

NAVIGATING HUMAN RESILIENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL LIFE STRUGGLES IN DANIELLE STEEL'S *ZOYA*

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Received: 2025-07-28

Accepted: 2025-10-31

Published: 2025-11-20

Abstract

This study explores the multidimensional nature of human resilience as portrayed in Danielle Steel's novel *Zoya*, focusing on the protagonist's psychological and sociological transformation amid historical upheaval. Employing Braun and Isaac's (1979) tripartite model of life struggle—conflict with self, others, and the environment—and integrating Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs alongside Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the research analyzes how *Zoya* navigates personal trauma, intergenerational tension, and socio-political displacement. Set against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution and global migrations of the 20th century, *Zoya*'s journey from aristocratic exile to self-reliant immigrant underscores the interplay of intrinsic motivation—such as identity reconstruction and emotional autonomy—and extrinsic forces like war, poverty, and social change. Through qualitative literary analysis, the study uncovers how *Zoya* redefines dignity, agency, and meaning across shifting cultural landscapes. The findings suggest that Steel's narrative transcends conventional romance, offering a compelling literary case study of adaptive resilience. By merging literary analysis with psychological and sociological theory, this article contributes to broader interdisciplinary discourses on trauma, survival, and the evolving female bildungsroman. *Zoya*'s evolution serves not only as a fictional reflection of resilience but also as a universal narrative of human tenacity amid crisis.

Keywords: *Adversity; Identity; Motivation; Resilience; Struggle*

1. Introduction

Literature serves as both a mirror and a mold for human experiences, offering a narrative space in which life's complexities—emotional, social, and existential—are explored and illuminated. As Sabudu (2020) notes, literary works frequently reflect socio-cultural realities in ways that resonate with readers' own challenges. The novel *Zoya* by Danielle Steel presents a vivid portrayal of such realities, encapsulating the personal and societal upheavals endured by its protagonist amid historical chaos.

Set against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution and the socio-political transformations of the early 20th century, *Zoya* traces the journey of Zoya Ossupov, a young aristocratic woman who is compelled to navigate profound loss, displacement,

and reinvention. Her transformation—from a pampered noble in Tsarist Russia to a resilient survivor in Paris and New York—is shaped by a series of internal conflicts and external pressures. As literature, particularly fiction, often embodies such psychological and sociological themes (Endraswara, 2008; Nurgiyantoro, 2013), *Zoya* becomes an ideal subject for analyzing the "struggle for life"—a concept that Braun and Isaac (1979) define through three core dimensions: conflict with self, with others, and with the environment.

This study utilizes both Braun and Isaac's framework and Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs to interpret the protagonist's narrative journey. Maslow's model offers a psychological lens for understanding *Zoya*'s intrinsic motivations—such as the pursuit of emotional resilience and identity reconstruction—while external influences, including war, cultural displacement, and class collapse, highlight extrinsic factors that compel behavioral adaptation. Furthermore, Krishnananda (2024) underscores the timeless human need to overcome existential challenges, suggesting that struggle itself becomes a medium for discovering purpose and meaning.

The sociological approach adopted in this study views *Zoya* not merely as a fictional character but as a symbolic representation of individuals negotiating identity, belonging, and autonomy in the face of historical trauma. The integration of previous scholarly analyses (e.g., Larasati et al., 2021; Syahputro, 2023) on character resilience and literary conflict further validates the thematic relevance of this research.

Ultimately, this article seeks to explore how internal psychological drivers and external sociocultural forces intersect to shape the human experience of struggle. Through the lens of *Zoya*, it examines the enduring capacity for survival, growth, and self-determination in even the most challenging circumstances.

2. Literature Review

This section provides the theoretical and empirical foundation supporting the analysis of life struggle in Danielle Steel's *Zoya*. The literature review is organized into four key subsections: the sociological approach to literature, the conceptual framework of struggle, intrinsic and extrinsic motivational theories, and an overview of relevant previous studies.

