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SURVIVAL ASPECTS IN FIRST THEY KILLED MY FATHER (2017): INSIGHTS FROM GONZALES' THEORY

Abstract

The movie *First They Killed My Father* (2017) portrays the harrowing experiences of a five-year-old girl, Loung Ung, who survived the Khmer Rouge regime's atrocities. This research analyzes Loung Ung's survival behaviors using Laurence Gonzales' survival theory from his book *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*. Gonzales identifies key aspects of survival, including perception and cognition, acceptance, mental toughness and resilience, improvisation and adaptability, and hope and faith. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, this study examines specific scenes from the movie to highlight how Loung's behavior aligns with these survival aspects. The findings reveal that Loung's survival is significantly influenced by her acceptance of reality, emotional resilience, and ability to adapt to rapidly changing and dangerous circumstances. For instance, Loung demonstrates acceptance when she quickly adapts to the new norms imposed by the regime. Her mental toughness and resilience are evident as she maintains hope and determination despite immense loss and trauma. Furthermore, her improvisation and adaptability are showcased in her resourceful strategies to survive. This research contributes to the understanding of human resilience and the psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to survive extreme conditions.

Keywords: Adaptability, Survival, Acceptance, Resilience, Aspects

Abstrak

Film *First They Killed My Father* (2017) menggambarkan pengalaman mengerikan seorang gadis berusia lima tahun, Loung Ung, yang selamat dari kekejaman rezim Khmer Merah. Penelitian ini menganalisis perilaku bertahan hidup Loung Ung menggunakan teori bertahan hidup Laurence Gonzales dari bukunya *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*. Gonzales mengidentifikasi aspek-aspek kunci dari kelangsungan hidup, termasuk persepsi dan kognisi, penerimaan, ketangguhan dan ketahanan mental, improvisasi dan kemampuan beradaptasi, serta harapan dan keyakinan. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini mengkaji adegan-adegan tertentu dari film tersebut untuk menyoroti bagaimana perilaku Loung selaras dengan aspek kelangsungan hidup tersebut. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa kelangsungan hidup Loung sangat dipengaruhi oleh penerimaannya terhadap kenyataan, ketahanan emosional, dan kemampuan beradaptasi terhadap keadaan yang berubah dengan cepat dan berbahaya. Misalnya, Loung menunjukkan penerimaan ketika dia dengan cepat beradaptasi dengan norma-norma baru yang diberlakukan oleh rezim. Ketangguhan mental dan ketahanannya terlihat jelas saat ia mempertahankan harapan dan tekad meskipun mengalami kehilangan dan trauma yang sangat besar. Selain itu, improvisasi dan kemampuan beradaptasinya terlihat dalam strategi cerdasnya untuk bertahan hidup. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang ketahanan manusia dan mekanisme psikologis yang memungkinkan individu bertahan dalam kondisi ekstrem.

Kata Kunci: Kemampuan Beradaptasi, Kelangsungan Hidup, Penerimaan, Ketahanan, Aspek

INTRODUCTION

Survival in extreme conditions is a profound testament to human resilience and the will to live. Laurence Gonzales, in his book “*Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*,” explores the psychological and behavioral traits that enable individuals to survive life-

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threatening situations. Gonzales identifies several key aspects of survival, each critical in its own right.

Staying calm and focused is essential in survival scenarios. Gonzales emphasizes the importance of maintaining calm and clear thinking, writing, "The rational brain must be in charge of the emotional brain" (p. 11). Additionally, situational awareness, recognizing and understanding the environment, is crucial. Gonzales states, "You must keep track of where you are and what's happening around you" (p. 35). Survivors also accept the reality of their situation without denial. Gonzales notes, "The very essence of survival is acceptance of the reality you're facing" (p. 47).

Developing a flexible plan and being ready to adapt is another critical aspect. "Planning, even in its roughest form, can make the difference between life and death" (p. 63). Survivors set small, manageable goals, breaking down the overall goal of survival into smaller tasks. Gonzales explains, "Survivors set small, achievable goals" (p. 81). Mental toughness and resilience are also vital. Keeping a positive attitude and hope alive is central to survival, as Gonzales writes, "The will to live is central to survival" (p. 97). A strong desire to survive and endure hardships is another important trait. "Survivors have a burning desire to stay alive" (p. 105).

Improvisation and adaptability are necessary for survival. Resourcefulness, using available resources creatively, is essential. Gonzales states, "The ability to improvise is essential" (p. 123). Flexibility, adapting to changing conditions, is also key. "Flexibility is the key to overcoming adversity" (p. 137). Having relevant knowledge and skills, and regular practice and mental rehearsal of survival skills, can make a significant difference. "Survivors draw on their knowledge and training" (p. 151) and "Practicing survival skills makes them second nature" (p. 167).

