

## Survival and Transformation Through Hope: A Reading of Manisha Koirala's Cancer Narrative "Healed"

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### Abstract

Situations of disaster, defeat, disease and calamities are normal incidents which are taken by certain people, as challenges and chances for life's progression. To overcome the hurdles, goals are to be set along with sustainable hope. Charles Snyder's article, *Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind*, published in 2002 explains that goals can be attained by high-hope individuals through a cyclical occurrence of pathways supported by agency thinking. The present article seeks to close - read *Healed* (2018), a cancer memoir of Manisha Koirala, applying hope theory of Snyder, to demonstrate how ovarian cancer in the body of Koirala is defeated through various pathways introduced and reinforced by agency thinking or self-motivational utterances, to reach the point of survival. This also attempts to understand how Koirala identifies and uses the traits like Optimism, Aloneness, Determination, Self-esteem, and Self-discovery to establish various pathways supported by the motivational thoughts that leads to achieve the target of recovery. The article also brings forth the transformation of Koirala from a film actor to a social activist working for women's rights. This is a journey from self to society. It also reflects on how the narrative structure and images used in the text has been constructed to transform the text into a survival memoir.

**Keywords:** Survival Literature, Illness Narratives, Hope theory, Positive psychology

### 1. Introduction

Goals and desires are significant in an individual's life while attaining progress. Hope generates multiple paths to overcome challenges and hurdles for goal attainment. Humans overcome challenges by finding various pathways accompanied by hope to accomplish their goals. Charles Snyder's article, *Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind*, published in 2002 explains that goals can be attained by high-hope individuals through a cyclical occurrence of pathways supported by agency thinking. The present article seeks to close - read *Healed* (2018), a cancer memoir of the renowned Indian Film actor, Manisha Koirala, applying hope theory of Snyder. It demonstrates how Koirala, defeats ovarian cancer as a warrior, through various pathways introduced and reinforced by agency thinking or self-motivational utterances, to reach the point of survival.

This study attempts to understand how Koirala uses the traits like Optimism, Aloneness, Determination, Self-esteem, and Self-discovery to find new pathways supported by the motivational thoughts that lead to achieve the target of recovery. It is observed that with the help of inspiring thoughts or agency thinking, Koirala overcomes the barriers that hinder the path and gets motivated reciprocally finding alternative pathways to fight through the trajectory of struggle.

The article also brings forth the transformation of Koirala from a film actor to a social activist working for women's rights, which becomes a journey from self to society, understanding the narrative structure and images used, with which the text therefore develops into a survival memoir.

Traumatic and resilient experiences of the fighters of cancer are not much represented as memoirs in literature before 1950s. Representations of traumatic experiences like illness, represented as auto-pathography could be read only from post 1970s. Authors like Susan Sontag and Audre Lorde were the prominent writers of cancer narratives during the late twentieth century. Margaret Edison's play *Wit*, examines the inseparable affinity of life and death as she says, "Life, death, soul, God, past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma" (Edison 8), and into the inseparable enters the inevitable struggle of illness, as Susan Sontag says in

*Illness as Metaphor* “Illness is the night side of life” (Sontag 3) “the reflection of the will which is speaking through the body.” (Sontag 44). It is the intellectual virtue of hope that remains between life and death which creates a prolonged living experience for the survivor.

## 2. Hope in Psychology

1970's and 1980's created a space for investigators from various disciplines to initiate discussions and theories about hope. It was in 1990s that hope theory got its prominence as per consistent and continuous research was conducted on hope for several years by C.R. Snyder and a group of dedicated and inventive psychologists and students who worked for the development of hope theory at the University of Kansas. Hope was meant as the term which described the motive to attach oneself towards positive outcomes or goals. Hope is considered as a positive state of mind leading towards the sense of success with pathways and the agency thinking for the attainment of goals. The reciprocal movement of the pathways which are the plans to meet the goals and the agency thinking that is the motivational energy created to inspire the person towards goal achievement can be realized as the process of goal achievement. It can be described that the trilogy of hope that is the goals, pathways, and agency orient the person towards goal-related thinking.

Goals were considered as claiming to try to get something done. Goals are meant as providing the end points of a sequence of actions. It is the anchor of any mental act. Goals are considered to have sufficient value and uncertainty in attainment.

