



## “Happiness is but an Occasional Episode in the General Drama of Pain”: A Psychological Study of Isabel Allende’s Two Memoirs.

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### Abstract

Personal loss like that of a child often alters into a traumatic event when it is espied as deadly and life-threatening. The response to such an event is replete with emotions such as uncontrolled grief, fear, anger and frustration. Isabel Allende faced a traumatic event, when her twenty eight year old daughter named Paula went into coma and after a year died in the comatose state. It became a loss of her own self, as she was confronted with a situation over which she had no control. It was then she decided to write about her experience. Writing, however, acted as a therapy and became a matter of survival for Allende. The present paper will analyse Allende’s two memoirs *Paula* and *The Sum of Our Days* written during her daughter’s illness and after her death, with the help of the six factor model of Psychological Well Being purposed by Carol Ryff. The aim is to study how the six factors namely Self-acceptance, Personal growth, Purpose in life, Environmental mastery, Autonomy and Positive relations with others; ensure Allende’s well being, happiness and contentment that she develops while she pens down and reveals her deepest emotions. It will also register the various emotions Allende encounters and how she is finally able to find meaning and happiness in life after battling with her life’s biggest catastrophe.

**Keywords:** Happiness, Psychological well-Being, Loss, Recovery, Survival

### Introduction

The universal goal of all human pursuits is happiness. Everyone desires it and search for it in their daily day to day life experiences. Although, happiness is a state of well-being, yet everyone has his/ her own definition of happiness. Sonja Lyubomirsky defines happiness in her book, *The How of Happiness*, as, “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.” (32). For Martin Seligman, there are five important factors that necessitate an individual’s happiness. These are: Pleasure (brought by anything that gratifies the senses), Engagement in an activity that is enjoyable and challenging, our Social Relationships, Meaning (from a sense of belonging to something worthier) and Accomplishment of goals. Sumner describes ‘being happy’ as “Having a certain kind of positive attitude toward your life, which in the fullest form has both a cognitive and an affective component. The cognitive aspect of happiness consists in a positive evaluation of your life, a judgment that at least on balance; it measures up favourably against your standard or expectations... The affective side of happiness consists in what we commonly call a sense of well-being, finding your life enriching or rewarding or feeling satisfied or fulfilled by it.” (145-6).

Happiness is often attributed to psychological well-being, which is achieved by striking a balance between the threatening and rewarding life events. However, sometimes a person is faced with events which not only threaten his/her happiness but the meaning of existence itself. For Adrienne Rich, “The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy” (237). Isabel

Allende suffered a similar tragedy, when her twenty-eight year daughter named Paula went into coma and eventually died due to a disease named Porphyria. Unable to control the situation, she took to writing a memoir *Paula*; with an aim of preserving memories for her comatose daughter, as she feared that her daughter would wake up without any memories of her own. However, the loss of her daughter became a loss of her own self. Enslaved in the moment, she started telling the story of her own life and in the process she started recreating her own life. Unfortunately, Allende’s daughter died in the comatose state and once again writing came into her rescue, and she wrote her second memoir *The Sum of Our Days*. Thus, writing acted as therapy for Allende and provided redemption from the immense grief and pain.

The present paper aims to study, how Allende is able to find happiness after the death of her daughter with the help of the Six-factor Model of Psychological Well being by Carol Ryff. According to Ryff, there are six areas of psychological well-being: Self-acceptance, Personal growth, Purpose in life, Environmental mastery, and Autonomy and positive relations with others. These factors help an individual’s psychological well being, which in turns leads to contentment and happiness.

The first novel under study is *Paula*, which is written by Allende, sitting by the side of her daughter’s bed in the hospital. The aim of the novel is stated in the very first line of the novel. “Listen Paula. I am going to tell you a story, so that when you wake up you will not feel so lost” (Paula 1). Divided into two parts, the novel is told as a story to Paula. Allende combines her present circumstances and her past by weaving her own life story, the story of her family and the

story of Chilean politics and history. The novel ends with the death of Allende's daughter.

The second novel under study is *The Sum of Our Days*, which is written after the death of Paula. Allende tells the reality of her life after the tragedy of her daughter's death, along with story of her extended family in California. She acts an archetypal mother and takes care of her own son, her step children, and her daughters in law, and her grandchildren. As she develops her relations in a new country, she finds herself constructing an environment that leads her to master tragic experiences like the death of her daughter in a healthy way and accept life as it comes to her.

