

**IDENTIFYING SELF-CONCEPTUALIZATION: PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTS OF TRAUMA TRACED IN *IT ENDS WITH US* (2016)**Sarah Ahsan\*<sup>1</sup>**Original Article**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The research aims to study women's traumatic experiences from their partners that increase the threat to their existence which demoralizes their strength to self-conceptualize. The study explores the idea of self-conceptualization in women through the theoretical lenses of Carl Roger's theory of self-conceptualization, particularly in the novel *It Ends with Us* (2016). Self-conceptualization is the tendency to self-actualize. This framework is fused with psychoanalytical feminism, borrowing the idea from Kate Millet that men have institutional power over women and are not inherited. Given, this idea further develops a nexus with Judith Herman's trauma theory to critically analyze the characters of the novel, particularly the women characters; and discuss how their (traumatized) past experiences affect their lives. The analysis drawn highlights the transformation of women who attain self-conceptualization through their bitter experiences and transform it into their strength.*

**Keywords:** Women, Trauma, Self-conceptualize, Psychoanalysis, *It Ends with Us* (2016)

**INTRODUCTION**

Trauma is an impaling effect caused by a mishap in life or a series of disturbing events. It can cause short and long-term effects on an individual which can be emotional or psychological. Thus abuse that leads to trauma results in hindrance to attaining self-conceptualization. It is troublesome for the victim to garner the strength to self-conceptualize because trauma not just scars the emotional and psychological integrity of a person but lowers their self-esteem too. In rare cases, the person overcome their fears caused by trauma; accepts and combats challenges, and establishes themselves as a new human being. This context is presented in this very research from a psychoanalytical feminist perspective by considering the novel *It Ends with Us* (2016) by Colleen Hoover.

*It Ends with Us* (2016) is a story weaved around domestic violence that resonates with the abusive story of the writer. Lily Bloom Blossom the protagonist of the story unlike her name is not very fortunate. A small-town girl from Maine travels her way to Boston to build the life she envisaged. Lily is introduced to the readers contemplating a recent event in her life; her father's death and her failure to deliver his eulogy. This rooftop event in the beginning of the first chapter lets us know the abusive relationship her parents had, and its trauma affects Lily even now. It is in the same description that she meets Ryle Kincaid (a neurosurgeon); his aura in 'scrubs' glimmers her unexpected and unwanted romance with her. A man of utter composure and grace sparks arrogance in the heart of the new relationship and story. This results in threatening Lily's life and her past friendship cum relationship with Atlas Corrigan. Atlas' character hints kind spirit heart, and his undying affection for Lily throughout the novel.

In connection to the novel this research claims that women's traumatic experiences from their partners increase threat to their existence which demoralizes their strength to self-

conceptualize. The said argument undergoes qualitative study of textual analysis under the framework of Carl Rogers' self-conceptualization with Kate Millet's psychoanalytical feminism fused with Judith Herman's trauma theory. The presented study aims to investigate how women's traumatic experiences alter their self-esteem, and how the idea of self-conceptualization is highlighted in women in the novel *It Ends with Us* (2016).

Generally, abuse is defined as maltreatment towards an individual which can be verbal, physical, psychological, or sexual. In a similar context, 'domestic abuse also called "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence", can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner' (United Nations, n.d). It is referred as a public health problem, which encompasses sexual, emotional, physical, and psychological issues, etc. In patriarchal societies, violence against women is a common nuisance as it is divorced from any class, creed, or educational barrier. Men exercise their strength over the weaker females to exert their dominance.

Similarly, the research analyzes the aforementioned scenario from the novel by critically studying the two major female characters: Lily Bloom and her mother Jenny Bloom who represent the vicious circle of domestic abuse, inclusive of male characters two of them are Ryle and Lily's father (Andrew Bloom) who use their power over their female counterparts. Another major character is Atlas who is Lily's childhood friend and has been a victim of domestic abuse, but he refrained from adopting this heinous behavior. He is the only man in her life till now with whom she has once slept; she makes this revelation before Ryle in their very first meeting which later results in dispute and violence between them. Also, the plot has an autobiographical undertone which makes the analytical understanding easier.

