

USING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO OVERCOME CATAclySM AND DEMORALIZATION IN THE WORKS OF SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH

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Abstract

Cataclysm is defined as a large scale and violent event involving disaster, catastrophe, calamity and tragedy. The recent surge of a pandemic (Covid-19), the natural calamity caused due to the flood in Mumbai and the disasters caused due to technological negligence like the explosion in Beirut or the flight crash in Kerala calls for a psychological study of these tragic events. Demoralization is the immediate effect caused on victims and survivors of such devastations. Svetlana Alexievich is one of those few authors who voices out for people who have witnessed and experienced the misfortunes that have occurred in the past during war and natural disasters like the Chernobyl incident. Her polyphonic writing style fetched her the noble prize for Literature in 2015, "a monument to suffering and courage in our time". A comprehensive study of cataclysm and demoralization is concomitant with the suffering produced by various factors pertaining to mass annihilation. During the 1950s, humanist thinkers helped renew interest in areas that focused on happiness and the positive aspects of human nature. While many other branches of psychology tend to focus on dysfunction and abnormal behavior, positive psychology is centered on helping people become happier. This paper focuses on adapting positive psychology to help human beings prosper and lead healthy, happy lives. It also explores post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and means to overcome traumatizing psychological dejection caused by such mishaps.

Keywords: Demoralization, Trauma, Cataclysm, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Moral Injury, Positive Psychology, Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI).

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Human behaviors and their causes are researched and studied elaborately in psychology while literature depicts human behavior through fictional characters. Both these branches of social science that study human behavior are interrelated and mutually beneficial. The keystone of the correlation between literature and psychology is a literary work. In his article entitled *Psychology and Literature as Inter-Dependent Domains*, Dr. L. Suresh mentions that,

“Literary works study human beings and describe their inner world with all its aspects. The reason is that a literary work is at the same time a product of a certain psychological condition. A literary work benefits from psychology in terms of successful presentation of its characters, expressing their moods, and bringing the reader into the psychological dimension of human reality.”

Svetlana Alexievich is one of those few authors who voices out for people who have witnessed and experienced the misfortunes that have occurred in the past during war and natural disasters like the Chernobyl incident. Her polyphonic writing style fetched her the

noble prize for Literature in 2015, "a monument to suffering and courage in our time". Victims and survivors share their experiences in the form of an oral saga which are collectively presented by Alexievich in her works. *The Unwomanly Face of War* is her first work which was translated in English. This book is constructed of monologues of women who participated in the war, speaking about the aspects of World War II that had never been related before. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* is another work that deals with first-hand accounts from the war in Afghanistan.

Testimonies of innocuous victims affected by the Chernobyl disaster have been collated by Alexievich in *Chernobyl Prayer*. The New York times reviewed her work, *Second-Hand Time*,

"as an intimate portrait of a country yearning for meaning after the sudden lurch from communism to capitalism in the 1990s plunged it into existential crisis. A series of monologues by people across the former Soviet empire, it is Tolstoyan in scope, driven by the idea that history is made not only by major players but also by ordinary people talking in their kitchens. "

A similarity in the themes of all the four works taken up for study, details around people who are affected psychologically and emotionally due to some form of cataclysm. There is a rising demand to deal with the PTSD and moral injury suffered by people who had previously endured unpleasant episodes. The National Alliance of Mental Illness offers the following definition for the disorder:

"Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD is a mental health problem that can occur following the direct experience or witnessing of life-threatening events such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults like rape. People who suffer from PTSD often relive the experience through a range of symptoms (e.g., nightmares and

uncontrollable thoughts, difficulty sleeping, and feelings detached or estranged from other people), and these symptoms can be severe enough and long enough to significantly worsen the person's quality of life and ability to function.”

David Wood, the senior military correspondent for HuffPost defines moral injury as “the pain that results from damage to a person's moral foundation. In contrast to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, which springs from fear, moral injury is a violation of what each of us considers right or wrong... It is moral injury, not PTSD, that is increasingly acknowledged as the signature wound of this generation of veterans: a bruise on the soul, akin to grief or sorrow, with lasting impact on the individuals and on their families.”

Psychologist across the world propounded several theories which focused on: Biological Perspective, Cognitive Perspective, Behavioral Perspective, Psychodynamic Perspective, Humanistic & Existential Perspective and Community-Cultural Perspective. Although these theories were able to analyze the reason behind demoralization, they were insufficient in providing solutions to the affected.

During the 1950s, humanist thinkers such as Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, and Abraham Maslow helped renew interest in areas that focused on happiness and the positive aspects of human nature. While many other branches of psychology tend to focus on dysfunction and abnormal behavior, positive psychology is centered on helping people become happier.

Christopher Peterson, author of *A Primer in Positive Psychology* and professor at the University of Michigan, noted that, "Positive psychology is...a call for psychological science and practice to be as concerned with strength as with weakness; as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst; and as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling as with healing pathology." On the contrary, he cautioned that positive

psychology does not involve disregarding the very real problems that people face and that other areas of psychology strive to treat. "The value of positive psychology is to complement and extend the problem-focused psychology that has been dominant for many decades," he explained.

Happiness, Optimism and helplessness, mindfulness, flow (what one experiences at the current moment), character strengths and virtues, hope, positive thinking and resilience are some of the major topics of interest in positive psychology. Research findings conclude that this psychological perspective makes people happy by building strong social relationships. Money, work and genetical aspects affect a person's happiness. Some people find happiness when they spend for others, while some focus on work and are able to engross in work that is purposeful and meaningful. Although happiness is influenced by genetics, individuals can learn to be happier by developing optimism, gratitude, and altruism.

