



TOXIC FEMININITY IN COLLEEN HOOVER'S *UGLY LOVE*

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Abstract. This research explores the concept of toxic femininity in Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love*. The data are taken from the novel by Colleen Hoover, entitled *Ugly Love*, focusing on the character of Tate Collins and how her behaviors reflect internalized patriarchal norms. Drawing upon Kate Manne's feminist philosophy, particularly her notion of *human giver syndrome* and *misogyny*, the analysis identifies key traits of toxic femininity portrayed by Tate, such as emotional self-sacrifice, dependency, and the endurance of emotional pain. The research adopts a qualitative method and uses feminist literary criticism approach to dissect the psychological and relational consequences of these behaviors. By examining Tate's emotional responses and choices, the research reveals how her submission to traditional gender expectations creates a deeply unbalanced and harmful romantic dynamic with Miles Archer. The analysis is divided into two main parts: the first identifies the elements of toxic femininity within Tate's character, and the second explores the impact of these traits on her relationship. The findings demonstrate that Tate's toxic femininity results in the creation of a toxic relationship, the reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms, and the inhibition of emotional healing for both herself and Miles. By internalizing the belief that femininity is defined by emotional labor and sacrifice, Tate becomes both the victim and the enabler of her emotional suffering. This research highlights how literary narratives reflect real-world gender ideologies and underscores the necessity of rethinking how female characters are shaped by and contribute to harmful relational dynamics.

Keywords: *emotional sacrifice and suffering, human giver syndrome, patriarchy, toxic femininity*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender has long been shaped by societal norms, where femininity is associated with emotional giving, selflessness, and submission. These traits, when taken to the extreme, can develop into a harmful behavioral pattern known as toxic femininity. Unlike toxic masculinity, which often involves dominance and aggression, toxic femininity operates subtly, urging women to erase themselves for the comfort and well-being of others. While this behavior is frequently perceived as noble or romantic, it can be emotionally destructive when women endure pain for the sake of love or acceptance. This pattern of expected emotional labor is particularly visible in literature, where female characters are often portrayed as enduring silent suffering to preserve relationships. Bell Hooks (2000) argues that "*Patriarchal culture teaches women that self-sacrifice is a virtue, that placing the needs of others above their own is what makes*

them good." This indoctrination of women to find value in giving rather than receiving becomes a destructive force, especially in romantic relationships where emotional reciprocity is lacking. Patriarchy remains a deeply rooted issue in many societies because the unequal relationship between men and women continuously reinforces gender disparities. Women are often positioned as secondary to men, which fosters a dynamic where they are expected to be passive, dependent, and in need of male protection. While this role may appear nurturing on the surface, it ultimately reinforces male dominance and denies women autonomy and resilience. In patriarchal systems, women are socialized to internalize submissive roles, whether in the private or public sphere, and their identities are often defined by their relationships with men first as daughters under their fathers, and later as wives under their husbands. This transactional view of womanhood sustains a cycle of inequality. Importantly, these patriarchal norms not only limit women externally but also encourage self-imposed limitations. When women embrace emotional labor, self-sacrifice, and passivity as markers of being "good" or "lovable," they may unknowingly adopt toxic behaviors. This study seeks to examine how such internalized gender roles despite being chosen by women themselves—can lead to toxic femininity, where women actively participate in their own emotional suppression and subjugation under the guise of love and loyalty.

The psychological toll of toxic femininity is profound, leading to feelings of resentment, low self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion. Hooks warns that "*loving others without self-love leaves women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse*" (Hooks, 2000:67). When women consistently prioritize others' needs over their own emotional and psychological health, they are trapped in cycles of self-neglect that are mistaken for virtues like loyalty and compassion.

