

## THE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S CHOICES IN *HOPELESS* BY COLLEEN HOOVER

Analisis Pilihan Perempuan dalam *Hopeless* karya Colleen Hoover

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**Abstract:** *This study delves into how women's choices are represented through a sexual abuse survivor character in Colleen Hoover's novel Hopeless. The novel addresses the issue of women's choices, depicted by two main female characters who have experienced sexual abuse by their family members. This research uses representation theory and a postfeminist perspective to analyze this portrayal of women's choices. This research identifies three choice categories for sexual abuse survivors striving for happiness: 1) women decide what they want, 2) women dare to take risks, and 3) women choose to self-acceptance. The two main female characters in Hopeless are portrayed as courageous individuals who dare to break away from the victim label by making bold and meaningful choices.*

**Keywords:** *Women Choices, Postfeminism, Sexual Abuse, Women Struggle*

**Abstrak:** *Penelitian ini menggali bagaimana pilihan perempuan direpresentasikan melalui karakter penyintas pelecehan seksual dalam novel Hopeless karya Colleen Hoover. Novel ini mengangkat persoalan pilihan perempuan yang digambarkan oleh dua tokoh utama perempuan yang pernah mengalami pelecehan seksual oleh anggota keluarganya. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori representasi dan perspektif postfeminis untuk menganalisis penggambaran pilihan perempuan. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tiga kategori pilihan bagi penyintas pelecehan seksual yang memperjuangkan kebahagiaan: 1) perempuan memutuskan apa yang mereka inginkan, 2) perempuan berani mengambil risiko, dan 3) perempuan memilih menerima diri. Dua tokoh utama wanita dalam Hopeless digambarkan sebagai individu pemberani yang berani keluar dari label status sebagai korban dengan membuat pilihan yang berani dan bermakna.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Pilihan perempuan, postfeminism, pelecehan seksual, perjuangan perempuan*

### INTRODUCTION

Women have the freedom to make personal decisions about what is best for them. It is important for women to be able to make their own decisions. Women's choices in the neoliberal era are no longer limited to women who must have careers or who must become successful in education and the economy field. Women have the right to create and define their own definition of real perfection, because only women can understand their circumstances (McRobbie, 2015). Therefore, there must be a movement that supports women to know themselves and what they want in their life (Thwaites, 2017), especially for women who become victims of sexual abuse as they only have a few options for preserving their dignity. They are also faced with many



external and internal forces. That pressure causes victims to believe that their lives are useless, and they have no choice to live happily ever after. Sexual abuse victims often prefer to cut themselves off and make their flaws as a point of shame, as if a dark experience makes their self-esteem as a woman slowly disappear (Briere & Runtz, 1986).

The intricacy of psychological and social problematics caused by such cases of abuse is often manifested in literary works. This study takes the novel written by Colleen Hoover, *Hopeless*, which was published in 2012 as the representing case of such statement. In this novel, there are two female characters who have the same backgrounds as victims of sexual abuse since their children; they are Sky and Karen. Sky is the main character in the novel, who is a victim of sexual abuse from her father. Meanwhile, Karen is a female character who experiences sexual abuse from her brother. After Karen meets Sky, she can feel Sky's trauma. She decides to adopt Sky and becomes a single mother to give extra attention to her daughter. To protect her daughter, she decided to limit Sky's life to avoid her daughter from criminal things. Sky is prohibited from having internet access, social media, and gadgets. Sky's educational environment is only limited to homeschooling. Sky's interactions with the outside world are only based on her knowledge from books and the stories of her neighbour's experiences about life in public schools. The problem between mom and daughter in this novel is the focal issue of the novel. They are forced to live with the burden of trauma and bad memories from the past. They struggle to make a better life than before.

This research needs to be carried out because the issue of women's choices in sexual abuse is still rarely discussed, especially as represented in literary works. Society focuses more on the chronology, the negative impact, and the reasons why women become victims of sexual abuse. Thus, this research is important to develop a new understanding for society about how women's choices contribute to the lives of sexual abuse survivors to achieve their goals in life.