Kendra Cherry in her article, *The Field of Positive Psychology* suggests that, "Positive psychology can have a range of real-world applications in areas including education, therapy, self-help, stress management, and workplace issues. Using strategies from positive psychology, teachers, coaches, therapists, and employers can motivate others and help individuals understand and develop their personal strengths." Therefore, victims and survivors of disastrous incidents can adopt positive psychology to overcome traumatizing experiences. Viktor E. Franklyn in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* writes about holocaust survivors and using his own therapy to treat their trauma. He introduced Logotherapy to help people fight stress. Franklyn explains the difference between psychoanalysis and logotherapy by stating that during psychoanalysis a patient lies down and talks about matters that are difficult to express, whereas, a patient can sit erect during logotherapy and listens to matters that are rather difficult to hear. Logotherapy focuses on the future and brighter aspects of life instead of bringing back negativity from the past.

Svetlana Alexievich has created a platform for the voiceless to express their pain and agony. Logotherapy can help the morally injured soldiers, their families, innocent war victims and people who have experienced other forms of catastrophe. Jean Paul Sartre, in his work, *The Aftermath of War* details around the social impact of Second World War in Europe. His reflection on collaboration, resistance and liberation in postwar highlights the need for psychological analysis that can aid those who are physically and emotionally wounded. Other authors like Dr. Joseph Murphy, Dale Carnegie and Daniel G. Brinton have also written about approaching life with sanguinity through their works *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* and *The Pursuit of Happiness* respectively.

Dr. Murphy links spiritual wisdom and scientific research to explain how a person's subconscious mind influences life. He reiterates that affirmative thinking can open a world of success, happiness, prosperity and peace among people who require the impetus to thrive. Brinton's rare classic, *The Pursuit of Happiness* helps individuals in their relentless pursuit of being happy. Brinton explores "pleasure and pain, the hierarchy of enjoyments, the distribution of happiness in the classes of society and in the two sexes, principles to promote one's own happiness, and the consolations of affliction." The monologues recorded by Alexievich include people from various sectors of life, from commoners to professionals, who are affected by tragic occurrences. According to Brinton, the victimized populace continues to suffer because they fail to appreciate the happier aspects of life; "Half of happiness is the recognition that we are happy; and half of misery is the forgetting how many causes of happiness we have." he writes. Carnegie shares similar views in his work, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* where he declares that, "The secret of being miserable is to have the leisure to bother about whether you are happy or not." Carnegie not only offers

solutions to break the worry habit but also suggests measures to conquer worry situations altogether, from his own experiences and realizations.

Such timeless practical advice is proposed by numerous philosophical writers to encourage the distraught and panic-stricken to break free from the shackles of shock, which is a consecutive result of cataclysm. Studies have suggested that happiness can be attained through diverse channels, including sensory awareness, social communication, gratitude practices, and cognitive reformations. In 2014, Parks and Schueller collated these factors in practical techniques called the Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI). Both, clinically distressed and non-distressed populations were tested, and the results were consistent in both the instances. By far, the most detailed definition of PPI was proposed by Park and Biswas-Diener in 2013. According to them, “positive psychology interventions are the ones that:

- Have an existing body of research to support its reliability,
- Address one or more constructs of positive psychology,
- Are scientifically proven and evidence-based,
- Benefit us for a lifetime.”

The types of PPIs include, Savoring PPIs that focus on a particular experience and aim to enhance their effects for maximizing happiness, Empathy PPIs that focus on strengthening positive emotions in interpersonal relationships, Optimistic PPIs which involves assuming that we are happy and prosperous in our lives and writing a summary of our lives based on that assumption and Meaning-oriented PPIs that, “are widely used for treating stress disorders, especially PTSD, where a person needs guidance to find the lost happiness in life and cope with the after-effects of a disaster” (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). Other interventions include, The Imagined Self Technique that involves imagining your ideal self and feeling the joy that you would have felt then. Self-enhancing practices like yoga, meditation, forgiveness exercises, complimenting ourselves by repeating sentences

like, “I deserve to be happy, I love my body and mind deeply, I will live in the present, etc.” are also a part of PPIs.

Positive Psychology provides treatment and prevention by assisting the patients to fight stress and pressure through resilience. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a pioneer among psychotherapies and is still a widely used approach for treating many psychological disorders. Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury, a psychiatric counsellor, in her article titled, *19 Best Positive Psychology Interventions and How to Apply Them*, explains that, “Positive CBT is a modification of the classical CBT with a shift in focus from symptom reduction to well-being promotion. As an intervention, CBT tries to identify the strengths of the clients rather than identifying and addressing only the manifested problems.”

Apart from these interventional activities there are a few guides that are used to identify the symptoms of depression and overcome it. The Mood Juice Self-Help Depression Guide is a workbook with multiple choice questions with scores which enables one to ascertain the intensity of the depression symptoms. Angela Gervais and Sheila Olver Szakács, leading professionals in the field of mental health and occupational therapy, created a Depression Self-Management Toolkit (DSMT) which is a step-by-step guide to fight depression in an organized way. Authors Dr. Dan Bilsker and Dr. Randy Paterson compiled The Antidepressant Skills Workbook (ASW) which is a collection of all the essential strategies that help in fighting and overcoming depression by shifting focus from the negative to the positive and thereby, emerging as happier individuals and combating depression with a scientific approach.

In conclusion, the psychological interventions developed to lead affirmative lives have been successful in treating cancer patients and distressed soldiers. This paper insists upon using positive psychology to better the lives of those who are affected by PTSD and Moral Injury. It also paves way to further research on using psychological aspects to analyse

literary works and to find solutions for those who are demoralized due to cataclysm caused by distinct universal factors.

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