Fordyce states "Happiness is a particular emotion. It is an overall evaluation made by the individual in accounting all his pleasant and unpleasant experiences in the recent past" (227). Similarly, For Allende, happiness comes after she had retraced all the pleasant and unpleasant experiences of her life, the most unpleasant being the death of her daughter by writing about them. Writing for her exorcizes the ghost of the pain and grief of not only her daughter's death but all the unpleasant experiences she has faced since her childhood, from the abandonment by her father at the age of three years, her exile, her broken marriage and her separation from her mother and her country Chile. Allende writes, "Writing is a long process of introspection; it is a voyage towards the darkest caverns of consciousness, a long, slow meditation. I write feeling my way in silence, and along the way discover particles of truth, small crystals that fit in the palm of one hand and justify my passage through this world" (Paula 9).

The first factor of psychological well being is Self-acceptance, which according to Carol

Ryff is defined, "as a central feature of mental health as well as a characteristic of self-actualisation, optimal functioning and maturity" (1071). In simple terms, self acceptance means recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses, an appreciation of one's talents and capabilities, and contentment with one's self in spite of past failures, behaviours and choices. Carol stresses that, "Life span theories also emphasize acceptance of self and of one's past life" (1071). Allende indulges in self-acceptance as she writes the pages of *Paula*. While she acknowledges her strength as a woman in the patriarchal society of her country Chile, citing examples of her gender as her strength than her liability. She is also stating satisfaction with the life choices she had made, from becoming a journalist, a writer, to the decision of going into exile and finally leaving Chile and becoming a citizen of California. In a way, by reconstructing her life, she is both accepting her self and her past life. In writing *Paula*, Allende ventures into a challenge as it inquests her firmly held beliefs of her past fears, trauma, experiences of abandonment, separation, molestation and violence of the past. Further, retracing into the past is not easy for Allende, as she writes, "It is so difficult to write these pages, Paula, to retrace the steps of this painful journey, verify details..." (Paula 22).

Allende was three years old when her father abandoned her without leaving any explanation or a goodbye note. Allende has no memory of him in her mind. She writes, "My father is a great lacuna in my life. He went away so early, and vanished so completely, that I have no memory of him at all" (Paula 15). Allende life's is marked by this incident, which had

struck a deep wound, the pain of which seems to trouble her for years. She says, "For years, morbid explanations for my father's disappearance rattled round in my head. I asked about him until finally I gave up, recognising that there is a conspiracy of silence around him" (Paula 16). While, Allende's mother was able to wipe the tears of abandonment soon, but for Allende acceptance came far too late, in fact, it comes as she writes about it in the pages of her memoir *Paula*. Allende also accepts that her childhood was a period of immense struggle, and fear, it was hard. She writes, "The theory that childhood must be a period of placid innocence did not exist then, this is something North American invented later" (Paula 31).

Allende's mother struggled to bring up her children single handed, so did Allende struggled with her. She accepts the fact that she played a role of mother to her younger brothers, and took care of them as her mother went to earn for the family or when her mother fell ill.

Another incident that instilled fear in Allende's mind is when at age of ten years, she was molested by a fisherman. She was so scared that until now, she hadn't told about it to anyone. She says, "I had locked that in the deepest corner of my memory" (Paula 103). It is only while writing *Paula* that she accepts any such incident and its effect in a very reluctant manner as she states, "This experience must have left a scar somewhere" (Paula 108).

Allende accepts that the fears of her childhood had a huge impact on her childhood and in a sense, determined her life. Allende writes, "My childhood was a time of unvoiced fears: terrors of Margara, who detested me; fear that my father would come back to claim us, or that my mother would die or get married; fear of the devil, of my uncles' games of ruffin, or of the things bad men can do to little girls" (Paula 50).

Another important experience that changed everything for Allende was the military coup in Chile. She writes, "Until the day of the military coup I thought that my youth would last forever; the world seemed a splendid place and people essentially good. I believed evil to be a kind of mistake, an aberration of nature. All that ended abruptly on September 11, 1973, when I awakened to the brutality of existence..." (Paula 113). She lost her job as a director and also lost her post of the editor in the women's magazine. She found herself caught in underground activities and as a result of which her name appeared on the blacklist of wanted people and therefore, she started thinking of exile. And, finally when one day, her children came back home in a state of abject fear, she decided that Chile was no longer safe for her and she went into exile. However, it is only during writing *Paula* that she accepts the fact that, "I, like thousands of other Chileans, have often asked myself whether I did the right thing in leaving my country during the dictatorship, whether I had the right to uproot my children and drag my husband to an uncertain future in a strange country, or whether it would have been better to stay where we were, trying to pass unnoticed-these are questions that cannot be answered" (Paula 213).

