

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Childhood is a crucial developmental stage for emotional stability, affection, and constant guidance. Elango et al. (2016, p. 243) argue that “early childhood environments have profound consequences on the lives of children, and affect the entire society through reduced crime, enhanced health, greater educational attainment, and greater social engagement.” Hence, an individual’s psychological development in adulthood is shaped by their early childhood experiences. One of the most significant influences on this developmental process is the quality of a child’s early relationships and caregiving environment.

During these periods, children need caring, encouraging relationships to grow in empathy, trust, and self-control. When early experiences of safety and care are replaced by trauma, fear, or abandonment. Consequently, disruptions in development may lead to distorted thinking, maladaptive behavioral patterns, and long-term difficulties with trusting others and establishing relationships.

The ideal concept of childhood centers on guidance and affection, yet the absence or inversion of these conditions can distort an individual’s development and lead to childhood trauma, as reflected in the character of Joe Goldberg in Caroline Kepnes’s *You*. This aligns with Caruth’s definition of trauma, which she describes as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996, p. 1). Given

the enduring influence of childhood trauma on psychological development, this study employs Cathy Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience.

Caruth emphasizes the belated nature of traumatic experience, as "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (Caruth, 1995, p. 8). She explains that traumatic experiences are often not fully comprehended when they occur, but return later in intrusive ways. This idea of a belated return shows how childhood experiences can influence a person's feelings, thoughts, and actions long after the event.

The phenomenon of childhood trauma is reflected in the novel entitled *You* by Caroline Kepnes. The novel tells the story of Joe Goldberg, a bookstore manager whose fascination with a woman named Guinevere Beck gradually turns into obsession. The story shows how childhood trauma that is never fully understood can return as obsessive and harmful behavior. Published in 2014, *You* gained wide attention for its psychological depth and was later adapted into a popular Netflix series. Through Joe's childhood traumatic experiences, readers witness how he uses manipulation, stalking, and violence as acts of love and protection. Therefore, this study explores the belated resurfacing of Joe Goldberg's traumatic experiences.

To examine how Joe Goldberg's childhood trauma shapes his psychological development and adult behavior, this study analyzes his character through a psychoanalytic approach. The analysis focuses on his monologues, interactions with others, and the narratives he constructs to rationalize his actions. Through these elements, the study uncovers how the lingering effects of unresolved trauma

shape his understanding of love, connection, and violence.

Through this approach, the study shows that Joe's harmful behaviors and troubled way of forming intimacy grew out of childhood experiences he was never able to understand or cope with. These experiences continue to influence how he perceives himself and relates to others. Furthermore, the research illustrates how trauma, when left unprocessed, continues to shape Joe's sense of self, his emotional life, and the choices that lead him toward destructive patterns.

1.2 Research Questions

In Caroline Kepnes' *You*, Joe Goldberg carries childhood trauma that reappears in the form of obsessive behavior and violent tendencies, particularly from his childhood with Mr. Mooney. These early experiences shape his distorted understanding of love, where control and obsession are misinterpreted as care and protection. This study examines how these unresolved childhood experiences become the major ground of Joe's identity and influence his harmful patterns. To guide the analysis, the following research questions are proposed:

1. What childhood experiences contribute to Joe Goldberg's trauma in the novel?
2. How does Joe Goldberg's childhood trauma return belatedly in his adult life?
3. How does Joe Goldberg demonstrate repetition compulsion as a response to his unresolved childhood trauma?

1.3 Objectives

1. To identify the childhood experiences that contribute to Joe Goldberg's trauma in the novel *You*.
2. To analyze how Joe Goldberg's childhood trauma returns belatedly in his adult life.
3. To examine how Joe Goldberg demonstrates repetition compulsion as a response to his unresolved childhood trauma.

1.4 Previous Studies

Caroline Kepnes' *You* has been examined in previous studies from a variety of critical perspectives. Several studies have analyzed Joe Goldberg's use of defense mechanisms, his psychological conflicts through psychoanalysis, his character and personality traits, feminist readings of the novel, and public perceptions that romanticize his behavior. These studies highlight the complexity of Joe's character while approaching the text from psychological, gender-based, and cultural viewpoints.

The first previous research is a journal article entitled "*Low Level of Defense Mechanism Portrayed on Joe Goldberg in The First Season of You Series*" (2021) by Devianti and Jumino. This journal argues that Joe Goldberg exhibits neurotic behavior as a result of childhood trauma caused by his abusive parents, who eventually abandoned him. He frequently overheard their fights, witnessed his father's abuse of his mother, and experienced physical abuse himself. These early experiences shaped Joe's behavior as an adult, which led to excessive anxiety.

The second previous research is a journal article entitled “*Psychoanalysis on conflict of the main character Joe Goldberg in TV series You season 3*” (2022) by Saraswati, Artawa, and Widiastuti. This study argues that Joe Goldberg enjoys stalking. He will seek out the lady he desires, break into their home, and seize their personal stuff to put in a box. This shows how Joe Goldberg’s id often prevails over his ego in conflict.

The third previous study is an article entitled “*Character Analysis of Joe Goldberg in Caroline Kepnes’ You and Hidden Bodies Novels*” (2021) by Wahyuni, Kuncara, and Lubis. This research examines Joe Goldberg’s personality through the lens of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. It argues that the dominance of his id largely drives Joe’s impulsiveness, violence, and stalking, while his ego appears mainly when he attempts to maintain a positive self-image. His superego appears only occasionally through brief moments of moral awareness.