This research aims to show how women with a background as victims of sexual abuse can make their own choices to create happiness in their lives. The first goal of this study is to find out how the representation of women's choice in *Hopeless* can represented women's capability to take responsibility for their lives. The second goal of this study is to know and understand the representation of postfeminism contained in the novel through the author's critical position. Postfeminism is understood as a continuation of waves of feminist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As societal condition grows into a more complexed environment, tackling issues related to feminist concerns is also turning to a more interconnected and interdisciplinary efforts.

## **METHOD**

This study used qualitative research methods to find related data on women's choices in *Hopeless*. Close reading technique was used to collect primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from the dialogues of Sky and Karen as female characters, which described events related to the topic of this research. Whereas secondary data was obtained from family or

environmental relations which were the determining factors in the choice of female characters in this novel. Those data will help identify the factors that influence the women's choices in *Hopeless*.

To analyze the data, this research employed a theory of representation by Stuart Hall (1997) and supporting theory from postfeminism perspective. Representation theory can help researchers analyze how the main female characters, as survivors of sexual abuse, can describe women's logic in determining their choices to achieve their own happiness through narrative texts. Meanwhile, the postfeminism perspective is used to develop an understanding of women's choice issues.

There are several steps in data processing that will be used in this study. A very important initial step is carefully read the main source data and deeply understand the context of the story. The second step is to establish keywords to search information relating to the study's topic based on the narrative and dialogue in *Hopeless*. The keywords used aim to lead to any considerations and influences experienced by women in deciding their choices through female characters in the novel. The keywords used are: women decide what they want, women choose to take risks, and women choose to self-acceptance. After data is categorized by keywords, researchers need to study the factors driving women's choices. These factors are linked to the issues the female character faces, influencing their decisions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Representation of Women Choices in *Hopeless*

This chapter will focus on describing how the representation of women's choices is depicted through the thoughts and actions of the two main female characters in this novel in determining their life choices. There are three classifications of women's choices that are contained in *Hopeless*. The choices that are made in this novel convey the idea that even women with troubled pasts or those who have been sexually abused have the freedom to choose what they personally need and want.

#### *Women's Choice to Decide What They Want*

In *Hopeless*, Sky's position is a victim of sexual abuse, but little Sky shows her position as a victim who has the right to arrange her own life. This is proven through the narration which shows how little Sky agreed to live with Karen because she did not want her father around her.

*"I'm Karen," she says. "And you get to stay with me for a little while. I'll tell you*

*all about it when we get there."*

*"... But what about my daddy? Is he coming, too?"*

*Karen shakes her head. "No, sweetie. It'll just be you and me when we get there." I put the straw back in my mouth because I don't want her to see me smile. I don't want her to know that I'm happy my daddy isn't coming with us. (Hoover, 2013, pp. 258).*

Based on the quotation above, Sky chose a secure place to live because she felt safer without her father. It is a natural reaction for victims of sexual abuse to seek a safer place and avoid perpetrators of sexual abuse. Victims of sexual violence will try to avoid the perpetrators in order to create peace for themselves (Prameswari & Khoirunnisa, 2020). Even though Sky was a victim of sexual abuse, she shows courage in making life choices that could give her security. Sky demonstrates her ability to determine what is a good choice for herself. Sky represents the attitude of women in making the right choices for themselves without any coercion from other parties. Her choice was purely to achieve her goal, to live safely without fearing that her father would enter her room every night.

Sky told Lesslie how much she hated her house. She believes no part of her house is safe, especially her bedroom, which used to be a happy place when her mother was alive. Her bedroom turned into a place that made her as a victim of her father's sexual abuse.

*"You have a lot of toys. Why don't we ever come here and play? We always go to my house and it's boring there." ... I don't tell her I hate my room. I don't tell her I hate my house. I don't tell her we always go to her house because I feel safer over there. (Hoover, 2013, pp. 278).*

The aforementioned excerpt perfectly captures how meaningless Sky feels at home. Every night, she is forced to use her body in exchange for the things her father has given her. Sky despises her father's presents because they make her uncomfortable. She refuses to open or play with the new toy that her father gave to her. Sky refused the gift because she was afraid of her father's demands. If her father buys new toys every night, then Sky must repay her father by becoming the object of her father's lust.