The reason why the researcher is interested in choosing this topic is because women deserve the right to express their opinions and hold the same positions as men in both personal and social spheres. However, in patriarchal systems, these rights are often suppressed or manipulated through cultural expectations that encourage women to prioritize others over themselves. When women internalize these expectations, they may engage in toxic behaviors such as excessive self-sacrifice, emotional suppression, and dependency that ultimately harm their own well-being, addressing a gap in previous studies that have rarely focused on toxic femininity from the angle of the woman as both victim and enabler.

The novel *Ugly Love* by Colleen Hoover centers on the emotional journey of Tate Collins, a young woman who becomes romantically involved with Miles Archer, a man emotionally burdened by his past. Unlike traditional romantic narratives, the story exposes how Tate's choices and actions are shaped by deeply ingrained expectations of self-sacrifice and emotional endurance. This research aims to explore the elements of toxic femininity as reflected in Tate's character and how her persistent emotional giving and silent suffering mirror the societal conditioning of women within patriarchal culture. Furthermore, the study analyzes the impact of these toxic traits on her relationship with Miles Archer, revealing how internalized gender norms can lead women to stay in emotionally harmful situations. Through this examination, the research seeks to highlight how toxic femininity not only reflects patriarchal values but also perpetuates them through women's own decisions and emotional behaviors,

addressing a gap in previous studies that have rarely focused on toxic femininity from the angle of the woman as both victim and enabler.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Toxic femininity, though less discussed than toxic masculinity, is gaining recognition in feminist academic discourse. It refers to the internalization of patriarchal norms that encourage women to adopt self-sacrificial, emotionally dependent, and submissive behaviors, often under the guise of love or care. This concept is deeply embedded in the “human giver syndrome” proposed by Kate Manne in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017). She explains that women are culturally expected to provide emotional labor and care without expecting reciprocity. This norm leads to a form of self-erasure where women's identities and boundaries are sacrificed for others' comfort. Bell Hooks (2000), in *All About Love*, states that “Patriarchal culture teaches women that self-sacrifice is a virtue,” reinforcing how cultural conditioning glorifies emotional suffering in women. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) also supports this framework by arguing in *The Second Sex* that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” suggesting that womanhood is shaped through socialization processes—many of which endorse toxic ideals of femininity. Naomi Snider (2021) builds on this by introducing the idea that women's silence and complicity are not always due to victimization but are also acts of internalized ideology. In her article *Why Didn't She Walk Away?*, she argues that many women remain in harmful relationships because they equate endurance and emotional labor with love. Hannah McCann (2018), in her theory of “rigid femininities,” identifies the narrow behavioral expectations imposed on women to remain emotionally composed and selfless, even in the face of emotional harm.

Women's lower status in this system is created by culture and feels unavoidable, with men having control over families, communities, and governments. “*The women cannot voice what they want to convey because their voices are rejected, and they do not have the right to speak out, which can result in losing their identity as women.*” (Firdausiyah & Rahayu, 2025 : 2) Patriarchy not only controls women's roles, but also silences their voices and emotions. According to Firdausiyah and Rahayu (2025), women are often denied the space to express their feelings or assert their needs, which leads to the loss of personal identity. These theories are reflected in literary works, where female characters are often celebrated for their endurance and emotional labor. This study on *Ugly Love* by Colleen Hoover contributes to this ongoing discourse by showing how the protagonist Tate Collins embodies these toxic feminine traits through self-sacrifice, emotional dependency, and an inability to leave an emotionally unbalanced relationship. This study bridges the gap by positioning the woman not only as a victim of patriarchal conditioning but also as an enabler of her own suffering, making it a unique contribution to feminist literary criticism.

