

Shining Through the Hierarchy: Rachel Kim's Psychological Journey in *Shine* by Jessica Jung Through Maslow's Lens

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Abstract

This study explores Rachel Kim's psychological development in *Shine* by Jessica Jung through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Rachel's journey as a K-pop trainee illustrates the progression through Maslow's five levels—physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. The novel highlights how Rachel and her family struggle with financial stability, addressing her psychological and safety needs. As she navigates friendships, family expectations, and industry challenges, Rachel's love and belongingness needs come into focus. Her self-esteem is tested by public scrutiny and personal setbacks, but is ultimately restored through support from loved ones. The culmination of her journey is self-actualization, as she embraces her talent and achieves her dream of debuting as a K-pop idol. Through Rachel's character arc, *Shine* reflects the universal nature of human motivation, demonstrating how ambition, resilience, and emotional fulfillment shape an individual's growth. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the novel's themes, emphasizing the interplay between personal aspirations and psychological development in high-pressure environments.

Keywords: Character Analysis; K-pop Industry; Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; Psychological Development; Self-Actualization; Shine.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Shine* by Jessica Jung presents a compelling exploration of ambition, identity, and self-fulfillment through the protagonist, Rachel Kim. Set against the high-pressure world of the K-pop industry, the novel follows Rachel's relentless pursuit of her dreams amidst personal and professional struggles. At its core, *Shine* is a coming-of-age narrative and a psychological study of motivation and resilience. The challenges Rachel faces—from financial hardships and societal expectations to self-doubt and betrayal—offer a nuanced perspective on human needs and aspirations. By examining Rachel's journey through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this paper aims to uncover the psychological dimensions of her character development and the underlying forces shaping her decisions (Ahmadi, 2023; Nur et al., 2024).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, first introduced in *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943), outlines a five-tier model of human needs, beginning with physiological necessities and progressing to self-actualization. This theory has been widely applied to literature, psychology, and sociology, offering a framework for understanding how

individuals prioritize and fulfill their needs (Hoffmann et al., 2021; Hutagaol & Widyaningrum, 2023; Lubis & Satria, 2021). In *Shine*, Rachel's experiences closely align with these hierarchical stages, providing insight into how external pressures and internal desires influence personal growth. From securing basic survival needs in a financially unstable family to striving for self-actualization as a K-pop star, Rachel's journey exemplifies the complexities of ambition and personal fulfillment within a rigid, highly competitive industry.

Scholars and critics have long debated the psychological implications of fame and ambition, particularly in youth-oriented industries such as K-pop (Lee et al., 2020). Previous studies have highlighted the mental health challenges faced by idols due to extreme competition, unrealistic expectations, and strict industry regulations (Wahyuni et al., 2022). The discourse surrounding K-pop frequently touches on identity formation, self-worth, and the tension between personal desires and industry demands. Rachel's struggles resonate with these broader discussions, making her story a valuable case study for exploring how human needs manifest in high-stakes environments. Despite the novel's fictional nature, it mirrors real-world dilemmas faced by aspiring artists, emphasizing the universal nature of Maslow's framework.

This paper posits that Rachel's development in *Shine* can be effectively understood through Maslow's hierarchy, as each stage of her journey reflects a psychological milestone. The thesis of this study asserts that Rachel's progression from securing basic survival to achieving self-actualization is marked by recurring challenges that test her resilience and redefine her sense of identity. Her experiences with rejection, validation, and personal agency serve as critical moments that illustrate how hierarchical needs shape human behavior. This analysis will explore how Rachel navigates each level of Maslow's hierarchy, ultimately demonstrating the novel's deeper psychological and existential themes.

However, while existing studies on K-pop psychology have primarily focused on real-world idol experiences, fewer analyses have applied Maslow's framework to fictional industry representations. By examining *Shine* through this lens, this paper fills a gap in literary scholarship, providing a psychological reading of Rachel's journey that connects fiction with broader discourses on ambition, success, and self-realization. This study extends Maslow's theory beyond traditional contexts, demonstrating its applicability to contemporary narratives of fame and personal struggle.

Ultimately, this discussion contributes to a greater understanding of how literature reflects and critiques societal structures, particularly within youth-driven entertainment industries. By situating Rachel's story within the psychological paradigm of Maslow's hierarchy, this paper not only deepens the literary analysis of *Shine* but also offers insights into the broader implications of pursuing self-fulfillment in environments fraught with competition, scrutiny, and emotional sacrifice.

