

OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING AND TRANSCENDENCE, POST-COVID PROBE OF PEARL BUCK'S LITERARY LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The post-COVID era has now confronted new chaotic and frenetic man-made methods of inflicting wretchedness. The ongoing raging wars between neighboring countries affect the mental health of the people of the world as they are watching the ravage, pillage, devastation, and destruction. Committed to seeking solutions that could mentally empower people, positive psychology as a holistic approach lights the mainstream dialogues by shifting from problem-orientated discourses to human strengths and transcendence. This paper demonstrates the expediency of this approach in deepening insights about the transcendental dominion of higher consciousness in the life Pearl Buck lived and the narratives she wrote. Acknowledged as a trans-Pacific author, she practiced high values in action and retained inner peace despite the abundance of miseries around her. Her life history and narratives convey enlightening and promising messages that fit the post-COVID time of war, fear, and frustration. Her unwavering engagement in global awareness elevation regarding peace, and human solidarity is undisputable.

Keywords: transcendence; positive psychology; optimal functioning; post-COVID; Pearl Buck

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Much time has not passed since the outbreak.
The lethal COVID, fatal infection, the all ache!
Notorious, outrageous like an earthquake
Global measures to resist the outbreak, to defy the disease and the plague.
From me to you, from you to me.
But it did! It spread! From East to West! To all the directions on Earth!
It wreaked havoc! Everything was at stake.
A tragedy is crawling everywhere like a snake.
(Haratyan & Kamyabizadeh, 2024)

We have discovered that human strengths act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future-mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight, to name several (Seligman, 2002, p. 5 cited in Boniwell, 2008). Much time has not passed since the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and the transmissible infection that led to the world's constant disease and numerous deaths. Consequent lockdown and harsh governmental measures of quarantine, social distancing, alienation, isolation, and travel restrictions emerged to defy the ongoing unprecedented fatalities. It wreaked havoc worldwide and led to the subsequent economic catastrophe,

financial disaster, and severe mental and psychological concerns and complications (Song et al., 2020; Mayer & May, 2021). And now again the globe is witnessing a new man-made tragedy of war, hostility, and enmity threatening world security. The augmented human vulnerability and the shaped negativity of thoughts require therapy and intervention in how thought and emotion regulation can help deal with the abrupt adverse challenges in life (Burke & Aslan, 2020; Haratyan & Kamyabizadeh, 2024; Haratyan, 2013; Haratyan, 2011; Khanalizadeh, & Haratyan, 2017; Wong et al., 2021).

Awareness about positive paths, approaches, and interventions can serve appropriately in realizing life's meaning and practicing self-transcendence. Positive psychology fits this hazy time of fear, terror, and anxiety as it proposes healing remedies and solutions by instilling optimistic and positive thoughts (Dhar et al., 2020; Rijavec, 2015; Kuzmics, 2015; Mesurado et al., 2021). It can mentally and emotionally empower people to focus on themselves and self-regulation to be able to resist not only COVID-19 perpetrated privations, but all other natural, man-made, self-imposed, or probable misfortunes that might take place in the future.

Positive psychology focuses on repairing weakness, understanding suffering, building a balanced life, and developing positive emotion, gratification, and meaning to nurture well-being in individuals and communities (Seligman, 2004, 2002, 2012; Khademi 2021; Khana & Singh, 2019; Boniwell, 2008). Knowledge about the inception and aftermaths of practicing self-transcendence in real-world activities allows people to manage daily duties and responsibilities effectively. It can optimize accomplishments by producing flexibility and adaptation as fundamental components of an optimally balanced life that extends to self-transcendence (Donaldson et al., 2015; Lee, 2011, Tanzer, 2021; Martin, 2007; Wong et al., 2021; Vitali & Morgan, 2022; Snyder et al., 2020; Travis et al., 2021). Multiple paradigms with a range of assumptions regarding self-transcendence help people thrive at various personal, relational, and social levels (Duckworth et al., 2005; McGareth et al., 2010; Ogier-Price et al., 2008; Kristjansson, 2010).

2.0 POSITIVITY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN LITERATURE

Positive stories, literature, messages, lessons, and narratives with meaningful plots and themes can inculcate constructive inspirations, thoughts, and emotions in readers. Perceived positive emotions buffer social conflicts, anxiety, depression, and stress; moreover, they can reduce their harmful and damaging impacts. Pearl Buck's life story and narratives generate optimism, equilibrium, and motivation for people experiencing insidious demanding situations (Hunt, 1977; Schrijvers et al. 2018). In this post-COVID-19 era, earning awareness about strengths in human nature by reading literary texts and applying the perceived inclusive insights and perceptions, can immensely affect cognition when confronting crises and problems.

Literature acts as a beneficial intervention for cultivating minds and thoughts (Schrijvers et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 1998) about the significance of responsibility, contribution, and position. Narratives with fictional characters and plots can simulate a real world influenced by sociocultural events. Literature enables readers to cultivate their sense of self and identity by impacting perceptions, values, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts about the world around them (Donyadideh & Haratyan, 2018; Stowe & Igo, 1996; Pandita et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 1998). Stories can develop empathy and sympathy as readers get involved in a self-reflection process

of comparing their lives with those of the characters entangled in challengingly hostile situations.

