

From victim to victor: A conceptual study on positive victimology in Vendela Vida's *And Now You Can Go*

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Abstract: Literature acts like a magical pill, providing solace to the readers to overcome their psychological trauma or emotional shock by witnessing the trauma of the fictional characters. Positive transformation from trauma is a rare act, as precious thoughts lurk in its rarity; this article is the first scholarly insight on Vendela Vida's novel *And Now You Can Go* (2003). This critical study aims to vindicate the importance of self-preservation during crises and shows how it enhances the chance of survival when one has to face the life-threatening situation like the protagonist Ellis. This research would provide a new insight into the literary canon as it alludes to Natti Ronel's concept of 'positive victimology', which is a sub-branch of victimological studies in criminology and psychology. This paper elucidates how one can use the components of positive victimology like humour and forgiveness, as a coping mechanism to erase the impact of trauma in their memory in order to make the victim psychologically feel relieved from the tagline of the 'victim'. Despite connecting various fields, there is hardly any explicit literary research related to this topic. By connecting this notion with the optimistic strategies in the novel, this study aims at broadening the scope of literary studies. The study also provides a holistic approach regarding trauma as it puts light on how one has to confront trauma by not submitting oneself to the offender and how one has to move towards positive transformation by also commenting on the stress one undergoes in the intermediary process.

Keywords: psychological trauma, self-preservation, positive victimology, forgiveness, humour

Introduction

Literature offers a safe place for individuals to confront the daunting challenges of life by looking into the ways in which the characters subdue their trauma as an exemplar of the victims of a violent cause if

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they push into noxious, life-threatening situations vehemently. The victim can be categorised as an umbrella term as it encompasses a wide string of individuals who have been subjected to all kinds of harm. This literary approach deconstructs the fixed notion of victim, thereby claiming those people “who lose their lives to conflict of any kind or degree aren't only the victims, but those left behind to take stock of the situation suffer more and are often made to go through traumatic experiences” (Chishti and Rashid 2023, 59).

Literary insight changes the perspective of thinking, as it demands the need to shed significant light on the psychological trauma of those who narrowly ward off the path of violence as they too go through Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Moreover, it encourages them to feed off their lives in a purposeful way by urging them to shed off the stigmatising passivity tagline, ‘victim’. Existing literary research on the victims gives due attention exclusively to probe on how they are negatively affected due to their traumatic event. Whereas this literary study intends to concentrate on the positive transformative power of victim by letting go of one’s psychological trauma. Thereby, it instils the necessity to embrace the notions of positive victimology, like forgiveness and humour, which would ultimately result in mitigating or erasing the power of such traumatic memory. By wielding forgiveness as a resilience strategy to combat emotional suffering, the victims can take control over the uncontrollable hurdles of life, like the protagonist Ellis in *And Now You Can Go*.

And Now You Can Go

Vendela Vida, the charismatic contemporary American novelist, has a defined voice through her psychological fictions that depict female characters who skillfully manage the situation that goes awry with indomitable spirit. Such evocative narrative earns the Kate Chopin Award for making her female protagonists choose a path “less traveled by” (Frost, line 19). She has penned five novels with a touch of reality through her creative writing. Hence, the renowned author Jennifer Egan has praised her debut *And Now You Can Go* as “something much rarer in contemporary fiction: a joyful investigation of the pleasures of living” (Egan 2004).

Vida’s *And Now You Can Go* revolves around the life of twenty-one-year-old grad student Ellis, whose life changes topsy-turvy after she meets the man with a gun in a New York City park who forces her to die with him for no reason. She leaves unharmed but “carries on as

if treading water in an emotional whirlpool, waiting to get sucked under” (Review of *And Now You Can Go* 2003) whenever she recalls the incident. Vida urges the significance of self-preservation and brings in forgiveness to rise above the odds of life through her fictional world created for Ellis that mirrors the actual society.

Problem-focused coping: Situation can be changed

There are certain elements in this novel that highlight the optimistic need for self-preservation by taking control over one’s life even during a crisis. Believe it or not, the way the mind thinks by rushing the adrenaline that triggers the flight or fight responses has to be in check, as it may backfire by ruining the life of the victim. Like a typical human mentality, Ellis experiences a sense of disquietude when a stranger politely addresses her, “Ma’am . . . I have a gun. If you keep walking I’ll shoot you. Just do as I say” (Vida 2004, 3). She feels electrocuted as her mind travels too hastily, igniting the hallucinatory thoughts related to such incidents when she learns money is not the source for this violent encounter. Hence, she maintains her stability of mind through controlling the adrenaline rush by chanting “No, no, no” (Ibid., 4), not to him but to the catastrophic plot she develops. This further leads her to behave as if she remains calm and composed while speaking, giving him no second thought about killing her immediately. She follows certain tactics, like “holding [her] breath”, and tries “to exhale without him noticing” (Ibid.). Though fear lurks within, she does not reveal it outwardly, which creates the impression of having control over the situation by disrupting the overpowering attitude of the offender.