In addition to declining to open the new toy, she consented to change her real name when she decided to move into Karen's house. Her real name is Hope, and Princess is the affectionate nickname that her father gave her. Moreover, she decided to change her name to Linden Sky Davis to forget her old name. She did not like her previous name because it reminded her of her father's mistreatment.

*"...I don't want to think about my old names or my old room or all the things that my daddy did to me when I was his princess. I love my new name. I love my new room where I don't have to worry if the doorknob is going to turn. (Hoover, 2013, pp. 336-338).*

The quotation above shows the courage of women's choices in

deciding what they want. Sky has complete authority over her own life. She wants to create comfort and serenity in her life. Choosing to forget her past is the right way to fight her way out of feeling sad and helpless as a victim of sexual abuse. Based on Wemmers (2017, pp. 15), making decisions is an important key in the recovery process for victims. It is essential for victims to have the desire to make their own decisions.

The decisions made by little Sky showed an interest in making the best choices for her life. These choices aim to help her achieve her desire of having a safe and comfortable life, far from sexual abuse perpetrators. She wants her life to be free from receiving the toys her father gave her and from paying for the toys by being the object of her father's lust.

### ***Women's Choice to Take Risks***

In this novel, Karen and Sky show their choice of courage by taking significant risks to create a better life for themselves. The circumstances they experienced after becoming victims of sexual abuse by their families push them to find the courage to determine their own lives. After enduring two years of sexual abuse by her brother following the death of her parents, Karen makes a bold movement to protect herself.

*"When I turned sixteen, I told a friend of mine what he was doing to me. She told her mother who then reported it. By that time, John had been in the police force for three years and was making a name for himself. When he was questioned about the report, he claimed I was making it up because he wouldn't allow me to see my boyfriend. He was eventually cleared and the case was dismissed, but I knew I could never go back to live with him. I lived with a few friends until I graduated high school two years later. I never spoke to him again."* (Hoover, 2013, pp. 359-360).

The quotation above shows that women are able to make the best choice for themselves, even though that choice has to sacrifice their family relationship. Karen makes a decision without hesitation as long as she believes it will offer a comfort sense. According to Wolf (in Lohyn, 1994), women have the right to choose what they believe is best for themselves and their way of life. Women must have the ability to take control of their own lives and make decisions for themselves. She did not hesitate to leave her brother rather than be the victim of her brother's passion every night. Her actions represent women are capable of taking charge of their own lives. With that decision, Karen shows how her decision was focused on her own comfort. This is appropriate with McRobbie's conception of women in postfeminism. Women must be able to choose the kind of life they want to live. Women must show greater sensitivity to their requirements and desires that are related to their interests (McRobbie, 2004).

After many years, Karen left her brother John. She accidentally sees his

brother again with a little girl. This accidental encounter prompts Karen to help the girl who lives with John. Karen believes this girl went through the same things as she did as a teenager. At the time, she makes the decision to do whatever it takes to keep the young girl safe.

*"A few days later I had made up my mind. If no one else was going to help you get away from him...then I was. The day when I pulled up to your house I'll never forget that broken little girl crying into her arms, sitting alone in the grass. When I called your name and you came to me, then climbed into the car with me...we drove away and I never looked back." (Hoover, 2013, pp. 360-361).*

The quotation above reveals Karen's choice to protect Sky from her biological father. Karen decides to adopt Sky and become a young single mother to ensure Sky's safety and have a normal life. She's willing to take risks for becoming a single mother, only to protect Sky. Moreover, she knows there might be consequences she would face for her decision to adopt Sky.

Karen's decision to become a single mother is proof that women have the power to make their own life choices. Karen's actions show how women who have had similar experiences in the past have shown greater empathy toward victims. Karen demonstrates how she, as a fellow woman, can assist in resolving these problems.

After Sky grew up, she decided to find out the reason why her father sexually abused her when she was little. Sky takes a risky decision to ensure that no one else becomes a victim of her father's abuse.