Readers can build their life narration, make decisions and goals, and evaluate problem-solving approaches through the stages of initiation, comprehension, evaluation, relation, response, interpretation, and implementation in internal monologue evoked by a narrative, through observing the experiences of the characters, (Seligman et al., 2009; Dhar et al., 2020; Kaptein & Lyons, 2009). The plot of the novel motivates divergent thinking, broadens viewpoints, sharpens insights, and activates authentic responses and performances on the path to self-transcendence.

This paper intends to remind people of a trans-national female author who is a true model of positivity, courage, tolerance, optimism, helpfulness, selflessness, and altruism. Pearl Buck stood strong amid all the conflicting and hostile incidents she confronted during her lifetime (Cheung et al., 2018; Bentley, 1935; Goodwin, 2008). She is an example of a determined woman who ascends to the top level of self-actualization, for she finds the true meaning of life and walks steadily towards her thoughtfully established transcendental goals (Hunt, 1977; Jean So, 2010; Kempf, 2012; Watts, 2008).

Pear buck's social activism proves her self-transcendence as she moves far beyond her concerns. She actively stood with people of color, women of all races, misfortunate people, and orphans. Not only did she receive the Nobel Prize as the highest accomplishment a woman writer could get when women were considered second citizens with underestimated potential, but she also contributed to many humanitarian gestures fighting for civil rights, women's rights, black people's rights, and handicapped children. She challenged the dominant discourses of power by raising the consciousness of the global public on topics of racism, sex discrimination, and abandoned children.

She fulfilled her tasks as a wife, a caring mother, a global author, and an international peace activist. She founded "The Welcome Home" as a foster adoption home for abandoned mixed-race children and the Pearl S. Buck Foundation to address impoverishment and discrimination faced by global children and to eliminate injustices and prejudices against underprivileged children.

By providing insights with a focus on selflessness and dedication, Buck's novels give a sense of life meaningfulness as the characters struggle to make sense of the world through some short and long-term goals they set for themselves. The study of her life and the themes of her narratives, where an individual's values, willpower, firmness, and resolution are well manifested, can educate people on how an authentic path can lead to self-transcendence, excellence, and peace (Lamberti, 2020; Spurling, 2011, Silver, 1973, Shin, 2006, Lipina, 2015). Post-COVID reading of her personal history also teaches present people the constituents of self-transcendence. It empowers them to stay solid despite all the miseries any natural or man-made catastrophe can inflict ranging from COVID-19, war, depression, or any other probable future cataclysm and calamity.

2.1 Positive psychology

Urgent is positive infusion

When souls get injured by illness, war, and rage.
Revolting, nauseating.
When against you, life is rebelling!
Positive self-configuration, emotion and mind regulation.
A compelling catharsis, a convincing artifice
In COVID critical crisis, or future deficits in mimesis.
(Haratyan & Kamyabizadeh, 2024)

[Positive Psychology] takes you through the countryside of pleasure and gratification, up into the high country of strength and virtue, and finally to the peaks of lasting fulfillment: meaning and purpose. (Seligman 2002, p. 61)

The growing field of positive psychology, founded by Martin Seligman, has earned extensive acknowledgment in both theory and practical applications. It turns away from the dominant clinical psychology of disorders, disease, neurosis, and human malfunctioning in search of treatments for repairing or healing psychological damages and wounds (Martin, 2007; Boniwell, 2008; Dieser, 2005). Seligman, the chairman of the American Psychological Association and winner of many awards, wrote insightfully revolutionary books such as *Helplessness* (1975), *Learned Optimism* (1991), *What You Can Change and What You Cannot* (1993), *Optimistic Child* (1995), *Authentic Happiness* (2002), *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004, with Christopher Peterson), and *Flourish* (2011). Unlike Freud and many other theorists who concentrated only on the negative sides of life, human diseases, disorders, and mental problems, he changed the direction of attention to the positive sides of life, positive human traits, and prosperous flourishing future in the totality of the social involvement and engagement.

In their paper "From Authentic Happiness to Well-being: The Flourishing of Positive Psychology" (2013), Scorsolini-Comin, et al. provide an overview of Seligman's developing theories as it initially focused on positive emotions to later fulfillment where well-being depends on both the individual and the context. While the theory of authentic happiness is after gratification, the well-being theory seeks to flourish. Sheldon and King (2001) commented on positive psychology as the systematic study of ordinary human capabilities, values, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Snyder et al. (2020) postulate that positive psychology is a theoretical and empirical approach to the recognition and discovery of an individual's potential and optimal functioning. By shifting the focus from mental maladies to the psychological wellness of growth and transcendence.

Positive psychology is drawn from the Aristotelian model of human nature that promotes growth, and improvement towards self-transcendence, which is defined by motivation, action, and goals determined by socio-cultural context (McGrath et al., 2010; Seligman, 2002, 2004). The behavior is determined by physical needs, emotions, and strong situational stimuli as the individual seeks pleasure and avoids pain (Zamani & Harayan, 2017). Some would avoid efforts by saying, "Because whatever will be will be, it doesn't really matter what I do," and "My life path is controlled by forces I cannot influence." Dysfunctional and nonadaptive Past-Negative and Present-hedonistic outlooks are linked to depression, anger, and aggression as the negative self-image hinders constructive actions, optimal functioning, and happiness (Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2015; Satterfield, 2001; Martin et al., 2023).