Social connection and support play a crucial role in survival. Seeking help and accepting it is important. "No one survives alone for long" (p. 179). Effective leadership and teamwork are also critical. "Leadership can make or break a survival situation" (p. 193). Maintaining hope and having spiritual beliefs can provide inner strength and purpose. "Hope is a powerful motivator in survival" (p. 207) and "Spirituality can provide inner strength and purpose" (p. 221).

In the movie *First They Killed My Father* (2017), Loung Ung's behavior exhibits several of these survival aspects, particularly Acceptance, Mental Toughness and Resilience, and Improvisation and Adaptability. Loung Ung quickly accepts the harsh reality of her situation. As she witnesses and experiences the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, she adapts to the new norms and circumstances, a key aspect of survival. Despite the trauma and loss, Loung maintains a strong will to survive. Her emotional resilience is evident as she faces each new challenge with determination. Loung also displayed remarkable resourcefulness and flexibility, learning to navigate and survive in the harsh environment imposed by the regime.

Based on the research background, the writer of this research formulated a question about "Which survival aspects proposed by Laurence Gonzales in *Deep Survival* are most prominently exhibited by Loung Ung in the movie *First They Killed My Father* (2017) ? "

METHODS

This research aims to analyze the survival aspects exhibited by Loung Ung in the movie "First They Killed My Father (2017)", based on the survival theory proposed by Laurence Gonzales in his book "Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why". The study uses a descriptive qualitative method to explore and identify the specific survival behaviors depicted in the movie.

a. Research Design

The research employs a qualitative descriptive design, which is suitable for understanding and interpreting complex behaviors and phenomena. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of Loung Ung's survival strategies and behaviors as portrayed in the movie.

b. Data Collection

1. Primary Data Source:

The primary data source is the movie "First They Killed My Father (2017)". The film provides a visual and narrative account of Loung Ung's experiences and survival strategies during the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge regime.

2. Secondary Data Source:

- a. The secondary data source is Laurence Gonzales' book "Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why". This text provides the theoretical framework for identifying and analyzing the survival aspects exhibited by Loung Ung. Specific references to Gonzales' work include:
 1. Perception and Cognition: "The rational brain must be in charge of the emotional brain" (p. 11) and "You must keep track of where you are and what's happening around you" (p. 35).
 2. Acceptance: "The very essence of survival is acceptance of the reality you're facing" (p. 47).
 3. Planning and Preparation: "Planning, even in its roughest form, can make the difference between life and death" (p. 63) and "Survivors set small, achievable goals" (p. 81).
 4. Mental Toughness and Resilience: "The will to live is central to survival" (p. 97) and "Survivors have a burning desire to stay alive" (p. 105).
 5. Improvisation and Adaptability: "The ability to improvise is essential" (p. 123) and "Flexibility is the key to overcoming adversity" (p. 137).
 6. Training and Experience: "Survivors draw on their knowledge and training" (p. 151) and "Practicing survival skills makes them second nature" (p. 167).
 7. Social Connection and Support: "No one survives alone for long" (p. 179) and "Leadership can make or break a survival situation" (p. 193).
 8. Hope and Faith: "Hope is a powerful motivator in survival" (p. 207) and "Spirituality can provide inner strength and purpose" (p. 221).

c. Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved several steps:

1. Identification of the survival aspects:
Using the theoretical framework provided by Gonzales, the researcher will identify scenes and behaviors in the movie that correspond to the survival aspects outlined in "Deep Survival".
2. Categorization:
The identified behaviors will be categorized according to the specific survival aspects they represent (e.g., acceptance, mental toughness and resilience, improvisation and adaptability).
3. Thematic Analysis:
A thematic analysis will be conducted to explore how these survival aspects are portrayed in the film and how they contribute to Loung Ung's overall survival.
4. Interpretation and Discussion:
The findings will be interpreted and discussed in relation to the survival theory, with a focus on how Loung Ung's behaviors align with the aspects proposed by Gonzales. This discussion will highlight the key survival traits that enabled her to endure the hardships of the Cambodian genocide.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The research movie is entitled "Survival Aspects in First They Killed My Father (2017): Insights from Gonzales' Theory". After completing the analysis, the writer found several pieces of evidence that reveal Loung Ung's behavior was accordance with the survival aspects proposed by Laurence Gonzales such as acceptance; mental toughness and resilience; and improvisation and adaptability in the movie First They Killed My Father (2017). Detailed information from this data was taken from the scenes shown on the movie:

A. Acceptance

One of the most prominent survival aspects displayed by Loung Ung in the movie is her acceptance of reality. Early in the film, when her family is forced to evacuate Phnom Penh (at 00:15:30), Loung quickly adapts to the new circumstances without denial.

