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Endearing Happiness in *Dear Zindagi*, a Movie with a Method for Millennials

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Abstract

The present paper reflects upon the fundamental human desire and dream revolving around ultimate happiness or broadly speaking, well-being, and how a movie can be the best suited medium to appeal and evoke those of our emotions which will force us into responding to that appeal. Drawing upon the principles of positive psychology, this paper studies the movie, *Dear Zindagi* as a practical guide to identify, acknowledge, accept and work upon our strengths and weaknesses and thereby, bring harmony and balance in life. It explores how the plot of this movie is modelled after the life of a typical millennial; it seeks to trace the indispensable crossroads in her/his life and it seeks to dig deep and decode the embedded techniques in the story which can galvanize them to take hold of their life and start orienting towards their true well-being. It critiques this movie as a visually played out story to analyse it from such a pragmatic point of view and recognize the underlying messages to accommodate the seemingly abnormal choices and unacceptable behaviours in the fast changing cultural scenarios.

Keywords: Happiness, Well-being, Millennials, Films, Positivity.

> "If entertainment can be directed to also increase positive emotion, meaning, eudemonia, it will be good enough" – (Seligman, The New Era of Positive Psychology, 2004)

Happiness is that alluring, elusive, intricate and promising phenomenon which has engaged, right from earliest times, saints, philosophers, motivational speakers, scientists, psychologists and of course, mankind in general too. The diverse range of definitions of and approaches to happiness itself speaks a lot about how people's perception of it is subjective; culture/religion/time/society/class specific and how it has been accommodated according to individual inclinations also. Shigehiro Oishi et al indicate at "the fluidity of happiness concepts, suggesting possible future drifts in

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uses of the term happiness" and point out "variations in conceptualizations of happiness across languages, cultures, and time." (Oishi). Although there has still not been a universal unanimity on defining happiness yet the variables offered to predict happiness can roughly be categorised as reflecting the physical, mental and spiritual aspect of human life and happiness resulting from the fulfilment of either of them. From Krishna's concept of bliss in the *Bhagavad Gita*, sAristotle's concept of eudemonia, Charvaak's doctrine of material happiness to the contemporary area of positive psychology have, through situating these factors differently, focussed on happiness as the end result. In fact, the recognition of the cruciality and centrality of happiness is visible all around us: there are institutes, schools, courses to teach, learn and live happiness. The United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network indexes happiness of the people of various nations and has been annually publishing World Happiness Report since 2012, wherein the rankings are never the same. Notably, United Nations adviser Jayme Illien founded The International Day of Happiness on June 28, 2012. With the whole 'happiness industry' working around this mysterious and unsteady state of a being, the 'market' is spilling with theories on how the millennials can beam. The millennials who are exposed to a milieu wherein there is no concept of a culturally/spatially cocooned existence, no fixed formula to achieve anything, a hybridized way of life is the norm, the emotional advertising by the consumerist media offers chimeric happiness and the pressure of living a life consisting of rush hours takes a heavy toll on the positive emotions pertinent to a happy state of mind, translated as an all-inclusive term; well-being.

Around the world, governments and all sorts of industries, including the new entrants like spiritual and emotional industries, keep raking this intrinsic fire of desire for happiness in us, offer promises of enhancing the life conditions which lead to happiness and sell their respective recipes. For a seeker, it is like being on a train to happiness, which cuts a route through many substations to hop on and off from.

Among the various models zeroing in on the core elements leading to happiness, the PERMA model given by Martin Seligman is considerably more balanced and show cases an evolved and integrated approach to the dynamics of happiness (Seligman, https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/learn/wellbeing). He is hailed as the father of positive psychology and propounder of 'Authentic Happiness' theory which he later developed into the Well-Being theory. The five core basics that he singles out are majorly dependent on an individual to be cultivated and maximized. They are Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement. Applying this model in our lives would mean having a positive perspective by nurturing positive emotions, being engaged in activities that make us find the flow and immerse in it, building positive, authentic social connections, having a purpose, a profound reason to living and achieving a sense of accomplishment by fulfilling ambitions and goals.