Based on the psychological aspects, people tend to show hyper-alertness during life’s existential peril, which helps in maximising the opportunity for survival. When he places the gun pointed towards her head by conveying his atrocious intention of dying with someone, Ellis experiences the manifestation of her intrinsic survival instincts because of hyper-vigilance that further serves as a platform to think of immediate escape through distorting negative thoughts. She expresses its swiftness as follows:

I can smell the leather of his jacket and I see he’s wearing glasses that say ‘Giorgio Armani’ in tiny, precise letters on the side. *I am going to be killed by a man wearing Giorgio Armani glasses.* . . . The pressure against my skull, just above my ear, makes me think I’ve been shot and there is a bullet going through my thoughts. (Vida 2004, 5)

The survival instinct kindles her thought of escaping from the act of violence and prepares her mentally by putting an end to her cognitive distortion that surges when someone traps in a harmful milieu. Kalpana Nair (2022, par. 2), a life coach, finds a connection between “science and emotion”. She adds, when one “get the connection” that everything is deeply rooted in biological processes especially “brain and its processing”, ultimately one can realise “every emotion and every instinct in you – has been to survive” (Nair 2022, par. 2). Reasserting control in her mind, Ellis firmly takes a decision by saying, “I don’t want him to think I’m trying to get out of this” (Vida 2004, 6), which shows her responsibility to preserve life from havoc. By scrutinising likely risks, she deliberately avoids ineffective means of escaping by evading shouting when nobody can actually hear. That is why she ponders getting help from the park service man nearby, as “he’s making so much noise that even if [she] screamed he wouldn’t hear [her]. And if [she] did scream, wouldn’t the man with the gun shoot?” (Ibid.).

According to Nair (2022, par. 2), “Whatever the trauma felt . . . has been dealt with in the most instinctive way possible that helped you at that time. It might not have been a beneficial way in the long run, but it made you survive the trauma and come out of it at the time”. Similar to that, Ellis comes up with an ingenious plan to divert the ill intent of the potential murderer and suicide victim by throwing himself into the activities that arouse his curiosity, which is a strategy of de-escalating the satanic intention. Thus, she intends to take “the man with the gun to a populated place, where there are people and phones and police” (Vida 2004, 6), thereby enhancing the chance for survival. Psychologically speaking, the underlying motive behind this plan is indeed the outcome of the tendency toward self-sustenance because the crowded area eludes the coercive attitude of the attacker. By pretending to have a rapport with him, she influences his mind by knowing his confused interest in poetry. She expresses, “There’s so much good stuff out there. There’s painting! . . . There’s poetry!” (Ibid., 7). Before she chooses another enticing art form that fosters a shared experience of humanity, he responds to her stimulus like a fish clenches the bait by asking, “Poetry?” (Ibid.).

Through her subconscious instinct, Ellis uses poetry as a weapon not only to shield her but also to lunge at him by carefully choosing certain poems that spark a humanising effect. In this way, she adopts poetry as a kind of defence mechanism by analysing the mindset of the

attacker. This prompts her to recite Ezra Pound's poem, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd" (Vida 2004, 7), renowned for its ability in combining contrasting ideas and arising a sense of wonder by teaching the transient nature of life, including one's sorrows. Then she rambles on about Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" and ends it abruptly as it deals with seduction. Therefore, she feels, "this is wrong" and does not want "to give him any ideas" (Ibid.).

In order to make him familiar with those enchanting poetry, Ellis strictly arouses curiosity about the popularity of Frost's poem, thereby urging him on the significance of knowing it. However, she withholds from revealing more of it by saying, "it doesn't matter what road you . . ." (Vida 2004, 7), as it might redirect the attention of the offender from her chosen plan. Such a response results from her urging desire for self-preservation, which warns her to cease at once that is clearly comprehensible. Then she meticulously chooses the poem of William Carlos Williams that is "more positive" and starts singing in a tune, which makes the man with the gun look at her like "a heroine, a scholar, a prophet", and as if she is "worse off than he is" (Ibid., 8). This marks the shift in power dynamics, as she is no longer a weaker one to be controlled by others.