*"...I can't let him walk away, knowing he might be doing this to someone else. I need to know. I owe it to myself and to every single child my father comes in contact with to ensure he's not the evil monster that's painted in my memories. In order to know for sure, I know I need to see him. I need to speak to him. I need to know why he did what he did to me." (Hoover, 2013, pp. 304).*

The quotation above proves Sky's courage in facing her childhood trauma. Sky chooses to take the risk of revealing the truth. Her choice aims to prevent new victims appears. Sky's courage enables her to overcome her fear of confronting her father, the perpetrator of sexual abuse. Sky's actions also prove that she has grown her confidence and courage while living with Karen. It also indicates that what Karen did when she adopted Sky was the right choice. Her choice brings about positive changes in Sky's life.

Karen's efforts to provide Sky with a supportive environment in order for her to gain confidence and empathy for helping other victims of sexual

abuse. Karen uses her empathic abilities to help Sky overcome her trauma. In other words, responsive empathy is a crucial factor in addressing emotional control disorders and helps reprocess to solve problems of child abuse. Paivio and Laurent (2001), contended that the importance of parental empathy is the basis for establishing a secure attachment bond. Parents' support and empathy are important for children who are victims of sexual abuse in order to rebuild the emotional regulation, self-confidence, and interpersonal trust that were lost (Paivio & Laurent, 2001, pp. 215-218).

Karen and Sky's courage in trying to save victims of sexual abuse is a form of women's success in controlling their emotions and having responsive empathy for victims with the same trauma. The decisions made by Karen and Sky show that in making decisions, women have the courage to take significant risks to protect their relatives who are victims of sexual abuse. This is in accordance with Gilligan's statement in Meyer's journal article regarding female rationality. In making choices, women's moral reasoning is more inclined to care for others (Meyer, 2012).

### **Women's Choice to Self-Acceptance**

Self-acceptance is the result of a lifelong process. It occurs when individuals are aware of what has happened and can accept themselves for the experiences they experience, which can be in the form of feelings of happiness or pain (Germer, 2009). For victims of sexual abuse, self-acceptance is a stage that explains how they can finally reconcile with their past and trauma, allowing them to find value in life despite the struggles they have faced. Self-acceptance is identical to forgiveness. These two things are interconnected when the victim tries to understand her life's problems and forgive the things that hurt her heart (Casarjian, 2010).

The concept of self-acceptance and forgiveness is reflected in Sky's life journey. It can be seen from her attitude in overcoming her trauma and trying to understand the positive value behind the incident. After discovering the motives behind Karen's decision to take her from her father, Sky tries to understand the positive impact of living with Karen.

*"When you took me from my father, you knew the potential consequences of your decision, but you did it anyway. You risked your entire life just to save mine, and I could never ask for you to suffer because of that choice. Giving up your life for me is more than I could ever ask of you. I'm not about to judge you for what you did. The only appropriate thing for me to do at this point...is to thank you. So, thank you. Thank you so much for saving my life." (Hoover, 2013, pp. 369).*

The quotation above shows Sky's attitude toward forgiving Karen. Sky's decision to forgive Karen explained that Sky's actions had reached

the stage of allowing and friendship. Even though Sky knows that the adoption process started incorrectly, she chooses to appreciate the risky venture that Karen took to protect her life.

Sky can finally accept her fate since she recognizes that there is a woman who is willing to make sacrifices to protect her. Karen's presence in Sky's life was able to fulfil the missing mother role in little Sky's life. Karen was able to help Sky understand that her life after being free from her sexual abuse trauma is more valuable than remaining trapped in her previous traumatic experiences.

*We wrap our arms around each other and we cry. We cry  
mother to daughter. We cry aunt to niece. We cry victim to  
victim. We cry survivor to survivor.*

*I can't begin to imagine the life that Karen has led the past thirteen years.  
Every  
choice she made was for my benefit alone.*

*Knowing that she loves me enough that she would be willing to  
give her whole life up for me almost makes me feel unworthy,  
now that I know that two people in this world love me in that  
way. (Hoover, 2013, pp. 369-370).*

The quotation above demonstrates Sky's disposition to reconcile with her past. She was no longer enraged by her childhood trauma. She tries to understand how Karen struggles while protecting her from the perpetrators of sexual abuse. Sky's attitude shows that she feels lucky to be adopted by Karen. She no longer feels alone in this world because the presence of Karen in her life can motivate her to get out of her past trauma.

