

Analyzing Zuko's Redemption Arc in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* Through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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Submission Track:

Received: 23-09-2025, Final Revision: 24-11-2025, Available Online: 01-12-2025

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ABSTRACT

Character development in fiction often mirrors fundamental psychological struggles, making it a compelling area for analysis. Although previous studies have explored *Avatar: The Last Airbender* from literary and cultural viewpoints, there has been limited focus on Zuko's redemption arc through the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This study aims to analyze Zuko's transformation from conflict to redemption, exploring not only Maslow's stages of physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization but also the impact of sociocultural influences and family pressures on his development. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered from selected episodes of the series and analyzed through Maslow's framework, supplemented by triangulation of theories to enhance the understanding of Zuko's character. The findings indicate that Zuko's journey through the hierarchy reflects both his internal conflicts and the evolving dynamics of his relationships, particularly with his father and Uncle Iroh, which play pivotal roles in his transformation. This study highlights how the fulfillment of human needs, alongside external sociocultural factors, shapes a character's redemption arc, thereby fostering a deeper dialogue between psychology and narrative studies.

Keywords: *redemption arc, character development, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, psychology, narrative studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Character development is a critical aspect of storytelling, particularly in animated series, where it serves not only as the driving force behind plot progression but also as the cornerstone for emotional engagement. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, a series renowned for its intricate narrative and multifaceted characters, offers a unique opportunity to examine

character growth, particularly through the lens of Zuko's redemption arc. Zuko's journey, which transitions him from a morally conflicted antagonist to a heroic figure, provides a profound and multi-layered narrative for understanding psychological and emotional development (Bennett & Royle, 2016). His transformation resonates universally, addressing themes of self-discovery, moral conflict, and redemption issues that are fundamental to the human experience. Zuko's character, therefore, serves as an ideal subject for psychological analysis, especially when viewed through the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological model that conceptualizes human development as a progression driven by the fulfillment of essential needs (Perlin & Fivush, 2021).

The concept of redemption arcs in literature and media has garnered significant attention, yet there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the application of Maslow's theory to the psychological development of fictional characters like Zuko. While much of the existing research on *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has focused on literary, cultural, and sociological analyses, fewer studies have explored Zuko's character transformation through psychological frameworks, particularly Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This study addresses this gap by offering a psychological analysis of Zuko's redemption arc, exploring how his journey aligns with the stages outlined in Maslow's theory from basic survival needs to the higher-level fulfillment of self-actualization.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs offers a structured approach to understanding human motivation, suggesting that individuals must first meet basic physiological needs before progressing through safety, love and belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). This hierarchical model provides a useful framework for analyzing Zuko's character arc, as it mirrors his psychological growth, with each stage of development reflecting his increasing ability to meet these needs. Zuko's journey, from a desperate survivalist focused on external validation to a hero who embraces self-actualization, illustrates the broader principles of Maslow's model. However, Zuko's psychological journey cannot be fully understood solely through Maslow's stages. Internal motivation, while crucial, is not the only factor at play; external influences such as sociocultural pressures

within the Fire Nation and the expectations placed upon him by his family are pivotal in shaping his psychological struggles. His transformation is not only the result of internal needs being fulfilled but also shaped by the intense external forces surrounding him. By integrating Maslow's theory with the external sociocultural dynamics surrounding Zuko, this study provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of his redemption journey.

The Fire Nation's hierarchical societal structure and Zuko's complicated relationship with his father, Fire Lord Ozai, and his more supportive uncle, Iroh, significantly influence his transformation. These familial and sociocultural dynamics are intertwined with Zuko's internal psychological conflicts, guiding his path toward self-actualization. For instance, Zuko's relationship with his father, characterized by emotional neglect and abusive authority, challenges his self-esteem and safety needs, while his bond with Uncle Iroh fosters a sense of love and belonging. These relationships serve as critical junctures in Zuko's journey, underscoring the notion that his redemption is shaped not only by his personal struggles but also by his interactions within broader cultural and familial contexts. Therefore, this study explores the intersection of psychological and sociocultural factors in Zuko's development, offering a more comprehensive analysis of his transformation.