2.1 Sociology of Literature

The sociological approach in literary criticism emphasizes the reflection of social phenomena within literary texts. Literature, according to Allan (2006), is not an isolated artistic expression but rather a product of its socio-historical context, mirroring the structures and dynamics of society. C. Wright Mills (1959) introduced the concept of the "sociological imagination," urging readers to connect personal experiences with broader societal patterns. In literary texts, this translates into character development shaped by cultural norms, class systems, and historical events.

In *Zoya*, the protagonist's life trajectory is shaped by systemic events such as the Russian Revolution, economic collapse, and wartime displacement. As Endraswara (2008) and Nurgiyantoro (2013) argue, literature is capable of encapsulating both psychological and sociological dimensions of human life. The sociological lens, therefore, is crucial in analyzing how external events impose identity crises and behavioral transformation on literary characters.

2.2 Conceptualizing Life Struggle

Braun and Isaac's (1979) theory on the "struggle for life" offers a framework for classifying conflict into three categories: struggle with oneself, with others, and with the environment. These categories collectively capture the psychological, interpersonal, and societal dimensions of adversity. Internal struggle involves emotional conflict, guilt, and value shifts; struggle with others concerns interpersonal dynamics and social expectations; and struggle with the environment includes war, displacement, and economic survival.

Krishnananda (2024) adds a philosophical dimension, arguing that life's fundamental struggles stem from basic human limitations and the need for existential meaning. He emphasizes that historical crises are fundamentally human crises—cyclical in nature, yet transformative in impact.

2.3 Motivation: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors

To understand how characters endure and overcome life's struggles, this study also incorporates Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs and the Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000). Maslow posits that human behavior is driven by layered needs—from physiological survival to self-actualization. Zoya's psychological resilience and transformation can be interpreted through her progressive journey across these needs.

Intrinsic motivation refers to actions driven by internal satisfaction—such as the pursuit of dignity, emotional healing, or personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Krishnananda (2024) highlights the role of curiosity, challenge, and emotional meaning in intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation involves behavior influenced by external rewards or pressures—such as war, exile, economic necessity, and social expectations.

These dual motivational frameworks are essential for interpreting Zoya's character arc. Her internal motivations for perseverance and her external pressures to survive form the core dynamics of her literary struggle.

2.4 Previous Studies on Life Struggle in Literature

A variety of recent studies demonstrate the analytical relevance of life struggle as a literary theme. Larasati, Triyogo, and Yulfi (2021) explored social class conflict in *Frankenstein*, emphasizing how structural inequalities shape character relationships. Syahputro (2023) examined survival and psychological struggle in *I2 Strong*, aligning closely with the current study's thematic focus. Sain and Dewi (2022) discussed perseverance in *Laskar Pelangi*, showing how characters adapt through educational and familial hardship.

Further, Husna (2021) analyzed determination in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, while Azka et al. (2021) investigated resilience in C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Other contributions—such as Gustaman and Lolowang (2021) on *Where the Crawdads Sing* and Manuputty et al. (2021) on *Kami Bukan Sarjana Kertas*—demonstrate how literary protagonists reflect endurance in hostile environments.

These works support the current study's focus on the multidimensional nature of human struggle, while reinforcing the value of combining psychological and sociological analysis in literary research. The originality of this study lies in its

integration of Braun and Isaac's (1979) tripartite framework with motivational psychology to examine *Zoya*'s transformation under the weight of historical trauma.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach rooted in psychological and sociological theory. The methodology is designed to interpret the types of life struggles experienced by the protagonist in Danielle Steel's *Zoya*, and to examine the internal (intrinsic) and external (extrinsic) factors that influence the character's transformation across the novel.