Sky's willingness to forgive everyone and her personal trauma represents the victim's method of embracing the problems she faces. This is as initiated by Casarjian in his book, forgiveness refers to a way of life that progressively transforms us from helpless victims of our circumstances into strong and loving subjects who embrace reality. It helps us go past our conditioned anxieties and coping mechanisms, leading us to a brave vision that opens up a new world of freedom and choice where we may lay our difficulties to rest. It takes us to places where peace is not uncommon. It helps us recognize our true strength. Forgiveness teaches us to firmly disagree with someone without withdrawing our love (Casarjian, 2010, pp. 36-37).

Sky represents how self-acceptance in women can bring peace in life. Self-acceptance is founded on a philosophical concept of how an individual sees themselves. On the other hand, self-acceptance is unconditional and includes all evaluations of the self. People can be themselves and have fun rather than trying to prove themselves. Emotionally balanced people are happy to be alive and accept themselves simply for being able to appreciate life (O'Kelly, 2013).



### Author's Critical Position

Colleen Hoover was born and raised in Texas. Before becoming a writer, Hoover was active in various fields of social work and teaching for a decade. She has also worked as a counselor for children and women in the field of supplemental nutrition. She then began her writing career at the age of 33 while working in the child protection services (Veltman, 2022).

Hoover has an interest in writing stories about the realities encountered by women. Her inspiration comes from her parent's lives and her surroundings. She believes there is no safe place for women in this world, and this fact encouraged Hoover to continue writing about bad things that happen to women. She is motivated to continue writing about dark issues because most of her readers are young women aged between 18 and 26. Through her stories, Hoover wants to share an experience with her readers that any potential bad thing can happen to a woman (Herman, 2022; Hoepfner, 2022).

The scene's setting in *Hopeless* is Texas, which is Hoover's hometown. According to the TexProtects report in 2012, child sexual abuse cases in Texas accounted for 8%. The age group with the highest percentage of victims of sexual abuse was 1-6 years, with a total of 45.8%. Moreover, the majority of perpetrators were parents, accounting for 77.9% (TexProtects, 2012). This data is related to Sky's character, who was a victim of sexual abuse by her father since she was 3-5 years old.

Hoover believes that being a victim of sexual abuse does not mean that they cannot fight back or have no other choice. Victims of sexual abuse can do anything to survive. Being a victim does not mean that they are always helpless. They must have the courage to take action against the perpetrator and struggle to survive.

*The things that knock you down in life are tests, forcing you to make a choice between giving in and remaining on the ground or wiping the dirt off and standing up even taller than you did before you were knocked down. I'm choosing to stand up taller. I'll probably get knocked down a few more times before this life is through with me, but I can guarantee you I'll never stay on the ground (Hoover, 2013, pp. 371).*

Based on the quotation above, Hoover explains how victims of sexual abuse must be brave in deciding to break free from the shackles of the term 'victim' that exists through Sky and Karen characters. Hoover also highlighted that the victim had to resist even when the offender had managed to render them defenseless. This relates to the situation experienced by Karen and Sky. Karen had reported John to the police station twice, but John still escaped punishment because he had a high position in the police institution. At the same time, Sky chose to leave her house because she did not want to live at home with her father, who

always sexually abused her every night.

Hoover also expresses her opinion on the decisions taken by Sky and Karen as survivors of sexual abuse. Even though their decisions were against the law, they were nonetheless a result of their fight for comfort in life.

*I'm the only one that can be held accountable for the way my life turns out. (Hoover, 2013, pp. 68)*

*"Sometimes you have to choose between a bunch of wrong choices and no right ones. You just have to choose which wrong choice feels the least wrong." (Hoover, 2013, pp. 365)*

According to the quotation above, Hoover also develops a postfeminist perspective on women's choices. She suggests that in a precarious situation, a woman has the right to choose what is best for her life even though her choice is judged to be wrong. For Hoover, only the women themselves that can take responsibility for their life choices and control their lives. She demonstrated this by describing how Sky and Karen can make decisions based on their desires, which lead them to achieve individual happiness. Through the characters Sky and Karen, Hoover attempted to set an example of how women as victims of sexual abuse, should be able to make the best decisions for their lives.

