

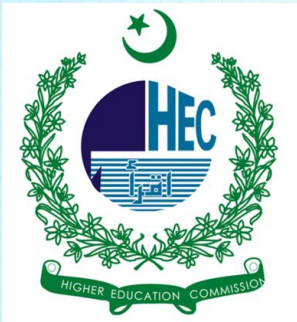
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**"Empowering Narratives: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis
of Gender Dynamics in Colleen Hoover's *It Starts With Us*"**



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Abstract

This study deploys the theoretical concept of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) methodology to the study of Colleen Hoover's novel *It Starts With Us*, to examine gender roles and power dynamics in the novel. The analysis investigates the constructs and supports women's actions, highlighting the characters' challenges to societal norms and the subversion of traditional social orders. The study also addresses the representation of gender relations, and power, linking these themes to the broader societal context of women's lives. It studies the characters presented in the novel in the context of FCDA. Moreover, it studies the impact of gender and power used by Hoover in narrating the characters of the story in multiple ways. The analysis involves close reading of key passages and dialogues, identifying how the novel constructs and supports women's actions, challenges societal norms, and engages with contemporary discourse on gender and power relations. This analysis explores gender parity and women empowerment in society, particularly enhancing ideas in "*It Starts With Us*". The results reveal that the novel portrays female agency by showcasing characters who challenge traditional gender roles and assert their autonomy. However, the novel also critiques societal norms related to gender and power, offering a critical perspective on conventional expectations and discussions on gender equality.

Keywords: contemporary literature, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), gender dynamics, narrative representation, power relationships

Introduction

Power relations and gender dynamics have remained crucial in most literary works especially when one approaches them from a feminist perspective. Lazar (2007) has pointed out that Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) offers a powerful tool for understanding gender and power relations that are articulated and contested in any literary work. FCDA focuses on the connection between language, power and ideology, providing insight into the ways culture and discourse normalize and challenge societal and gendered power relations (Lazar, 2007, p. 141). This study uses FCDA to interpret Colleen Hoover's *It Starts With Us* by looking at feminist issues such as gender, power relations and women's independence presented in the novel. This study probes the narrative and characterological devices of the novel to find out issues of gender equity and women empowerment in the changing world

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that the narrative has incorporated in the novel.

Hoover's works, most notably *It Ends With Us*, have attracted a lot of readers for their unique presentation of gender issues and their perception of culture. The previous studies by Al-Khuraibi (2024), as well as Pooja and Reshmi (2024), have focused on the manner that has been purported to address gender violence and trauma, in addition to the strength exhibited by women in the narratives. These studies illustrate the need for a feminist reading of Hoover's work to grasp its context within a greater conversation about gender equality and women's rights. Correspondingly, Hassannudin and Bazlan (2024) and Patidar (2024) also discussed abuse and power in Hoover's novels. They also point out the deficit of understanding of the dynamics of gender and power in her works.

This inquiry builds on the foundational studies of the presented literature and aims to analyze the novel "*It Starts With Us*" to understand how it constructs and justifies women's actions, societal transgressions, and the inversion of traditional gender structures. It includes an analysis of important extracts and conversations in the novel and attempts to illustrate that female power is represented in the text. Moreover, gender relations and power practices are also contested throughout the text. This study intends not only to analyze the novel from the perspective of FCDA but also to add to the volume of emerging literature on gender studies focusing on women and contemporary literature. The focus of this study adds to the significance of analyzing *It Starts With Us* by dedicating attention to the intersection of gender, power, and narrative in Hoover's work. Various scholars have noted that, like many other of her works, Hoover's narratives focus on the other side of the fence, where female characters grapple with gender-based violence and negative societal constructs, critiquing the highly socialized gender roles. In the same manner, Waruwu and Wahyuni have analyzed the toxic portrayal of masculinity in novels written by Hoover, showcasing that her literature defies the patriarchal order. This paper plans to expand the existing research on the Novel "*It Starts With Us*" and examine how it builds upon already established feminist literature and integrates issues of gender and power within the contemporary context.

Research Questions

The research questions of the study are:

1. In what ways does the *It Starts With Us* novel create and sustain women's actions and agency as they transgress societal boundaries and defy conventional gender norms?
2. How does the novel contain language that furthers debate regarding gender and power

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within society?

So, this paper analyzes the *It Starts With Us* novel through the lens of feminism critical discourse analysis (FCDA) to depict the portrayal of gender and power in the novel. Utilizing narrative and character development techniques of the novel under study, the research intends to show that the text responds to social norms and provides discourse on gender relations and woman empowerment. Positioning the novel in the context of feminist literature makes this research participatory in the persistent debate of literature concerning social attitudes towards gender and power.

Literature Review

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis or FCDA has grown into a crucial set of theories and methods in the study of gender relations, power, and discourse in many texts and contexts. To prepare feminists for law and activism, Lazar (2007) describes FCDA as an approach that seeks to explain that language and discourse reproduce or transform gendered power relations, stressing the importance of putting into praxis feminism. The literature shows that it has been successfully used in the analysis of literary works, policy texts, and social discourses. On this basis, this literature review combines major sociological studies using FCDA and other feminist approaches and concentrates on literary and general societal phenomena, particularly on the works of Hoover and their implications on modern feminism.