Positive psychology aims to help people reach the stage of flourishing and transcendence attached to a greater meaning and purpose. Essential features of self-esteem, self-worth, self-knowledge, temperament, resiliency, self-determination, and self-confidence (Hossein Niaya Salimi, & Haratyan, 2023) can pave the way to transcendence. Individuals can constantly improve themselves through psychological training and interventions. The significance of a flow state should not be neglected as one can solve problems and challenges through self-reliance and full recognition of potential.

It is a long-term attempt from both individuals and the community. The authorities and institutions should set priority on the enhancement of people life quality. The benefits of this joint effort lead to communal well-being. Moving towards self-transcendence is not only the outcome of individual attempts but also depends on the commitment of the decision-makers and policy determiners to effectively perform their portion of responsibility and contribution in full flow. (Park & Peterson, 2007; Peterson & Seligman, 2003; Seligman, 2002; Martin 2020; Murgan et al., 2022; Snyder et al., 2020).

2.2 Optimal functioning and flow

Internal circumstances under voluntary control can be modified; however, true constructive changes come with effort and sacrifice. (Seligman 2002, p. xiv)

Self-transcendence occurs in the state of flow as an optimal engagement with reachable goals beyond personal concerns. The individual is so deeply and meaningfully involved in the activity that is able to monitor every immediate feedback on the progress. Self-transcendence occurs when emphasis is placed on greater personal engagement, the resolution of challenges, not blaming external factors, and modifying coping strategies for the condition appropriately.

Self-transcendence is positive functioning (Ryff, 1989) according to the psychological concept of well-being that embodies self-acceptance, empathy, affection, and intimacy. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997) postulates that the flow state leads to the optimal experience and intense involvement in activities declining tedium and anxiousness. As the challenge increases and the acquired skill doesn't match its severity, people lose their interest, concentration, and engagement. The goals should concretely adjust to the internal and external stimuli to provide adequate self-control and concentrated attention (Mesurado et al., 2022).

In his Tanner Lecture on Human Values, "Flourish: Positive Psychology and Positive Interventions," he identified constituents of happiness as pleasure and gratification when basic needs are met (Zamani & Haratyan, 2016), and consequent positive emotions are formed through engagement and contribution to society (Conway, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Conway, 2012). Gratitude and forgiveness can establish positive emotions in the present and build hope and optimism for the future. However, they cannot be considered the sole determinant of optimal functioning.

He advocated the positive interventions of PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. He asserted that happiness is learnable, buildable, and expandable (Renato Pérez Mayo et al., 2019; Seligman et al., 2004, 2002; Vitali and Morgan, 2022; Tanzer, 2021). Some believed that positive affectivity was inherited and genetically determined; some contended that it could be learned and boosted. His exploration

of religious and philosophical texts about self-transcendence proved that positive interventions could be formed into self-sustaining habituated processes and alter passive-destructive thoughts or relations to active-constructive responding by social intelligence and optimism with its transformative power of positivity.

2.3 The transformative power of optimism toward transcendence

Positive Psychology nurtures values and virtues.

Raises merits. fosters joy and bliss.

Repairs paleness. builds balance that brings fairness.

To be optimal in happiness.

To praise patience, lenience, mercy, clemency,

Compassion, care, courage, kindness

Helpfulness, helpfulness, faithfulness

Optimism, bravery, gallantry

Gestures of generosity, acts of humanity.

As you fight for civil rights, human rights,

You care about the oppressed and the deprived!

When you stay steadfast,

With your conscience that is right

Transcendence is in reach and in sight!

(Haratyan & Kamyabizadeh, 2024)

Seligman's revolutionary reorientation of potential human flourishing redefined mental hygiene as individuals attempt to improve selves and their potential by extolling the transformative power of positive thinking and balancing in both private and public spheres. Positive psychology focuses on the enhancement of human life quality through in-depth analysis of positive emotional outcomes at physical, psychological, and social dimensions (Hiroto & Seligman, 1978; Klein et al., 1976; Maier & Seligman, 1976; Miller & Norman, 1979; Martin, 2020).

In the face of inauspicious forces, individuals with a negative mentality are more susceptible to psychological crises. Positive emotions influence the autonomic nervous system (ANS) affecting the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, consequent changes in heart rate and blood pressure. The surge of positive emotions and thoughts affects levels of cortisol in the blood (a hormone related to self-immune and inflammatory diseases) and oxytocin (Seligman et al., 2004; Khanna & Singh, 2019; Peterson et al., 2007).

A detailed exploratory study of positive effects and emotionality refers to humanistic psychology. Seligman created his approach to humanity, temperance, and persistence after Maslow and Rogers' humanistic psychology and self-actualization.(Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, Satterfield, 2001; Boniwell & Zimbardo , 2015)

Some literary artifacts elaborate on focused practices, processes that can modulate concentration, attention, cognizance, and credence (Van Dam et al., 2018). Numerous research highlighted the long-lasting benefits of positive interventions and positive practices and exercises like expressing gratitude, forgiveness, compassion, generosity, and sympathy (Seligman et al., 2005, 2006; Wong et al., 2021; Travis, et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2023; Singh

& Bamel, 2020). Positive psychology meaningfully impacts positive emotions and cognitive or affective appraisal of one's own life as a whole in the path of self-discovery. In the course of Self-transcendence, the individual cultivates skills for mood modification and enhancement, psychological resilience, positive reappraisal of thoughts, and improved interpersonal interactions (Hanley & Garland, 2019; Bethlmy & Corraliza, 2019; Singh & Bamel, 2020).