The second proof, (at the scene of 00:17:15 until 00:17:57), she stopped her father during long walk, because she was confused on why the Khmer Rouge soldier didn't fulfill their promise, because the Khmer Rouge soldiers told the Cambodian civilians to leave their houses

in order to avoid the US airstrike bombings and will take them (the Cambodian civilians) to their houses after three days of the evacuation; and then she was told by her father to keep on going and follow every the Khmer Rouge's orders out of necessity rather than defiance. On this scene, it shows about Loung Ung's confusion on why Khmer rouge regime do not fulfilling their promise to take back those Cambodian civillians, no exception herself to back to their homes; initially, Loung Ung thought that it just temporary evacuation, and Loung Ung never thought that she and her entire family alongside those Cambodian civillians will be sent to the concentration camps to live collectively to be employed as peasants located in Cambodian villages; this action was to support Khmer rouge regime's government idea of living in utopian agrarian society.

And the third proof (at 01:13:08 to 01:14:00), shows that Loung's mother instructed Loung Ung's and her other siblings gathered in that place where the scene played, Loung Ung's mother asked them to falsify their identities to protect them from the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, targeted individuals and families associated with the previous government, the military, and those perceived as intellectuals or educated. Loung's father was a former high-ranking official in the Khmer Republic's government (the previous government lead by Lon Nol before the Khmer Rouge took over and ruling the entire Cambodia), making the family a target for persecution.

By changing their identities and hiding their true backgrounds, Loung's mother hoped to protect her children from being recognized and potentially executed by the Khmer Rouge. This act of falsifying their identities was a survival strategy, reflecting the extreme measures families had to take to avoid detection and ensure their survival during the brutal regime.

She understands the gravity of the situation and begins to navigate the harsh realities of life under the Khmer Rouge regime. This aligns with Gonzales' assertion that "The very essence of survival is acceptance of the reality you're facing" (p. 47).

B. Mental Toughness and Resilience

Loung's mental toughness and emotional resilience are evident throughout the movie. For instance, when her parents were executed by the Khmer Rouge; and Loung Ung kept the photo of her family and looked at it (at 01:22:34), Loung grieves but does not succumb to despair. Instead, she maintains her will to live and continues to push forward. Gonzales highlights the importance of emotional resilience by stating, "The will to live is central to survival" (p. 97). Loung's determination and strength of spirit are crucial to her survival.

C. Improvisation and Adaptability

Loung's ability to improvise and adapt is critical to her survival. An example of this is when she learns to navigate the labor camps and finds ways to secure extra food (at 01:05:16). Her resourcefulness and quick thinking enable her to survive in an environment where resources are scarce and conditions are brutal. Gonzales underscores the significance of adaptability by noting, "The ability to improvise is essential" (p. 123).

CONCLUSION

Loung Ung's journey in *First They Killed My Father* (2017) provides a compelling narrative of survival amidst the brutal realities of the Khmer Rouge regime. This research has explored Loung's survival behaviors using Laurence Gonzales' survival theory from *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, identifying key aspects such as acceptance, mental toughness and resilience, and improvisation and adaptability.

Loung's ability to accept the harsh realities imposed by the regime was immediate and profound, reflecting Gonzales' assertion that survival begins with acceptance of one's circumstances (Gonzales, 2004, p. 47). Throughout the film, her mental toughness and resilience were evident, particularly in moments of loss and adversity, where she maintained hope and determination despite overwhelming odds (Gonzales, 2004, p. 97). Her adaptability and improvisation were crucial in navigating the dangers and uncertainties of the labor camps, demonstrating Gonzales' emphasis on flexibility and resourcefulness in survival situations (Gonzales, 2004, p. 123).

By applying Gonzales' survival theory to Loung Ung's experiences, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of human resilience and the psychological attributes that enable

survival in extreme conditions. Loung's story underscores the importance of emotional strength, adaptability, and a determined will to live as fundamental factors in overcoming adversity.

In conclusion, Loung Ung's survival during the Cambodian genocide exemplifies the enduring human spirit and the profound capacity to adapt and persevere in the face of unimaginable hardship. Her resilience serves as a testament to the power of acceptance, mental toughness, and improvisation in sustaining hope and survival in even the most dire circumstances.

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