The second factor that influences psychological well being is personal growth. According to Carol Ryff, psychological well-being, "requires not only that one achieve the prior characteristics, but also that one continues to develop one's potential, to grow and expand as a person" (1071). Personal

growth refers to the development that takes place over the course of a person's entire life. It includes activities that help in upgrading the quality of life, with a need to realise one's potential. She stresses further that, "Life span theories also give explicit emphasis to continued growth and the confronting of new challenges to continued growth and the confronting of new challenges or tasks at different periods of life" (1071).

Similarly, for Allende the period of exile was a great challenge for her. She lost her family, her friends, her country and her roots. Further, life in Venezuela was not easy for her at first. She was unable to find a job or make any friends. She writes, "I learned very quickly that when you emigrate, you lose the crutches that have been your support; you must begin from zero, because the past is erased with a single stroke and no one cares where you're from or what you did before" (Paula 242). However, Allende confronted the challenges that life threw at her, not letting anything come in between herself and her potential. She continues to grow even in her harder times and learned some valuable lessons for her life. She writes that in Venezuela, she was able to become the person, she could never become in Chile. She states, "Love of revelry, the sense of living in the present, and the optimistic vision of the Venezuelans that at first terrified me later became the lessons I valued most from the period of my life." (Paula 239). She adds further, "It took years to learn the rules of that society and to discover a way to slip over the rugged terrain of exile without creating too much friction, but when finally I succeeded, I felt freed of the back-bowing burdens I had carried in my own country" (Paula 239).

The third factor according to Ryff is having a purpose in life. For almost everyone meaning or the purpose of life derives from philosophical, religious or scientific inspections about various aspects of their life such as their existence, social relationships, consciousness and happiness. For Carol Ryff, "The definition of maturity also emphasises a clear comprehension of life's purpose, a sense of directness, and intentionality. The life span developmental theories refer to a variety of changing purposes or goals in life, such as being productive and creative or achieving emotional integration in later life" (1071). For Allende, emotional gratification comes with writing. Writing has always acted as a therapy in difficult times. Writing gives a sense of purpose in her life as she states that, "My life is created as I narrate, and my memory grows stronger with writing; what I do not put in words on a page will be by time" (Paula 8). She says that it's the loneliness of difficult times that encourage one to write. In her case, she feels that, "I suppose that it is from that feeling of loneliness the questions arise that lead one to write, and that books are conceived in the search for answers" (Paula 50).

Her first book, *The House of the Spirits*, was conceived as a letter written to her ailing grandfather in Chile. She started a fictional history of her family and her country Chile, which also gave her life a purpose as she was lost in the loneliness of exile and the hustle and bustle of Venezuela. Allende claims that "The book saved my life" (Paula 9). Similarly, writing will help Allende during her daughter's illness. It will cure her of her grief and the pain of her daughter's death. Allende writes, "Since you fell ill I have had no strength for anything but you, Paula. You have been

sleeping for a month now. I don't know how to reach you; I call and call but your name is lost in the nooks and crannies of this hospital. My soul is choking in sand. Sadness is a sterile desert. I don't know how to pray. I cannot string together two thoughts, much less immerse myself in creating a new book. I plunge into these pages in an irrational attempt to overcome my terror. I think that perhaps if I give form to this devastation I shall be able to help you, and myself, and that the meticulous exercise of writing can be our salvation." (Paula 9).

The fourth factor affecting well being is environment mastery. For Carol Ryff, a major characteristic of psychological well being is an individual's ability to create an environment that is suitable to his/her mental and physical conditions, by manipulating and controlling complex life situations and complex environments. According to her, "Active participation in and mastery of the environment are important ingredients of an integrated framework of positive psychological functioning" (1071). In 1987, after her divorce, Allende met her second husband and married him in 1988 and shifted to California with him. Finally, she got her citizenship in 2003. The environment of United States was a contrast for Allende. She had come from a culture, where focus is more on interdependence and collectivism. However, Allende in no time adapts to her new environment. Although, at first, she does so by applying Chilean codes. She writes, "We lived as a tribe, Chilean style; we were almost always together" (TSOD 77). Then, she does so by minimising the effects of difference. She describes that, "When we met we had little in common; we came from different backgrounds and we had to invent a language--Spanglish--in order to understand each other. Past, culture and customs separated us, as well as the inevitable problems of children in a family artificially glued together, but by elbowing our way forward, we succeeded in opening the space that is indispensable for love" (TSOD 113). She started accepting the idea of cultural difference by both changing her behaviour and adapting to others and by adjusting the environment according to her own needs and the needs of the family.

Finally, Allende's mastery of the environment is seen in these lines, as she writes, "I learned to speak in public without panicking, to go through airports without getting lost, to survive on what a carry-on would hold, to whistle down a taxi, and to smile at people greeting me, even though my stomach hurt and my shoes were too tight. I don't remember all the places I went...On planes, I wrote my mother by hand to tell her my adventures, but when I read the letters a decade later, it is as if all that happened to another person" (TSOD 110).

