



Research article

Optimist vs Pessimist: Indulging and Contextualizing Martin Seligman's Learned Optimism in "Once Again" and "Trisanku" by C.S. Lakshmi

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Abstract

Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, developed the idea of 'learned optimism' by embracing the idea that an optimistic outlook can be developed through learning. This article discusses the idea of learned optimism, its advantages, and how one may begin to transform their life and thinking. According to the analysis, optimistic personalities appear to have a greater success rate when it comes to reaching their intended goals, even when the pessimistic characters do amazing things in their lives. Both pessimists and optimists achieve things in their lives, but optimists are perceived as having accomplished more. Martin Seligman's theory of learned optimism is analysed and contextualized in this paper, which aims to evaluate the optimistic and pessimistic personalities found in the characters in the selected short stories of C.S. Lakshmi. Seligman's concept of learned optimism is well connected with the characters of Loki in "Once Again" and Anjana in "Trisanku". The characters are also subjected to cognitive distortions of the three P's: Personal, Pervasive and Permanent to develop themselves to be optimistic personalities through the concept of learned optimism. Seligman also proved that through learned optimism one can change from a pessimistic to an optimistic personality so that they can prevent themselves from depression and anxiety.

Keywords: Learned Optimism, Cognitive distortions, Three P's, optimistic, pessimistic.



Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Born in 1944, C.S. Lakshmi is an Indian feminist author who writes under the pen name Ambai. She gives her characters a feeling of identity, and the majority of them have unique personalities. Most of her characters are connected to other characters in the story either directly or indirectly. Psychological self-construal traits, such as being unique, recognizing one's abilities, interests, and desires, and putting one's own goals ahead of those of in-groups, are common in her characters.

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Ultimately, though, while the character develops into a personality centred around society, they retain all of their individuality. Through her characters, Lakshmi projects the balance of mind to her readers which is also postulated by Seligman in his theories. Her first work *Nandimalai Charalilae (At Nandi hills)* was published in 1962. Her first serious work of fiction was the Tamil novel *Andhi Malai* otherwise *Twilight* which was published in the year 1966 and also it received *Kalaimagal Narayanaswamy Aiyar* Prize. For her short story *Siragugal Muriyum (Wings will be broken)* she received critical acclaim which was published in the literary magazine *Kanaiyazhi*.

The researcher has taken two short stories for the analysis, "Once Again" and "Trisanku" appeared in the collection *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* published in 2019, translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Kirkus Review states,

Ambai... the pseudonym used by researcher and educator Dr C. S. Lakshmi for her fiction, evokes in sensuous, vibrant prose the colours, flavours, and sounds of Indian life in a collection of 21 stories...For some women, journeys- meaningful, necessary, planned, or spontaneous in epiphany; others find contentment at home...Fresh, graceful stories create a palpable world. (2019, p. 23).

The primary objective of the article is to examine how characters from the select short stories develop themselves psychologically to be optimistic personalities in association with Martin Seligman's learned optimism theory and theory of cognitive distortions, or the three Ps, as a framework for changing one's behaviour to become more optimistic. The article attempts to discern the likelihood of success for the optimistic and pessimistic characters. A study found that optimistic persons are more likely to succeed in reaching their goals, even when the pessimistic ones perform amazing feats in life.

Pessimists and optimists both achieve in life, however, optimists are seen to have accomplished more. If someone learns to be optimistic, the concentration of the positive wave which they attract as per the law of attraction is greater than that of the negative wave. Elizabeth Scott stated, "The law of attraction is a philosophy suggesting that positive thoughts bring positive results into a person's life, while negative thoughts bring negative outcomes" (2022, p. 1). According to some philosophers and scientists, the law of attraction is predicated on the idea that good energy attracts success in all spheres of life, including relationships, health, and economics, and that ideas are a type of energy. According to Seligman, one must let go of any negative ideas for one's good thoughts to advance in life.

The characters in the selected short stories set an optimist and a pessimist apart. More often than not, the issues that the protagonists in the short stories faced were internal. They have opposing optimistic and pessimistic personalities, with one greater than the other. This article aims to show how an optimist and a pessimist approach a situation, as well as how learned optimism helps the characters Loki in "Once Again," and Anjana in "Trisanku" in managing their mental conflicts.

Martin Seligman is a clinical psychologist by training, and his literature has mostly dealt with optimism and pessimism. He discussed learned optimism in his book *Learned Optimism* published in 2006. He was also curious as to why some people do not feel hopeless even if they have been trained to feel that way. His interests shifted, and he started looking into how to teach others to be more optimistic in its place. The link between optimism and pessimism, as well as how people

interpret challenges and unfavourable circumstances, were explored in his early works. According to Seligman's explanatory style definition, "The basis of optimism does not lie in positive phrases or images of victory, but in the way you think about causes" (Seligman, 2000, p. 52).