The researchers chose this novel because it comprises an interesting topic about how complex and competitive the lives of the trainees are before becoming an Idol, which can inspire the reader to work hard to achieve dreams. Not only that, according to Canfield (2019), in an article entitled *K-pop star Jessica Jung has written a YA novel. It's already being developed for the Screen Weekly Entertainment Website*, which states that the novel *Shine* by Jessica Jung has sold out in 11 foreign territories. This novel is also planned to be adapted into a movie that Matt Kaplan of ACE Entertainment will produce, the team behind the Netflix adaptation of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*.

This study analyzes the theory of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which the researcher found in the novel *Shine*, where the main character is Rachel Kim, who struggles to achieve her dreams. Maslow theorized that people have five classifications of needs. Some needs must be satisfied at each level before moving to the next level, and the corresponding needs must be satisfied. The Hierarchy of Needs consists of physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs (Pamungkiasari & Wajiran, 2024).

Some undergraduate theses use the same theories, Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, and a song by the same author. The first undergraduate thesis is based on Jessica Jung's work. Ganis Citra Yuningsih wrote a thesis in 2019 entitled "Figurative Language Used in Jessica Jung's First Mini Album." This study focuses on finding the kinds of figurative language used in the first mini-album by Jessica Jung, entitled "With Love J."

It examines the types of meaning of the metaphorical language used in the album. This research results in the researcher finding one apostrophe, two rhetorical questions, two metonymies, three metaphors, four similes, four hyperboles, four alliterations, five parallelisms, seven paradoxes, and twelve symbols. Also, the researcher found six out of seven kinds of meaning in the figurative language used in the album are one conceptual meaning, one social meaning, six thematic meanings, nine affective meanings, ten connotative meanings, and seventeen reflective meanings (Yuningsih, 2019).

The next is an undergraduate thesis with the same theory. Fitri Dwi Cahyani wrote an undergraduate thesis entitled “Hierarchy of Human Needs as Reflected in The Main Character of Melissa De La Cruz’s Something in Between: A Psychological Approach.” The researcher discusses the fulfillment of the Hierarchy of Needs from the basic to self-actualization in the novel *Something in Between* by Melissa De La Cruz. The researcher uses the qualitative and psychological approaches, specifically Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory. According to Abraham Maslow, the result of the research is that the main character, Jasmine, can fulfill all the stages of the hierarchy of human needs. The first stage is Jasmine does not have to struggle to have daily food, which fulfills psychological needs. Then in the second stage, Jasmine can fulfill her safety needs and does her best to make herself safe. Jasmine can also fulfill the third stage of belongingness and love needs by being loved by her boyfriend, friends, and family. The fourth stage is esteem needs. By recognizing from others that she is beautiful, smart, and inspiring, Jasmine can fulfill her esteem needs. The highest is self-actualization. At the end of the story, when Jasmine finally can attend the college the university she has been dreaming of and can stay in America, Jasmine finally achieves her self-actualization (Cahyani, 2021).

The next is Mega Andini, who in 2017 wrote a paper entitled “Hierarchy of Human Needs Through The Main Character in *Hitch* Film.” This study aims to analyze the hierarchy of human needs of the main character Hitch (Alex Hitchen) in *Hitch* film (Durou, 2020). This study shows that Hitch can fulfill all stages of human needs. In the first stage, Hitch can fulfill his dream well because he has a place to live and a satisfying job. The second stage is safety needs; by earning some money, Hitch did not have to worry about his finances. Next is love and belongingness; Hitch can fulfill these needs by getting love from his friends and his lover, Sara Melas. The fourth is esteem needs; Hitch gets achievement and a reputation from his job to fulfill his esteem needs. The last stage is self-actualization; Hitch can fulfill this by being a love consultant (Andini, 2017).

The following related studies take the same theory. Wilda Norma Yunita wrote a thesis in 2017 entitled “Hierarchy of Human Needs of Amir in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*.” This study discusses how the main character, Amir, displays the fulfillment of Abraham Maslow’s theory of human needs and identifies the most dominant needs of Amir. The result of this research is that Amir can fulfill all of the hierarchy of human needs, and in fulfilling his needs, Amir has other people to help him, especially his best friend, Hassan. The most dominant human need of Amir is safety needs. This is because Amir always tries to fulfill his safety needs, for example, when he is in Ali’s foyer (Yunita, 2017).