Pathways become the workable routes that lead to the desired goals. Pathways activate the observable skill to produce reasonable ways for goal attainment. Pathways are used effectively with agentic thinking, to continue the progress of goal achievement. Agentic thinking reflects the self-referential thoughts that are motivating in order to move along a pathway. It supports the journey towards the progress for goal achievement. Motivational words like, “I can do this”, “I am not going to be stopped” etc. help in creating hope among the survivors. Pathways and agency thinking have a give-and-take movement creating approaches to realize and to solve the difficulties in order to accomplish the targeted desire, which is supported by inflexible notion of hope.

Agency thinking is created with a self-analysis, of identifying the strength that can motivate, and fortify the process of goal achievement. Agency is meant to be the motivation that helps people to move towards their imagined paths in order to achieve the focused goals. It becomes the process of motivating oneself by identifying similar circumstances of achievement from the past which helps the person to arouse emotions in order to attain the desired goals.

Pathways along with agency thinking initiate the movement towards the process of goal achievement. Both these components improve the ability to achieve the desired goal accompanied by hope. Therefore, hope, pathways, agency thinking or positive emotions form the foundation of goal achievement.

Not all process of goal attainment is smooth, barriers occur as blocks in goal achievement. The unpredictable barriers hinder the process, making the person to find new pathways supported by agency thinking, such individuals who never yield to difficult situations and who find multiple possibilities of goal achievement are suggested to be high hope individuals.

Snyder also introduces high hope individuals as those who brilliantly identify their goals and find multiple pathways as per the need, there on become successful in goal attainment. “The person faced with an impediment must call upon a reservoir of alternative pathway thought to produce a workaround. Agentic thinking also is important when the initial routes are blocked; it provides the necessary motivation that must be channeled to the alternate pathways” (Irving, Snyder, & Crowson, 1998; Snyder, 1994b).

Though it is observed that barriers produce negative emotions, the high hope individuals create positive emotional response to such barriers and try to generate alternative pathways when they face blocks on their progress towards goal achievement. It is deduced that Koirala in *Healed* creates multiple pathways in the process of her struggle to overcome ovarian cancer, which takes her forward, supported by motivational talks and auto suggestions therefore helping her on the path of recovery.

### **3. Manisha Koirala as a high hope individual**

Manisha Koirala's memoir *Healed* unravels the apprehensions, disappointment and uncertainties of the protagonist as a cancer warrior to emerge and rebuild a life with perceptions of a positive and productive, socially benefitted living. The study attempts to identify the goal achievement process of cancer struggle and survival. It also encompasses the unimpeded vision of cure which becomes the only targeted goal in the life of Koirala when she was informed of being BRCA -1 positive and have stage III ovarian cancer at the age of 42, in 2012. She was diagnosed as having 44% of survival rate and 56% of chance for losing her life. According to the Ovarian cancer statistics of the World Cancer Research Fund International, Ovarian cancer is meant to be the eighth common cancer found among women. Caught between life and death, though reassured by hope, death seemed to have reminded Koirala throughout. Koirala converts cancer struggle into a battle with life, she says, "I would now send my soldiers into the depths of the mysterious shadowy kingdom festering inside my stomach.", (Koirala 45) and also adds that "No longer will I remain a passive observer. I will now become an active participant in my treatment, I decided." (Koirala 45) Cancer is portrayed as a treacherous enemy which has invaded her body and developed its own army. The diagnosis of the disease appears to her as "...exposed. Like a huge wound whose covering had just been scratched off." (Koirala 6) and death was staring at her. She realizes that cancer is not a death sentence and confirms that there is still hope. Koirala appears to be successful in finding alternate pathways to fight with cancer as a high hope individual. Snyder states in *Hope and Health that*, "the high hope individuals exhibit some of the same cognitive, emotional and attitudinal attributes as do people who are successful in avoiding cancer." (Snyder 299)

Physical training and strict diet with consumption of healthy and systematic food pattern were the initial decisions which made her to accustom with the crucial illness. She says that, "I took a mannat, a vow, there that I would not touch grains, non-vegetarian food or alcohol for three months" (Koirala 7) along with the physical exercise she realized a loss of weight as she says that it resulted to loss of weight from everywhere except from her stomach. The next decision was diagnosis, Koirala was ready to do anything at that point and told her brother that it could not be taken anymore and decides to get diagnosed. Decisions were made to leave for America for the best treatment that could help her surpass the critical situation. It is the strong hope that she encompassed in each step that she took towards the process of treatment which made her realize the importance of life. It was this understanding that led her towards self-discovery which helped her to come out of her abode and live for the community and for the cancer patients after her recovery.