Finding and talking to one's negative self-talk might help one change their thinking and behaviour, according to the notion of 'learned optimism'. It is stated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, "The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (Seligman, 2000, p. 5). Resilience and learned optimism have similar psychological effects. Seligman asserts that acquired optimism may lead to resilience in an individual's life and vice versa. Seligman states that "Life inflicts the same setbacks and tragedies on the optimist as on the pessimist, but the optimist weathers them better" (2007, p. 312).

Learned optimism is the reverse of learned helplessness. The notion that optimism, positivity, and happiness are something that can be acquired is known as learned optimism. These qualities must be developed within oneself. By conducting a workshop, Seligman was attempting to prove the notion. The session yielded some excellent results. In that session, compared to the twenty-two per cent of students in the workshop group, over thirty-two per cent of students in the control group reported having a moderate to severe episode of depression. Furthermore, only 7% of the workshop participants experienced a generalized anxiety disorder episode, compared to 15% of the controls. They also discovered that the avoidance of anxiety and despair resulted from the shift from pessimism to optimism. While these studies are excellent, there is a strong relationship between them and the lives of Loki in "Once Again" and Anjana in "Trisanku". This is demonstrated by the character of Loki, who, despite having been a pessimist all of his life, becomes an optimist after being impacted by Sabari, his lover's good qualities. He detested his early years, but he began to change when he recognized his negative outlook on life. It was Sabari who altered his entire outlook on life and taught him this sort of mindset.

The two main characters in the short story "Once Again", Loki and Sabari, are raised in two distinct circumstances. The two main protagonists in the short narrative were Lokidas and Sabari, a boy and a girl born into distinct orthodox households. While Sabari was ready to serve as a woman and follow orders, Loki, despite being born a boy, was raised as a man and ready to reign. As a young girl, Sabari endured great hardships as a result of society's dominance. Since she was a little child, she has chosen to fight back against society's inadequacies and has learned to accept her gender. She has also managed to avoid all terrible experiences in her life. Despite everyone's opposition, she made the courageous choice to abort her child. She attempted to flee the scenario after accepting her miserable circumstances, and she was successful in doing so. She also avoided all of the psychological shocks that were inflicted upon her. As a man, Loki had several opportunities to avoid the childhood horrors he endured at the behest of his parents, but he made no effort to do so. He quickly realizes that he is powerless, gives up, and accepts the shocks.

However, in the same circumstance, Sabari would likely be able to handle things whereas Loki would not be able to. This is referred to as acquired helplessness. He even spent much of his youth contemplating suicide. However, he conquered such ideas as an adult, and as a result of his efforts to alter his perspective, his life improved. This perspective of acquiring optimism through learning

is termed as learned optimism. Meanwhile, every reader may relate to Anjana's statement on the value and advantages of optimism in the short story "Trisanku."

The protagonist Anjana in the short story "Trisanku" wants to pursue her Doctorate. Anjana was a mediocrate naturally. Victor Mong states that

Mediocre people want to do the very minimum. They won't and can't exert themselves to go the extra mile. They are comfortable with getting low grades whether it's about how they manage their health, eating habits, money, relationships, personal development. (2021, p. 1).

She wants to get over it and does everything she can to do so, but fear keeps her from doing so. She had only ever seen bowing and giving up since she was a young child. She therefore educates herself to accept the circumstances as they are rather than resisting them. Anjana registered for her PhD at the closest university since she feels more at ease there and because her professor attempted to abuse her. Following that, she finds herself torn between listening to her heart, which is telling her to go after her dreams, and her intellect, which is telling her to stay in her comfort zone. She follows her heart's advice and reapplies to another university to pursue a PhD.

There, she runs across another issue with her new professor's name. She is never admitted as his pupil by him. He criticizes her incessantly. She goes through periods of extreme depression. She has a strong need to prove herself, and she does so in a flash. Even the professor is sceptical as to whether this Anjana is the same one, he has been critiquing for years. The professor acknowledged her as one of his students moving forward. Anjana, the main character, became an optimist because of the horrific circumstances she endured. Anjana learnt to be an optimist and helped herself get out of difficult situations throughout that period. Throughout their lives, Loki and Anjana have not been particularly cheerful people. However, throughout difficult times, they both developed positive traits that prevented them from experiencing despair and worry. Clinical evidence has demonstrated that the most successful people are those who can manage their anxiety and despair.