METHODS

This research applies a **qualitative descriptive** method with a **feminist literary criticism** approach. The data were collected by conducting close readings of Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love* and identifying dialogues, scenes, and actions relevant to the themes of toxic femininity and patriarchy. **Kate Manne's feminist theory**, particularly her concepts of misogyny and the “human giver syndrome,” serves as the primary

theoretical framework. Supporting theories from bell hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, and Naomi Snider help provide further insight into patriarchal structures and internalized oppression.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Elements of Tate's toxic femininity Portrayed in the Novel

Through the lens of Kate Manne's feminist philosophy, particularly her concept of *human giver syndrome*, this chapter explores how Tate's toxic femininity such as, self sacrifice, emotional dependence, and submission serve as literary manifestations of toxic femininity. Manne's theory, supported by contemporary feminist scholars such as Hannah McCann and Lois Tyson, highlights how women are often positioned as emotional caretakers whose value lies in their ability to endure, give, and remain loyal. These traits, when taken to extremes, reveal the harmful expectations imposed on women under patriarchy. Each section in this chapter identifies specific traits of toxic femininity as performed by Tate, using textual evidence and feminist critique to demonstrate how these internalized ideals contribute to her psychological struggle and loss of self-agency. By exposing these dynamics, the study not only critiques gender norms within romantic narratives, but also offers a deeper understanding of how toxic femininity operates within contemporary literature.

1.1 Self Sacrifice

Hannah McCann (2020) introduces the concept of "rigid femininities" to describe socially enforced norms that pressure women into self-sacrificing roles. She explains that these rigid femininities are characterized by the expectation that women should prioritize others' needs over their own, maintain emotional composure, and derive their identity through relationships, often at the expense of personal autonomy and well-being. McCann states, "*Rigid femininities are those that are inflexible, narrow, and often harmful, demanding that women adhere to strict norms of behavior and self-presentation*" (McCann, 2020:10).

For instance Tate states She was not sure whether it would be okay with her if she agreed to an unfeeling physical relationship with Miles, realizing her hesitation she pretended that she agreed and was okay with it,

"He wants me for sex. I'm nervous because I'm not sure that just sex with him is possible. Based on the way I'm drawn to him, I have pretty good feeling sex will be the least of our problems. Yet here I sit, pretending to be fine with just sex. Maybe if it starts out this way, it'll eventually end up being something more." (Hoover,2014:93)

That quotation above shows the pattern of self-sacrifice is reinforced when she realized that Miles only wants her for a sex. Her willingness to accept any condition, regardless of the emotional toll it takes, aligns with what Bell Hooks (2000) identifies as the patriarchal indoctrination of women: "*Women are taught that to be female is to be self-sacrificing ... to be willing to give up one's own desires and needs for the sake of others*" (Hooks,2000:44).Tate knowingly suppresses her emotional needs and accepts a relationship on Miles's terms, hoping it will evolve into something deeper. She is aware that what she wants emotionally is not being offered, yet she chooses to remain silent and compliant, sacrificing honesty and personal boundaries to maintain a connection with him.

1.2 Emotionally Dependency

In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017), Kate Manne does not explicitly mention the term “toxic femininity”, as she avoids blaming women directly for their roles within patriarchal structures. However, she very clearly discusses how women are encouraged to be emotional caregivers for men, which makes them neglect their own needs. This makes unhealthy sacrifices, and get caught up in unequal relationship dynamics. This is closely related to the idea of “Human Giver Syndrome” where women: “...are expected to give their time, energy, love, attention, and bodies to others especially men without demanding reciprocity.” (Manne, 2017:130)

Manne asserts that “good” women according to patriarchal norms are women who give constant love and emotional support, without expecting anything back. This creates a one-way emotional dependency, where women like Tate depends on men's acceptance and affection for her happiness, even if it damages her emotionally. In this scene Tate shows the emotional dependency by being passively agree with whatever Miles wants,

“I absolutely don't like either of those rules. They both make me want to change my mind about this arrangement and turn and run away, but instead, I'm nodding. I'm nodding because I will take what I can get. I'm not Tate when I'm near Miles, I'm liquid, and liquid doesn't know how to be firm or stand up for itself. Liquid flows. That's all I want to do with Miles.” (Hoover, 2014 : 96)

Tate demonstrates both emotional and physical dependence on Miles throughout *Ugly Love*. Although she realizes that their relationship lacks emotional reciprocity and commitment, she continues to center her happiness around Miles. She hopes for something deeper and more meaningful, yet accepts his terms even when they contradict her own desires and emotional needs. As a result, she becomes emotionally powerless and places herself in a vulnerable position, illustrating how her identity and self-worth become deeply tied to Miles's presence and approval.