The positive interventions suggested by Seligman to nurture one's character strengths and virtues may be like walking on a tightrope for many as it requires coming out of the closet, the status quo and reconditioning one's existence on the lines of such 'tasks and assignments'. The question that arises is: what can be the best method to make these theoretical concepts inform our lives practically? Can they be

brought down from the unrealistic, abstract and extraordinary heights to the ground reality of existence?

There can be many ways which can make us capable of identifying and cultivating our signature qualities, be it fictional/biographical stories, music, dance, theatre, meditation, group activities, sports, questionnaires, consultancy etc. However, when it comes to measuring the impact of the different tools of turning theory into practice, that too voluntary, entertainment industry is the most influential agency of change. Its mass appeal hinges on its being closer to home, projecting our wishful existences in their 'products' directly. One of its prominent branches, film industry, be it Hollywood, Bollywood, or the regional cinema like Nollywood, Lollywood and so on, attests this fact. The inspirational appeal of films takes them beyond their entertainment value and has directed our attention towards their therapeutic and pedagogic roles too. In their book, *Positive Psychology at the Movies: Using Films to Build Character Strengths and Well-Being*, Ryan M. Neimiec and Danny Wedding emphasize upon "character strengths… […]…learning to use these strengths in a more balanced way to elicit greater well-being, deeper engagement with life, and better relationships" and assert that "Movies are one way - and a good way - to get there." Ryan M. (Neimiec). In fact, Neimiec has been announcing Positive Psychology Movie Awards since 2009 by reviewing "a wide range of movies, studying them using the criteria of a positive psychology movie" because "Movies, more than any other art-form, capture the human spirit" (Neimiec). Movies are the space where we see patterns of life. They are the medium that works as an explanatory mechanism for a theory which is maneuvered into modelling lives by the filmmaker, consciously or unconsciously. As it stands, their influence is markedly visible in the way they shape our appearances, perceptions, values, beliefs, attitudes and even worldviews, for better or worse. It served as a big statement of the acknowledgement and contribution of movies' appeal when Seligman invited Lindsay Doran, a distinguished Hollywood personality to give a presentation on "Hollywood and Happiness" in Second World Congress on Positive Psychology which was held in Philadelphia.

Although the influence of textual content in our lives can never be ruled out, yet when it comes to taking that influence to the next level of acting upon them, a narrative may not always be much effective owing to the barriers of either language or context. However, when a movie is critically 'read', it serves as a socio-emotional learning tool, owing to the augmented form of the language values, messages and teachings which are embedded in any given literary text. The context and the further development of a particular story which a screen-mediated reality provides is easier to be aligned with. Most importantly, the engagingly emotive trail that the ending of a movie leaves is harder to shake off, whether it is negative or positive. In a way, the functionality of both movies and textual stories remains the same i.e., educating and entertaining.

Coming to the positive and inspirational aspect of movies, the movie, *Dear Zindagi* serves as a very strong medium to transmit the spirit, fears and illusions, as well as to communicate the vision of the present times. Skimming through its critical reviews, it