The significance of this study lies in its integration of psychological theory with narrative analysis, bridging the gap between psychological research and media studies. Maslow's theory has been widely applied in educational and clinical settings to understand human motivation and behavior (Bland & DeRobertis, 2017), but its application to fictional characters, particularly in animated media, has been largely underexplored. By examining Zuko's redemption arc, this research contributes new insights into how psychological needs drive character transformation in popular media. Additionally, it highlights the complexities of redemption arcs in animation, emphasizing that these narratives are multifaceted processes, involving both internal psychological growth and the impact of external sociocultural forces.

At the core of this study lies Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which provides a useful framework for analyzing Zuko's psychological development. According to Maslow (1970),

individuals must address their lower-level needs, such as physiological needs and safety, before progressing to higher levels like love and belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization. This model is particularly helpful for understanding Zuko's character as his journey progresses through these stages. Initially, Zuko is focused on survival and acceptance, gradually learning to address deeper emotional and psychological needs, ultimately reaching self-actualization. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations of Maslow's theory when applied to non-Western cultural contexts, such as those presented in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

Maslow's model is rooted in Western values that emphasize individualism, personal achievement, and self-fulfillment (King-hill, 2015). In contrast, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is deeply influenced by Eastern philosophies, particularly Confucianism, which emphasizes balance, harmony, and the collective good (Wu, 2012). These Eastern values prioritize interconnectedness and moral equilibrium over individualistic pursuits, presenting a challenge when applying Maslow's theory to Zuko's character development. While Maslow's hierarchy remains a valuable tool for understanding psychological transformation, it must be viewed through a cultural lens that acknowledges the significance of social harmony and interdependence values that are essential in Zuko's world.

To address these limitations, this study integrates Confucian ethics and cultural positioning into the analysis. Confucianism's emphasis on relationships, social harmony, and collective well-being offers a more nuanced perspective on needs fulfillment, focusing on interdependence rather than individual independence. By combining Western psychological concepts with Eastern philosophical ideals, this study provides a more culturally sensitive interpretation of Zuko's character development, recognizing the importance of cultural context in shaping his psychological growth.

Additionally, this study incorporates Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Ghaleb, 2024), which emphasizes the importance of environmental contexts in shaping human growth. This model suggests that individual development is influenced not only by internal psychological factors but also by the social, cultural, and familial systems in

which an individual is embedded. Bronfenbrenner's model complements the sociocultural pressures Zuko faces, particularly through his interactions with key figures such as his father, Uncle Iroh, and the broader social structure of the Fire Nation. By applying this model, the study contextualizes Zuko's psychological development, highlighting how his transformation is shaped by both internal struggles and external forces.

While previous research has applied Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to analyze character development in various fictional contexts, few studies have focused on *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Noti and Murtiningrum (2025) applied Maslow's theory to analyze Peter Parker's character in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, and Hartawan and Sriastuti (2025) explored Lady Christian Nimmo's psychological growth in *The Maiden*. However, these studies fail to address the unique complexities of Zuko's redemption arc, which involves both psychological growth and significant cultural and familial influences. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a detailed analysis of Zuko's character arc, using Maslow's theory as the primary analytical framework while considering the influence of sociocultural factors.

This study has three main objectives. First, it analyzes how Zuko's redemption arc aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, focusing on both his internal psychological struggles and the external sociocultural influences that shape his character. Second, the study explores how Zuko's emotional and psychological growth unfolds throughout the series, ultimately leading to self-actualization, and how this growth is influenced by his familial relationships and cultural expectations. Finally, the study provides a deeper understanding of how the fulfillment of psychological needs, combined with sociocultural pressures, drives Zuko's transformation, contributing to the broader conversation between psychology and narrative studies. Through these objectives, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of Zuko's character development, highlighting the interaction between personal growth and external forces at play in his redemption.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore character development in-depth, following Creswell's (2017) framework. The primary aim was to analyze Zuko's

character journey in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, with particular focus on his emotional and moral growth. The research examined how Zuko's character arc aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological theory suggesting that individuals must fulfill various levels of needs from basic physiological requirements to self-actualization before achieving personal growth. By analyzing Zuko's redemption arc through this framework, the study explored how the fulfillment of psychological needs influenced his transformation over the course of the series.