1.3 Endurance of Emotional Pain

Tate's repeated choice to stay in a painful, undefined relationship with Miles, despite knowing that she deserves more, reveals how emotional pain becomes a space she inhabits willingly. Her endurance is not driven by hope alone, but by an internalized belief that love must be proven through suffering a belief rooted in **rigid femininities**, as discussed by **Hannah McCann (2018)**. According to McCann, rigid femininities trap women into narrow expectations, where being emotionally strong means enduring pain quietly and without protest. Furthermore, **Lois Tyson (2006)** explains that women in patriarchal narratives are often depicted as emotionally selfless beings, whose identity is tied to their capacity to love unconditionally and suffer in silence. Tate embodies this pattern, believing that enduring pain is a necessary part of sustaining love even if that love is unreciprocated.

Within **Kate Manne's (2017)** framework of *human giver syndrome*, this endurance is normalized. Women are socially positioned as givers of emotional support and comfort, and when they experience pain, they are expected to do so quietly and gracefully, without needing to be cared for in return. Manne asserts: “*Women are expected to give their time, bodies, and emotions but not demand care or attention in return.*” (Manne, 2017:130) Thus, the endurance of emotional pain becomes one of the clearest expressions of toxic femininity. It is a form of internalized oppression where the act of suffering is transformed into a performance of love. In Tate's case, her ability to endure becomes a tool of self-destruction, reinforced by societal messages that praise women

for staying, forgiving, and suffering silently in the name of devotion. This scene when Tate suffers but all she could think is just Miles, she knows she deserves much better,

“I quickly bring a hand up and wipe away a tear that somehow just escaped down my cheek, the absolute last thing I want is for him to see me cry. As much as I know I’m too far gone to continue treating this as casual sex, I’m also too far gone to stop it. I’m terrified to lose him for good, so I sell myself short and take what I can from him, even though I know I deserve better.” (Hoover, 2014:257)

Tate reveals her deep emotional suffering, yet chooses to endure it in silence. She actively conceals her vulnerability, suppresses her pain, and accepts emotional neglect in order to maintain her connection with Miles. Although she is fully aware that the relationship is unbalanced and that she deserves more, she convinces herself to accept the minimum out of fear of losing him entirely. This behavior reflects a central trait of **toxic femininity**: the normalization of emotional pain as part of feminine loyalty and romantic endurance.

2. The Impact of Tate Collins's Toxic Femininity on Her relationship with Miles Archer

Tate’s toxic femininity causes some impacts on her relationship with Miles such as creating a toxic relationship, reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms, and *inhibition of emotional healing*.

2.1 Creating a Toxic Relationship

A toxic relationship refers to a relational dynamic characterized by emotional imbalance, lack of mutual respect, poor communication, and patterns of harm that persist over time. It often involves one or both partners engaging in behavior that erodes the other’s sense of self-worth, stability, or autonomy. Unlike overt abuse, toxic relationships frequently develop from subtle emotional neglect, manipulation, or codependency dynamics that are sometimes misunderstood or even romanticized as part of love. When emotional pain is normalized, and harmful patterns are tolerated or justified, the relationship gradually becomes destructive to both individuals involved.