3.1 Research Design

This research is classified under qualitative literary criticism, employing a descriptive-interpretative approach. As explained by Strauss and Corbin (in Riyanti, 2018), qualitative methods are effective in exploring phenomena that cannot be quantified—such as emotional depth, personal transformation, and cultural tension in literature.

Specifically, the analysis is informed by the psychological-sociological lens. From a psychological perspective, the study employs Abraham Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to explore internal motivations. Sociologically, it utilizes Braun and Isaac's (1979) tripartite model of struggle—conflict with self, others, and the environment—to identify the nature of adversity and social tension in the narrative.

Following Peck and Coyle (1984), this critical framework is suitable for examining the emotional and ideological constructs embedded in fiction. The purpose is not to evaluate the aesthetic merit of the text but to understand how the protagonist's life journey reflects universal themes of human struggle, resilience, and transformation.

3.2 Data Source

The primary data source is the novel *Zoya* by Danielle Steel, first published in 1989 by Dell Publishing. The novel spans approximately 500 pages and is divided into three major settings—Imperial Russia, interwar Paris, and Depression-era New York.

Textual data are drawn from:

- Character dialogue and monologue
- Narrative exposition
- Descriptive passages related to historical and social context

These elements were extracted based on their relevance to the study's core themes: types of life struggle and factors influencing character behavior.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The documentation technique was employed as the primary method of data collection. As suggested by Sugiyono (2020), documentation in qualitative research involves gathering data from textual or archival materials to explore latent meanings and recurring motifs.

In this study, narrative excerpts from the novel were selected through close reading and coded according to the following thematic categories:

- Internal psychological struggle (e.g., guilt, identity loss)
- Interpersonal struggle (e.g., conflict with family or community)

- Environmental struggle (e.g., war, poverty, displacement)
- Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors

Passages were selected that best illustrated Zoya's character development in response to these categories.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted using descriptive qualitative analysis, as outlined by Sugiyono (2020). This involved several systematic steps:

1. Thematic Identification: The researcher categorized textual data into Braun and Isaac's (1979) struggle typology: with self, with others, and with the environment.
2. Motivational Mapping: Data were further analyzed using Maslow's (1970) and Ryan and Deci's (2000) frameworks to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators affecting Zoya's decisions.
3. Contextual Integration: Passages were interpreted in relation to historical background, class struggle, and cultural displacement as represented in the novel.
4. Interpretation and Synthesis: Themes were synthesized to construct an overarching understanding of the character's transformation. Zoya's psychological and sociological journey was then interpreted not only as a fictional narrative but as a reflection of broader human experiences during social crises.

3.5 Research Validity and Limitations

While qualitative research does not seek statistical generalizability, its validity is strengthened through triangulation of theory and narrative interpretation. By grounding the study in established psychological and sociological frameworks, the analysis offers both depth and theoretical consistency.

The primary limitation lies in the subjectivity inherent to literary interpretation. Reader bias and cultural context may influence how themes are perceived. However, the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives enhances the reliability of the analytical conclusions.

4. Discussion

The analysis of *Zoya* reveals that Danielle Steel's novel is more than a historical romance—it is a profound literary exploration of human resilience in the face of sociopolitical trauma. Zoya's journey through loss, displacement, and reinvention encapsulates the universal "struggle for life," articulated through Braun and Isaac's (1979) typology: struggle with self, others, and environment. This section discusses how these types of struggle intertwine with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, drawing upon Maslow (1970), Ryan & Deci (2000), and Krishnananda (2024), while anchoring the argument in narrative excerpts.

4.1 Internal Struggle and the Psychology of Identity Disruption

Zoya's internal conflict represents a psychological rupture caused by the collapse of the social structures that once defined her. The fall of the Russian aristocracy forces her to confront not only the loss of family and status but also the erosion of her self-concept. A pivotal moment occurs when Zoya begins to morally compromise, lying to her grandmother to attend dinner with a man:

“She felt guilty about it, but by the time she left the house, she had forgiven herself for what seemed like a harmless lie... After all, what harm was there in dinner with a nice man?” (*Paris: Chapter 15*)

This moment signifies the emergence of moral dissonance—a critical phase in identity realignment (Erikson, 1968). Her aristocratic values conflict with the necessities of exile. Zoya's self-forgiveness reflects a cognitive adaptation (Festinger, 1957), suggesting she begins to recalibrate her ethical framework to survive emotionally in a morally ambiguous world.