### **4. Charles Snyder's Hope Theory in *Healed***

Observing the various pathways generated throughout the process since diagnosis towards the treatment and the realization of recovery, Koirala seemed to struggle between optimism and despair and had to fight back to regenerate determination. This created a reciprocal movement which was frequently motivated by agentic thinking as mentioned by Snyder. The multiple pathways created by Koirala in order to overcome the barriers that emerged on her way to recovery made her a high hope individual. Koirala struggles to find different possibilities to achieve her target of cure and decides never to yield to cancer. Optimism, Aloneness, Determination, Self-esteem, and Self-discovery made her create pathways which were engendered by her along with the motivational thoughts to achieve the target of recovery creating progressive transformations in her life. Beginning from the diagnosis and her tough acceptance of illness, Koirala fights as a warrior to find new routes to reach out for the best treatment available, with strong determination and through spirituality she comes out successfully transformed into a better human being sustaining life for social cause.

### **5. Optimism: From fear of death to hopefulness of life**

Optimism is a general thought that good things will happen. Optimism, in Koirala's life, incorporates hopefulness to overcome the fear of death and other uneasiness that accompanied cancer. The fear about her treatment at US became a barrier which made her nervous and uncertain about the whole process. The vagueness about the period of stay at America was another stressor which was to be handled by her as well as the whole family. In spite of all struggles it was the best medical care which she was particular about. Both positive as well as negative events occurred simultaneously during the tough process of the attainment of the goal. She says that, "Yet again my heart became a fierce battleground for life and death, Optimism and despair. The endless tug of war kept playing out in

my mind.” (Koirala 2). The image of a fighter is prevalent throughout the memoir. The tremendous struggle to win the battle with the strong intention that she doesn’t want to die helped her make every pathway a success accompanied by self-assurance, augmenting oneself with aspiring thoughts.

Koirala repeatedly convinces herself that she was not ready to accept death. Various types of fears haunted Koirala at various stages of the treatment process, like the fear of recurrence after the treatment, the fear about the future, fear for financial dependency, fear to start a new life after recovery, fear to face the society, fear of one’s own body with battle scars and the response of people about her beauty and her appearance. Koirala tries to handle those fears gently, as she writes, “I grabbed an eyebrow pencil and penciled out my missing eyebrows” (Koirala 124). It was very difficult for her to fit into the frame of a standard version of a woman which the society has created. Still, she tries hard to get back to her former self. Finance was another threat which she came across. She understands that she would need a lot of money and makes sure of arranging it very intelligently.

Koirala fought all fears, especially fear of death with confidence. It could be realized when she says that, “...fear finally spoke out...bravado popped out and said: next time its I who will rule” (Koirala 126). She reinforced herself to be strong and optimistic. The changes that she realized during her stay at the hospital were that She, “learnt the art of picking up each moment carefully, diving inside it, admiring its possibilities and experiencing it fully” (Koirala 87), she also understood that she has become a moment-to-moment person, with deep appreciation about what life has generously handed over to her. This confirms hope and optimism became stable personality traits in Koirala which helped her break the conventionality of being a weak and depressed cancer patient.

#### **6. Aloneness: From loneliness to self-content**

Koirala journeyed from loneliness towards aloneness and learnt to be content with oneself and to enjoy one’s own presence during the time of cancer treatment. She mentions that, “Liking your own company is the first step towards healing” (Koirala 193) The fear of being abandoned again by life was the threat that she had at the time of the diagnosis and treatment. High hope individual tries to avoid the recurrence of the sorrowful incidents of the past which becomes barriers on their path of life. Koirala felt abandoned when her mother left her at the age of eight to accompany her father in Nepal, at that time Koirala was left alone to stay with her grandmother. Later the similar feeling of loneliness filled her mind when her marriage failed. All these remained as haunting memories. The fear of being abandoned was chasing Koirala all through her life and so cancer was another secret threat which made life itself to abandon her. Koirala writes that, “The loneliness of dying seemed frightening. It was the kind of loneliness that corroded my insides.” (Koirala 43). This was overcome through self-love, and with the establishment of the feeling of aloneness which became motivational agency for the attainment of her goal of recovery.