The fifth factor affecting well being is Autonomy. Autonomy in simple terms refers to freedom of actions and independence from external control. Carol Ryff comments that, "Self-actualizers...are described as showing autonomous functioning and resistance to enculturation...Individuation is seen to involve a deliverance from convention, in which the person no longer clings to the collective fears, beliefs, and laws of the masses" (1071). Allende's description of her life in both the memoirs, reflect her as an autonomous woman, free from the constraints that the patriarchal society levy on her. She was convinced of the injustices that were met to women in her society. At a very tender age, when her brothers were allowed to play, she was told to knit. But she stood for equality and

freed herself from this injustice inherent in her society. She writes, "I threw the knitting as far as I could and at that instant decided I was going to be a man" (Paula 142). In another incident, when her mother was ill, tending to her, she took the biggest decision of her life. She says, "I place one hand over my heart and say in a little girl's voice: I don't want to be like my mother, I will be like my grandfather-independent, heathy, and strong" (Paula 37). Further, she accepts that she started working early because she wanted to be self-independent. She writes, "I wanted to be on my own" (Paula 96).

Further, Allende remarks that, "We were brought up in the tradition that the husband provides for the family and the wife takes charge of home and children, but in our case it was not entirely that way" (Paula 148). Therefore, in her house she earns, while her husband studied. She asserts her independence as she becomes the bread winner for the family. However, it was in Venezuela, she realised that she needs to save her hard earned money and once again she asserted her freedom and took her decision. She writes, "I decided that my first step in this new phase would be to find a steady job, save everything I could, and change the rules of our domestic finances so that his income was earmarked for household expenses and mine went into saving" (Paula 263).

Allende has always asserted her autonomy in all the matters in her life, from choosing her life partner, deciding her children future, her exile and finally her decision to marry Willie and settle in California, which she defends by writing, "to me, Willie represented a new destiny in another language and a different country; it was like being born, again, I could invent a fresh version of myself only for this man." (Paula 302).

Another decision in which she asserts her freedom is when she suggests a divorce to her first husband, when she realises the futility of her relationship and feels that both of them had become strangers. Finally, her freedom can be felt in her words as she writes, "When finally the truck of our divorce pulled away...I was alone in the house, I threw open the windows and doors to let the wind and rain blow in to sweep away the past; I began to dance and whirl like a maddened dervish, weeping with sadness for what was lost and laughing with relief for what was gained, while crickets and tree frogs sang outside, and inside the torrential rain steamed across the floor and the gale blew dead leaves and bird feathers in a whirlwind of farewells and freedom" (Paula 297).

The last factor according to Ryff is developing positive relations with others. The ability to love, care and form warm and positive relations with others is a sign of psychological well being. Allende's ability to form positive relations can be seen in the way she adjusts to her new environment and new family in a new country in California. Not only does she adjust to it, she also involves herself in caring and loving for her extended family that she gathers around herself, whom she calls her own small tribe. She cares for them, struggles for them and by playing a role of an archetypal mother. Allende writes that, "My role in the tribe is disproportionate" (TSOD 171).

Carol Ryff suggests that, "Self-Actualisers are described as having strong feeling of empathy and affection for all human beings and as being capable of greater love, deeper friendship, and more complete identification with others" (1071). Further, in *The Sum of Our Days*, Allende's shifts portray an inclusive

self-definition by shifting from "I" to "We". As a result, the pains and gains of her family and friends in a way become her own. There are so many incidents when the mother in her overpowers her and she indulges herself in the care of everyone around, to the extreme of fighting with her husband over adoption of her dying step daughter's daughter.

Finally, Allende is able to develop empathy towards all mothers who lose their children, after she writes her two memoirs. She states that, "It has become clear that my loss was not exceptional but that of millions of mothers: the most ancient and most common suffering of humankind" (44).

Life stopped for Allende the moment she heard about her daughter's illness. She had no strength left for any worldly tasks. However, writing came to her rescue and she started exploring her life, her past experiences and her present circumstances word by word in her memoirs. Allende writes, "When I finished writing Paula, I realised that I had travelled a tortuous road and reached the end cleansed and naked. Those pages contained your luminous life and the trajectory of our family. The terrible confusion of the year of torment had dissipated" (TSOD 45). Thus, Allende was cleansed of the pain of her daughter's loss. However, in her memoirs we trace how Allende is incorporating the six factors elaborated by Carol Ryff, which ultimately aids her of her pain and grief and she is finally able to come out of her torturous experience and attain her psychological well being and finally find happiness.

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