From the description above, the researcher tries to compare and see how to support the data from the other researcher. After reading the other research, I found that this research is similar to the other in that it uses the same theory as Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. The difference is the subject of the study. The main object of this study is the novel *Shine* by Jessica Jung. This indicates that this study is different from the previous one.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically using textual analysis to examine Jessica Jung’s *Shine* through the lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. As a literary analysis, this research does not rely on numerical data but focuses on interpreting textual elements, themes, and character development (Wajiran, 2024). The study explores how Rachel Kim’s journey reflects the stages of Maslow’s psychological framework, identifying key moments in the novel where her needs for survival, security, love, esteem, and self-actualization are fulfilled or challenged. By closely examining the protagonist’s experiences, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how Maslow’s theory applies to literary character development within the context of the K-pop

industry.

The theoretical framework guiding this research is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a widely recognized psychological theory that explains human motivation. Maslow (1943, 1970) proposes that individuals progress through five levels of needs, beginning with physiological survival and culminating in self-actualization (Hutagaol & Widyaningrum, 2023; Lubis & Satria, 2021; Maslow, 1943, 1970). This framework is particularly useful in literary studies for analyzing character motivations and psychological growth. Previous research has applied Maslow's theory to various fields, including psychology, education, and business, but its application in literary studies—especially in contemporary K-pop narratives—remains relatively unexplored. Using this framework, the study aims to provide a structured interpretation of Rachel Kim's personal and professional struggles, illustrating how her journey aligns with Maslow's model of human fulfillment.

This study's primary data collection method is close reading, where significant passages from *Shine* are carefully analyzed to identify moments that correspond to Maslow's hierarchy. Direct textual evidence, including character dialogues, internal monologues, and narrative descriptions, is examined to determine how Rachel's needs are addressed throughout the novel. The study categorizes Rachel's experiences into Maslow's five levels—physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization—providing textual support for each stage. Additionally, secondary sources, such as scholarly articles on Maslow's theory and psychological studies on K-pop idols, are referenced to contextualize Rachel's experiences within broader academic discussions.

The data analysis process involves thematic interpretation, wherein recurring motifs, character interactions, and pivotal plot points are evaluated to Maslow's theory (Krippendorff, 2018; Naeem et al., 2023). Each level of Maslow's hierarchy is examined separately to determine how Rachel progresses or regresses in fulfilling her needs. Special attention is given to conflicts and turning points that challenge her psychological growth, such as financial instability, social rejection, and career uncertainty. By mapping Rachel's development onto Maslow's framework, the study identifies patterns in her behavior that illustrate the psychological demands of the entertainment industry and the broader theme of self-discovery in the novel.

This methodology ensures a systematic and comprehensive approach to literary analysis, allowing for a clear and well-supported examination of Rachel Kim's psychological journey. By integrating textual analysis with Maslow's theoretical framework, this study bridges literary interpretation with psychological theory, offering new insights into the portrayal of ambition and self-fulfillment in contemporary fiction. Furthermore, by applying Maslow's model to a fictional character, this research highlights the relevance of psychological theories in understanding character development and narrative structures, contributing to interdisciplinary discussions in literature, psychology, and media studies (Ahmadi, 2023; Shahnaz, 2023).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Jessica Jung's *Shine* offers a captivating narrative centered on Rachel Kim, a young girl striving to make her mark in the competitive world of K-pop. As the protagonist navigates through fame, friendships, and personal aspirations, she also embarks on an internal journey of self-discovery. One of the most compelling frameworks through which Rachel's journey can be analyzed is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This psychological theory suggests individuals must fulfill a series of basic to complex needs, culminating in self-actualization. In this discussion, we explore how Rachel Kim's actions, motivations, and decisions align with the various levels of Maslow's hierarchy, offering a psychological lens through which her development can be better understood (Padua, 2010; van der Zalm et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2022).

At the foundation of Maslow's theory, human behavior is driven by fulfilling needs, starting with physiological necessities and progressing through safety, love, esteem, and finally, self-actualization (Maslow, 1943, 1970; Wajiran, 2013). For Rachel, these needs manifest in her personal and professional endeavors. From her initial quest to gain acceptance in the K-pop industry to her struggles for emotional security and recognition, each stage of her journey is marked by a need for validation, belonging, and eventual self-fulfillment. This psychological approach allows for an in-depth analysis of how Rachel navigates the entertainment industry's challenges while

also grappling with internal desires and personal growth.

By applying Maslow's framework to Rachel Kim's character arc, we understand how the pressures of fame and ambition influence her psychological development. Through her experiences, the novel highlights the universal nature of these needs, making Rachel's story relatable to readers despite its celebrity-driven backdrop. This discussion seeks to dissect her progression through each level of Maslow's hierarchy, from her pursuit of basic needs to her journey toward self-actualization, thereby offering a richer interpretation of her character and the broader themes of *Shine*.

