

# Mina's Self-Determination Expressed in Axie Oh's The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea

*by* Ufi Nafi'ah

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## Mina's Self-Determination Expressed in Axie Oh's *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea*

Ufi Nafi'ah

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia

Email: uffinafiah@gmail.com

Ambar Andayani

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia

Email: ambarandayani@untag-sby.ac.id

**Abstract.** This study explores the expression of self-determination in the character Mina from Axie Oh's *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea*, using the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2000). The research applies a literary psychology approach and uses qualitative descriptive methods to analyze Mina's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations throughout the novel. The findings reveal that Mina fulfills the three core needs of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Her decision to sacrifice herself is rooted in personal values rather than external rewards, demonstrating strong intrinsic motivation. Additionally, her character development reflects a progression through various forms of extrinsic motivation, from external regulation to integrated regulation, showing how external pressures are gradually internalized. The study concludes that Mina's psychological growth and self-determined actions offer a clear literary representation of SDT principles, contributing to a deeper understanding of motivation and identity in fictional narratives.

**Keywords:** Extrinsic Motivation, Intrinsic Motivation, Self-determination.

### INTRODUCTION

Self-determination emphasizes an individual's ability to make independent choices and act on them without external pressure. At the heart of this concept is Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which asserts that people flourish when three core psychological needs are met: autonomy (freedom to make one's own choices), competence (ability to handle challenges effectively), and relatedness (experience of meaningful connections with others). This framework is supported by Albert Bandura's idea of self-efficacy, which underscores the importance of believing in one's own abilities to influence life events. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy further contributes to this discussion by asserting that humans are entirely free and responsible for the meaning they create in their lives through personal choices.

A practical illustration of this concept can be seen in the life of a student from a disadvantaged background who chooses to pursue higher education despite significant societal and economic obstacles. Her decision reflects autonomy, as she follows her own path instead of conforming to cultural expectations. Her perseverance through academic

and financial challenges highlights competence, while the support she gains from friends and mentors shows the importance of relatedness. This example demonstrates how fulfilling the three psychological needs identified by SDT can result in strong intrinsic motivation, resilience, and personal development.

Focusing on Axie Oh's *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea*, a young adult fantasy novel inspired by Korean mythology, the analysis explores how self-determination is embodied in the main character, Mina. When her brother's beloved is chosen to be sacrificed to the Sea God, Mina courageously offers herself instead, setting off a journey into the mystical Spirit Realm. There, she seeks to awaken the cursed Sea God and restore balance to the world. Throughout her quest, Mina displays autonomy through her decisions, competence in facing difficult trials, and relatedness in her growing bonds with allies like Shin and other spirits she meets.

Using Self-Determination Theory as the central analytical framework, this paper investigates how Mina's personal growth is shaped by her ability to satisfy the three core psychological needs. The focus remains specifically on Mina's character and development, without examining secondary characters or broader mythological elements of the novel. Through qualitative textual analysis, the researcher interprets Mina's motivations and actions as expressions of self-determined behaviour.

Overall, this examination contributes to both literary scholarship and practical understanding. It highlights how self-determination can be represented in fiction and offers valuable insights for educators, students, and future researchers. By analyzing how Mina's journey aligns with SDT, this research encourages deeper appreciation of psychological themes in literature and fosters stronger critical thinking and literary interpretation skills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this research, the researcher will give statement about the theory which will be used to examine the statement's problem. The researcher will use theory of Self-Determination by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2000), focused on the self-determination that expressed by the protagonist in Axie Oh's *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea*.

Self-Determination Theory, created by Deci and Ryan, is a broad idea for studying what makes people do things and how their personalities work. A central part of SDT is the belief that people naturally want to grow and have psychological needs that cause them to act in certain ways. According to the theory, individuals experience the highest level of motivation when three fundamental psychological needs are fulfilled: the sense of autonomy, which involves having control over one's own actions and decisions; the sense of competence, which refers to feel capable and effective in reaching desired goals; and the sense of relatedness, which reflects the need to feel connected to and supported by others.

Deci and Ryan (2000) stated that if people are helped to meet these three needs, they are more likely to do things because they enjoy them. This leads to feelings of pleasure, happiness, and growth as a person. SDT is different from using rewards or punishments to control people. SDT highlights how important it is for people to initiate and manage their own behaviour. When studying literature, SDT can help us see how characters show that they can make their own choices and deal with what makes them act in certain ways, especially when faced with pressure or what society expects.

In SDT, motivation is seen as a range based on how much control a person has over his or her own actions. Motivation is not simply internal or external; it takes many forms that

indicate how well a behaviour has been accepted as part of oneself. Deci and Ryan point out different types of motivation:

#### 1. Amotivation

This happens when someone has no motivation at all. Motivated people don't do things because they want to, or because someone tells them to. They may feel like they can't do anything, have no purpose, or feel like what they're doing is meaningless.

#### 2. Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation means doing something because you enjoy it or because it makes you feel good. Intrinsic motivation is the strongest type of motivation because you do it because you want to do it. The action is in line with what you believe and what you want.

#### 3. Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation is when you do something to get something else, like a reward or approval, or to avoid punishment. But SDT also says that extrinsic motivation can change based on how much a person has made it their own. There are four types of extrinsic motivation: External Regulation is a behaviour that controlled by external forces like a rewards, threats, or commands; Introjected Regulation is a behaviour that driven by internal pressures like a guilt, shame, or the desire to protect one's ego; Identified Regulation is a behaviour that is more autonomous (the individual recognizes the value of the action and accepts it as something personally important); Integrated Regulation is the most self-determined form of extrinsic motivation, where actions are fully assimilated with one's values and identity, even though they may not be inherently enjoyable.

