems come to be greatly influenced by numerous factors including their past experiences or trauma, and

prior as well as current relationships with their parents, foster caretakers, social workers, other children in the foster care facility, etc. We see Wilson exploring the theme of children in foster care in some of her other works too (*Lily Alone* and *The Dustbin Baby*, for example). While this study has used *The Story of Tracy Beaker* as a means to examine certain facets of the literary portrayal of children in foster care systems and the process of identity formation, there remains space for broader research. For example, the formation of sexual identity among youth in care, is one that is outside the scope of this study and is an underrepresented area in research. Looked at from a psychoanalytic perspective, the themes of gender and sexuality in children's literature have great research potential and studies in areas such as these can also become effective tools to create awareness.

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