3.1. Physiological Need

In the novel *Shine*, Rachel and her family move from America to South Korea. They move to Korea to support Rachel's dream of becoming a K-pop idol. After moving to Korea, Rachel's family does not have the same finances as before, so her family works twice as hard. In addition, Rachel and her trainee friend have a bad relationship, which complicates things.

Rachel's family finances are not in good condition; the gym run by her father is not as good as it used to be, and her mother is busy helping in the office. Both his parents worked very hard to make their finances better. In such conditions, luckily, they still have a place to live, an apartment.

“The first thing I hear when I enter our apartment is the sound of K-pop music, followed by Leah’s laughter and a group of giggling girls. I slide into my slippers and walk toward the living room, where Leah is sprawled on the floor with four other girls from the class, watching the newest Electric Flower music video on their phones.” (Jung, 2020, pp. 32–33).

Rachel and her family have a comfortable place to live together. This is related to the physiological or basic needs in Maslow's theory, which states that a person needs a place to shelter. By owning an apartment, Rachel can fulfill her physiological need for shelter.

3.2. Safety Need

Rachel's safety need is greatly shaken when she knows that being a trio with Jason and Mina is DB Entertainment's plan to promote Jason's solo debut song. If the public examines Jason's solo debut song, it is related to Jason's love story between Jason, Rachel, and Mina. What shakes Rachel's safety need is that the public will judge Rachel as the person who has hurt Jason and will not accept Rachel as a K-pop idol. Because of this situation, Rachel's need for a secure job became almost unfulfilled. However, at the end of the story, Rachel's potentially unsatisfied safety needs are fulfilled because, finally, Rachel can achieve her dreams of becoming a K-pop idol. It is shown in the quotation:

“This morning, I thought my career was over. Now I’m about to debut.” (Jung, 2020, p. 337).

Being a K-pop idol means Rachel has a secure job and does not have to worry about her future, so it can be concluded that Rachel can fulfill her safety needs.

3.3. Love and Belongingness Need

Rachel's trainee life did not go smoothly. Her family had to work twice as hard to return to their previous financial condition. Rachel was not treated well by her trainee friend, and her mother wanted Rachel to continue her studies, not just as a trainee. Sometimes, Rachel feels sad and guilty toward her family. Even while Rachel is at her father's gym, Rachel wonders if her father is happy with them moving to Korea because her father's gym business is not doing well right now. Rachel's father, who ran a gym business while taking law school to get their finances back, says the most important thing now is that he loves Rachel, Leah, and their mother more.

“I love this and Leah and Umma even more. But I love the gym; you three are important now, and becoming a lawyer will give us some financial stability.” (Jung, 2020, p. 28).

The third step in Maslow's theory of human need is the need for love and belonging—the feeling of being loved by others and giving love to others. Rachel, who worries about her father, is a form of giving her love to her father. From the quotation above, it can be seen that Rachel got love from her father. Even though his father's gym did not run smoothly after their move to Korea to support Rachel's dream, her father still gave Rachel love and affection. Her father had no problem with it at all. Rachel can also satisfy some of her needs for love and belongingness by giving and receiving love from her father.

3.4. Esteem Need

When Rachel's self-esteem was badly shaken, and she gave up on her dream of becoming a K-pop idol, her mother came to her and apologized for not supporting her dream for a long time. Now, her mother admits that Rachel is talented and good enough to become a K-pop idol. Because of that, Rachel's self-esteem needs slowly began to be met again.

“I was never good enough to make it. But you are. You have what it takes, Rachel. You always did.” (Jung, 2020, p. 326).

“I’m proud of you,” she says. ‘And Umma is sorry. Sorry that it took me so long.’ (Jung, 2020, p. 327).

Her mother, who at first disapproved of Rachel's dream that she wanted to become a K-pop idol, finally supported Rachel's dream. The pride that Rachel's mother conveyed to her could mean that Rachel was able to start fulfilling her esteem needs again. With the support of her mother, Rachel regained her self-confidence and continued to work hard to make her dreams come true. This is proven when Rachel debuts as a K-pop idol at the end of the story. It can be seen in the quotation:

“I am pleased to announce Rachel Kim as lead vocalist . . .” (Jung, 2020, p. 327).

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the public does not hate Rachel, which means that Rachel's talent and ability in singing and dancing are recognized by the public, even when she is a trio with Jason. With Rachel's debut as a member of Girls Forever as a lead vocalist, it can be concluded that Rachel is indeed a talented person and has enough ability to become a K-pop idol. Rachel debuted not only as a regular member but as a lead vocalist, which means that the executives of DB Entertainment recognized her singing ability.

