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Hope amidst Adversity: A Psychological Encounter on Resilience in *Never Fall Down*

Jayanth Anto Vijay J

PhD Research Scholar,

Department of English,

PSG College of Arts and Science.

&

Dr. Nancy Thambi

Associate Professor,

Department of English,

PSG College of Arts and Science.

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Abstract:

This research examines the application of hope theory, postulated by the American psychologist Charles Richard Snyder, within the context of the novel titled *Never Fall Down* authored by Patricia McCormick. The book is all about a young boy named Arn Chorn-Pond who escapes the cruel domination and attacks of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. The study on Arn's chaotic journey through the lens of Snyder's hope theory helps highlight how individuals navigate extreme adversity and trauma using hope as a crucial psychological fuel. Goals, pathways, and agency — the primary components of the theory are thoroughly analysed in the paper. A strong sense of purpose is witnessed in Arn's desperate goal of survival and his attempt to reunite with his family. He figured out various strategies, like learning music, which helped him gain the attention of the leaders of the regime, ultimately helping him escape death. Arn can fight against dehumanisation and stand up for his survival because he believes he has agency, or

the ability to control his destiny. This analysis sheds light on the development of resilience and psychological well-being attained through the transformative power of hope. It also attempts to provide valuable insights on both psychological theory and literary analysis by exploring the relationship between resilience and hope in the face of trauma. In the end, *Never Fall Down* serves as a reservoir of both a survival story and a display of Arn's resolute strength by portraying hope lighting up the pathway amidst the darkness.

Keywords: Goals, pathways, agency, resilience, growth.

Introduction

Patricia McCormick's moving and terrifying book *Never Fall Down* is based on the actual story of eleven-year-old Arn Chorn-Pond, whose life is permanently changed by the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia. The story opens in Arn's quiet village in 1975, where he had a happy childhood full of family and music. But when the Khmer Rouge forcibly removes the villagers and sends them on a cruel march to labour camps, his entire world falls apart. Arn, cut off from his family, must endure unspeakable atrocities such as malnutrition, forced labour, and seeing other inmates perish. He sticks to the survival tactic of 'never fall down' throughout his ordeal, emphasising the value of perseverance in the face of difficulty. When Arn is given a flute and told to play revolutionary songs, music becomes a lifeline for him, allowing him to retain his identity in the face of brutality. The journey of Arn, who is ultimately forced to fight as a child soldier for the Khmer Rouge, symbolises both the loss of innocence and the struggle for survival. He flees to a refugee camp in America after years of suffering, where he starts to mend and start over. McCormick's use of colloquial English gives Arn a heartbreakingly authentic voice, heightening the impact of his experiences. In the end, *Never Fall Down* shows the enduring

strength of hope and the human spirit, illustrating the profound effects of trauma and emphasising the significance of recovery and resilience.

Hope

Individuals have varied emotions in reacting to any situation they face. These emotions define a person and provide a clear picture of what they are undergoing. One of these emotions is hope. Hope is a strength peculiar to humans that offers them the ability to extract resources from the environment to assist their pathways toward healthy development and achievement (Colla et al., 2023). Individuals get motivated to accomplish their goals amidst hardships by developing resilience by embodying the belief in the possibilities of a better future. Hope helps in inspiring individuals to foster positive thinking along with the spirit of perseverance in all their endeavours. It provides comfort and resistance in difficult times as it acts as a psychological armour to oneself. Hope helps in framing new pathways and strategies for individuals to accomplish their aims. In the end, hope is a vital force that uplifts the human spirit and gives courage to face obstacles in life.

Hope theory

Charles Snyder's hope theory puts forth hope as a dynamic motivational experience which is an outcome of two different types of cognitive tools under the phenomenon of achieving goals. They are pathways and agency thinking. A few decades back, hope theory was discovered due to the increase in motivational literature and the revolution happening in human cognition inspired by Karl Menninger, an American psychiatrist (Colla et al., 2023). Snyder postulates that an individual's distinguished tendency to foster flexible and multiple pathways to attain their goals results in the emergence of hope. This allows them to figure out the obstacles and create new

strategies to achieve their destination. Hope doesn't stop by only serving as a tendency to create or strategize plans, but also provides the ultimate support that cannot be given by others all the time. Enhancement of relationships is one of the concepts under Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun's theory of Posttraumatic Growth. It explains that our relationship with the people around us after the trauma gets enhanced after a few realisations and reconsiderations. But this enhancement is a result of developing hope which stimulates positive growth in the affected individuals.