When Seligman was working on dogs regarding the concept of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Dweck & Goetz, 2018; Duckworth, 2005; Klein et al., 1976), he wondered why many people in the uncontrollable harsh situations, stop trying, become passive, and surrender; while few others keep fighting, struggling, and striving. The key mechanism of optimism was the answer to him as successful people never formed a habitual way of tragic looking at obstacles in life and rose after each collapse and failure. He later called this phenomenon learned optimism (Maier, 2019; Hiroto & Seligman, 1975; Costello, 1978; Carol & Therese, 2018; Maier, 2019; Maier & Seligman, 1976; Seligman, 1972).

In Zarathustra, Nietzsche said, "If it doesn't kill me, it makes me stronger" (McKenzie, 2016). Nietzsche believed that human development has three stages camel sitting, accepting, enduring, and moaning; lion stage of rebellion, standing against poverty, discrimination, subjugation, and other oppression, which, if managed well, could eventually lead to the child reborn stage of flourishing. Optimistic thinking styles are associated with better mood and life quality. Optimists avoid the ramifications of psychological problems by actively implementing strategies to cope with health problems and self-repair (Seligman et al., 2009; Seligman, 2002, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, 2011).

Positive psychology is not about "happiology" and mood change but about motivating people to achieve mastery over their lives, goals, wishes, dreams, and intra/interpersonal interactions (Seligman, 2012; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). He regarded positive psychology as a supplementary intervention to healing pathology that could help people build better relationships, active involvement, and successfully regulate thoughts and emotions. The whole process can add to the intellectual development of well-being, life satisfaction, well-being, and self-transcendence. (Satterfield, 2001, Tanzer, 2021; Taillieu, 2021)

2.4 Transcendence

"Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos" (Maslow, 1971, 269).

Words are heavily loaded with meanings, denotations, connotations, implications, and long history. They are not merely meaning and content containers, they can affect the cognition and emotions of individuals. Their impacts on individuals from diverse perspectives are irrefutable considering their certain position within an individual's world-view described as "personal constructs" or "subjective theories" (Ruschmann, 2011).

Self-transcendence and self-realization embody feelings of wonder, surprise, awe, astonishment, veneration, humbleness, and yielding (Maslow, 1999, p.89). Self-perception

transcends the self in an attempt of oneness with the broader universe, a sense of connectedness with the entire universe where the private sphere is consumed in flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) sees it as a state of absorption, full attention, and abstraction that leads to harmony, integrity, joy, balance, exaltation, the sublime, inner peace, and self-sufficiency going beyond self-imposed limitations into self-transcendence (Yaden & Graziosi, 2022; Travis, et al. Martin et al., 2023, Singh & Bamel, 2020). It all eventually results in aesthetic awakening, intellectual realization, and connectedness when you become one with nature, the environment, and the universe.

Næss (2016) reviewed that from Greek or Latin writings on “transcendere/transcendens” to Thomas Luckman and Abraham Maslow’s application of the term, there were many reconceptualizations and reformulations for the term “transcendence” in philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and theology. It denotes both the process of “transcending” (going beyond), and the ultimate destination of this process. Terms “anodos or anabasis” in Platonic philosophy mean “moving upwards” towards higher spheres of being as the reminiscence of earlier metaphysical understandings of heaven and earth and God that surmounts mind faculty according to Augustine (Singh & Bamel, 2020; Bethelmy & Corraliza, 2019). Transcendence can occur in spiritual, religious, atheists, and agnostics of different ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Self-transcendence is classified under the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), hypo-egoism, mindfulness peak experiences, and mystical experiences (Martin et al., 2023; Martin, 2020; Newberg & Waldman, 2018). Descartes saw god or transcendence as a necessary innate idea rather than an ontological reality of the “chain of being.” Kant placed it beyond the theoretical philosophy “exporting” metaphysics into the field of theology/religion/personal beliefs.

Aristotle's model of human nature is drawn from his concept of teleological life, as he believes that the mechanism of self-transcendence functioning inwardly drives human beings. “In Book I of the Nicomachean Ethics he asserts that every craft and every line of inquiry, and likewise every action and decision, seems to seek some good; that is why some people were right to describe the good as what everything seeks”(1094,1-2 cited in Boniwell, 2008). The Aristotelian model is based on the teleological goals as the individual with the realization of his potential tries to live a life in which thoughts and ideas about the future are positive and affect the direction of actions here and now (Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2015; Hartman, 2006) to the higher state of consciousness.

2.5 Higher state of consciousness

To explain self-transcendence, meaning, and higher states of consciousness, Maslow (1969a, 1969b, 57) defined “transcendence as overcoming egocentricity, and egoism with thirty five different descriptions of transcending processes: (1) Transcendence in the sense of loss of self-consciousness. (3) Transcendence of time. (4) Transcendence of culture. (5) Transcendence of one’s past. (6) Transcendence of ego, self, selfishness, ego-centering, etc. (7) Transcendence as a mystical experience. Mystic fusion, either with another person with the whole cosmos, or with anything in between. (11) Transcendence of the basic needs. (15) Transcending the opinions of others. (16) Transcendence of dichotomies (polarities, black and white oppositions, either-or, etc.). (23) Transcendence also means to become divine or god-like, to go beyond the mere human. (24) Transcendence can mean living in the realm of Being, speaking the language

of Being, B-cognizing, and plateau-living. (27) A transcendence of negatives ... is seen in the report from the peak experiences. (28) Transcendence of space. (35) Transcendence of one's own credo, or system of values, or system of beliefs."

