

The Psychology of Azula's Character

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When it comes to antagonists in animated films and series, few can rival the manipulative and fearsome Azula from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. A prominent character, Azula was the princess of the Fire Nation, daughter of Fire Lord Ozai, and younger sister of Prince Zuko. She made her first key appearance in the finale of Book One, tasked by the Fire Lord to hunt down Prince Zuko and Iroh, and also made it her personal goal to secure the Avatar, a feat that Zuko failed to accomplish.

Throughout Books Two and Three, she was a constant threat to Team Avatar, and a source of deep-seated conflict for Zuko. She was a Firebending prodigy, and to symbolize that, her Firebending was distinguished for its signature blue (DiMartino, & Konietzko, 2010, p. 87). In the episode *The Chase* in Book Two, she proved that she was capable of fending off multiple enemies single-handedly, and it was not until she was outnumbered six to one, when she had to flee. Beyond her physical prowess, she also exhibited a great capacity for intellect, able to assess situations decisively, execute intricate political maneuvers, and manipulate others for her benefit.

As a character, Azula was psychologically complex, and the skillful control over her emotions, actions, and behaviors masked her underlying internal conflicts for most of the series. Zuko in particular was integral in her character development, as she was for him. A lot of their shared family history drove their respective motivations and constant hatred for each other. In many ways, Azula and Zuko were alike, and as the series entered the second half of Book Three, Azula began to mirror what Zuko was originally in Book 1. Her failure to cope eventually led to a mental breakdown, where she became emotionally unstable, and experienced episodes of psychosis.

Personality

Azula was characterized by her stone-cold personality, showing no remorse for her adversaries and taking pleasure from the sufferings of others. Her complex personality was a result of socio-environmental factors and a complicated family history. Thus, despite her tough exterior and cool composure, she still possessed some insecurities and vulnerabilities beneath.

Socio-environmental factors. First, her personality was influenced by her status and privilege as the princess of the Fire Nation. Under the Fire Lord's rule since the time of Fire Lord Sozin, the people of the Fire Nation were conditioned to believe that they were superior over the other nations, and to achieve that, they had to display their power and strength audaciously to prove their individual worth. Therefore, it was important as the princess, that Azula continuously exerted her authority over others, as a way to prove to her father and to herself that she was better than Zuko.

Even so, there were social expectations that even she had to conform to. As a member of the royal family, she had to observe a certain level of comportment in the public eye. She had to look and behave a certain way that would not tarnish the reputation of the Fire Lord. In the whole series, Azula was not seen once without her hair up or make-up on except for in the bedroom, as seen in the episode *The Awakening* from Book Three. Therefore, it is possible to attribute her attention to detail and perfectionism to her efforts in meeting these social expectations.

Family history. In addition, Azula's past shaped a lot of who she came to be as a young adult. In her childhood, she found it difficult to gain the love and attention of her mother, Ursa. Ursa was particularly protective of Zuko, perhaps because he was subject to the pressure of one

day succeeding the throne. Azula's attempts to get her mother's attention were often met with discord, as it would usually result in Zuko getting victimized in the process. However, due to her aptitude for military tactics and Firebending, she found it easier to impress her father.

As the daughter of the Fire Lord, and not the son, she was not the direct heir to the throne. Hence, driven by her jealousy of Zuko, she worked hard to gain her father's approval over him. This led to her obsession with power, perfection, and superiority. Her efforts were seemingly met with success as Zuko consistently disappointed Fire Lord Ozai, making her the favorite child. Over the years, this drive and persistence to obtain her goals eventually became an integral part of her personality.

Repressed elements. Viewers had the rare opportunity of discovering a different side to Azula's personality in the episode *The Beach* from Book Three. Growing up as the princess, she barely interacted with others aside from people within the palace, and the children of noblemen. Her social ineptitude became apparent in her attempt to interact with normal people in a house party on Ember Island. For instance, she tried to be humorous and complimented the host of the party's outfit, saying it is 'sharp' enough to "puncture the hull of a fire nation empire-class battleship, leaving thousands to drown at sea".

In the same episode, Azula voiced out her thoughts and insecurities, such as her jealousy towards Ty Lee for her natural interaction with boys. Following Ty Lee's advice to smile and laugh at anything a boy tells her, she awkwardly laughed way too loudly, drawing everyone's attention. Later, she also revealed that her mother thought she was a monster, and that it hurt, even though Azula admitted that Ursa was correct to think that way. It was interesting to see how in that scene, Azula gave little regard to her insecurities, clearly still attempting to hide her true emotions from the rest.