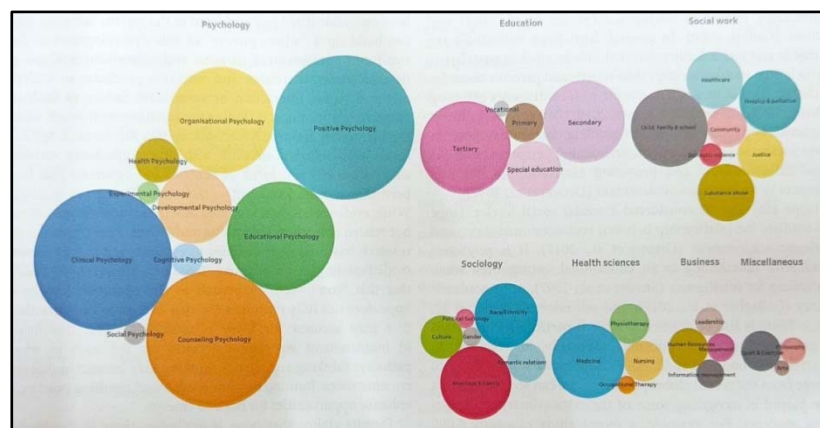


Figure 1: © Murphy & Moore Publishing, 2023

The above figure shows the blueprint of Hope Theory's application in various departments. All these years, the use of hope theory in various disciplines of research has produced a variety of invaluable research outcomes that have benefited multiple disciplines across the globe. However, the Arts and Humanities haven't used considerable application of hope theory when compared with other scientific disciplines. It might be because of the notion that hope theory deals with concepts related to Psychology and uses a lot of scientific terminology, which seems to be a Himalayan task for researchers who are from an Arts and Humanities background. Even though contemporary researchers attempt interdisciplinary research studies incorporating their discipline with others, more collaborative research is the

need of the hour. The arts discipline is placed only in the miscellaneous section, where the application of hope theory is very minimal and is shown as a small circle in the above figure. This paper tries to serve as one among a few examples of how hope theory can be applied and analysed in literary studies.

Components of hope theory

There are three components framed by Snyder in hope theory, they are: goals, agency, and pathways (*Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind*). These components play a vital role in attaining the ultimate treasure— hope. The goals demonstrate the desired objectives and outcomes that any individual wants to achieve. Goals serve as a binding force of hope by yielding direction and motivation in the journey of fulfilling desires. The factors that are essential for attaining hope are having clear and relevant goals. Setting goals requires a few steps, which ease the process of framing desires. Further, these result in igniting the ability to generate pathways that comprise rigorous planning and finding various solutions for the problems. The last component is the agency. It serves as the driving force that gives a sense of motivation, belief, and confidence in the process of achieving the desired goals. These cyclical components— goals, agency, and pathways that Snyder paves the way to overall motivation and belief in fostering the capacity to develop hope.

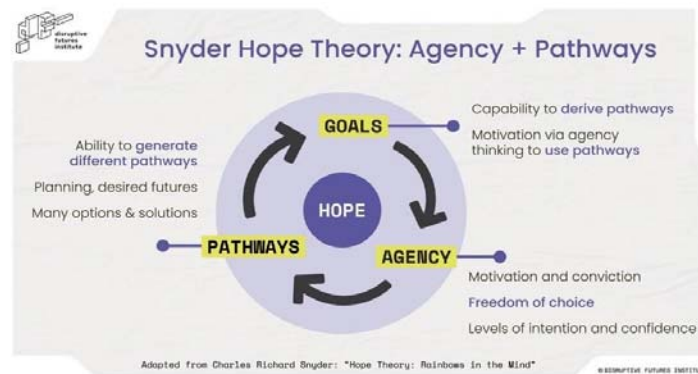


Figure 2: © Disruptive Futures Institute

Goals

According to George Doran, the former director and consultant of Washington Power Company, goal setting must be under the SMART criteria. He abbreviated it as specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time (*There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write managements's goals ...*). Any worthy goal must have a particular and precise target because it provokes the mind to begin producing strategies and pathways. The goals can vary in numbers from individual to individual, as some might have a few sub-goals that are related to the primary one. Sub-goals are the ones with comparatively less intensity or importance, which will not produce any serious harm to the individuals and their primary goal. These goals should be attainable. Realistic and relevant goals allow a smooth planning for the pathways to success, but a fantasy goal will make the process difficult and often impossible to fulfil. These goals will have a set time to be achieved. After all the formations of strategies and pathways, the minimum and maximum duration to finish the goal must be near concrete.