In qualitative research, the data collection process is crucial for ensuring that relevant and comprehensive information is gathered (Aguinis et al., 2021). For this study, data were drawn from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, an animated series created by Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko, Aaron Ehasz, Tim Hendrick, and Nick Malis, and its official script. These sources provided the foundation for examining Zuko's character development and understanding his evolving identity throughout the series.

The data collection process involved two primary methods: observation and documentation. First, this research carefully watched each episode of the series, identifying key scenes and moments that highlighted Zuko's character transformation. As Zuko's journey progressed, these scenes illustrated his psychological development as he navigated various emotional and moral challenges. In addition to watching the episodes, this research analyzed the official script in detail. It was read multiple times to capture key dialogues, narrative structures, and descriptive elements related to Zuko's inner conflicts. The repeated engagement with the material ensured that all important aspects of Zuko's development were captured for analysis.

Furthermore, this research employed a recording technique, transcribing relevant parts of the script and noting key scenes, prologues, and dialogues integral to the analysis. This process allowed for clear references to be categorized and interpreted in alignment with the study's focus. By combining observation of the series with documentation of key text elements, this research ensured a comprehensive and robust foundation for subsequent analysis.

The data analysis process in this study was structured and systematic, designed to uncover the relationship between Zuko's psychological needs and his redemption arc. The analysis was broken down into several steps to examine Zuko's character development and align it with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

First, this research reviewed the collected data scenes, dialogues, and actions to identify moments where Zuko made efforts to fulfill his psychological needs. These moments were categorized into Maslow's five levels: physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. This categorization helped this research organize Zuko's journey across these levels, illustrating how his actions and emotional development reflected his progression through each stage of Maslow's hierarchy.

After categorizing the data, this research focused on identifying key turning points in Zuko's redemption arc. These moments represented Zuko's internal struggles and growth, such as guilt, reconciliation, and self-discovery. By tracing these turning points, this research mapped the psychological and emotional shifts that shaped Zuko's transformation. These turning points served as key milestones, helping this research understand how Zuko's evolving psychological needs influenced his character development.

Each scene was then coded based on significant emotional and moral milestones in Zuko's arc. These milestones marked key moments of change in his character, from his early struggles with self-worth to his eventual moral redemption. The coding process provided this research with a granular understanding of Zuko's transformation, mapping specific events that marked his progress, such as moments of self-doubt, moral conflict, and reconciliation with others. This coding system helped this research capture the nuances of Zuko's character journey and organize the data in a way that facilitated deeper interpretation.

Finally, the coded data were analyzed to uncover the relationship between the fulfillment of Zuko's psychological needs and his moral and emotional progress. By interpreting these coded moments, this research sought to understand how meeting Zuko's psychological needs influenced his behavior and decisions. This analysis also allowed the

study to conclude how Zuko's redemption arc mirrored Maslow's framework, particularly his journey toward self-actualization, the final and highest level of need in Maslow's theory. Through this lens, this research demonstrated that Zuko's internal growth, rooted in the fulfillment of his psychological needs, drove his moral transformation.

The data analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of Zuko's character development and its alignment with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Through categorization, coding, and interpretation of key scenes, this research traced Zuko's emotional and moral transformation as he navigated the fulfillment of his psychological needs. The findings highlighted how Zuko's redemption arc mirrored the process of self-actualization, revealing the dynamic interplay between psychological motivation and personal growth.