becomes clear that its likability rests around its capacity to kindle positivity in a life fraught with inner and outer conflicts. Andy Webster calls it an "insightful movie" (Webster), an opinion which is endorsed by various audience reviews on Google. Watching the movie proves that it is such an example of a positive psychology movie which aptly fits in the PERMA model. It charts the journey of a young bohemian cinematographer, Kaira aka Koko who seems smart, confident, witty, outgoing, ambitious and independent. She shares a great bond with her brother Kiddo, friends Fatty and Jacky and house-help Alka. However, she begrudges her parents who live in Mumbai and stays in a rented accommodation in Goa. She is shown to be seeking a good romantic relationship but is non-committal. Although the break-ups affect her but she does not let emotions overpower her, is passionate about her work and has a dream to shoot her own film. She is close to realize her dreams when Raghavendra, her producer friend asks her to shoot his film in USA and proposes her, which she responds to very casually. However, after getting to know that his ex-girlfriend, Gautami is working on the same project, she seems uncomfortable and bluntly shuts him off, apparently unaffected but still secretly wishing him to call. His engagement with Gautami in USA proves cataclysmic and renders her sleepless and miserable, though she puts on a brave face. She happens to overhear the psychiatrist, Jehangir Khan aka Jug at a conference while shooting a restaurant promo for her father's friend, and seeks his help, professionally. That's the point where her psychological mobilization starts happening. Layers after layers of her personality, in bits and pieces, are laid bare and piecing them together reveals a troubled journey of a wronged-by-parents child who grows up into an emotionally insecure yet confident, impulsive yet self-controlled, casual yet meticulous, nonconformist yet defensive, messy yet focused, restless yet laid back young woman who is a seeker, a seeker of a tangible yet elusive, wholesome purpose in life. However, a full view of Kaira'a life shows that life is wholesome only through keeping the stakes of its every aspect positively alive and that means not leaving any of them unduly unattended. Kaira's life, when lived in pieces, is not different from a bumpy roller-coaster ride but is a pleasant journey when these fragmented parts are well-aligned.

Dear Zindagi is one of those stories of human lives wherein we witness that clichéd before and after picture. Although this movie has been hailed for destagmatizing psychological issues and the required treatment, it also delineates a flowchart of happiness for the generally, seemingly healthy people. Kaira represents today's youth who exercise free will to live life on their own terms and seem perfect with it. She brushes aside her emotional issues and strives for vindication over them, until the physical fall out in the form of sleep deprivation necessitates dealing with them head on but sympathetically. Despite being carefree and emotionally strong, having rock solid friendship and having the means to fulfil her long cherished goal, she has the breakdown. And that's a big hint towards her disturbed emotional system. Dr. Jehangir Khan credits it for rendering in her an attitude sickness that prevents her from being positive and induces in her a kind of cynicism towards her love life, which in turn affects her professional life. He makes her take her emotional baggage off her back, peep into it, find what can still be useful, what requires 'repair', what needs 'recycling', what needs to be discarded, and how, then, the remaining lot can be put

the best use for her well-being. That makes her receptive and appreciative of herself and others.

Dr. Khan incorporates relevant anecdotes to offer Kaira an insight into her own state and find solutions. The first step he makes her to take is to let go of the stress of accomplishing something at the cost of her mental well-being, when he advises her vulnerable self not to incur self-punishment by taking the difficult path of working with Raghvendra to realize her dream. The positivity of patience pays off in the form of a deep sleep and subsiding toxicity of the heart break. Then, when she gets disturbed by her dream wherein she falls of the heights of an under construction building into the mud on the ground and sees traditionally groomed married women deriding her, Dr. Khan interprets it and puts her at ease. He makes her let go of the fear of criticism from the conventional society regarding her apparently experimental love life.

Kaira's tendency to judge and blame others and victimize herself is also altered when he suggests her to notice goodness in others too. He refers to Einstein when he says that a mad person is he who does the same thing daily but wants different results. The result is that she is initiated into increasing her contact span with her parents and making up with the people who are special to her like Jackie, Fatty, Kiddo, Alka. Instead of remaining closed and withdrawn, she is much relieved when she starts being open and vocal about her emotions. She becomes forgiving and sympathetic, breaking the pattern of her emotions.

Once emotionally well placed, Kaira strengthens her bond with her family and friends and the second component of well-being starts as a corollary developmental feature. She collects the pieces of her broken dream of directing a short feature film in Goa, instead of seeking some far-off destination via an escape route. And that in turn strengthens her belongingness and sense of stability. Her engagement with her project lulls her into an ease which does not let any doubt or unwanted stress creep in.