Abuse according to "Battered Women: Issues of Public Policy", a proceeding from 1978 denotes that the abusive culture has been in existence for a large span of time. As per the report, several domestic violence issues result in the death of the female counterpart. Data collection led them to investigate issues like 'job stress, money problem, use of alcohol' (II) are generally the cause of domestic violence or homicide. However, often at time these reported cases are closed by 'cooling off' the wife. Lily's mother is one such example from the text. Despite an abusive relationship with her husband, she puts in immense effort to maintain her marital status.

Generally, women or young girls are expected to behave in a certain way; they are taught to be the 'good girl' who 'helps around the house and is well-behaved, obedient, and respectful' (Boudet et. al., 2013, p. 42). Viz a viz the males harness the traditional role of being 'workers, providers, and fathers' (Boudet et. al., 2013, p. 42). Therefore, it must be noted that these intra-familial discords happen ignoring the financial, regional, or religious boundaries. This violence is profoundly rooted in a woman's life one way or the other let alone the emotional abuse. The impact of abuse is often prominently found in lowering the self-esteem of women. Thus, these women due to a lack of courage and emotional dependency develop much stronger ties with their abusers, whereas women with higher self-esteem have lower chances of prolonged depression due to their timely resistance (Higgins, 2011, p. 5). She prolongs her argument by putting forth her study of offering shelters to the victims. Several NGOs run their shelters for abused women, to regain their sense of self-esteem. However, with greater self-esteem women tend to look for employment which increases their self-confidence, whereas some women with low literary skills turn back to their abusers (Higgins, 2011, p. 4). Relating this idea with the argument I evaluate that women's traumatic experiences are inherited by their children too, especially the female child. Drawing the reference from the text Lily attempts to redirect the course of her life by not following

victim to her mother's sufferings. Lily's mother could not cleave herself from the abusive relationship because 'she didn't have financial stability', 'the resources to leave and give me what she thought was a decent shelter' (210). Since Lily's mother did not have access to the basic necessities of life let alone the luxuries, she could not afford than to return to her husband. The research here draws a connection with the author's life because as explained earlier domestic abuse is an endless circle, it is also not a mere work of fiction, however, it is the representation of reality. Bringing in a similarity from the author's life adds strength to the established discussion. Colleen Hoover has voiced her own mother's abuse in the 'note from the author' (273) section at the end of the book. A few incidents from the text resonate with her mother's life. But, her mother firmly took the decision and sought a divorce. She did not have a shelter or any federal help. With utmost difficulty, she raised her two daughters. Similarly, Lily projects the same headstrong character, preferring divorce than lifetime abuse for the betterment of her own daughter.

Battered women as a result of constant torture transfer their insecurities to their children. Given, the article titled "Motherhood of Battered Women: The Struggle for Repairing the Past" by Eli Buchbinder highlights the struggles the interviewed women's mothers faced in their abusive relationships. Resultantly, the women with higher self-esteem sought divorce for the safety of their children; a group of women afraid to self-assess themselves in the outer world preferred to stay in abusive relationship. Altogether, there is a relationship between battered mother and child. A victimized child turns to develop a strong sense of living and does not appreciate being like their mother, as in the case of Lily. Thus, a holistic approach tells us that understanding these women's life history can be challenging; they can be abusive to their children, or rather be defensive. Their children then decide their future establishing their sense of right and wrong by evaluating their parents' behavior. This is again evident in Lily's character. She prefers divorce in order to give a secure and promising future to her daughter.

Additionally, abuse causes trauma which in Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* is described as a 'psychological distress' (1). It is a long time overwhelming effect because trauma is associated with the past, it excavates history to gauge other person's misery [ies] which demoralizes their métier to live in the present. Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster (American Psychological Association, 2022). Primarily, the awareness of trauma was generated in the masses after the Vietnam War, for the returned soldiers. However, with modernism trauma penetrated into several other domains including feminism in order to develop a connection between political and social concerns. As earlier mentioned trauma is an integral effect of abuse. The *Handbook of Women, Stress, and Trauma* edited by Kathleen A. Kendall-Tackett elaborates that trauma is categorized into two types: acute and chronic. A temporary phase caused by disturbing of events is referred as acute trauma, whereas an incident that lingered on a longer span of time and had connecting incidents with it is termed as chronic trauma. Chronic trauma is fairly long-lasting and leaves an impression in adulthood too. Considering the provided fact, we can correlate the ideas of abuse, and trauma. Lily's potency sets the mood of the novel, but her trauma is the main cause behind her resentment for not delivering her dead father's eulogy;

"I know you didn't freeze up, Lily. You stood at that podium and refused to say a single good thing about that man. It was the proudest I have ever been of you. You were the only one in my life who ever stood up for me (263).