3.5. Self-Actualization

After Rachel gets the chance to be a trio with Jason and Mina, Rachel is one step closer to her dream, and her self-actualization needs begin to be fulfilled. However, Rachel's self-actualization needs to be shaken when she finds out that she is being used by DB Entertainment to promote Jason's debut song. Rachel's self-actualization needs become almost unfulfilled, as seen when Rachel has given up on her dream of becoming a K-pop idol. It can be interpreted that Rachel has a life goal of becoming a K-pop idol, which she must debut to achieve her life goal. So, suppose Rachel gives up on her dream. In that case, it means that Rachel's self-actualization needs will not be met because people who are satisfied with their self-actualization needs are those who accept themselves. Rachel, who is surrendering to her dream, also shows that she is unsure of herself.

At the end of the story, Rachel's self-actualization needs are potentially unfulfilled because Rachel gave up her dream of becoming a K-pop idol. However, Rachel's confidence returns when she gets support from her mother, who says that Rachel is talented enough to become a K-pop idol. This is what makes Rachel's self-actualization need to begin to be fulfilled again, which can be seen when Rachel starts to convince herself that she deserves what she has worked so hard for.

“I’m not going to let anybody step on me today. Not when I’ve worked so hard to be here. Not when I’ve earned this. Not even the DB execs can take this away from me . . .” (Jung, 2020, p. 333).

From the quotation above, it can be seen that Rachel is convinced and believes that she deserves to debut as a K-pop idol. Rachel's self-actualization needs to begin to be fulfilled, as Rachel bravely faces problems in a trio project with Jason and Mina, and she will not allow anyone to stop her from becoming a K-pop idol. Eventually, Rachel debuted as a lead vocalist at Girls Forever. Rachel's self-actualization needs are satisfied with achieving her dream of becoming a K-pop idol. Rachel's hard work has finally paid off.

“This is my time to shine.” (Jung, 2020, p. 344).

After Rachel's debut as a member of Girls Forever, it is time for Rachel to show that she was born to shine as a K-pop idol, which means Rachel is a singer who is meant to sing. As in Maslow's theory, which states that a painter must paint and a poet must write (Maslow, 1943, 1970). This means that Rachel is a singer who must sing.

As the conclusion of the discussion, the difference of this research lies in its unique subject matter and analytical depth compared to previous studies applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. While earlier research, such as Yuningsih (2019), focuses on figurative language in Jessica Jung's *With Love J* album, this study shifts focus entirely to a psychological character analysis in her novel *Shine*, offering a literary and theoretical exploration rather than a linguistic one. Compared to Andini (2017), Cahyani (2021), and Yunita (2017), who also applied Maslow's theory to analyze character development in other literary and cinematic works, this study distinguishes itself by examining a contemporary K-pop, themed novel authored by a real-life industry insider, providing a rare blend of fiction grounded in authentic cultural experience. Unlike the earlier studies, which primarily describe how characters fulfill each level of the hierarchy, this research offers a more nuanced and critical reading by emphasizing non-linear psychological progression, emotional setbacks, and the impact of industry manipulation on personal growth. Moreover, this study incorporates broader contextual insights into the pressures of the K-pop industry, thus expanding the application of Maslow's theory into modern entertainment culture, a perspective not fully explored in the research mentioned above.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Rachel Kim's journey in *Shine* vividly reflects the complex and layered structure of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, highlighting her emotional and psychological evolution amid the high-stakes demands of the K-pop industry. From securing basic physiological needs to ultimately achieving self-actualization, Rachel's progression mirrors human motivation's hierarchical nature while revealing the non-linear and often disrupted pathways to psychological fulfillment. The novel portrays her struggles for safety, acceptance, self-worth, and identity in a competitive and image-conscious environment, and her ability to overcome setbacks through resilience, familial love, and self-belief illustrates the universal relevance of Maslow's theory in modern literary narratives. What distinguishes this research from previous studies is its application of Maslow's framework to a novel authored by a former K-pop idol, providing a rare insider-informed literary perspective grounded in realistic industry experiences. Unlike other studies that merely catalog fulfillment of needs, this analysis offers a deeper exploration of Rachel's psychological challenges, setbacks, and growth within a highly commercialized and emotionally taxing field. For future research, it is recommended that additional psychological theories, such as Erikson's psychosocial development or Bandura's self-efficacy, be applied to similar contemporary works. Cross-cultural comparisons or longitudinal studies on character development in serialized young adult fiction could offer new insights into how literature reflects youth identity formation in diverse societal contexts.

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