Figure 3: © Peoplebox

“No crying,” my aunt says, very strict. “You cry only in your mind.” Then she told us all in her arm. “Do whatever they say,” she whisper. “Be like grass. Bend low, bend low, then bend lower. The wind blow one way, you bow that way. It bow the other way, you do, too. That is the way to survive.” (37)

After the arrival of the Khmer Rouge, the peace of the people in the village was shattered. The Rouge wants the people of the village to evacuate and leave their homes, and move to a new place. They are forced to leave. Arn’s aunt didn’t take it lightly because she had something serious going on in her mind. She holds Arn and his sister and asks them not to fear and cry. She made them clear that their only goal is to survive all the hardships that are yet to come. She advised them to do whatever they are asked for and to bend like grass when the wind blows. This vision is deeply registered in the mind of Arn which ultimately helps him develop new strategies to cope with the Khmer Rouge for survival. Survival becomes the primary goal for all of them. Their goal is very specific. Survival is the goal of all the captives, and so it becomes measurable because it is a goal that is desired by a countable group. The goal can be attained with appropriate planning and smartness. For the victims, the quest for survival is a much-needed one. Their goal seems relevant to the situation. The duration to attain the goal is uncertain but it is

somehow achieved with patience within a few years. However, very few captives survive, and most of them are killed by the heartless Khmer Rouge. This being mentioned, George Doran's explanation of the quality of goals is applied in *Never Fall Down*.

Authentic and relevant goals have the tendency to provide traces of growth along with fostering hope. Developing hope requires a certain stimulus. Often, these stimuli are associated with psychological aspects of the human mind. Hope is a result of the positive growth practised in individuals. Any victims who undergo trauma or experience any heart-wrenching situations get carried away with a sense of failure and inferiority. Even in this novel, numerous characters lose their hope as a result of the dominance of the Khmer Rouge. Nevertheless, Arn finally develops hope and gets a chance to escape from the invaders. It is the power of setting pathways and agency thinking that helped him to win the liberation.

Pathways

The second component of Snyder's Hope theory is pathways. It reflects the cognitive ability to formulate several ways to accomplish the desired objectives (*Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind*). This places emphasis on the significance of planning and strategizing to get through barriers. Hope plays a vital role in envisioning various strategies for individuals to achieve their goals. This is a demonstration of the creativity and adaptability of the individuals while facing adversity. Pathway thinking does not involve the identification of capable routes alone, it also helps in recognizing possible methods for balancing the challenges. Pathways enhance the other two components— goals and agency. They are internally linked together within the framework of hope. Pathways provide the source of navigation toward goals, while goals offer only direction and motivation. For instance, a student who aspires to crack a difficult examination

should not appear for the exam directly with only the desire to crack it. Rather, the student shall chisel up their pathways to achieve it. They should focus on time management, techniques in studying, and proper utilisation of resources. This comprehensive strategy is crucial for holding hope because it cultivates a sense of agency—the conviction that one can act and pursue the designated paths.

“You,” he says to me. “You put them in the ditch.” I don’t want to do this, but I do it. My body does what this guy says. I push the people, very heavy, lot of blood. I push them into the grave. I do it. One guy, he’s not even dead. They say to push him anyway.

.....