To make him completely fall into her strategy, Ellis dejectedly claims that she forgot the remaining stanzas of Philip Larkin's poem that grapple with the ironical situation one faces in love, thereby urging him that one can live for Larkin. When he asks, "What's a Philips Larkins?" with "some confused interest", she is quick to seize the opportunity for escape by saying, "Let's go up to the bookstore" and "find . . . the part I forgot" (Vida 2004, 8). For this shared interest, he agrees by walking with her. This way of positive distraction results in changing the psychological state of the offender, it might trigger his empathy when he says, "Look, you can run now . . . and do whatever . . . I'm so, so sorry" (Ibid., 9). Feeling guilty, he frees her physically and only after witnessing him running in the opposite direction does she feel relieved, as "he's far enough away that he can't shoot" (Ibid.). Thus, she successfully shifts the focus of the offender by evading traumatic encounter through her way of interaction by utilising those well-chosen poems, which opens the door for de-escalating the motive of violence as well as an escape from a nearly departed death that is achieved through her desire for self-preservation.

Ellis' strategy questions the ideology behind the notion of 'victim precipitation', which is a part of criminology theory. It asserts,

“victims sometimes initiate the actions which lead to their harm or loss” (Petherick 2017, 262). However, in Ellis’ case, there is an inexplicable reason behind why the gunman chose her, as she is highly unaccountable for such a traumatic event. Similar to the unpredictability of life, anyone can become a victim of an inhumane storm of violence since there need not be a fixed cause or motive behind it; even the arbitrariness adds to its cruelty as it solely depends on psychosocial factors. Moreover, only through her interaction she analyses the mentality of the offender, which helps in escaping from the perilous situation.

PTSD: Narrowly averted but still a victim

Ellis suffers from PTSD, as she says, “When I close my eyes I can see him with the gun and I can hear myself reciting poetry” (Vida 2004, 23). She hardly tolerates the hallucinatory lingering effect of the garlic odour that reminds her of the odour from the offender’s gun. Even though the odour specialist does not feel any, it haunts her as it symbolically represents the freshness of traumatic memory. That is why her inner voice reacts aggressively by pointing out that, “It’s garlic. That’s the smell” and so tries to stamp it out while taking a shower for “onetwothreefourfive-five times” (Ibid., 55). Though she seeks support from a therapist, she experiences hallucinations that clearly show the instability of her mind after the crisis.

Because of her deep-seated fear of the unknown offender, Ellis initially likes the miscalculation about her caring boyfriend Tom being the gunman, as people have a misjudgment that a stranger has not done this to her without any motive. However, the weight of the rumour only increases her anxiety, thereby triggering intense fear, which makes her assume Tom is the offender when she meets him unexpectedly. As a result of her trauma-inducing paranoia, she “start[s] to run . . . sprinting” (Vida 2004, 65), taking big steps away from Tom, who intends to speak to her. These incidents clearly show how she is subjected to PTSD, though narrowly escaped the actual occurrence of violence.

Emotion-focused coping: Unchangeable situation yet manageable solution

The focal point of positive victimology, which is the subfield of victimology studies in criminology and psychology, is “aspiring to minimize the impact the offence might have” by encouraging the

victim to move forward in life by leaving behind the trauma through enhancing their “personal psychological process” (Ronel and Toren 2012, 173). It concerns “empowering the victims as well as assisting him or her grow on a personal and social level despite being hurt as a result of a negative traumatic event” (Ibid.). Ronel with his research team provides a novel perspective by considering the victims as the active participants, encouraging them to rely on their strength, thereby highlighting their potential for resilience, which marks a considerable shift from those traditional approaches that merely focus on the passive aspects like noticing the harm, rather than repairing it within. Thus, “Positive victimology reaches out to the survivors of traumatic painful behavior and desires to assist them while using positive components” such as humour and forgiveness “as a main road in their journey towards rehabilitation and healing” (Ibid., 176).

Ellis learns to see the optimistic part of life by admitting the truth: “There’s always a way of knowing, [i]f one pays attention (Ross 2024, 223) while accompanying her mother to a medical camp in the Philippines to help the poor. There, she realises how people remain happy with what they possess through navigating various traumatic illnesses. By taking that as an inspiration, she treats her trauma lightly. Using humour, she imagines how the optimistic and perfectionist mother of hers tackles the traumatic encounter and comments as if she overhears her mother’s conversation, saying:

She’s criticizing his [the man with the gun] negative attitude when there are others less fortunate. She’s teaching him to tie his shoelaces without using double bows. She’s telling him . . . how she and her brother are the only surviving members of a family of five. (Vida 2004, 113)

By thinking of her mother’s whimsical speech, Ellis feels “relieved, almost thankful, that [she] was the one in the park— not [her] mother” (Ibid., 113-114). Thus, humour reframes her cognitive ability by making the event funny, as it is a way of overcoming trauma.