It is their collective trauma that expels her inner strength to muster up courage and stand for herself and her daughter. "It isn't until this moment that I finally make a decision about him. About us (279). Lily makes Ryle realize about domestic abuse (triggered by temperaments) referring to their daughter 'What would you do? If one of these days, this little girl looked up at you and she said, 'Daddy? My boyfriend hit me' (280).

Nonetheless, this study here draws a connection from the presence of trauma explained in American literature. *The Trauma of Gender: A Feminist Theory of the English Novel* by Helene Moglen's introductory part of the book converses about the Renaissance period when a sudden shift in family structure was observed. It affected the economic, family, psychic as well as gender construct. Men and women being the two binaries of existence were designated roles; men in the outside world, whereas women harbor the inside domain. It brought with it a number of other elements that defined femininity, for example, women's sexuality was replaced with their maternity only, and their full-time home governance led them to lower self-esteem. Altogether, the 'different social relations produced different aspirations and forms of self-control, as they produced different fantasies, resistances and desires' (5). This way narratives composed presented a variety of social and psychological aspects. The narration technique also shifted with the dawn of the modern age.

It is believed that by the dawn of the 1960s women writers started to blur the boundaries of fiction and history hence blending the two. Their past (childhood) experiences found a means of utterance through language. *It Ends with Us'* (2016) language too provides a picture of trauma when the plot reaches its climax. The first incident of Ryle hitting Lily did not only surprise Lily but also petrify the readers, 'I'm instantly not laughing anymore. I'm on the floor, my hand pressed against the corner of my eye (137). The perfect lover's persona sheds off when the animal side of Ryle is revealed. Surprisingly, Lily accepts his apology and her inner self constantly reminds her that 'he's not like my father' (139). The childhood trauma lives inside her; her yearning for a loving partner for the rest of her life is absolutely a different picture from her father's. It must be noted that the very incident is the writer's own mother's experience, which she as a child witnessed.

The mentioned psychological distress of the female characters is studied under the framework of psychoanalytical feminism presented by Kate Millet. Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* (1969, 1970, 2000, 2016) argues that patriarchy is a social construct, and contesting Freud's gender theory she says that man is not inherently powerful, nor is woman inherently born to be subjugated. Sexuality has been politicized and power is associated with sex. This association of power has deepened the roots of the power structure in our society, starting from a basic family structure. The power discourse has contoured to become the sole reason for subjugation including violence and abuse (X).

Similarly, Kristina Wolff says in her essay says "Psychoanalytic Feminism" (2007) that there are various factors that problematize the gender binary discourse. One such barrier to impart inferiority and superiority complex is an economical concern when men are told to work and to be the breadwinner of the family, whereas women are left with domestic chores. This is linked with the earlier cognitive development of a child. The masculine development occurs when a male child is distant from the female that is his mother; it could be due to several reasons: growing age, bodily changes, or due to emerging responsibilities this thus leads to abstaining from femininity which gives rise to masculine nature that later contour with the societal mannerism. Likewise, this study also deconstructs Freud's argument that males are inherently dominant or abusive. The male characters analyzed from the story the father, Ryle, and Atlas (abusers and savior) do not highlight any symptoms of an abusive past. Lily's father is shown as an alcoholic and has

temperament problems. A similar condition is portrayed in Ryle. Ironically, Ryle is a neurosurgeon who does not have control over his own impulses. His overall persona is of a thorough gentleman. Ryle's abusive nature is later linked in the novel to his guilty past; the loaded pistol of his father resulted in the accidental death of his elder brother. The trauma of his brother's death conflated with the guilty consciousness is the underlying cause of his abusive behavior. On the other hand, we have Atlas a boy from an abusive household; experienced a bitter familial past, but he resisted the acquisition of violence. This discussion explains what psychoanalytic feminists have advocated that a man is not an abuser by birth; it is the social construct that defines the role of the sexes and often makes the man the abuser.