I make my eye blank. You show you care, you die. You show fear, you die. You show nothing, maybe you live. (53)

One night, Arn, along with a few kids, was having dinner. A Khmer Rouge guy asks Arn to accompany him. He was puzzled because he is a part of the music band and they are exempted from being a part of other work, which the other children did. Arn is taken to a mango grove nearby, which is so dirty and wet. All that he sees are some parts of bones— skull, leg and some pieces of cloth peeping out of the soil. Arn then sees a group of around fifteen people kneeling with their hands tied behind their backs. It is like a bolt from the blue to Arn when the Khmer Rouge guy hit one of the men in his head with an axe. The hit was so hard that it sounded like cracking a coconut. The man falls on the ground immediately with lots of blood oozing out. Arn goes speechless and trembles on seeing such a terrible act. The Khmer Rouge guy orders Arn to push the body into the grave. He didn’t want to do that, but if Arn chooses to refuse or even thinks of refusing their orders, he will be the next one to go into the grave. As mentioned earlier,

the goal is to survive all the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, and so Arn realises that to extend his living, he must formulate new strategies or pathways to be considered by the Khmer Rouge. This serves as evidence to assert that this pathway strategizing is a result of setting goals. Also, the positive mental changes tend to develop in the journey of survival. Ultimately, pathways are not just routes to achieving goals; they represent the dynamic and adaptive strategies that empower individuals to navigate the complexities of life, developing a hopeful outlook that is essential for personal growth and success.

Agency

Agency encompasses the belief in one's capability to pursue these pathways. It reflects the motivation and confidence necessary to take action and work towards one's goals (*Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind*). Agency thinking is critical for sustaining hope, as it empowers individuals to assert their will and resist feelings of despair or hopelessness. As these components of hope theory are cyclical and interconnected, well-defined pathways might not be fostered effectively when the agency thinking is low. Each of these components paves the way for the effectiveness of the others, and together they become responsible for developing hope and positivity in the individuals. Individuals might struggle in initiating action and can end up giving up when facing adversity. Pathways thinking without agency can result in a lack of action, while agency without pathways can lead to frustration and unsatisfied potential.

So tire now, each time I step forward it take all my strength only to lift my foot. I say to myself, "Just one more step, then you can rest." Then I trick myself and say, "Okay, Arn, now one more."

. . . .

But I need to survive. I need to eat. Before, I kill human being, and now I kill little animal. Why?

Because every minute I have to think about surviving.

Every minute. (145-147)

The Khmer Rouge guy is sleeping under a tree after a tiresome day. Arn steps down from the tree in the morning, and he feels as if he is going to cross hell because he must not disturb him. So, he motivates himself by saying ‘one more step’ every time he takes a step. This self-motivation didn’t come all of a sudden to Arn. It is only because of the goal he wanted to achieve, along with the planning of good pathways this motivation or agency thinking is fostered. The primary goal of Arn— surviving, plays a vital role in maintaining his spirit of hope, which ignited hope within him. If it is not hope, he couldn’t have travelled this far without being killed. Arn Chorn-Pond still serves as a living example of fostering hope amidst all the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime. This interaction shows how important both components are because pathways and agency thinking help in forming a resilient mindset by enabling individuals to navigate hardships and remain committed to their goals, which ultimately enhances their overall well-being and hope.

Summation

The interplay between these three components - goals, pathways, and agency - is central to Snyder's conceptualization of hope. He posits that hope is not merely an emotion but rather a dynamic cognitive process that involves the identification of goals, the development of strategies to achieve those goals, and the belief in one's ability to execute those strategies successfully. *Never Fall Down* is undoubtedly a masterpiece that serves as an ultimate epitome of showing

traces of Snyder's hope theory. Snyder mentioned hope as a cognitive process rather than a mere emotion, because his understanding of the distinction of goals, pathways, and agency thinking is remarkable that he postulated a theory on his own. Arn Chorn-Pond sets a clear goal of surviving, which eventually led him to create ways to his journey of escaping death.

By applying Hope Theory, individuals can cultivate a hopeful mindset that fosters resilience, enhances well-being, and increases the likelihood of achieving their desired outcomes, even in the face of adversity. While agency thinking gives people the drive and confidence to follow those strategies through to completion, pathway thinking provides people with the tools and routes they need to overcome obstacles. When combined, these elements form a strong framework that encourages flexibility, resilience, and a proactive approach to achieving objectives. Through the comprehension and development of both pathways and agency, people can improve their feeling of hope, which will enable them to get past challenges and realise their goals. This interaction not only helps people succeed personally but also emphasises how important hope is as a psychological tool for overcoming obstacles in life. In the end, cultivating a positive outlook by creating avenues and agency can result in increased fulfilment and well-being in a variety of spheres of life.

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