DISCUSSION

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological framework consisting of five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Jauhari & Karyono, 2022). Each level represents a stage of human motivation that must be fulfilled to achieve higher forms of psychological satisfaction (Aguinis et al., 2021). In this study, the findings are presented by linking these five levels of needs to the character development of Zuko in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Zuko's journey from an antagonist plagued by inner conflict to an individual who ultimately achieves redemption can be traced through the gradual fulfillment of these needs. By analyzing Zuko's actions, dialogue, and turning points throughout the series, this section explains how each stage of Maslow's hierarchy contributes to shaping his character's arc of redemption.

Psychological Needs

Physiological needs are the first level in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory and form the main foundation for human survival. These needs include basic elements such as air to breathe, food and drink, shelter, sleep, and physical protection (Montag et al., 2020). In this study, the character Zuko is analyzed through the framework of physiological needs to observe how he fulfills his basic needs, as can be seen in the narrative below.

The scene shows back on Zuko's ship. Iroh enters Zuko's room. (00:06:55 – 00:07:01 — Episode 18, Book 1)

After being exiled for opposing his father, Zuko lived on the Fire Nation ship during the expedition to capture the Avatar as a way to restore his honor. The ship became his home and primary means of transportation, providing basic shelter even though it was far from the palace. This shows his determination to regain his father's acceptance, even at the cost of leaving his "home". Fulfilling shelter needs even when "far from home" is very important because it is one of the basic necessities for survival, which is in line with Andika's (2024) opinion in his research. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the ship fulfilled Zuko's physiological need for shelter, which also provided safety and security, showing how basic needs and safety overlap in supporting his journey. Just like a house, the ship that Zuko lives on provides various facilities as mentioned in the narrative above, one of which is a room for resting. In addition, Zuko also fulfills his basic needs, such as eating and drinking, which are provided in his dwelling as described in the following narrative.

When the servant turns around, the scene fades to inside Zuko's ship, where the servant is serving the cooked fish at the table of Zuko and Iroh. (00:07:09 – 00:07:20 — Episode 4, Book 1)

One of the main elements of physiological needs is the fulfillment of daily nutritional requirements in the form of food, as the human body needs energy to survive and function optimally (M.P. & B.W., 2021). In the narration above show a scene is depicted where Zuko and Iroh are enjoying their meal. In this context, food is not merely a biological activity but also a representation of the fulfillment of a very essential basic need. When the character Zuko is depicted eating, it indicates that he is still in the survival phase, where his primary priority is to maintain physical survival. Providing food in times of crisis or distress is extremely important, and this is supported by Lubis and Satria (2021) in their research.

Safety Needs

Once physiological needs are met, individuals are driven to fulfill the next level of needs, namely the need for safety. This need encompasses aspects such as security, stability,

dependence, protection, and freedom from fear, anxiety, and chaos. Individuals also begin to desire structure, order, rules, boundaries, and strong protective figures (Maslow, 1954 as cited in Citra et al., 2020). Although not as intense as physiological needs, the drive to fulfill the need for safety still plays an important role in the development of human motivation. In Zuko's character, his need for safety is often disrupted due to the circumstances he experiences. However, this is not a big problem for Zuko, and he is still able to fulfill his need for safety even in unsafe situations. This is illustrated in the following narrative.

The scene cut to the interior of the ship, where Iroh is confronting Zuko disguised as a Fire Nation soldier. Zuko is forced to wear the disguise to keep the secret from Zhao that he survived an attempted assassination. (00:04:57 - 00:05:00 — Episode 19, Book 1)