Intelligence

Aside from her personality, Azula was also known for being very intelligent. She was excellent at making quick decisions and identifying the best solution in a situation, by good use of her crystallized and fluid intelligences. Additionally, despite her lack of expressiveness with her emotions, she appeared to be emotionally intelligent, able to perceive and understand the emotions and internal conflicts of others.

Crystallized intelligence. Crystallized intelligence refers to the ability to use the skills and knowledge accumulated through experience. Under the tutelage of Fire Lord Ozai, and her elderly advisors, Li and Lo, Azula became very well-versed in the military history of the Fire Nation, as she proved in Book Two in the episode Zuko Alone, when she recounted an old battle of Fire Lord Sozin correctly to her father as a child. When she and her friends, Ty Lee and Mai, disguised themselves as Kyoshi Warriors to infiltrate Ba Sing Se, she was aware of the role and authority of the Dai Li as key to conquering the impenetrable city, displaying that she also had good knowledge of the politics in the Earth Kingdom city.

Her excellent Firebending skills also allowed her the ability to bend lightning, a technique only Fire Lord Ozai and Iroh managed to perfect at the time. Furthermore, she showed that she was familiar with various fighting techniques other than Firebending, as she was able to predict the movements of her opponents with relative ease. Even when she could not Firebend during the Day of Black Sun, she still proved too agile for Team Avatar to defeat her. She seemed to have also acquired several fighting techniques from her two closest friends, as she could perform acrobatics, and also appeared to be able to use a hidden throwing knife.

Fluid intelligence. On the other hand, fluid intelligence refers to the ability to reason and solve novel problems. In the episode The Chase from Book Two, Azula and her party were following the trails of the Avatar, left behind by Appa's shedding fur. They eventually came to a stop at a river, where most of the fur had been washed off. In that situation, Azula's keen sense of reasoning led her to notice the broken trees caused by Appa's take off, recognizing that Aang was trying to lead Azula and her party away from his friends.

Azula's fluid intelligence also came to good use in her attempt to orchestrate a coup to take down Ba Sing Se. After failing to penetrate the outer walls of the city with the Fire Nation drill by force, she adapted her strategy accordingly, focusing instead on conquering Ba Sing Se from the inside by disguising herself as a Kyoshi Warrior. This was a similar idea to how Ty Lee incapacitated her opponents through chi-blocking, which Katara referred to as taking a person down "from the inside", and to how Team Avatar successfully stopped the drill by weakening its internal foundations.

Emotional intelligence. For someone who showed barely any empathy for an individual, Azula had the uncanny ability to perceive and understand the thoughts and emotions of others. She used her emotional intelligence to her advantage by manipulating others. In the episode The Avatar State from Book Two, she exploited Zuko's desperation to restore his honor and gain the approval of his father, which almost led to Zuko and Iroh getting captured as prisoners of the Fire Nation. In the finale of Book Two she did the same, and this time successfully got Zuko to join her side against the Avatar.

In the episode The Awakening, Azula was aware of Zuko's depression, prompting her to reassure him that the Fire Lord was proud of him for defeating the Avatar. Zuko's attempt to hide his knowledge of the Spirit Oasis water that Katara had, was detected by Azula. As a result,

she was suspicious of Zuko and of the supposed demise of the Avatar. Later in the series, her suspicions proved to be right.

Persuasion

On various occasions, Azula demonstrated her ability to manipulate others for her benefit. Besides being smart with words, she frequently used threat to arouse fear in others, which was often followed by an implicit recommended response. This made her very effective in persuading others and eliciting conformity to her demands.

Use of threat. In the episode, The Avatar State, she exerted her authority as the princess of the Fire Nation on the ship captain, convincing him that he is vulnerable through perceived susceptibility, one of the two components to effective use of threat. She questioned him whether the tides commanded the ship, after being told that their arrival will be delayed. She then proceeded to ask, "...if I were to have you thrown overboard, would the tides think twice about smashing you against the rocky shore?" creating the perceived negativity as a consequence of non-compliance.

Similarly, Azula instilled fear in Ty Lee in order to recruit her to hunt down Zuko on Fire Lord Ozai's orders. Faced with initial rejection, Azula stayed behind for Ty Lee's circus performance, using her authority to command the ringmaster to set the safety nets on fire, and release all the animals. Afraid of what else Azula might do in the following day's show, Ty Lee agreed to join her in her quest, knowing fully well her susceptibility to the negative consequences of non-compliance.