A thorough understanding of Loki and Anjana's development may be obtained if they are exposed to the three Ps of cognitive distortion. As Seligman told to eradicate the three p's to become an optimistic person, Loki and Anjana figured out the cognitive distortions in them and eradicated it to protect themselves from anxiety and depression. Three main categories of cognitive distortions influence how people understand their experiences. They are permanence, personalization, and pervasiveness. By tackling these misconceptions, a person can grow into an optimist.

Personalization may be thought of as an internal vs external attribution strategy. A pessimist would always point the finger within when anything bad happens. By thinking that they are responsible for the failure or setback, people will personalize the outcome. Conversely, optimists externalize that they are not at fault and maybe it will be better the next time. Adversity or a bad incident is described as ubiquitous when it pertains to a particular or global level. An attribution that is widespread or global is negative and strongly associated with catastrophizing. An individual who perceives an unfavourable consequence as widespread is also likely to think that it will affect other facets of their existence as well. It may be claimed that optimists perceive better than negative situations as commonplace. Whether or whether a bad circumstance is seen as transient

or as permanent and unalterable is what is meant by permanence. While a positive explanation sounds more upbeat, a pessimistic one sounds gloomier.

The saying "The only time you fail is when you fall down and stay down" (Richards 4) very well suits the short story "Trisanku". The short story's heroine, a mediocre person who was content with her status and made no attempt to improve it, was willing to accept her regular existence and her desire to pursue a PhD. Not only does she find her mediocrity annoying, but so does the professor she was working with on her doctorate. The following were the words that her professor uttered about her at the time of her thesis submission:

My Independence Day. Anjana has finished her thesis. (Ambai, 2019, p. 167).

She could not even begin to express how awful this was for her. Her lecturer would always make changes to the articles she brought to class that belonged to him rather than to her. Because of their relationship, he was never able to trust her, and she was more afraid of her professor than attached to him. The main character wanted to get away from her father's boring life. She wanted to stand out from the throng by doing something unique. She had known this from childhood, and only after conquering many challenges did, she come to realize it. She was worn out and believed that total helplessness was worse than having a slave beaten. She felt worn out every time she took a step toward surpassing her innate shyness, but she also desired to conquer her mediocrity. This is the first step in applying Seligman's theory to psychological training so that an individual can become an optimist.

The first P is permanence which helps the character to decide whether the situation is permanent or impermanent. Optimists typically do more, have an overall higher quality of life, and are generally in better health. On the other hand, pessimists are more likely to give up, feel depressed, and lead unfulfilling lives overall. Moreover, optimists and pessimists differ mostly in how they interpret whether a phenomenon is persistent, universal, or individual. The protagonist, Anjana in "Trisanku" experiences humiliation and rejection all of her life. Anjana was pessimistic and dejected since she was unable to make improvements in her life. She might view any issue as permanent and refuse to take action to address it when it arises. However, she decided to confront her life and transformed herself into an optimist via her efforts.

Anjana made every effort to shift her perspective on an issue from permanent to transient, as this stage is the first P stage that denotes 'permanent'. Similar to Sabari, his beloved, Loki did not experience as many hardships despite being a man, but even so, he is ill-prepared to deal with any event that comes his way. Despite having many chances to evade the atrocities he suffered as a youngster at his parents' command, Loki chose not to try. He gives up and takes the shocks after rapidly realizing he is helpless. But in the same situation, Sabari probably could handle things, whereas Loki probably could not. One term for this is learned helplessness. He even considered suicide for a good portion of his adolescence. However, he demonstrated improvement after he decided to view his issues as temporary.

According to Seligman's explanatory theory, 'pervasive' describes the second P of an optimistic personality. A pessimist would get an inferiority complex at this point. He would hold himself responsible for the events outside of himself and allow himself to figure out a solution. When Anjana's PhD professor constantly made fun of her performance, she also refused to let go of the

idea of solving her difficulty. After heeding the courageous speech, she delivered in a seminar, the speaker from overseas exclaims, "Who is this woman?" (Ambai, 2019, p. 178). For the first time, Dr. Tripathi whispered, "My student" (Ambai, 2019, p. 178).

Anjana chose to take a stand after receiving a lot of criticism, and regardless of what her professor said, she would see that as one isolated incident and not spend too much time on it. For the first time in her life, Anjana received the recognition she so well deserved. With a smile on her face, she walked confidently into the throng, looking like a queen wearing a crown full of compliments from other people. She never recognizes it in any of her circumstances, but her positive outlook is the sole thing that made this possible. Anjana chose to enjoy her positive traits rather than dwell on her shortcomings, which allowed her to receive the attention she so desperately needed throughout her academic career.