As part of Zuko's self-protection strategies to fulfill his need for safety is to hide his true identity. For someone like Zuko, whose life is filled with adventures and battles, and who bears the throne as prince of the Fire Nation while being hunted by various parties, both external enemies and internal forces within his own country, Zuko's identity becomes a crucial aspect. It is also mentioned in Muflikhah & Oemiati's (2024) research that, psychologically speaking, it can be proven that to achieve a certain desire, a person is willing to do anything, including changing or concealing their identity. In the narration above, it is revealed that Zuko came to see Iroh after he had just experienced an incident masterminded by Zhao. Zhao's forces attempted to kill Zuko by blowing up the ship he was on while he was alone and resting. The massive explosion led everyone to assume that Zuko had died as a victim. In reality, Zuko survived, and this was known only by Iroh, who was at the time negotiating with Zhao. Iroh's loyalty to Zuko helped Zuko continue his mission to capture the Avatar without having to confront Zhao. This is why Zuko had to conceal his identity temporarily, because if Zhao's men knew he was still alive, he would face an even more intense threat and psychological pressure.

As explained earlier, due to his circumstances, Zuko often faces challenges that not only threaten his physical safety but also affect him psychologically. In the series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Zuko, who is on a mission to hunt down the Avatar, is not always portrayed as a prince who, despite being exiled, is still treated as someone who deserves respect for his

throne. In fact, the fire nation where Zuko comes from is also becoming a threat, forcing Zuko to abandon his throne and live as a commoner so that he is not disturbed by his father's cronies. Therefore, in order to maintain stability in his drastically changed life, Zuko, accompanied by his uncle Iroh, starts a new life and finds stability by working in a tea shop, as described in the following narrative.

Pao pours some tea in two cups, hands them to his new employees, and heads to the back of the shop. The scene cut to view of Iroh and Zuko. (00:06:06 – 00:06:20 — Episode 14, Book 2)

Having a job and financial stability helps fulfill the need for security by providing structure, safety, and reliability in daily life. Maslow points out that safety is not only about protection from physical threats, but also about stability in normal circumstances. He also states that the need for safety can be observed through phenomena such as a general preference for jobs with guaranteed stability, the desire to have savings, and various forms of insurance protection, such as health, dental, unemployment, disability, and pension insurance (Hopper, 2025) This new experience, such as having a job and changing life conditions for Zuko, also became one of the points where Zuko's psychological state changed.

Love and Belonging Needs

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the stages of love and affection arise after the two previous stages of needs have been fulfilled. This needs is only natural that individuals begin to long for the presence of those around them, such as friends, family, partners, and social groups (Noor Latifah et al., 2019). In Zuko's character, the love and belonging need emerges as one of the main drives in his narrative arc. This indicates that Zuko's redemption journey reflects not only his search for identity but also his attempt to mend the emotional gap from his fractured bond with his father. His longing for love and acceptance consistently shapes his decisions, often pushing him to risk his safety either to win his father's approval or to protect those he cares about.

In the series, Zuko is portrayed as someone who lost his parents when he was a child. His mother left Zuko when he was very young because she wanted to protect him from Ozai.

Meanwhile, Ozai had always underestimated his eldest son and constantly compared Zuko to Zuko's younger sister, Azula. This is what caused Zuko to lose the love of the person who should have given him the most love of all. Eventually, this void in his need for love and acceptance from his father would cause Zuko to become a harsh person, trapped in desires that would ultimately ensnare him. In Putu's (2025) research, a similar phenomenon was found, whereby when a character or person is unable to fulfill their need for affection and acceptance from someone who is expected to be the source of that fulfillment, it will result in feelings of worthlessness, unlovability, and inadequacy becoming very real psychological consequences.

Uniquely, despite losing his father's love and acceptance, which shaped Zuko's character as an antagonist at the beginning of the series, Zuko's need for love and acceptance also led him to undergo a major change and reach a point of redemption. One of the characters who played a major role in this was his uncle, Iroh. Iroh was sent to accompany Zuko on his journey to capture the Avatar. However, Uncle Iroh's presence in Zuko's expedition was not only to accompany him physically, but also to accompany his nephew's character transformation. It began with Iroh showing his sincerity to Zuko by treating him like his own son, as described in the following narrative.

Zuko: I don't need your wisdom right now, Uncle.

Iroh: I'm sorry. I just nag you, because ... well,..ever since I lost my son ...