The fourth previous study is a thesis entitled “*An Analysis of the Female Character in Caroline Kepnes’s You: Reading Through Theory of Sexual Politics*” (2020) by Gupta. It offers a gender-based reading of the female protagonist, Beck, in the novel *You*. In this study, Beck is presented as a woman oppressed by patriarchal norms, and feminist theories are used to show how the novel reflects structures of domination and female subjugation. Joe Goldberg, as the central male character, is analyzed as both a stalker and an aggressor whose actions reinforce patriarchal control. This thesis focuses primarily on gender inequality and male dominance.

The fifth previous study is a thesis entitled “*Another Likable Serial Killer: Fans’ Representation of You’s Joe Goldberg Through Memes*” (2020) by Lynch. This research examines how the public, particularly internet users, perceive Joe Goldberg as a likable serial killer. It explains how fans often romanticize Joe despite his violent actions, explores why audiences are drawn to problematic characters, and examines how this attraction becomes normalized through online media.

Compared to the previous studies, this research offers a new perspective by examining Joe Goldberg’s childhood trauma through Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory. The existing literature focuses on several areas, including psychoanalytic studies that examine Joe Goldberg’s defense mechanisms, personality conflicts, and character traits. Feminist studies also approach the novel from the perspective of patriarchal oppression, while cultural studies explore public perceptions of Joe Goldberg, particularly the romanticization of his character.

However, none of these studies examine Joe’s childhood trauma using Caruth’s concept of trauma, particularly the idea of trauma that is not fully processed and later returns in belated, destructive ways. Although some studies mention Joe’s traumatic childhood, they do not analyze how these early experiences resurface in his adult behavior or how belated trauma shapes his perception of love and protection. Hence, this research fills the gap by offering a trauma-centered psychoanalytic reading that links Joe’s childhood experiences with his present obsessive and abusive behaviors. This aspect has not been explored in previous studies.

1.5 Research Method

1.5.1 Types of Research

The type of this research is library research. As described by George, it is a research method that “involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/ expert opinion on a research question; a necessary component of every other research method at some point” (2008, p. 6). Furthermore, this research is qualitative and will examine Joe Goldberg’s childhood trauma in Caroline Kepnes’ *You*. As George also defines, qualitative research is “designates any research whose results are captured in words, images, or nonnumeric symbols; for instance, research on dreams” (2008, p. 7). The purpose of this research is to explore the roots of Joe’s childhood trauma. His trauma will later explain how leaving it unprocessed causes it to resurface in his adult life. Therefore, the writer will analyze how its belated return shapes his perception of love, intimacy, and protection.

1.5.2 Research Approach

To thoroughly analyze Joe Goldberg’s character and trauma, the writer uses a psychoanalytic approach. According to Freud, psychoanalysis is grounded in the idea that “mental processes are in themselves unconscious and that of all mental life it is only certain individual acts and portions that are conscious” (1920: 11). In line with this emphasis on hidden mental processes, the research also applies Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory to examine how Joe’s unresolved childhood experiences influence his adult life. In doing so, this study aims to explore how Joe Goldberg

could not process the childhood trauma left by Mr. Mooney and how it returns belatedly in the form of a distorted perception of love and protection. Joe mistakenly expresses violent behaviors as acts of love and as attempts to maintain security. However, this is a sign of trauma, as Cathy Caruth explains in her theory.

1.5.3 Data Source

The novel *You* (2014) by Caroline Kepnes is treated as the primary data, supported by secondary sources such as Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, as well as Sigmund Freud's *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, all of which provide the interpretive theoretical framework through which the primary data is examined. In addition, secondary data, such as relevant journal articles and previous data, are used to support a thorough analysis of the novel. Together, these primary and secondary sources allow for a comprehensive and theoretically grounded analysis of Joe Goldberg's childhood trauma.

1.5.4 Method of Data Collection

The method of data collection for this research involves a close reading of Caroline Kepnes's *You*, as a careful and detailed analysis of the text. According to Brummett, close reading is "the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings" (2019, p. 14). This method focuses on Joe Goldberg's memories, behavior, narrative voice, and relationships to identify traces of unprocessed childhood trauma and its belated return in his adult life. This approach strengthens the analysis by allowing a deeper interpretation of how Joe's

unresolved childhood experiences continue to shape his character.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This literary research examines the intrinsic elements of Joe Goldberg in Caroline Kepnes's *You*. The analysis focuses on the character, characterization, setting, and conflicts surrounding Joe, using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as the primary analytical framework. Furthermore, to help examine Joe's childhood trauma and its belated return, this study uses Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, especially the concept of unclaimed experience. This study also uses Sigmund Freud's concept of repetition compulsion to analyze how Joe demonstrates it as an adult. Through these elements, the study explores how Joe's childhood trauma is represented in the narrative and how it influences his adult behavior and his relationship with his romantic partner.

1.7 Writing Outline

In the writing of this thesis, the organization of the study will follow this outline:

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the introductory section of the study, including the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, previous studies, scope of the study, and organization of the writing.

CHAPTER II THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter discusses the theories and intrinsic elements used to analyze the object of the study. It presents the theoretical framework that supports the analysis and explains the intrinsic elements of the novel, such as character & characterization, setting, and conflict, which are examined throughout the study.

CHAPTER III RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter explains the results and discussion of Joe Goldberg's childhood trauma in the novel *You* by Caroline Kepnes. This answers the questions concerning Joe Goldberg's childhood experiences that contribute to his trauma, the belated return of trauma in his adult life, and his demonstration of repetition compulsion as a response to his unresolved childhood trauma.

CHAPTER IV CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes all research results from the object under study.