

Traumatic Experiences Depicted in Colleen Hoover's *Hopeless*

Ardhella Nuritamaya

Universitas Pamulang
Email: nuritamaya@gmail.com

Anita Sari

Universitas Pamulang
Email: dosen01170@unpam.ac.id

Abstract

This research aims to analyze traumatic experience depicted in a contemporary literary work. The object of this study are the traumatic events experienced by the main character from a novel entitled Hopeless (2013) by Colleen Hoover. This study applies a qualitative research method as the analysis is presented in the form of textual interpretation which utilizes narrative type of research design as the discussion mainly explored the life experience of a character in the novel. The writer uses the concept of trauma and memory proposed by Cathy Caruth (1995) as the conceptual guidance in this study. The study found that the traumatic responses reflected from Sky's attitude are the intrusion, avoidance, and negative alterations of cognition and mood symptoms. The avoidance symptoms are the most prominent and/or dominant symptom that Sky is experiencing throughout her life. The results of the study stated that there were two types of indicators of the impact of trauma on her psyche which were contradictory that emerge from repeated and prolonged traumatic experience: Sky is amnesic for the early life she had during her childhood; while she simultaneously remembers too much of the traumatic event in terms of how it influences her life as an adolescent.

Keywords: *dissociative memory, psychological impact, traumatic experience, traumatic symptoms*

A. Introduction

Humans possess the ability to process and respond to constructed or natural events that happen in their lives. The initial physical and mental response differs respectively depending on the impression a certain event or collective events left on the individuals. Good-natured events that will later become good experiences are more likely to elicit good responses because of their beneficial implications. On the other hand, unpleasant events that happened early or at any point in an individual's life are perceived as bad experiences, which in most cases become the fundamental cause of trauma.

Trauma refers to the emotional responses inflicted upon an individual as the result of an extremely unusual event. The extent to which an event becomes a trauma-inducing event is when the individual affected by the experience develops the fear of repetition where they are forced to be in the exact same or similar situation. Makwana (2019) categorized trauma-inducing events into two types of disaster, the first one is the type of disaster from a natural cause such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and cyclones, and the other is a man-made disaster stemming from human actions in the form of atrocity that involves the role of the perpetrator(s) and the

victim(s). A psychiatrist, Judith Herman, stated in her book regarding the latter that “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (Herman, 1992). This refers to the concept of inherent latency caused by the traumatic experience in which the traumatized victim unconsciously erased traumatic experience from their memories which further elaboration will be discussed later on.

The study of trauma has gained public attention as the issue become increasingly hard to ignore. The pervasiveness of the issue is apparent through the events that is constantly happening around us, and with the advancement of technology we are now able to be more aware of traumatic occurrences through the media, both in print and electronic form. With the mission to protect women and children from any form of violence, the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia developed a system for documenting violence data that allows all service unit throughout the country to input and record the data of violence. According to the data taken from the official recording and reporting violence web system or known as *Sistem Informasi Online Perlindungan Perempuan dan Anak (SIMFONI-PPA)* developed by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia, the percentage of child victim of violence categorized by age status reached the highest number of 56,9%, compared to the adult category which reached 43,1%. The data taken was entered into the system from January 2022 to the time of writing on January 15th, 2023, which indicates that the data taken is a real time data of violence in Indonesia.

The number of violence cases against children has significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Based on data taken from *SIMFONI-PPA*, the number of cases with children as the subject of violence from January 1st to June 19th, 2020, reached 852 cases of physical violence, 768 cases of psychological violence, and 1,848 cases of sexual violence (Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, 2020). The media platforms also play an important role in gaining public awareness towards the cases of violence against children as there has been several cases of child abuse that has recently gone viral on social media. For instance, the case of a 14-year-old girl in Tojo Una-Una Regency who becomes victim of sexual abuse by 13 men on Wednesday, January 11th, 2023 (Susanto, 2023). Susanto (2023) highlighted in his article that the girl has reportedly been receiving assistance from the local Technical Implementation Unit for the Protection of Women and Children and has been diagnosed with severe trauma.

The significant concern about the issue lies in the fact that the number are potentially higher in the field as the case of violence that leads to trauma is constantly increasing. Therefore, based on the social implication and the constant growth in the number of children assault cases to this day, the writer decided to do an in-depth analysis of the object of the research, a novel by Colleen Hoover *Hopeless*, that acts as the representation of human life with traumatic experience as its corresponding psychological aspect. The writer is interested and determined in analyzing the impact of traumatic experience on the victim, *Sky*, and her response to the trauma in terms of how it affects her life.