Zuko: Uncle, you don't have to say it.

Iroh: ... I think of you as my own.

Zuko: Faces his uncle, a softer expression on his face. I know, Uncle. We'll meet again.

Iroh hugs him. After I have the Avatar. (00:13:08 – 00:13:32 — Episode 19, Book 1)

Iroh's statement that he considers Zuko his own son highlights the fulfillment of Zuko's need for love and belonging. The line, "I consider you my own son," is a crucial emotional moment, showing that the void can still be filled. Influenced by his sadness over the loss of a child, Iroh consistently acts as the father figure Zuko needs, embodying Maslow's concept of love and belonging through his guidance and care. Later, it was Iroh who helped Zuko find his true self. Iroh himself was actually strongly opposed to the war started by Ozai, which is

why he wanted to protect Zuko from its influence, hoping that Zuko could become the catalyst for change in the Fire Nation and restore peace.

After a long adventure and a pursuit that even Zuko himself did not know where it would end, Zuko finally reached a point where he realized that something was wrong with what he was experiencing. Especially when Iroh managed to make Zuko realize that what his father had done and the influence he had passed on to Zuko was wrong. From this point, coupled with the impact of all his experiences during his adventures, Zuko finally understood that his desire to be respected by his father was an empty promise that only benefited his father in gaining more power and creating even more chaos.

Later on, at the close of the series, and after Zuko experiences his redemption, there will be a narrative where Zuko declares that he will join the Avatar team and fight his father. This narrative will be explained and categorized as the fulfillment of the need for esteem. However, the narrative when Avatar Aang finally accepts Zuko is the point of fulfillment of the need for love and acceptance.

Aang: I think you are supposed to be my firebending teacher. When I first tried to learn firebending, I burned Katara, and after that, I never wanted to firebend again. But now I know you understand how easy it is to hurt the people you love. I'd like you to teach me (bows before Zuko.)

Zuko: (Bows) Thank you. I'm so happy you've accepted me into your group. (00:20:43 – 00:21:08 — Episode 12, Book 3)

In this moment, however, he is no longer a threat to Avatar but someone asking to be accepted, marking the culmination of his redemption. This transformation reflects how his long journey and struggles gradually align with the fulfillment of his psychological needs.

Esteem Needs

A further level of need is also classified as a psychological need, which is the need for self-esteem. Maslow divides this need into two main parts, the first being self-esteem (internal), which includes self-confidence, achievement, independence, and the feeling of being able to cope with the world. The second part is esteem from others (external), which includes recognition, status, honor, and social appreciation (Kuranchie-Mensah & Kwesi

Amponsah-Tawiah, 2015). Fulfilling these needs enables individuals to feel useful, competent, and valued.

As the prince of the Fire Nation, Zuko already had external recognition through his royal status, but his deepest desire was recognition from his father. As Zuko's story in the series unfolds, it becomes clear that behind the honor he touts, what he is really seeking is love and acceptance. Self-esteem only becomes important after he learns to accept himself and gains support from others. Therefore, self-esteem in Zuko's redemption arc emerges after his social and emotional needs are met, demonstrating his layered character development. As described in the narrative below, when Zuko finally realized that what he had been seeking from his father was not something he would ever get, but mere nonsense, Zuko finally declared his opinion and stood up to fight his father.

Zuko: For so long, all I wanted was for you to love me, to accept me. I thought it was my honor I wanted, but really, I was just trying to please you. You, my father, who banished me just for talking out of turn. (00:10:14 – 00:10:28 — Episode 11, Book 3)