The most important part of Kaira's life is her struggle with handling relationships. We see a multifaceted yet contradictory approach towards her relationships. When it comes to her relationship with her parents, she is totally regressive and indifferent, whereas she is aggressively steadfast and loving with her friends. When it comes to her romantic relationships, she seems so keen yet non-committal and unsure. So, she is always in a state of perpetual denial and scepticism which does not let her be sure of her capability to forge long-lasting relationships.

However, Dr. Jehangir Khan gears her tendencies to a level where she experiences the inner wilderness and turmoil transforming into the rightly channelled energy which fills her with wholesomeness. The revival of her bond with her parents and the removal of guilt in her romantic relationships prove to be the missing piece of a puzzle called life. Forgiveness, empathy, care, love, understanding are the factors which now steer her vision of life with people around her. It is like her system getting cleansed of the toxic grudges and getting invigorated. She opens up to her parents, makes amends with Jackie, ends up being the godmother of Fatty's baby girl and stops being hard on herself as well as others.

All her efforts at seeking help, and Dr. Jehangir Khan's counselling culminate into the private screening of a beaming Kaira's film wherein she chooses to select a theme which reflects her own struggles with identity. She chooses to tell the story of an early 18th century female warrior named Dona Maria, the first woman commander of Portuguese army, who has to mask her identity and disguise as a man named Balthazar to join the army. Her daily struggle with the dual identities ends only when she is wounded in the war, exposed and helped by a male officer to retain her real identity and still fulfil her dream. The way she voices over this story, her own journey gets echoed. Kaira seems to have sorted out her relationship complexities in the past. Like Dona Maria, she has found out that her tougher self and maladjusted defensiveness were there because that was the only way to defend herself from the fear of abandonment and the ensuing humiliation. She also had to continuously fight two battles; one on the battle ground of life and the second with herself, her fears. Finally, and luckily, her mask was pulled off when she meets Dr. Jehangir Khan who, like Captain Alfonso did for Dona Maria, 'not only helped her cure her wounds but assuaged her fears also. He freed her from the ghost of her imposed identity.' Like Dona Maria, for the first time in her life, came face to face with herself: "Finally she felt free, she felt alive." Owing to her courage and morale, she could also fulfil her lifelong dream of making short film single-handedly. Now, like Dona Maria, she does not have to fight a battle with herself.

Her choice of the theme reflects her desire to seek meaning in life. It proves how her own travails with identity direct her to seek the true purpose and meaning to live a contented life. And that she has found it is exemplified by her statement at the end of the movie: "Dear Zindagi, I know we haven't been in touch for a while. So nothing. (I) just wanted to say 'Hi'." That is a significant statement in itself as it marks a break with Kaira's escapist attitude to embrace life and model it for an enduring happiness.

The movie *Dear Zindagi* works as a very good example of positive media which, by playing out a life we can identify with, helps us to identify our strengths and weaknesses, harness our energies towards positivity and enhance our well-being. This film validates how happiness is an indispensable aspect of a free and fulfilled life. Exploring it through the psychological interventions like PERMA is like venturing into a simulated session with a psychotherapist which makes our own strengths and weakness identifiable. In this capacity, it presents an explanatory framework for this theory. *Dear Zindagi* is what Neimiec calls a "cinematically elevating" movie and we can use such cinematic exemplars as models through which we can develop, grow, and become better people." (R. M. Neimiec)

The casual but sincere approach with which the tabooed psychological issues are treated in *Dear Zindagi* makes it a paradigm shifter in that it normalizes the so-called abnormalities. Catching the nuances of mental blocks of the patients requiring but resisting help, it has Kaira preferring a nonconformist doctor Khan over the other conformist experts in the field. Such normalization of the problematic of self-actualization and personal integrity certainly goes a long way in helping a person make peace with his life and tap the positive energy within.

Movies, by their nature and scope, are situated at the intersection of various disciplines of knowledge. They offer great take a ways for the whole field of humanities and social sciences to act upon or use effectively. The rich textual-audio-visual language of movies can be leveraged to hone our life skills. The potential of this format of live short stories needs to be explored, acknowledged and utilized to bring about individual as well as collective flourishing.

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