Further, her decision to dance professionally—once unthinkable for a Russian noblewoman—marks a psychological turning point. Though the act risks shame and defiance of familial codes, it embodies Maslow's (1970) idea of moving beyond basic survival toward self-actualization. Zoya's ability to find pride in what was once seen as dishonorable reflects her internal transformation:

“Paris is a big city that is very difficult to survive in, let alone Zoya and her grandmother did not bring much wealth.”

Steel uses economic precarity as a catalyst for inner growth. Zoya's decision to redefine dignity in terms of persistence and adaptability rather than social status signals her movement toward psychological autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

4.2 Interpersonal Struggle and Intergenerational Tension

Zoya's interpersonal conflicts primarily emerge through her interactions with her grandmother, Evgenia, whose commitment to traditional aristocratic values becomes both a source of stability and repression. Their debate over Zoya's dancing illustrates a classic intergenerational clash between duty and agency:

“Never mind in any case Zoya, I shan't allow it.”
“What's so terrible about being a dancer? It doesn't shock you that Prince Vladimir drives a taxi...” (*Paris: Chapter 10*)

This dialogue juxtaposes two interpretations of dignity—one rooted in heritage, the other in practicality. Zoya's assertion reveals her growing alignment with existential individualism (Frankl, 1963), emphasizing meaning through lived action rather than inherited identity.

Zoya's struggle with her grandmother also mirrors feminist readings of *bildungsroman*, wherein a female protagonist must challenge the "benevolent patriarchy" of older guardians to achieve subjectivity (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Here, Evgenia acts as a gatekeeper of aristocratic virtue, but her eventual concession—“*She felt too old and tired to fight her.*”—marks the surrender of social tradition to lived necessity. This emotional surrender allows Zoya to enter a new sociocultural identity as an immigrant laborer rather than a displaced noble.

4.3 Environmental Struggle as Historical Trauma

Perhaps the most profound form of external conflict Zoya faces is environmental—encompassing war, revolution, migration, and poverty. The collapse of her world begins violently, with the death of her brother and the physical destruction of her home:

“Evgenia sold her last pair of earrings on December first, and she was horrified at how little they gave her. All they had were Zoya’s wages now...” (Paris: Chapter 18).

Material deprivation here is not merely an economic condition but a metaphor for social entropy—the dissipation of inherited identity under the weight of modernity. Her family jewels, symbols of aristocratic permanence, are exchanged for the transient security of bread and rent.

Zoya’s subsequent employment in a ballet company marks her entry into a different environment—one governed by merit and commodified skill rather than inherited class. In Krishnananda’s (2024) terms, she transitions from a passive recipient of privilege to an active agent of meaning-making. The environment forces her to become, rather than simply belong.

Later, the novel revisits the theme of environmental upheaval when Zoya contemplates returning to Russia: “*Grandma, let’s go to Russia!*” This decision reflects not nostalgia, but a reconciliatory impulse—Zoya seeks to integrate her past self with her reconstructed identity. Such narrative arcs resonate with trauma literature, where survivors must “re-story” their lives (Caruth, 1996). Her return to Russia is not regressive but therapeutic, aligning with Maslow’s concept of meta-motivation—seeking meaning beyond mere survival.