In the case of *Ugly Love*, the toxicity in the relationship between Tate Collins and Miles Archer is not created by overt cruelty but by continuous emotional avoidance, suppressed expectations, and one-sided sacrifice. While Miles consistently maintains emotional distance, it is Tate’s **performance of toxic femininity** her tendency to stay silent, forgive quickly, and endure emotional pain without confrontation that allows the relationship to remain unbalanced and unresolved. Her internalized belief that love requires suffering transforms the emotional neglect into something she feels she must accept rather than resist. This scene explains how Tate's attitude accepts Miles' presence again after what he did to her the week before when Miles left her wordlessly after they had sex. But again in this scene Tate makes another exception for Miles,

“If any other man ever treated me like he did, it would be the one and only time. I don’t put up with the things I’ve seen a lot of my friends put up with. However, I find myself continuing to make excuses for him, like something could actually justify his action last week. I’m beginning to fear that maybe I’m not so tough after all.” (Hoover, 2014:193)

Tate recognizes the contradiction between her values and her actions. She admits that she normally would not tolerate emotional mistreatment, yet in the case of Miles, she repeatedly makes exceptions. This self-awareness, coupled with her continued emotional concession, illustrates how her performance of toxic femininity traps her in a cycle of emotional submission. The emotional harm Tate experiences being left immediately after sex without explanation should represent a boundary-crossing event, a moment of realization that the relationship is unsafe and unbalanced. Instead, when Miles returns, she not only accepts his vague apology but begins justifying his behavior in her own mind. This willingness to excuse emotional neglect reveals a key aspect of **toxic femininity**: the belief that love requires endurance, forgiveness, and emotional tolerance, even in the absence of accountability.

Furthermore when she says “*Sex, I remind myself. It’s just sex. Nothing more. He’s not giving any other part of him. I’m a fool. At least I’m a self-aware fool.*” (Hoover, 2014:213), Tate’s behavior reflects what **Hannah McCann (2018)** describes as the embodiment of *rigid femininity*, where women internalize emotional roles that demand silence, understanding, and patience. In this framework, Tate sees her capacity to accept pain as a form of emotional strength, when in fact, it reinforces her emotional vulnerability. She begins to question her own toughness not because she is weak, but because the feminine ideal she is performing equates resilience with staying, forgiving, and enduring. As the emotional imbalance grows, so does the toxicity of the relationship.

2.2 Reinforcement of Patriarchal Gender Norms.

Tate’s toxic femininity does not only affect her emotional well-being and relationship with Miles, but it also reinforces patriarchal gender norms that define women through emotional subservience and silence. Instead of resisting or challenging Miles’s neglect, Tate consistently conforms to the role of a woman who sacrifices, endures, and waits roles historically idealized under patriarchy. According to **Lois Tyson (2006)**, patriarchy promotes the belief that women’s identities should be based on their relationships with men, encouraging emotional dependency and passive behavior. Similarly, **Kate Manne (2017)** emphasizes how patriarchy moralizes women’s roles as “givers” of love, care, understanding without expecting reciprocity. Tate’s behavior echoes this moral logic. She becomes the emotional caretaker in a one-sided relationship, internalizing the belief that love must be proven through suffering. In doing so, her actions not only sustain an emotionally toxic relationship, but also reproduce the patriarchal ideals that place the emotional labor of relationships solely on women’s shoulders.

In the quote, “*No, Miles. I follow. That’s how it is with us. You’re solid, I’m liquid. You part the waters, I’m your wake*” (Hoover, 2014:117), Tate clearly identifies herself as someone who adapts, yields, and follows. She positions herself not as an equal partner but as a passive extension of Miles’s decisions and desires. This metaphor of being “liquid” and letting him “part the waters” symbolizes a total surrender of agency. Tate’s self-erasure in this moment is not only an expression of emotional dependency but also a reflection of internalized patriarchal ideals those that define ideal femininity as submissive, adaptive, and compliant.

In another moment of reflection, Tate states, “*I should be ashamed of my weakness. A man should not be allowed to make me feel the way that stolen kiss just made me feel*”

(Hoover, 2014:151). Here, she equates emotional vulnerability with shame and weakness, reinforcing the idea that a woman's emotions must be controlled, hidden, or diminished in the presence of a man. Rather than holding Miles accountable or questioning the imbalance, Tate blames herself for feeling too deeply. This mindset aligns with what **Lois Tyson (2006)** critiques as patriarchal conditioning where women are taught that expressing emotion or desiring more than what a man offers is a form of personal failure, rather than a valid emotional need.