Zuko's courage to confront his father and reveal the truth that had blinded him marked an important moment in the formation of his self-esteem. Initially, he equated self-esteem with his father's recognition, reflecting Maslow's idea that in some cases, the need for recognition can override the need for love. This belief drove Zuko to pursue honor and recognition as a substitute for affection, often resorting to aggression as a shortcut to gaining acceptance. However, in reality, the recognition he achieved also contained a partial fulfillment of love and belonging, albeit unconsciously. Zuko's wounded self-esteem, stemming from the loss of his mother's love and his father's rejection, made him long to restore what had been taken from him. However, in this confrontation, he finally realized that true love does not come from blind obedience, but from self-acceptance. By rejecting Ozai's misguided authority, Zuko freed himself from the false assumption that self-esteem depends entirely on external validation. Instead, he built respect for himself from within, through honesty, courage, and the choice to follow what was right, even if it was painful. This transformation shows that Zuko's redemption did not lie in regaining his father's approval,

but in rebuilding his own sense of worth, a shift that perfected his journey toward self-actualization. This is in line with Maskhur's (2023) finding in his research and states that the fulfillment of self-esteem by breaking free from the pressure that constrained the individual has shown their courage to do what is considered right.

After successfully achieving self-esteem, Zuko also received valuable recognition from his uncle for everything he had gone through. As Maslow explained, what Iroh did for Zuko was the fulfillment of external needs, as described in the following narrative.

Iroh: No. Someone new must take the throne. An idealist with a pure heart and unquestionable honor. It has to be you, Prince Zuko.

Zuko: Unquestionable honor? But I've made so many mistakes.

Iroh: Yes, you have. You have struggled; you've suffered, but you have always followed your own path. You restored your own honor, and only you can restore the honor of the Fire Nation. (00:18:40 - 00:19:11— Episode 19, Book 3)

After witnessing the ups and downs of Zuko's life, Iroh bestows upon him the recognition he deserves, thereby fulfilling Zuko's need for external self-esteem. The healthiest and most stable form of self-esteem is derived from legitimate recognition by others, based on real achievements and personal responsibility (Julien, 2025). This aligns with what Iroh said to Zuko, especially when he remarked, "*You've struggled; you've suffered, but you have always followed your own path. You restored your own honor, and only you can restore the honor of the Fire Nation.*" In that scene, Zuko has joined the Avatar team and reunited with his uncle Iroh after they had been separated. This shows that Iroh's statement was not merely praise but had a deeper meaning. Especially when he emphasizes that Zuko has finally found his own path and freed himself from the chains of his desire to return to his father's side. This is supported by Yunandi's (2020) findings in his research, where he also emphasizes that validation from others is very important for building a person's self-confidence and psychological development. Zuko has successfully decided what he wants and become a better person, which is why Iroh places his trust in Zuko as the worthy successor to Ozai as the next Fire Lord and to end all the wars between the nations.

Self-actualization Needs

The final level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid is self-actualization. When individuals reach this level, they use these values as a basis for determining what is right and how they respond to the world around them (Kaufman, 2018). In Zuko's character, self-actualization is clearly seen in his long journey to find his true self, overcome his fears, and achieve inner peace. This process is reflected. The driving factor for Zuko to achieve self-actualization lies in the fulfillment of his need for love and belonging, which he desperately seeks from his father, Ozai. However, it is Zuko's change in perspective on these needs that leads him to redemption and self-actualization, as in the following narrative.

Zuko: But I've come to an even more important decision. I'm going to join the Avatar, and I'm going to help him defeat you. (00:14:30 – 00:14:39 — Episode 11, Book 3)

The dialogue above shows when Zuko makes an important declaration after he opposes Ozai's ideology. This moment represents the most decisive turning point in Zuko's character development. By choosing to ally himself with the Avatar, who was previously his sworn enemy, while openly defying his father, Zuko shows that he has reached a stage of self-actualization. At this point, he has freed himself from the pursuit of honor and the need for his father's approval, and instead embraces the values he has discovered through his own journey. His decision to join the Avatar in fighting for peace directly contradicts the ideology of the Fire Nation, but it signifies his transformation into someone guided by justice, reconciliation, and redemption.