Nevertheless, the research further amalgamates the referred frameworks, trauma, self-conceptualization, and psychoanalytic feminism to support the argument that women's past experiences threaten and demoralize their stamina to exist. Overlapping the idea of trauma with self-conceptualization's tenet self-esteem the study channelizes similarities between Lily's and her mother's characters. The not-so-strong mother, and financially weak awaits her husband's death. On the other hand, Lily (experiencing episodes of abuse) obeys her mother's advice to quit the toxic relationship else her sense of forgiveness will accustom her to physical abuse,

The first time your father hit me, he was immediately sorry...the fourth time it was only a slap. And when that happened, I felt relieved. I remember thinking. "*At least he didn't beat me this time. Thus wasn't so bad*"... 'Don't be like me, Lily...If Ryle truly loves you, he wouldn't allow you to take him back. That's the kind of love a woman deserves (249).

A. H. Malsow's *Motivation and Personality* (2015) also discusses self-actualization as a common trait for all human desires or achievements. He states his argument by exemplifying a woman who fantasizes about a life with a loving husband, who provides her with home and children. All human beings most of the times desire for more blessings. These desires when fulfilled overlook the present blessings of mankind hence; men strive for more eventually taking the previous ones for granted. In the first chapter, Lily tells Ryle how she is not into one-night stands, and Ryle does not want to get married and have kids. Later, the two get married and together have a daughter. But, in the meanwhile, their relationship turns sour and Lily maintains her distance from her (abusive) husband. Once the pregnancy is over she asks for divorce. It embodies that human desires are not bound to be accomplished successfully. One's desire can be another person's misery or the greatest assessment of life. Notwithstanding, the accomplishment of wishes or desires, reaching an end happy or sad is self-actualization or the maturity to deal with a situation.

Lastly, limited literature is found in the novel *It Ends with Us* (2016). The text plays a significant role in highlighting the atrocities of the society. As already discussed the novel is based on abusive relationships likewise, Winda Dwiastuti and Harumi Manik Ayu Yamin analyze the same issue in their article "The Simplification Domestic Violence in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* (2016)". According to their analysis, domestic violence has been a horrible social practice for ages. However, the greatest dilemma of this is normalizing the practice of violence against women (especially). The authors have scrutinized every character individually to offer their roles and stance on domestic violence, the conclusion relates to the fact (as earlier mentioned too) that abused women harness lower self-esteem, and each woman does not have the audacity to leave an abusive relationship owing to a number of factors; preventing the sanctity of marriage, financial instability, etc.

A conclusive analysis of the text, a complex trauma results in various individual patterns. 'Sense of self' and 'the ability to self-regulate' (Courtois & Ford 4) come as defensive tools for a traumatized individual. At times heightened emotions play the role to express the psychological effect such as anger, depression, anxiety, lack of trust, low or high self-esteem, etc. In a similar fashion, Lily's character develops with the plot; her idea to set up a floral business is iconic. Like her name Lily Bloom, she envisions a blooming future. Her energy is emitted in her entrepreneurship. Unlike a typical floral shop, she plans to sell the 'villainous side' of flowers (36). Her floral ideology echoes Ryle's dialogue 'there is no such thing as bad people. We're all just people who do bad things' (16). The very idea when sabotaged uncovers self-conceptualization of Lily. Her financial independence brings in her inner strength, her mother's lower self-esteem turns to Lily's strength, 'brave and bold' (250). Psychoanalytically, she sparks her cognitive potency that is channelized through her mother's bitter experiences.

Furthermore, in the final event of abuse in the text; '...he sinks his teeth into me so hard, I scream' (197). To Lily's surprise, Ryle had found her childhood belongings that were gifted by Atlas. Since, Ryle is an impulsive character, partially shadowed by his childhood conscious guilt, and partially by his domineering personality does not allow Lily to show the tiniest bit of affection for any other male counterpart. His obsession with her abuses her emotionally, and physically ultimately resulting in marital rape; a similar incident Lily witnessed in her past between her parents. The aggressive tendency in Ryle is the subjectively a climax of the plot. The pinnacle of abuse contours Lily's personality. As readers we see a significant shift in Lily's character, her courage to remain strong (even after gaining consciousness) and accepting the bitterness of reality realizes her hatred towards her husband. It is daring for a timid Lily to rush to Atlas for help. With every passing scene, the reader's apprehension about Ryle catching Lily and Atlas together grows stronger. It is so, in the midst of the novel the two males happen to indulge in a fight over Lily.