These types show a range of reasons for doing things, from not being motivated at all (amotivation) to being completely self-motivated (intrinsic motivation). Knowing where a character's motivation falls on this range can reveal their inner conflict, how they change, or why they fight outside forces.

### METHOD

A literary psychology approach is applied in this study, utilizing Self-Determination Theory by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2000) to analyse expression of self-determination in Axie Oh's *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea*. This approach is chosen because the analysis centers on the main character of the novel, examining her psychological development, motivations, emotions, and personality. By using psychological theory, the study explores how the protagonist experiences and demonstrates self-determination throughout the story.

The focus of this investigation lies in how self-determination is portrayed in the main character, guided by the Self-Determination Theory developed by Deci and Ryan (2000). A qualitative descriptive method is used to carry out this analysis. As Creswell (2009) explains, qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups give to a social problem. Since the primary data source is the novel itself, this method is suitable, as it allows the analysis to be presented descriptively in the form of words rather than numerical data.

### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research examines how self-determination is expressed by the main character, Mina, in Axie Oh's *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea* using Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000). The theory highlights three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which drive intrinsic motivation. Mina's

story is set in a myth-inspired fantasy world where she voluntarily sacrifices herself to save her brother's beloved from being offered to the Sea God. Her journey into the Spirit Realm reflects a deep internal motivation rather than a desire for external reward, showcasing strong autonomy. This is evident in her declaration, "This fate was never mine to begin with. I claimed it for myself when I jumped into the Sea" (Oh, 2022: 27), which shows her full sense of agency and choice.

In terms of competence, Mina exhibits increasing mastery and resilience as she navigates the supernatural challenges of the Spirit Realm. She demonstrates problem-solving skills and grows more confident in interpreting mystical signs, as shown when she reflects, "The puzzle of her words falls into place, and I think I finally understand what she wants" (Oh, 2022: 212). This aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2000) concept that people are "intrinsically motivated to seek out challenges that allow them to demonstrate and develop their competence." Her success in overcoming obstacles not only advances the story but reinforces her development as a self-determined individual.

Mina also satisfies the third SDT component, relatedness, through her deep emotional connections with others. Her selfless act of becoming the Sea God's bride is rooted in her love for her family and community. Her emotional reunion with her brother Joon exemplifies this connection: "You only have one sister." "Yes, and she is the bravest person I know" (Oh, 2022: 272). In addition, her evolving relationship with Shin reflects authentic, emotionally reciprocal love. In the novel their relationship formed not by destiny, but by mutual care and choice, fitting SDT's emphasis on emotionally secure and voluntary bonds.

The research also explores how Mina's character evolves through different types of extrinsic motivation outlined in SDT, from external to more autonomous forms. Initially, her decision to sacrifice herself is influenced by *external regulation*, shaped by cultural expectations of women as sacrificial brides: "They were going to sacrifice Shim Cheong... And brides are always eighteen" (Oh, 2022: 55). As her journey progresses, *introjected regulation* appears in moments of internalized guilt and obligation, such as when she questions her offerings to the goddess: "Were my offerings too little for the goddess? My prayers too weak?" (Oh, 2022: 214). These emotions drive her actions without any explicit external demand, reflecting pressure from within.

Eventually, Mina's motivation shifts to *identified and integrated regulation*, the more self-determined forms of *extrinsic motivation*. She chooses to stay in the Spirit Realm not out of obligation, but because she believes in the importance of saving others. By the end, her choices fully align with her personal identity, showing *integrated regulation*. Her final reflection encapsulates this: "The girl who, by saving herself, saves the world" (Oh, 2022: 272). This quote not only summarizes Mina's character arc but also confirms that she has internalized the values that guide her actions, embodying the essence of self-determined agency.

In conclusion, Mina's journey in *The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea* vividly illustrates the psychological dimensions of self-determination. Through *autonomy, competence, and relatedness*, as well as the spectrum of extrinsic motivations, Mina's actions are shaped by a dynamic interplay of internal and external forces. Her evolution from acting under cultural expectation to becoming a self-possessed heroine aligns with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, offering a compelling literary example of how motivation and identity develop in complex, meaningful ways.

## CONCLUSION

This research goal is to analyse the concept of self-determination in Mina, the main character in the novel entitled *The Girl Who Beneath the Sea* by Axie Oh, using the framework of Self-Determination Theory developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. The theory emphasizes the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as key elements in fostering intrinsic motivation, while also distinguishing different types of extrinsic motivation, namely external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation. Throughout the narration, Mina's been told as a character that chose her own determination revealed through her internal and external.

The intrinsic motivation in Mina shown by her voluntary decision to replace Shim Cheong as the sea god's bride, a decision that roots by love to her family and her commitment to justice. The autonomy expressed by her objection to human's expectations, and then her competence showed up when she successfully solves the problem in the Spirit Realm, and her relatedness can be seen by her relationship with people around her. At the same time, Mina also experienced the extrinsic motivation in the form of obeying social expectations (external regulation), feeling guilty (introjected regulation), valuing her mission (identified regulation), and fully aligning her decision with her true identity (integrated regulation). These all kinds of motivation show the complexity of human being and the spectrum of influence that can cause someone to do something.

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