Further reinforcing these norms, Tate admits, *"Now he knows exactly how much I'm not Tate when I'm near him. I'm only liquid. Conforming, doing what he asks, doing what I'm told, doing what he wants me to do"* (Hoover, 2014:179). This is perhaps the most explicit acknowledgment of her complete submission to Miles. By conforming to everything he wants, Tate embodies what **Hannah McCann (2018)** describes as *rigid femininity* a limited and harmful model of womanhood that requires emotional obedience, self-neglect, and compliance. She is aware of her transformation in his presence, yet sees it as inevitable rather than oppressive.

2.3 Inhibition of Emotional Healing

Tate's performance of toxic femininity does not only affect her own emotional stability, but also prevents Miles from fully processing and healing from his trauma. Her tendency to absorb his pain, suppress her own emotional needs, and remain emotionally available despite knowing his emotional boundaries ultimately enables his avoidance of healing rather than encouraging it.

In the quote, *"He's hurting, but I don't know what the hell to do about it"* (Hoover, 2014:212), Tate recognizes Miles's inner pain but is paralyzed by her need to stay close to him. Instead of stepping away to create space for his healing or challenging his emotional closure, she chooses to remain, even when it hurts. This reflects **Kate Manne's** theory that women, under patriarchal norms, are often conditioned to act as emotional caregivers without expecting healing or reciprocity. Rather than disrupting the emotional cycle, Tate enables it by remaining present in silence.

Tate admits to a powerful contradiction between what she says and what she truly feels. Outwardly, she attempts to draw a boundary by telling Miles that she no longer wants to be involved with his unresolved trauma. However, internally, she confesses a desire to fully absorb his pain, to not only be close to him, but to merge with his suffering, like what happened in this scene,

"you're a jerk, and you have serious issues, and I don't want to be a part of them anymore." "I'm lying, I really want to be a part of his issues. I want to immerse myself in his issues and become his issues. I want to immerse myself in his issues and become his issues, but I'm supposed to be his independent, headstrong girl who doesn't cave just because she likes a guy." (Hoover, 2014:211)

This reveals a critical pattern of toxic femininity, in which emotional care taking becomes self-erasure. Tate is not simply trying to support Miles; she wants to become the vessel for his damage. As **Kate Manne (2017)** explains, women under patriarchal expectations are conditioned to be emotional givers, often absorbing male pain as a moral obligation. Rather than encouraging Miles to confront his trauma on his own

terms, Tate's desire to "become his issues" indicates a willingness to be consumed by his brokenness, reinforcing his emotional dependence and preventing his growth.

CONCLUSION

This research explores the concept of toxic femininity as portrayed in Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love* through the character of Tate Collins. By applying feminist literary criticism and drawing on Kate Manne's theory of "human giver syndrome," the analysis reveals that Tate embodies toxic feminine traits such as self-sacrifice, emotional dependency, and endurance of emotional pain.

The findings show that these behaviors, although often socially praised, create emotionally harmful situations. Tate's toxic femininity leads to three significant outcomes: the creation of a toxic relationship with Miles Archer, the reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms, and the inhibition of emotional healing for both herself and Miles. Instead of challenging oppressive dynamics, Tate internalizes them, contributing to her own emotional decline and reinforcing a one-sided emotional structure.

The study underscores how literary narratives can both reflect and reinforce societal expectations placed on women. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing toxic femininity as a form of internalized oppression that deserves critical attention. This research also contributes to the broader discourse on gender by offering a nuanced understanding of how women's roles within patriarchy can become self-defeating when shaped by unbalanced emotional expectations.

Future research may expand this analysis by comparing toxic femininity across different genres or cultural contexts, or by exploring how media and literature influence young women's perceptions of love, endurance, and emotional sacrifice.

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