Ellis provides an alternative perspective for the transformation journey by adopting humour in a way that results in de-escalating the intensity of trauma. It is highly commendable when Mark Twain says, “Humor is the great thing, the saving thing after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations, and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place” (quoted in Davis 2022, par. 1). While going through PTSD, she fears even closing her eyes by feeling insecure. However, she daringly visits the place where she

fears to tread earlier: such transformation results from embracing humour as a strategy to overcome struggles in life. She feels unaffected even when acting out what happened there precisely; hence, she normalises the traumatic memory by managing the narrative in a humorous way.

Forgiveness is one of the crucial components of positive victimology, as it assures the victims by freeing them from the bitter experience of trauma, though it is highly challenging to accept it easily by giving up the mentality of punishing or taking revenge on the offender. The epoch-making essayist highlights this notion even before the advancement of the law by voicing out the cruelty behind revenge as “wild justice” (Bacon 1857, 14). The United Nations General Assembly defines the victim as an individual who is forcefully shoved into the sea of “emotional suffering” and also sinks beneath the weight of the emergence of “substantial impairment of their fundamental rights” (1985, 40/34), which results from intentionally violating the universal norms of human rights. That being the case, forgiveness upholds the principle of fundamental human rights by thinking about the lives of both involved as well as the entire human community because violence should not breed violence. Hence, by adopting forgiveness, one can remove oneself from the stereotypical social stigma of being a ‘victim’ as it purely involves psychologically liberating oneself from traumatic pressure, which is the outcome of the healing journey.

Ellis considers forgiveness as “an inclusive practice” (Ronel and Toren 2012, 175) and wholeheartedly embraces the four crucial components of forgiveness that are “self-awareness, letting go, perspective-taking and moving on” (Field, Zander, and Hall 2013, 244) in order to unfetter herself. Through valuing potential strength, she normalises her thought process by accepting the reality of life, as it does not stop abruptly at one particular point while facing trauma. Thus, she recalls how her family accepts her father even when he intentionally leaves them and returns only after years without even apologising for ruining the family. She expresses the traumatic pain her father inflicted that makes her expect her “father to never have left, or to never return” (Vida 2004, 187). Her resentment is applicable to anyone who embraces a familial bond because “a mother dead and lost is far more easy to accept than a callous and deserter mother” (Bande 2014, 30), which is rightly suitable for a father too.

Ellis takes time to realise that her father feels genuinely apologetic for his wrongdoings and so her family accepts him in their web of life again. Henceforth, her self-awareness aids her in adopting forgiveness by thinking from the perspective of an offender who actually feels guilty about that situation. She witnesses her friends, who are holding the gunman in front of her to punish him. Nevertheless, she understands the burden of his guilt on seeing that “his face has more depth . . . his mouth is moving” (Vida 2004, 181). Thus, she lets him go, which is the result of embracing those components comprising forgiveness and she clarifies the reason by stating decisively:

I know a harmless man when I see one. I know sorry men when I see them, too. . . . I’ve seen a sorry man come home after being away four years. I’ve seen the change in a sorry man’s face- the embarrassment, the grief- and I know how to recognize it in others. (Vida 2004, 189)

By letting go of the offender, Ellis frees herself from the impact of psychological distress, thereby carefully eschewing proliferative negative thoughts. The true value of forgiveness prevails when, “though knowing the right to revenge, one forgoes the right for taking revenge. Here to get compassion is not the right of a wrongdoer, but it is a gift given by the victim of transgression” (Lijo 2018, 2). The way she bounces back from adversity by adopting forgiveness marks her resilient attitude, which ultimately guides her to stop stressing over the already done things. Thus, she moves on by liberating herself from the cycle of violent experiences and traumatic memories by gaining mastery over her life.

Conclusion

Overall, the PTSD journey of Ellis adds valuable insight by thinking about the psychological mindset of people who narrowly escaped from violence by showcasing the power play behind it. She alters the power dynamics using her desire for self-preservation, which not only saves her life but also asserts control over the situation. This research article voices against the cruelty of both intended and unintended violence through the literary voice of *And Now You Can Go*. It also encourages a victim to learn the art of managing one’s traumatic mind, which bears the mark of tumultuous emotional shock, and not to feel electrocuted by ruminating on the vastness of one’s emotional currents. By doing so, it would ultimately pave the way for a daring sail through the Mississippi of life. Just as a phoenix rises from its ashes, Ellis rises

from her traumatic pressure through humorously reframing her cognition and clinging to the rope of forgiveness as a coping mechanism. Her resurgence preaches a life lesson: one's traumatic pressure not only pushes down but also gives psychological power to navigate it by propelling upward in life.

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