Self-transcendence refers to the most humanistic, inclusive, and holistic levels of human consciousness to significant others including human beings, plants, animals, and nature which is called horizontal transcendence and to a spiritual/divine reality classified as vertical ("Theory Z," Maslow, 1969b). Different worldviews and "preferences" choose "horizontal transcending" (towards other people and nature) or "vertical transcending" towards higher spiritual beings beyond the merely human being (Maslow, 1969a, 61). Maslow (1971) said that "transcendent" self-actualizes enjoy the plateau experience:

The fact is that these plateau experiences are described quite well in many literatures. This is not the standard description of the acute [peak] mystical experience, but the way in which the world looks if the mystic experience really takes place. If your mystical experience changes your life, you go about your business as the great mystics did. For example, the great saints could have mystical revelations but also could run a monastery. You can run a grocery store and pay the bills, but still carry on this sense of witnessing the world in the way you did in the great moments of mystic perception. Again, this implies a cognitive experience, and it feels like a witnessing of something that's there rather than something that you produce yourself. Therefore, you have a feeling of reality and can make a claim about the nature of reality. (Maslow, as cited in Gruel, 2015).

Maslow believes that self-transcendence is the highest accomplishment of humans in the path of growth and development beyond self-actualization. Increased awareness of the present moment, reduced focus on personal concerns, enhanced sense of connectedness, increased humility and openness, and greater appreciation for life. Self-transcendence leads to well-being through the influence of positive emotion as the main determinant of mental health and happiness. Positive emotions can be associated with past, present, or future experiences. Transcendent thoughts are founded on hope and optimism which result in positive emotions of contentment and serenity. (Tanzer, 2021; Taillieu, 2021; Travis et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021).

Self-transcendence occurs once people are well-equipped with positive intra/interpersonal relationships, self-acceptance, self-affirmation, persistence, motivation, and mindfulness (Maier, 2019; Titmuss, 2013; Khademi, 2021; Travis, 2021; Wong et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2023; Yaden and Graziosi, 2022). Autonomy, agency, and meaning in life guide and direct all efforts and challenges. When the self is fully realized and fulfilled through self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2015), optimal psychological functioning occurs as the individual is intrinsically motivated with coherent values. Buck's life history and narratives exemplify the advocacy agendas of positive psychology with this proposed epistemology (Olsson, 2006; Spurling, 2011, Conn & Conn, 1998; Shaffer, 2003, 2016, 2020). This paper is promoting her narrative readership in this adverse post-COVID era.

2.6 Pearl Buck's life and narratives, a case study

When I was working at Suzhou University as a professor, in a meeting with the dean at the Faculty of Foreign Studies, I found her interest in the literary works of American writer Pearl Buck. She was enthusiastically reading her novels and lent me a book that included selected

articles reviewing Buck's novels from different perspectives. I started exploring the papers published in peer-reviewed journals about her ideology, style, and narratives; However, I noticed that barely any study investigated her narratives in terms of positive psychology, whose fundamental elements were so conspicuous in the life she lived and the novels she wrote.

Buck is a well-known humanitarian writer who wrote carefully and extensively about people from around the whole globe. As an associate professor teaching in different universities in China and experiencing living in different provinces, traveling around, and tracing the teachings of wise Confucius about the concept of happiness and inner peace, I discovered the core topic of Buck's writings enlightening and inspirational. The corpus of her writings manifested aesthetic creativity and endeavors to bring awareness about insightful layers of life. The interdict of Confucius that fiction has an immoral influence, prevents logic and reason, and averts the mind from virtue and true understandings does not apply to her narratives that promoted humanity, transcendent values, and peace (Watt, 2008; Suoqiao, 2005; Shaffer, 2003, 2020, 2016; Lamberti, 2020). She was a productive writer and wrote over seventy books and abundant of short stories about America, Japan, India, Korea, and China such as *The Good Earth* (1931), *Sons* (1932), *The Mother* (1933), *Pavilion of Women* (1947), *The Bondmaid* (1949) *East Wind: West Wind* (1930), *The First wife* (1933), *The Young Revolutionist* (1934), *A House Divided* (1935), *The Exile* (1936), *Fighting Angel* (1937), (1949), *The Patriot* (1939), *Dragon Seed* (1941), *The Promise* (1943), and *China Flight* (1943).

Pearl Buck led a healthy, robust, and confident life despite the adversities she experienced in diverse countries during the hardest historical war periods. She received the Nobel Prize during the outburst of WWII and the second China-Japan war between the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan. She set several high goals in her life and fought for them, which eventually led to their fulfillment. She witnessed the realization of all her humanitarian dreams before she died. To reach self-transcendence and meaning in life, she merged her literary art with humanitarian commitment (Cheung et al., 2018; Augustine, 2022; Bentley 1935; Cevasco, 1967). She supported women's and minority rights, encouraged humanitarianism and fought against discrimination (Kempf, 2012; Jean So, 2010; Lipina, 2015). She struggled for the welfare of mentally or physically disabled or disadvantaged children. She adopted eight children and established the Welcome House in 1949 to improve people's attitudes and understanding regarding mental illness.