4.4 Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation: The Force behind Survival

Throughout *Zoya*, Steel crafts a delicate interplay between intrinsic values (dignity, love, purpose) and extrinsic pressures (war, poverty, social expectation). One of the most emotionally charged scenes captures Zoya’s plea to Simon:

“Please.... Zoya begged, ‘Please, Simon....’ She was overcome with grief. ‘I couldn’t live without you.’” (*Chapter 44*)

This excerpt illustrates how attachment trauma intersects with internalized fears of abandonment and loss. Simon’s presence is not just love, but a symbolic bulwark against emotional collapse. Yet Zoya’s eventual recovery from Simon’s death, and her collaboration with Paul, signals her internalization of resilience:

“They worked hard, and dined late... but their friendship was always more important to them than the lovemaking.” (*Chapter 48*)

Here, love is redefined—not as romantic rescue but as partnership and shared endeavor. Zoya’s transition from dependency to co-creation mirrors autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), where personal growth is driven by alignment with internal goals, rather than external validation.

In *Zoya*, Danielle Steel constructs a narrative that transcends romantic or historical fiction. Through Zoya’s transformation—from a displaced aristocrat to a self-reliant woman navigating multiple cultural and emotional geographies—the novel explores the depth of human resilience. The integration of internal psychological shifts, interpersonal evolution, and environmental adaptation affirms Braun and Isaac’s (1979) and Maslow’s (1970) theories of struggle and motivation.

Zoya’s life arc is ultimately one of survival through meaning: she does not merely endure loss; she learns to redefine selfhood through adversity. In this way, *Zoya*

reflects not just a fictional life story, but a literary meditation on the human condition under pressure.

5. Conclusion

Danielle Steel's *Zoya* offers a nuanced literary portrayal of survival, identity reconstruction, and the enduring human spirit amid historical and personal catastrophe. This study has examined the protagonist's journey through the analytical frameworks of Braun and Isaac's (1979) tripartite theory of life struggle—conflict with self, others, and the environment—and Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, further contextualized by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). By integrating these psychological and sociological lenses, the analysis reveals that *Zoya*'s transformation is shaped by the dynamic interplay of intrinsic motivations—such as emotional resilience, loyalty, and self-worth—and extrinsic forces including war, exile, and social dislocation.

Zoya's internal struggle is marked by the psychological fragmentation caused by grief, loss, and identity dissolution. Her moral recalibrations and emotional adaptations reflect an evolving selfhood that moves from inherited social roles to self-authored meaning. Simultaneously, her interpersonal conflicts, particularly with her grandmother, illuminate the generational tensions and value shifts demanded by survival in unfamiliar cultural contexts. These are not mere narrative obstacles but representations of wider social transitions, wherein tradition must yield to adaptability.

The environmental conflict, primarily through war, poverty, and migration, situates *Zoya*'s story within broader historical trauma. Yet, instead of portraying *Zoya* as a passive victim, the novel constructs her as an agent of her own narrative, capable of reconfiguring her life across shifting geopolitical and emotional landscapes. Her eventual success—professional, emotional, and personal—is not a return to past privilege, but the result of agency, effort, and continuous reinvention.

What emerges is a compelling literary case study of human resilience. *Zoya*'s struggle for life is not only a matter of surviving historical upheaval, but of finding coherence and purpose amid fragmentation. Her ability to adapt without relinquishing her ethical core affirms the psychological depth of intrinsic motivation, while also acknowledging the formidable influence of sociopolitical context. This narrative arc resonates with contemporary concerns about displacement, identity loss, and emotional endurance in times of crisis.

Thus, this study concludes that Steel's *Zoya* stands as more than a historical or romantic narrative—it functions as a literary inquiry into how individuals navigate adversity through an ongoing negotiation between personal agency and external realities. Through this lens, the novel contributes not only to literary discourse but to interdisciplinary discussions in psychology, sociology, trauma studies, and feminist criticism.

Future research may further explore comparative analyses between *Zoya* and other literary heroines of exile and transformation, or extend this framework to examine how contemporary fiction portrays resilience in times of forced migration, war, and social upheaval.

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