Hoover also voiced sympathy for sexual abuse victims. She asserts that experiencing sexual abuse is a traumatic experience that must be passed on and accepted. Their position as victims of sexual abuse is not permanent, because it does not accurately reflect who they truly are as a person.

*"I want you to remember who you are, despite the bad things that are happening to you. Because those bad things aren't you. They are just things that happen to you. You need to accept that who you are, and the things that happen to you, are not one and the same." (Hoover, 2013, pp. 343).*

According to the quotation above, Hoover emphasized that the status of a victim is not an identity. Victims of sexual abuse must live without thinking about their status as victims. Bad events will always happen to women, but those bad events will make women stronger and able to show their power even though they have many shortcomings. Hoover's opinion regarding the status of victims of sexual abuse is also explained in Deutchman's research. Women should not keep perceiving themselves as sexual abuse victims. They are not destined to be victims for as long as they can fight (Deutchman, 1998).

Hoover tries to provide her views through *Hopeless* on how victims of sexual abuse should have to deal with bad experiences in their lives. Women have the right to choose and determine what is best for their lives. Moreover, Hoover tries to show that wrong decisions do not always feel wrong if they are meant to achieve goodness and happiness.

## CONCLUSION

Through this research, it can be concluded that victims of sexual abuse will not always live in a state of powerlessness. They also have the right to determine and design their own lives to fulfil their desires. Through Hoover's perspective, she tells how we must respect the choices made by victims in creating the life they desire without passing judgment on whether those choices are right or wrong. She emphasized that victims of sexual abuse also have the right to live happily, free from the burdens of their past.

In *Hopeless*, there are three choices presented by Hoover. The first choice is for women to decide what they want. This choice explains how women as survivors of sexual abuse, can determine the choices they believe can bring comfort and peace. This choice can help the female characters in *Hopeless* achieve a comfortable life without being haunted by the fear of things that easily trigger their trauma. The second is women's choice to take risks. This choice explains the logic of women in *Hopeless* when they have to make quick decisions to save themselves, even though the choices are risky and have consequences. The choices made by Karen and Sky show the perspective that there are no right or wrong choices in an urgent situation. All that needs to be done is to decide what is the most correct to do in an urgent situation. The third choice is women's choice to self-acceptance. This decision explains how the sexual abuse victim can eventually accept the situation and recognize the advantages she gains from her efforts to find happiness.

Hoover shows her support for victims of sexual abuse through the choices she creates in the novel. She demonstrates how women's choices can affect the lives of female characters to be better and happier, even though the choices made are risky and take them out of their comfort zone. Hoover believes being a victim does not mean a woman's identity is purely weak because 'victim' is only a temporary status. In order to break free from 'victim' status, women must be brave in making choices to achieve their life goals. Women who have experienced sexual abuse have the right to make life choices that will bring them happiness. They must focus on happiness and their purpose in life, so they can return to enjoying life without feeling helpless as victims.

In *Hopeless*, Sky and Karen are described as women who dare to break away from the label of victims of sexual abuse by making choices that are risky and significant for their lives. The choices made by the two female characters illustrate the situations they have to endure as victims of sexual abuse. They no longer judge whether their choice is right or wrong based on the legal point of view because they are already disappointed with the law, which has failed to protect them from perpetrators of sexual abuse. Sky and Karen are willing to bear the consequences as long as it can keep them away from the perpetrators and bring peace to their lives.

This research aims to show that women who have experienced sexual abuse should have the freedom to make choices to regain control over their lives. It highlights the need to respect their decisions without passing judgment and reduces the stigma surrounding survivors. Society should support survivors in their ongoing lives, creating a safe and supportive environment for their personal choices. The author encourages fellow researchers to explore this topic further and provide more evidence on how women break free from the status of sexual abuse through their choices.

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