Pearl Buck is one of those prominent writers who attempt to contribute greatly to this transformation and mental health improvement. The elevation is associated with humanitarian acts of virtue and mental beauty as a person navigates through life's journey with internal peace, warmth, openness, curiosity, creativity, sympathy, understanding, gratitude, and admiration (Lamberti, 2020; Shin, 2006; Watt, 2008; Hardy, 2021). Buck's careful attention to such human emotions when portraying the characters in the plot stems from her awareness and understanding of human beings apart from the constraining cultural specifications (Wacker, 2003; Weems, 2020; Addelston, 2006; Doyle, 1966; Leong, 2005; Lipina, 2015; Melvin, 2006; Bentley, 1935). Humanity beyond borders devoid of discrimination and political deformations is a vital topic, especially in post-COVID era of war and frustration that has wreaked havoc and brought misery to the whole world. The growth of empathy, sympathy, and compassion among people of different nations is more than necessary.

3.0 METHOD

This qualitative-reflective study with the focus on descriptive expositions appreciates Buck's effort in demonstrating self-transcendence. Through an interpretive-heuristic method, her activities, ideologies, values, and strengths were probed in her personal life events and in the narratives she wrote. Seligmanian positive psychology was utilized for explicating the concept of self-transcendence in action.

This paper focuses on the life history and narratives of the first female Nobel-Prize winner, Pearl Buck, a woman of many altruistic orientations. She narrated the lives of simple people that attempted to fulfill their dreams by not allowing negative thoughts and calamities to take control of their lives. Not only did Pearl Buck intend to raise people's awareness regarding this crucial issue through her narratives, but she also lived her life to the fullest and personified it in reality. She practiced her values in action, reaching the highest personal level of fulfillment and self-actualization globally. What she did throughout her life is the authentic illustration of transcendental values in action (Conn & Conn, 1998; Goodwin, 2008; Agustine, 2022). Throughout her life, Buck confronted many challenges in the different parts of the world she lived in (both the East and the West); however, she proved to be a strong-willed woman fighting for all good global causes. Through the humanitarian events she was actively engaged in, she was circuitously guiding people on how to gain the lost hope and meaning in life.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The strengths and virtues [...] function against misfortune and psychological disorders, and they may be the key to building resilience. (Seligman 2002, p. xiv)

Positive psychology, a flourishing paradigm, centers on the remedy of pathologies through an insightful understanding of human agency and optimal cognitive functioning. Many philosophical and religious schools, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, encourage people the inclusion of attributes such as bravery, intra/interpersonal skill, aesthetic responsiveness, receptivity, persistence, insistence, clemency, leniency, compassion, sympathy, empathy, optimism, novelty, creativity, spirituality, wisdom, responsibility, altruism, graciousness, respect, moderation, broadmindedness, acceptance, and mastery in order to maximize the optimal functioning through self-transcendence.

According to Seligman, unique human strengths are nourished in the course of her attempts towards life meanings, aims, and goals; therefore, optimal functioning and inner peace can be achieved in both individualistic, altruistic, and transcendental levels where one steps beyond her zone of comfort and contemplate about other people's happiness and gratification from being in the service of others (Timus, 2013; Boniwell, 2008; Seligman, 2002, 2004, 2012; Seligman et al., 2009).

Buck's life events, activities, ideologies, attempts, awards, concerns, and narratives reveal how strongly she persists in her humanitarian goals (Wacker, 2003; Weems, 2020; Addelston, 2006; Doyle, 1966; Leong, 2005; Lipina, 2015; Melvin, 2006; Bentley, 1935). Her writings with various promising implications have the power to affect, motivate, and empower people mentally and emotionally. Literature and novels have been extensively used to raise awareness, empower, and improve mental health and psychological wellbeing. COVID-19 wreaked havoc

and brought negative repercussions and suffering to the world. This necessitates a growth of interest in the readership of texts about human understanding, sympathy, empathy, compassion, and humanitarian actions across the world. The post-COVID era, with all the perturbed human communication it witnessed, accentuates positive novels readership, among which Buck's trans-pacific novels are suggested.

Pearl Buck's novels focusing on humanity in the trans-pacific spectrum can be reread for the insightful themes that cherish life's meaning and value. Her celebrated novel *The Good Earth*, as the name denotes, reminds people of the foundational resources for self-transcendence leading to optimal functioning. In *The Good Earth*, the attachment to the farming land is obvious as the characters Wang Lung and his wife O Lan regard it as the mere life meaning, purpose, and valuable source of nurture and nourishment, so they stick to it to the end. In this novel, Buck demonstrates that sources of characters' strengths, values, and virtues are summarized in the land. They think that through farming and agriculture, they can reach fulfillment. For them, optimal functioning occurs when they are planting and harvesting and are in close contact with the land.

"I shall never sell the land! Bit by bit, I will dig up the fields and feed the earth itself to the children and when they die I will bury them in the land, and I and my wife and my old father, even he, we will die on the land that has given us birth." (Buck, 1966, p.61).