It is generally known that the study of trauma involves the deepest part of human consciousness; as a result, the subject became somewhat of a taboo in the past. The study of trauma also has become interdisciplinary and branched from psychiatry to literature. Literature, as a reflection of human existence, provides readers with numerous viewpoints that allow them to ponder upon the issue itself as well as allowing them to think on a wide range of responses to an overwhelming experience in the shape of a storyline, whether in novel, film, or poetry. Nowadays, the topic of trauma depicted in novels is considered as part of a campaign to raise public awareness of the increasing cases of abuse, especially with children as the victim. Balaev (2012) stated that the novel presents an artistic interpretation of consciousness that calls attention to aspects of human experience that may be disregarded or rejected in society and thus brings the topic of trauma into the public eye. In this case, the novel written by Colleen Hoover entitled *Hopeless*

represents the wound of the mind through its narration.

Colleen Hoover is an American author of young adult fiction and romance novels. Michelle Parkerton (2022) wrote in her article for Parade that Hoover is highly capable in incorporating social issues, trauma and family drama into captivating stories with relatable characters, thus making most of Hoover's works deeply resonates with her readers. The theme of psychological issues is enticingly captured in some of her works. One of them is a #1 New York Times Bestselling novel entitled *Hopeless*. *Hopeless* is an intriguing and captivating book telling the story of the main character, *Sky*, a seventeen-year-old girl, and her journey in finding her true self by recovering the hidden truth of her past. *Sky* is struggling with a certain condition where she could not feel the full experience of being a typical teenager, especially when it comes to romance. This refers to both her homeschooled life as well as her inability to react to physical stimuli. *Sky* never thought that her condition was in any way related to her lost childhood memory that was caused by trauma. *Sky*'s only link to her family is her adopted mother, who is later revealed to be her biological aunt. The book recounts fragments of her forgotten childhood memories in reverse chronology, building suspense until the ultimate event in her memory was triggered, causing the heart-breaking revelation of the fact that *Sky* is a victim of domestic sexual abuse by her father.

Due to the severity of the main issue portrayed in this book along with its implication in society, the writer chose this novel to be analyzed in this research. The highlight of this study is analyzing the issue of trauma by investigating the symptoms of trauma shown by the main character that indicates back to her traumatic experience, which happened during her childhood, as well as how the traumatic experience impacts her psyche. Therefore, to ensure the success of the investigation, the writer uses the psychological theory of trauma and memory as well as the posttraumatic stress disorder diagnostic criterion to support the analysis process, which will all be discussed in the following chapters.

Similar studies have been conducted on the subject of trauma over the years. In the first section of this chapter, the writer identifies three undergraduate theses that are related to this research, as follows:

The first related study discussing the subject of trauma is conducted by Endang Sartika (2020) entitled "Traumatic Experience in Eka Kurniawan's Novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*" which was published in Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra Volume 8 Issue Number 2. This study uses the descriptive qualitative approach and aims to analyze the issue of traumatic experience in the novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*. The writer of this study analyzed the issue of traumatic experiences by using the theory of trauma and memory proposed by Cathy Caruth. The study found that the characters portrayed in the novel responded to their trauma differently such as having intrusive thoughts, re-experiencing the traumatic event through intrusive dreams or flashbacks, avoidance, and having negative feelings and moods. The study also reveals that the pain, suffering, and traumatic experiences of the chosen characters leads them to gain high self-esteem, self-knowledge, and philosophical understanding of social reality.

Another study about trauma was conducted by Rezi Oktafiani (2016) from Pamulang University in his thesis entitled "Psychological Trauma Analysis in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*" Novel by Stephen Chbosky" This study uses a qualitative method with a psychological approach to analyze the trauma the main character in the novel, Charlie, experienced and the impact of the trauma reflected in the main character from the psychological perspective. The writer of this study focuses on several psychological aspects related to trauma by applying the theory of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by Sigmund Freud. The study

found that there are three types of traumatic event the main character experienced portrayed in the novel, namely traumatic loss, sexual abuse, and witnessing a traumatic event. Based on these traumatic experiences, the writer concluded that the main character is indicated to have developed a sense of guilt, anxiety, and PTSD, which in turn caused him to employ several methods of self-defense mechanisms such as repression, denial, and displacement.