The journey to reach redemption and fulfill his needs until he succeeded in fulfilling his highest need, self-actualization, certainly bore sweet fruit. After rebelling against his father's misguided authority, and learning to accept himself. This aligns with Murtiningrum's (2025) explanation, which summarizes Maslow's ideas by stating that an actualized individual is someone who lives to be themselves, creates, loves, and makes a positive impact in their life. At the end of the story, Zuko and Avatar Aang ally for world peace. During this phase, Zuko also gains a new title, not as a prince but as the next Fire Lord, succeeding his father, Ozai.

Fire Sage: Puts the Fire Lord headpiece into Zuko's top knot. All hail Fire Lord Zuko! Everyone cheers again. Zuko rises. (00:20:17 – 00:20:25 — Episode 2, Book 3)

This narrative is the final scene and also the climax of Zuko's journey toward self-actualization. In this scene, Zuko is crowned Fire Lord, replacing Ozai. His new title is not only a symbol of political power and social status, but also a reflection of his character development, showing his growth from insecurity and inner conflict to maturity, integrity, and responsibility. This achievement illustrates self-actualization, as Zuko represents authenticity, autonomy in choosing his path, and the fulfillment of his potential. He no longer lives under the shadow of others' expectations, but accepts his destiny as a conscious decision in line with his true self.

Zuko's new achievement is also a manifestation of his potential being used optimally with clear and correct goals, allowing Zuko to achieve his best version of himself with the title of Fire Lord. This is in line with Maslow's concept of self-actualization, which states that individuals are considered to have achieved self-actualization when they no longer live based solely on external expectations, but rather based on their moral compass and true identity (Hurst, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Zuko's redemption arc in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* provides a compelling case study in how human needs underpin character development, with his journey closely aligned to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Initially, Zuko's struggle centres on fulfilling fundamental physiological and safety needs. However, a pivotal shift occurs as he begins to satisfy the need for love and belonging. This emotional connection, particularly through the relationship with his uncle Iroh, becomes the catalyst for his transformation, enabling Zuko to move beyond his preoccupation with honour and his father's approval, ultimately achieving self-actualization. In this framework, love and belonging are not only integral to his redemption but also serve as the key to his advancement through Maslow's hierarchy, underscoring the dynamic and multifaceted nature of personal growth.

This study further distinguishes between two distinct but interconnected dimensions of Zuko's journey: narrative-driven redemption and psychologically-driven self-actualization.

Zuko's redemption unfolds through moral decisions and the evolution of relationships, shaped by the narrative structure of the series. In contrast, his self-actualization is marked by a more profound psychological transformation, wherein internal motivations harmonize with ethical action. While these dimensions converge, they are not synonymous; each plays a unique role in his development. This dual approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of Zuko's arc, reflecting both the narrative progression and the underlying psychological transformation.

Beyond offering a thematic interpretation, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology and literary studies. By integrating psychological theory into the analysis of literary characters, this study provides deeper insights into Zuko's character while also advancing methodological rigor and theoretical innovation. The work extends beyond mere thematic exploration, presenting a sophisticated framework that elucidates the relationship between narrative structure and human motivation.

Finally, the study acknowledges the potential cultural biases inherent in Maslow's hierarchy, particularly in non-Western contexts. While Maslow's framework offers valuable insights into character development in Zuko's arc, its application outside Western cultural paradigms warrants critical consideration. The hierarchical structure of needs may not fully capture cultural differences in the prioritization of values such as community or spiritual fulfillment, which can reshape the understanding of personal growth and self-actualization. This reflection highlights the need for a more nuanced and contextually aware application of psychological frameworks in the analysis of diverse cultural narratives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the university for providing the academic resources, institutional support, and a conducive environment for research. We deeply appreciate the opportunity to conduct this study under the university's guidance, which has played a pivotal role in shaping our research process. Our heartfelt thanks go to the faculty and staff for their continued support and for fostering an academic atmosphere

that encourages intellectual growth and collaboration. This research would not have been possible without the university's commitment to promoting academic excellence and interdisciplinary inquiry.

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