Despite all the droughts and hardships, Wang Lung and his family are attached to the farming land whose separation means ruin and destruction for the whole family. It shows that they deposit an abundance of value to the land and bring rationalizations for this attachment and bond to the land, without which their whole life becomes meaningless. Individuals' well-being depends on the way they assess their performances (optimal functioning and transcendental values) in the presence of positive affects or emotions that help them reach their full potential (Deci & Ryan, 2015; Kristjansson, 2010; Martin, 2007; McGrath et al., 2010). She discloses values in action in her personal life and through the life of her characters and the way they fight to accomplish their goals and realize their dreams. She illustrates characters in decision-making, resilience, and strengths during troubles.

"Still, one thing remains to him: his love for his land." "his land can provide peace and security;"... "It is the end of a family when they begin to sell the land; "Out of the land we came and into it we must go--and if you hold your land you can live--no one can rob you of land ... " (Buck, 1966, pp.307-8)

Through the vicissitudes of life experiences, Buck's protagonists evaluate their performances, whether optimal or not, when they gain or lose access to various resources. In the novel *The Good Earth*, farming land and agriculture are the symbols of nurture, supplying men with basic needs: bread, corn, rice, vegetables, and fruits for nourishment. The protagonists, Wang and O Lan, undergo noteworthy mental modifications to gain independence, growth, optimal functioning, peace, and even transcendence. Her narration of farming in *The Good Earth* looked like John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, written in the 1930s during the Great Depression. In *Pavilion of Women* she portrays Madam Wu, a powerful woman confined by sociocultural issues who tries to improve her world.

Pearl Buck depicts how characters evolve, grow, learn, and change thoughts, desires, emotions, behaviors, and actions to accomplish goals based on self-transcendence, and reach optimal functioning. Buck has unconsciously formulated and explicated several psychological concepts presently highlighted in Seligman's positive psychology. She describes life events such as marriage, family, having children, working on land, planting, harvesting, and agriculture as meaningful values.

She enthusiastically writes about the people on the other side of the globe. It is because she has experienced living there, communicating with them, and understanding them. She intends to create a bond between the East and the West despite the tumultuous economic and cultural transformations. She acts as an activist and fights to destroy the persisting "otherness"; the ideology that attempted to manipulate and control the minds of the public. She is raising consciousness regarding the divide separating "them and us" and gives voice to the "Other" from other geographical regions and recounts the experiences barely previously recognized. She promotes an inclusive international dialogue as a transnational mediator for international fraternity based on universal humanistic values that unite people across the globe. As an intellectual philanthropist, she intends to identify shared problems and propose solutions for transnational humanitarian solidarity.

"It would be hard for me to declare which side of the world is more my own," she once wrote. "I am loyal to Asia as I am loyal to my own land." (cited in Augustine, 2022)

In her speech appreciated by the Nobel Committee, Buck assumed her duties as a novelist and commented on the philosophy of narratives embracing authenticity, originality, simplicity, purity, and naturalness bereft of sophisticated artificiality and fakeness. She encouraged the writers to use a universal genre with a mighty potential that could affect different facets of life and bring hope even during severe cultural imbalances or natural disasters. She brings Confucian ethics into her narratives to remind the public how to fight with fears, superstitions, primitive emotions and imaginations of the overwhelming multitude in order to reach optimal functioning associated with self-transcendence (Watts, 2008). Through the art of characterization, she reveals the dimensions of human qualities, personality inclinations, and fulfillments with rhetorical interior monologues in her narratives.

According to Seligman, pleasure and gratification, strengths and virtues, meaning and purpose can help human reach their full potential and optimal functioning founded upon self-transcendence. Self-proclaimed pessimism inflicts learned helplessness with depression, while optimism, gratitude, forgiveness, positive orientation, adaptation, and habituation of mindfulness can affect health, performance, satisfaction, and happiness (Seligman, 2012; Conway, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 2001; Dieser, 2005; Lenzenweger, 2004; Rijavec, 2015).

Studies maintain that positive emotions result from fortunate circumstances and favorable environments where talents, strengths, patience, moderation, balance, self-restraint, flow, self-consciousness, and temperance can be cultivated. However, Buck proves that positivity can be maintained even in adverse conditions. Although she confronts many mishaps and misfortunes throughout her life, she never allows the helplessness or negativity of situations to affect her struggles. Buck is actively engaged in whatever she sets as her goals and struggles to attain them. Buck well manages many hardships she faces in her life, during the war when growing up in another country and culture, when getting a divorce in 1935, and when informed that her

daughter, Carol, is mentally disabled (as a result of a hysterectomy surgery for removal of a tumor in her uterus). Buck is concerned about the mentally disabled children who are stigmatized like her daughter. This is a gigantic pain for a mother, a perpetual grief, the toughest agony any woman as a mother can endure (Finger & Christ, 2004; Haratyan, 2017; Jiang & Haratyan, 2020; Haratyan & Yanling, 2023; Haratyan, 2014) . In a letter to her close friend, she wrote:

I am sore to the touch there and I cannot endure even the touch of sympathy. Silence is best and far the easiest for me. I suppose this is because I am not resigned and never can be. I endure it because I must, but I am not resigned. So make no mention of her and so spare me. (Buck, letter to Emma Edmunds White, as cited in Finger & Christ, 2004 from Jablow, 1992, p. 10)

In her letter, it is clear that she feels so devastated by the fact that her daughter is mentally disabled; however, she tries to keep strong and does not allow the disappointment and the bitter truth to prevent her from moving forth, from progressing, from reaching excellence. She has already found the meaning, the hope, and the transcendental purpose in her life.