The third related study about trauma is conducted by Ida Ayu Made Sonia Purwita (2021) from Sanata Dharma University in her thesis entitled "*Lili Bloom's Trauma and Defense Mechanism Seen in Colleen Hoover's It Ends with Us.*" This qualitative study applies the psychoanalysis approach and aims to reveal the trauma that the main character in the novel "It Ends with Us," Lily Bloom, experienced and her form of defense mechanism as a way to cope with her trauma. This study uses psychoanalysis theory of defense mechanism by Sigmund Freud and the theory of characterization in analyzing Lily's attitude. The study found that her trauma developed from an early age and that it was caused by an abusive environment. The writer concluded that the profound connection between Lily's trauma as the effect of her being the victim of abusive relationships and the four attitudes she displayed, namely resentment, anxiousness, pessimism, and acceptance, leads to the development of Lily's defense mechanisms: sublimation, denial, repression, and rationalization.

There are similarities and differences in all of the studies mentioned above with this study. The psychological issue of trauma is analyzed and discussed in the three studies, which is also the focus of this study. All three of the related studies employed a qualitative method within the scope of literature to analyze traumatic experiences portrayed in the respective research objects, which brings another similarity that is the selection of novel as the research object in all three studies as well as this study. Meanwhile, the difference between the related studies to this study is the conceptual perspective from which the analysis is based on, safe for the first study that applies the theory of trauma and memory by Cathy Caruth which is also used in this study, while the second and third studies use Freud's psychoanalytical perspective of trauma.

There are several topic and terms that is being used in this study, which are included in the theory related to a traumatic experience from a psychological perspective. This section highlights selected subject matters pertinent to the study and theories that will support the research and serve as conceptual guidance in solving the problems formulated by the writer in the preceding chapter.

B. Method

The methodological framework of this study used a qualitative approach in analyzing psychological aspects of the human world. The reason in choosing to conduct a qualitative research was because the issue of trauma has come to the storefront among the vast number of problem in our society, it is as Creswell (2007) highlighted that qualitative research is conducted because a problem or issue needs to be explored and a complex, detailed understanding of the issue is needed. This study was conducted with the intention to further the writer's understanding of how psychological conditions impact the life of a traumatized individual. Guba (1990) stated that qualitative research is based upon the observation and interpretation of people's perceptions of different events, and it takes a snapshot of the people's perceptions in a natural setting.

Additionally, understanding trauma as the phenomenon of interest was this study's fundamental objective, which was associated with the essential characteristic of qualitative research design. According to Merriam & Grenier (2019, p. 6), the key characteristics of qualitative research consist of the writer's initiative to understand constructed meaning of

life and the experience, the utilization of the human instrument for data collection and analysis, an inductive analysis strategy, and the descriptive nature of findings. Aside from understanding a phenomenon, the writer of this study was also interested in how the main character in the novel comprehends her situation. This study used the narrative type of research design as the discussion mainly explored the life experience of a character from which the research data derives that was told in the form of a story. The data taken from the story were analyzed based on the internal thoughts of the main character, and therefore a psychological approach was essential in the process of analyzing the story. Moreover, along with the narrative research design, the writer had also incorporated phenomenological design in her research. The topic of traumatic experience was pertinent to the focus of phenomenological study by focusing on the essence of an experience in an attempt to deal with inner experiences unexamined in everyday life (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Therefore, by combining the two type of research design the writer is able to use and understand the gathered data for an appropriate research.

To highlight the human problem in the text, the writer used the psychological point of view in studying the main character in the novel as the unit of the analysis. The focus of this study was to analyze human behavior in response to a contemporary issue. Therefore, the qualitative method was best suited to conduct this research. Holloway and Wheeler (2002) assert that this method allows the writer to deeply explore behaviors, different perspectives, and life experiences. Finally, by using this method, it allows the writer to develop critical observation skills that might be helpful for her in the future.

The primary data source of this study is taken from prose fiction in the form of a novel entitled *Hopeless* by Colleen Hoover, which was first published in December 2012 by Simon and Schuster.

Based on the grounded theory approach of data collecting, the data collecting process of this study used the observation technique. The steps of data collection with this technique are as follows:

1. Reading the novel *Hopeless* by Colleen Hoover.
2. Undertaking a series of repetitive readings of the novel to increase further understanding of the characters and interpreting of the issue.
3. Marking important sections which are suspected to be data.
4. Identifying the marked sections and categorizing the collected data into a worksheet.
5. Organizing all of the collected documents and uploading them to the cloud for easy access.