Additionally, Lily's life ideals do not let her give up on her love life; various violent incidents in her life do not abstain her from betrothing Ryle. Their pre-marriage vows included her right to vote, receiving expensive gifts from her husband, etc. It is observed in these incidents that Lily's mind was accustomed to playing a traditional wife's role. Like a patriarchal man, he designed her living standards. It is due to which she tolerated his offensive behavior because she was keeping true to her vows like her mother; an example of inherited trauma. In chapter fifteen, Atlas (Lily's friend, an ex-boyfriend) confronts her; Lily has a bruised face from the previous rough incident, asserting it to be an accident she defends Ryle 'It wasn't like that. Ryle is a good person (146). On the other hand, Atlas knows her since childhood he reflects her inner-self to her mother's past 'You sound just like your mother' (147). Repeatedly, we witness that Lily Bloom like her mother struggles to keep her love/married life straight. Her acts are a constant connection to her traumatic past. Psychologically, she was strong; she maintained her strength even after witnessing her mother's wretched life, afterward being victimized by physical abuse she musters up the courage to seek help from Atlas, distances herself from her abusive husband, and carries out the nine months of childbearing solely. The protagonist's solitary days of pregnancy foreshadow her metamorphosis. Like a mature woman, she celebrates the hospital moment with her husband, together they name their baby. Lastly, she brings an end to every existing misery 'I want a divorce' (265) are the final words the couple shared. Her pressing questions regarding their daughter's abusive life in future realizes Ryle that his monstrosity has destroyed Lily. As a benevolent lover, he leaves her. Lily brings an end to the atrocities she and her mother had experienced. 'Circles exist because they are excruciating to break' (267). This very moment is a turning point and

highlights self-conceptualization and self-actualization of the characters. The novel ends with Lily's final lines to her daughter 'It ends with us' (267).

## CONCLUSION

Conclusively we see that women's traumatic experiences from their partners often increase the threat to their existence which demoralizes their strength to self-conceptualize. In the text *It Ends with Us* (2016) by Colleen Hoover references are drawn to showcase domestic atrocities that exist globally. It is merely a work of fiction, but it foregrounds the author's own life. The study draws its framework from Carl Roger's theory of self-conceptualization; psychoanalytical feminism from Kate Millet; and trauma theory by Judith Herman. The fusion of three gives an insight into abuse and trauma which obstructs self-conceptualization for some women. The struggle to self-conceptualize is witnessed in Lily's character predominantly, whilst drawing traces of self-conceptualization from her mother's character too. In a nutshell, it is difficult for abused women to regain their lost self-esteem, and overcome their insecurities to relive their lives. It is rarely observed that women combat such threats and revert to life.

Internationally, United Nations is putting in the effort to curb domestic violence so that women can live equally a better life. On various fronts UN has deployed smaller scale teams, organizations to curb the practice of violence. In the last five years issues like 'me too', to pinpoint rapists/abusers and to courageously highlight victim stories surfaced the media. This year UN has initiated UNiTE program from November 25<sup>th</sup> to December 10<sup>th</sup>, a sixteen days program on the theme of end violence against women (United Nations, 2022). The underlying theme of UNiTE attempts to halt, human trafficking, child abuse, violence against women and issues related to it. In doing so, countries would be able to achieve Sustainable Development Goal- to leave no one behind.

Moreover, such abusive incidents must be taken to court. The victims must undergo therapeutic sessions to filter out their trauma, regain their self-esteem, and rebuild their psychological strength. Once again the protagonist's character (Lily) must be examined closely; a normal girl with childhood trauma seeks a partner unlike her father. Nonetheless, fate does not favor her and her lover cum husband is the abusive authority in her life. The parabolic shift in her character not just presents her stronger self; it uncovers her cognitive ability to solely take decisions of her life, and her courage to overcome her trauma. Such incidents are lessons for life and examples for the victims of society. The text considered is one such example of the commonly practiced horrid acts that are nowhere near depletion.

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