Providing a recommended response. Though not explicitly stated, Azula did imply recommended responses to the subjects of her threat. In the same example with the ship captain,

he was convinced that he was capable of enacting the recommended response, due to his role and responsibility on the ship. Azula also implied the efficacy of the response by stating that she was still mulling over whether or not she would throw him overboard, convincing the ship captain that he could rectify the situation and keep his life. In the example with Ty Lee as well, it was implied that by joining Azula in her quest, she would be safe from further attempts to be inflicted with danger, and that she could be the useful tool that Azula needed.

Locus of Control

For someone obsessed with power and control over others, it is not surprising that she had very strong self-control. She appreciated the value in delayed gratification, rarely becoming swayed by emotions when dealing with challenges. Therefore, she had a strong internal locus of control, believing that she needed to take matters into her own hands. However, her loss of power and control near the end of the series drove her to insanity, as she not only lost control over others, but also over her own mind.

Strong internal locus of control. Azula had an extreme control over her facial expressions and physiological behaviors, to the extent that even Toph found it difficult to detect if she was lying during the Day of Black Sun. She rarely wavered in the face of danger, understanding that the point of giving in is the point of losing control over the situation. Her ability to control all emotion also allowed her to create and direct lightning, dubbed by Iroh as the "cold-blooded fire".

Loss of power and control. When Ty Lee and Mai betrayed her, Azula realized that she no longer had control over them through fear. This notion was consolidated when Mai told her that she loved Zuko more than she feared Azula. Her repeated failures to capture the Avatar and

punish Zuko further compounded the pain as she no longer had the support system of her friends. The final straw was when Fire Lord Ozai decided not to take her along to destroy the Earth Kingdom in the final episodes, making clear the fact that she was seen as a monster by everyone around her as her mother once called her.

Psychosis

In dealing with the stress of being perceived as a failure and unwanted by others, she redirected her emotions towards Zuko, becoming increasingly obsessed with killing him. Her mental instability also led to the resurfacing of her repressed emotions that she had for her mother. As a consequence of being unable to cope with the overwhelming thoughts, she began exhibiting signs of psychosis, including irritability and paranoia, loss of attentional focus, experiencing hallucinations, and fabricating false beliefs. She became worse off after losing an Agni Kai with Zuko, and subsequently became admitted into a mental health facility.

Irritability and paranoia. In the presence of her servants, Azula became easily displeased by them, and was paranoid about getting killed. In the final episodes of the series, Azula dismissed her servants for trivial issues such as leaving a pit in her cherry, as she claimed that she would have choked on it and died. She also got angry at the Dai Li for being five minutes late after being summoned, stating that within that time, an assassin could have snuck in, killed her, and went, "...on his merry way."

Loss of attentional focus. Worried for Azula's welfare, Lo and Li, her advisors, suggested to her to rethink the coronation. Infuriated, she ordered Lo and Li to fight an Agni Kai, failing to remember that they were not Firebenders. Realizing this, she proceeded to dismiss Lo,

however pointing at Li instead, which made the twin advisors confused as to who was actually dismissed.

Hallucinations. Right before Azula's coronation, as she looked into the mirror to fix her hair, she saw a reflection of Ursa behind her, who denied that she feared her own daughter, and in reality really loved her. Unable to swallow those words, she threw her brush at the reflection and discovered that Ursa was just a figment of her imagination. Throughout the comic series *The Search*, Azula continued to experience hallucinations of her mother, and in trying to take control of the situation, came to the conclusion that she intended to kill Ursa to ascend the throne.

False beliefs. Azula was in constant denial of the expression of love by her hallucination of Ursa, and thus to rationalize the problem, she convinced herself that it was Ursa's plan all along to eliminate her in favor of Zuko. The thought became so prominent that she believed that everyone around her was colluding with Ursa to bring her down, which prompted Azula to attack the group on several occasions in *The Search*.

Conclusion

Exploring the various aspects of Azula's psychology shed some light on the reasons why she was one of the favorite antagonists of the entire series. Along with Zuko, they were two of the most complex characters, and highly depended on each other to develop. Azula also provided an interesting paradigm to how Zuko would have turned out without the unconditional love and support by his uncle, Iroh, to steer him on the right path. In the bigger picture, Azula provided an insight into the intricacies of human personalities and motivations, where an individual is the result of the interactions between the self, and the environment, whether good, or evil.

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