I don't know of any blow in all my life that was as rending. It was as if my very flesh were torn. It was beyond belief, yet I knew I had to believe it and shape my life around the fact. (Buck, as cited in Finger and Christ, 2004 from 1969, p. 119)

Her letter proves her resilience, adaptation, and flexibility regarding this harsh catastrophe. Unlike many people who collapse, fail, or remain in the stage of anger and denial lingering in the passive and static state, she reaches the stage of acceptance and proceeds with the mobility and dynamicity of her life. She energetically and intelligently keeps going.

This is a beautiful day. Carol is at home – I like to have her here but all sense of flesh, my flesh, is gone. I feel toward her as tenderly as ever, but I am no longer torn. I am, I suppose, what may be called “resigned” at last. Agony has become static – it is true but I will not disturb it or allow it to move in me. (Buck, as cited in Finger and Christ, 2004 from Harris, 1969, p. 279)

She does not allow despair of any sort to affect her, ruin, and disintegrate her. She has discovered life's transcendental purpose and humanitarian responsibilities, and she feels contentment and satisfaction. Despite many writers who committed suicide when they confronted hardships, Pearl Buck lived a long life, for she intelligently discovered the meaning and purpose in life. She never became frustrated or disheartened.

Winning the Nobel Prize for Literature was not her only accomplishment that her self-transcendence; she aimed at seeing the happiness of the "Other", which many people ignored and tried to destroy the concept of "otherness," which was barely previously recognized. She was preoccupied with civil rights activities against discrimination toward women, African Americans, and Asian Americans. She gave voice to silenced and subjugated people and encouraged people to put aside their cliches, biases, prejudices, and misunderstandings. She sought love (Haratyan & Kamyabizadeh, 2024; Haratyan, 2005; Fard & Haratyan, 2019) and humanity anywhere in the world, both East and West, by bringing recognition and peace between the two distant parts of the world. Her philanthropic activities in promoting humanistic values and ethics are undeniable.

Buck reached the level of transcendence as she gained popularity even after her death, for she proved she was not indifferent to the pain of others. She was an American writer with an international, multicultural spirit who earned global respectability, civility, dignity, decency, and transcendence. She reached self-actualization and self-transcendence when she earned perpetual global literary recognition as a prolific writer. Her numerous writings reformulated the notions of womanhood, otherness, and mental health. Her engagement in the foremost concerns of her time was to educate and train the minds. She embraced her responsibility as a social human being and dedicated her talent and energy to global humanity beyond borders.

In this harsh era of post-COVID, this paper encourages Pearl Buck's narrative readership. She recounts journeys toward self-actualization through authenticity and naturalness, not artificiality and fakeness. She remains eternal in the minds of global generations that acknowledge her endeavors for scarce humanitarian pedagogy, enlightenment, and awareness. She practiced her values in action. Her life history and her narratives remind us that people can elevate their selfhood to the higher level of consciousness and transcendence by unwavering concentration, non-judgmental awareness, contextual cognizance, careful attention to the goals, contemplation, and wisdom. People can discover meanings in life via attentiveness, mindfulness (Haratyan & Kamyabizadeh, 2024; Haratyan, 2005; Fu et al., 2023) and the disposition to receive the pros and cons of conflicting propositions. COVID-19 inflicted miseries and problems; psychological repercussions can be approached by self-reflection, self-determination, resilience, introspection, and contemplation. They facilitate the journey toward strength, fulfillment, connectedness, unity, and transcendence. Pearl Buck has confident assertion in her strength as a novelist in reminding people of transcendental values that can bring optimal operations, identity recognition, and a compromising attitude leading to a deeper sense of fulfillment and higher level of consciousness.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Seligman's positive psychology redefines the concept of an individual's optimal functioning. It suggests positive interventions and empowers afflicted people during this catastrophic post-COVID period. The expediency of positive thoughts, constructive emotions, and eventually desirable behaviors is illustrated through narratives and values. Pearl Buck, a world-known Nobel Prize winner, took the agency to elevate people's awareness, moods, and insights on a global scale. She reminded people about the significance of meaning and purposes in life as the sources of happiness through her life history and the narratives implications. She raised public consciousness about global humanitarian acts of virtue that socio-cultural specifications cannot constrain. Pearl Buck's portrayal of self-transcendental values is congruent with Seligman's idea that individuals attempt to cultivate their potentials and capacities to achieve a transcendental self. In her trans-pacific narratives, she implements Confucian values to articulate togetherness, collaboration, resilience, and adaptation as the components of transcendence and to advocate the equitable social arrangements of reciprocity in contributions. The Seligmanian reading of her novels benefits people in a post-COVID era of war, fear, fury, and frustration as they are helplessly seeking solutions to the ceaseless man-made disasters.

5.1 Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interest among writers.

5.2 Funding

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5.3 Bio Summary

Farzaneh Haratyan is currently an Associate Professor at the Vellore Institute of Technology in India. Before taking up this role, she taught as an associate professor for four years in China. She earned her first PhD in English Literature from University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and received her second MA in General Psychology from Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University in Tehran, Iran. Her interest lies in the way psychological theories can be applied in the analyses of literary works or the way literature can be employed in therapies like poetry therapy. She pursues her interests in the practices of positive psychology, REBT, emotion regulation (ER), and poetry therapy.

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