After collecting all of the data using library research data collection technique, the writer analyzes the text by applying the conceptual framework. The theory of trauma and memory proposed by Cathy Caruth is used to analyze the issue of trauma depicted in the novel from a psychological perspective. The theory focuses on the response to traumatic events and how it influences memory, which in turn is reflected in human behavior and personality traits. The writer analyzes and explains the findings following the statement of the problems. Finally, the writer draws her conclusion based on the findings through the data analysis process.

C. Findings and Discussion

After doing the steps of analyzing the *Hopeless* novel (2013), the writer obtained

the data information regarding the main character, *Sky Davis*, whose life is severely damaged due to the traumatic event she experienced during her childhood. In elaborating the resolution to the problem formulation stated in the early chapter, the finding and analysis of the study will be divided into two parts. First, it discusses the traumatic experience depicted in the novel and elaborates on how it impacts the main character's psyche and memory. Second, it presents *Sky's* attitudes as narrated in the novel that reflect the traumatic symptoms as proposed by the American Psychiatric Association.

This section presents *Sky's* attitudes as narrated in the novel that reflect the psychological response to her traumatic experience. There are mainly four diagnostic criteria of PTSD: avoidance symptom, intrusive symptom, altered mood symptom, and arousal symptom. Analyzing the methods of each data serves as the supporting narrative perspective to the symptoms that *Sky* portrayed through her attitude during the adolescence phase in her life.

Traumatic symptoms can be seen after *Sky* encountered an overwhelming event of sexual incestuous abuse and the trauma caused by the experience ruptured her psychological functioning. It has been established in the previous section of this chapter that *Sky* has a condition in which she could not remember and has no recollection of the traumatic experiences that happened during her childhood, while at the same time her body and consciousness remember the impact of what her father did to her. As a result, *Sky's* character development is disrupted and it altered her personality which is shown through her attitude in the story. It is important to note that having traumatic stress reactions such as intrusive dreams, trouble concentrating, or other reactions are normal reactions in the aftermath of experiencing traumatic event(s). However, if these reactions do not fade after a considerably long period of time, they can be classified as PTSD symptoms. *Sky* has been experiencing different kinds of reactions ranging from emotional to physical reactions since the day she chose to start a new life as *Sky Davis* and leave her past as *Hope* behind. Therefore, the writer has compiled the trigger and the corresponding reaction that *Sky* shows in her attitude, behavior as well as actions during the period of total loss of traumatic memory that reflect the posttraumatic symptoms.

One of the most prominent posttraumatic symptoms depicted in the book is the intrusion symptoms which is shown through episodes of flashbacks. The existence of this symptom often started to show on the traumatized individual after the occurrence of traumatic event(s) or the reminiscent of said event and usually appears in different kinds of behaviors. Moreover, the intrusion symptoms may include the manifestation of involuntary distressing memories, recurring dreams related to traumatic events and/or dissociative reaction from the victim. *Sky* started having recurring dreams or flashbacks of the events that happened in the past after her encounter with the main male character which is initiated by the moment he called her by her old name, *Hope*. The name in this case plays a crucial role as an external reminder to *Sky's* past traumatic event and therefore caused her to have a flashback episode through a dream.

The flashbacks occur several times in the story, and similar to the first flashback, each of them are triggered by an external factor that correlates with her past. There are seven occurrence of flashbacks in total throughout the story, and it is found that *Sky* shows severe emotional distress and/or physical reaction after the reenactment of her distressing memories. These distressing memories consist of the revelations of essential aspects that change her life.

"Everything is so heavy. I don't like this feeling. There isn't anything physically on my chest, but I feel a pressure unlike anything I've ever felt. And sadness. An overwhelming sadness is consuming me, and I have no idea why. My shoulders are shaking and there are sobs coming from somewhere in the room.