Loki on the other hand, could not accept anything his parents pushed upon him, even if he had total faith in their wisdom. However, his parents were adamant that they ought to bring him up according to their wishes. Many young people in the community wanted to pursue professions of their own but lacked the financial means to do so. But this was not Loki's only problem. Their inability to follow their dreams and their lack of readiness to comply with their parents' requests caused them psychological anguish. The psychological effects of a child's continual parental pressure to comply with their professional wishes were thoroughly examined by the author. The writer proclaims that,

In the drawing lesson, he wasn't able to do circular men with arms and legs as he was told to do. He made them all square. "Is this the way to do it? Look how everybody else has done round men. Is this how people are?". "Yes, that's how they are. They have square arms. Square heads. And they can fly. They fly up to the sky and play cricket there. Even the footballs they play with are square. (Ambai, 2019, p. 12)

With the aforementioned lines, the author demonstrated Loki's specific state and his lack of creative potential due to parental oversight. He struggled with an inferiority mentality, and he was able to interact with society. However, he recovered himself and enhanced his creative abilities when he discovered how to be an optimist.

According to Seligman's explanatory theory, 'personal' is the third P of an optimistic personality. The individual is in a dire condition at this point since they are unable to speak up. They would compare themselves to others in addition to demeaning their talents. In addition to having complicated inferiority, the individual allows other people's opinions to affect them. They become self-judgmental in the eyes of others. When Anjana was the professor's frequent target of humiliation, she took the same action. Rather than placing the responsibility on others, she would voice her complaints. She never talked there and even protested when she was mistreated before leaving.

Anjana did not have much interaction with Bassavayya, her former PhD professor, who attempted to abuse her. She thought about reporting other students and removing Basavaya's disguise, but her lecturer took advantage of her inferiority complex, thus she was unable to act. She was trained to protect rather than attack, thus she was unable to do so. The surprise attack had caused Anjana considerable distress. Neither could she accept it nor, maybe, take offense.

However, Anjana began to speak up when she realized that others might experience the same thing. She made the decision to rip her professor's mask off. She overcame her personal fear since she learned to be an optimist and never saw that situation as personal. Anjana stands as a model for those who experienced psychological suffering as a result of abuse during their lives. A survey state that,

...women who experienced sexual violence were facing mental disorder like anxiety, sleeping disorder, obsession, acute stress disorder etc. More surprisingly, the women who were facing mental disorders due to sexual violence have been and continue to be exposed to further sexual violence. (Rai and Ambarshi, 2020, p. 1).

In the meantime, Loki was not only restricted in his pursuit of knowledge but he was also prohibited from making friends. He was told to restrict his friendships to guys in that specific community and to steer clear of males of other religions. Loki took it more personally and stuck to his parent's decision. He also lost sight of his true identity. He started evaluating himself according to other people's opinions. It wasn't until he discovered optimism that he began to view things differently.

According to Seligman's idea, someone with a pessimistic explanation style will crush the souls of others. Every effective communicator has a positive way of explaining things. Therefore, optimism is far more beneficial to a person than pessimism, although balance is still necessary. Seligman also discusses the drawbacks of excessive optimism. He believed that a person's perspective on life should be balanced. As with anything else, balance is necessary to avoid being too irrational and maybe injuring oneself.

The study believes that while being an optimist is perfectly valid, it is also important to balance optimism with pessimism or even plain realism because this fits in nicely with Seligman's theory of learned optimism. According to the creeds of positive psychology, learned optimism is a perspective on how one interprets the environment rather than a set characteristic or aspect of one's temperament. Rather, it's better understood as a mindset and approach that one might develop over time by first confronting habitual negative thought patterns. According to some research, optimism therapies employing rigorous psychological testing can greatly increase people's optimism. It can also be accomplished, as Seligman suggested, by using Dr. Albert Ellis's ABC approach, investigating explanatory styles, completing a thought record worksheet, connecting with one's inner optimism, and writing about one's ideal self.

In support of Seligman's theory, Daniela Kahlert and Ralf Brand have published an article entitled "The Role of Learned Optimism, Proactive Coping and Goal Adjustment in Re-establishing Regular Exercise after a Lapse: Results from a Prospective Study with Objective Data in a Health Training Centre" in *German Journal of Exercise and Sports Research*. They analysed the way of people by using an explanatory style according to the Theory of Learned Optimism contributing to practising exercise attendance in a Health-Training Centre. Loki and Anjana serve as examples of Seligman's 'learned optimism' because, despite being in the stage of learned helplessness, they have transformed into optimistic people through learning optimism.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest.

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