#### **7. Determination: From despair to divinity**

Throughout the treatment it is observed that Koirala and her family were relying in various spiritual modes of solace like chanting prayers, conducting lifesaving religious rituals like ‘death conquering pooja’ and also getting advices from spiritual heads and astrologers for saving her from cancer and for lengthening the life span. Koirala’s words, “Lord please show me the path – my purpose in life” (Koirala 6) shows complete dependency to God at each step of her trial. The faith in God and in prayers and finding a path of spirituality, helped her to wipe off despair from her mind. Prayers sent silently and deeply at Haji Ali Dargah, the tomb of the saint located at the southern part of Mumbai, also reflects the intensity of her faith. The *rudhraksha mala* which her mother offers to Dr. Chi during the time of the operation and the doctor’s response that “ This mala has done the magic”.(Koirala 65) shows how prayers became a tool of rescue. With ‘frantic prayers’, chanting mantras and visualizing the smashing of cancer cells, she was able to bring down the cancer markers from forty to three. She also affirms that she was grateful to “all the prayers and wishes of all my fans.” (Koirala 120), which helped her to bounce back to life. The various possible methods experimented with determination during the struggle like the nutritional interventions, walks, personal prayers and developing strong bond with the divine has helped her come out successfully. She asserts that, “I have worked hard ... at becoming the best version of myself-emotionally, spiritually and physically.”(Koirala 192)

## **8. Self-esteem: From self-enchancement to self-efficacy**

It is obvious from the words of Koirala, “My day is now filled with health and nutrition regiments, exercise, yoga and pranayama.” (Koirala 207), that the illness has helped her come out of an enchanting and mesmerizing world of film and glamour, to the day of reality. “I have finally embraced life and I think it has embraced me back.” (Koirala 209) During the initial days of diagnosis and treatment Koirala was considering herself as a Bollywood star and suddenly when she was reduced to a patient, it made her quizzical about the situation, as she quotes, “others have got cancer. How can I have it? I was healthy, ate well, exercised well. No, no. there must be a mistake.” (Koirala 10).

Koirala says that her body did not belong to her, “I was a caricature of what I once was.” (Koirala 43) During the realization of the disease in her, she sensed that self-esteem was at the lowest and she felt useless with lack of confidence. These experiences made her realize the value of self and the importance of one’s life and of each little thing on earth. Koirala made peace with the issue of losing her hair and becoming bald. She converted her pain into positivity as she says that as chemo was making her bald, it was a sign that it was also killing the cancer cells. Cancer left behind many learnings for her like, “It bought calmness and mindfulness. It taught me to never devalue myself. To be grateful for each precious moment and live it fully.” (Koirala 198) She also advises to “surround yourself with positive friends and influences. Flood your life with sunshine.” (Koirala 199) to banish negativity from life and to create a balance of harmony between body, mind and spirit and to drift away anger, jealousy and anxiety. She confirms her positivity saying that, “I started falling in love with life once again.” (Koirala 140).

## **9. Self-discovery: From family to Society**

Family and friends were the most supportive group for Koirala to endure the hardest days of struggle, in the hospital as well as during the post traumatic period. She says “But cancer picks out and places in your inner orbit the most unexpected of friendships” (Koirala 129) The form of relationship which she had with her family slowly changed, “our roles reversed. Earlier, I had been the decision – maker and caretaker. Now it was them. I felt blessed to have them around me.” (Koirala 113)

“Reinvented, renewed and realigned” (Koirala 206), Koirala sets new boundaries around her to shatter hardness and yet not to become vulnerable. She calls herself a “deep rooted banyan”, branched out towards many directions spreading towards multifaceted sides. She has flourished out as a motivational speaker at schools, hospitals and organizations and also taken up the role of a goodwill ambassador of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and also initiating relief activities in earthquake affected areas of Nepal. She has also identified herself as a social worker working for women’s rights and for the prevention of violence against women, and also working against human trafficking of Nepal girls for prostitution. She feels to have a clearer mind with priorities realigned with the desire to serve back the society with a sharper vision. Pramod K. Nayar says that “It is then possible to see blogging, storytelling (Koirala’s term), and narrative appurtenances, such as the list of recommended books in Koirala, as attempts to reach out to a world of (similar) sufferers—to offer life lessons from their case histories.” (Nayar, 90)

## **10. Conclusion**

Snyder says that a “high-hope” person considers the stressor as a challenge which guides them towards finding alternate pathways in order to achieve their goals. The identification of the disease and understanding the gravity of it makes Koirala create a strong goal to successfully fight against the disease and attain cure. The reciprocal process of the creation of pathways and agency thinking as she takes each step through discussions, decisions and methods of achieving each goal from the beginning of the treatment has proven that Koirala is a “high-hope” individual with a positive emotional set.

Therefore, the pathways enumerated in the study along with the powerful positive motivations working as agentic thinking has helped Koirala to defeat all the severe difficulties that intervened through the path of recovery. The struggle also formulated a renewal and reinvention of the self, benefitting the social milieu. The analysis creates scope for further psychological studies relating survival in real life illness memoirs and autopathography.

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