...I squeeze my eyes shut and try to regain control, because I have no idea what is happening and I can't breathe. I can hear myself crying and I can't inhale a breath because of it." (Hoover, 2013, p.147)

The passage illustrates *Sky's* reaction after her first flashback triggered by her old name. The severe emotional reaction as the passage describes is caused by a distressing event in the past, in which her younger self is experiencing a dreadful night right before her father assaulted her. As seen in the passage, *Sky* is feeling "*an overwhelming sadness*" after she saw a glimpse of her past. It is also indicated in the passage that she is battling with her own emotions while her mind is still trying to process and understand the situation. It can be inferred that along with an overwhelming sadness, she is mentally disoriented by the very notion that she is crying without knowing the exact reason why she is behaving like that. Furthermore, her confusion turned her sadness into anxiety which brings about a physical reaction in the form of breathing difficulty. "*It was a dream. It was just a dream.*"

I can feel my heart beating wildly in every facet of my body. It's beating so hard I can hear it. I'm panting for breath and covered in sweat.

...He puts his hand on my neck, right below my ear..."Your heart," he says, feeling my pulse beating against his fingertips. "You're scared."

"Holder...I remember." My voice shakes when I speak and I feel the tears wanting to come out." (Hoover, 2013, p. 183)

The passage shows another negative reaction that *Sky* experiences after a flashback prior to the revelation of her kidnapping. The flashback illustrates the moment her mother, *Karen* pulls up in front of her and urges her young self to get in the car. In this part of the story, the flashback reveals the truth that her mother, whom she thought to be the most trusted person in her life, turns out to be the same person who took her from her biological family. This truth has deeply wounded her and it also brought upon the feeling of betrayal.

Before the flashback happened, as *Holder* told her the truth about her past which he stated, "*You have been missing for thirteen years, Hope,*" *Sky* responded to it with denial. Nevertheless, *Holder's* confession has wedged itself into her mind and therefore she started to put two and two together, gathering *Karen's* peculiar behavior such as preventing *Sky* to have open access to media information and putting her into a homeschooling program. Moreover, as these thoughts started to point in the direction of something that she keeps denying, the flashback occurs and therefore confirms her suspicion. It is implied in the passage that she is still trying to deny the truth even after seeing the flashback, as she stated "*It was a dream. It was just a dream.*" It is only after she has a direct encounter with *Karen* that she is forced to accept the truth. Furthermore, the flashback arouse a strong emotional distress which is shown in the line where *Holder* says, "*You're scared.*" The feeling is marked with a quickened heartbeat as well as rapid breathing, which indicates the physical reactions of her emotion after the event of memory recollection through flashback.

D. Conclusion

The novel "*Hopeless*" is a fictional novel written by Colleen Hoover and was first published in 2013. After a series of comprehensive reading followed by data collection from the novel, which enables the writer to proceed with the analyzing process using the theory of trauma exploration in memory proposed by Cathy Caruth, it can be concluded that the

traumatic experience portrayed in the novel is being exposed to a domestic sexual abuse by her father which has psychologically impact *Sky Davis's* memory. As a result, *Sky's* trauma responses are delayed, which involve severe emotional distress from her flashbacks, persistent avoidance of potential reminders of her past, and distorted view of life. The writer analyzed *Sky's* personality traits to point out the fundamental attitudes that might reflect her delayed responses to trauma. It is found that there are three main attitude that *Sky* shows throughout the story, namely severe emotional distress which appears in as much as two data, distorted view of life which appears in as much as three data, and finally the persistent avoidance which appears in as much as four data. It is evident that avoidance symptoms is the most dominant symptom that *Sky* has been experiencing throughout her life. Moreover, along with the aforementioned attitude, *Sky* shows strong emotions such as confusion, frustration, anger, and sadness.

Thus indicating that the appearance of strong emotions can be considered as part of her response to trauma. The traumatic experiences portrayed in this novel are narrated from the main character's past-self, namely *Hope*, the person she was known as during her childhood. *Hope* narrated the events of her father's atrocities from a first-person point of view. The memory of each event is relayed in a vivid image while at the same time is implicitly narrated in a secret language that matches the level of a child's understanding to the overwhelming event. Thus, marking the basic aspect to the impact of traumatic experience to her psyche, which the study found that *Sky* is amnesic of the early life she had during her childhood, but at the same time she simultaneously remembers too much of the traumatic events. The term used for this condition is dissociative traumatic memory, which the writer found is the fundamental impact from her traumatic experiences due to the complexity level of the trauma that strongly influences her life. This condition become apparent during the span of her adolescent life as *Sky* slowly starts to regain her traumatic memory back. As a result, the dissociative traumatic memory renders her to develop the belated trauma responses that occurs long after the traumatic experiences happened.

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