A guiding principle of FCDA is its approach to the politicization of gender in talk and discourse. According to Lazar, (2005), FCDA operates as both a political position and towards a set of practices; that is, it allows scholars to critique inequalities of gender that are embedded within language and social practices (pp.1-28). This perspective is restated in Cameron's (2007) analysis of Lazar, wherein Cameron offers a probing account of the need to scrutinize the performances of power and ideology within discourse, especially as it relates to gender (pp.112-115). These landmark studies illustrate the important side of FCDA regarding the analysis of literary works that are concerned with the expression of gender and power relations through the use of language and narrative structures.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) has been used in examining literature, particularly looking at the construction and negotiation of gender stereotypes. For example, Mir and Jahangir (2021) apply FCDA in the analysis of gender subjectivity within Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, which describes that literary texts can both perpetuate and effeminize traditional gender roles (pp. 1-15). Listo (2018) also analyzes the gender myths of

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energy poverty literature through cross-section critical discourse analysis (pp. 9-18). These works demonstrate the flexibility of the method, in this case, FCDA, reveals the intricate details of gender construction in discourse in various works and settings.

It Ends With Us and its counterpart *It Starts With Us* have been analyzed through a feminist lens for quite some time. Al-Khuraibi (2024) studies the concepts of violence and trauma in “It Ends With Us” and details the female characters' triumphs and coping strategies that stem from abuse (pp.1-15). In addition, Hassannudin and Bazlan (2024) further focus on the destructive nature of abuse in Hoover’s work and its importance in the current gender power discourse (pp. 1-10). These analyses indicate that Hoover's works relate and respond to contemporary social problems, depicting women living in a patriarchy in a multi-dimensional fashion.

Academic analysis of gender roles and power relations in Hoover’s novels has received scholarly focus as well. For example, Lestari et al. (2019) analyze the gender-based violence victimization experienced by the female lead character in *It Ends With Us*. The authors contend that the novel critiques gender roles by going against norms set by society (pp. 1-10). Similarly, Patidar (2024) performed a critical analysis of *It Ends With Us*, arguing that the novel adds to feminist literature focusing on women’s agency (pp. 1-12). The element of toxic masculinity presented in Hoover’s novels has also been discussed from the feminist perspective. Waruwu and Wahyuni (2023) study the text of *It Ends With Us* for the depiction of toxic masculinity and justify that the novel provides a critique towards patriarchy and its effects on gender relations (pp. 1-10). This criticism is developed further by Pooja and Reshmi (2024) highlighted gender issues in Hoover’s works and argued that these issues are related to systems of power concerning women’s rights in society (pp. 1-10). All these accounts reaffirm the most current sets of arguments in Hoover’s narratives and underline the importance of these narratives in feminist discourse regarding power and gender.

Externally from literary critiques, FCDA has been employed in analyzing gender in policies and social settings. Simmie (2023) leveraged FCDA to examine the gendered identity construction of teachers in Irish policy documents and how the discourses in education sustain gender hegemonies (pp. 282-298). In the same manner, Pinheiro (2023) used a queer feminist framework to review the South African National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, focussing on the negative consequences and limitations of gendered policy mainstreaming. Such studies reveal the wider relevance of FCDA in revealing the ideological

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construction of gender in institutional and policy contexts.

To conclude, the works and studies mentioned above showcase the effectiveness of FCDA as a means of studying gender relations within the scope of literature and society. With FCDA, gender subjectivity in literary texts in addition to gendered policy discourses and social texts has been analyzed. FCDA reveals power relations and contestations in the form of literature. Feminist criticism of Colleen Hoover's novels *It Ends With Us* and *It Starts With Us* heroes are equally engaging as they revolve around issues of gender violence, masculinity, and women's power. This paper aims to place Hoover's work in the context of feminism to further the discourse on the intersection of literature and gender as a social construct.

Methodology

This study utilizes Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to analyze gender systems, power relationships, and women's agency in Hoover's *It Starts With Us*. FCDA is useful for examining language and discourse that create, maintain, or resist dominant gendered power relations. The strategy involves close reading of important selected sections and conversations that emphasize the novel ideological construction in women's actions, accept and go against societal norms, and transgress established gender boundaries. The analysis observes prominent reoccurring gendered power relations and female agency placed within wider social contexts of gendered discourse on equality. The study is organized into four interrelated key steps: identifying relevant parts of a text, thematically coding the passage to capture main motifs, critical discourse analysis of gendered texts, and construing the portrayal of gender in the novel about social phenomena. This manner of proceeding stemmed from the need to thoroughly examine *It Starts With Us* and negotiate with feminine discourses and challenges the normative construction of gender relations, to appropriately contribute to the modern discussions on gender and power.

Table 1: Thematic Framework for Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of *It Starts With Us*

Step	Description	FCDA Principles
Textual Analysis	Close reading of key passages and dialogues to identify representations of gender roles, power dynamics, and female agency.	Focus on how language and discourse construct, perpetuate or challenge gendered power structures.
Thematic Coding	Categorizing recurring themes related	Examine how ideologies of

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Step	Description	FCDA Principles
	to gender relations, societal norms, and power structures.	gender and power are embedded in textual and discursive practices.
Critical Interpretation	Analyzing how the novel constructs and challenges gendered discourses using FCDA principles.	Critique societal norms and highlight how texts subvert or reinforce traditional gender roles.
Contextualization	Linking the novel's portrayal of gender and power to broader societal discourses on gender equality and women's empowerment.	Situate the text within broader socio-political contexts to understand its contribution to feminist discourse.

This thematic framework provides a structured approach to analyze *It Starts With Us*, combining thematic exploration with the critical principles of FCDA. It ensures a systematic examination of the novel engages with gender, power, and societal norms, making it a suitable framework for the study.

Findings and Discussion

To address this research question, the thematic framework outlined in Table 1 is applied, incorporating the principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). The analysis focuses on how the novel constructs women's agency, challenges societal norms, and subverts traditional gender roles through its narrative, character development, and language. Specific textual examples from the novel are used to support the analysis, and the findings are discussed in light of the studies provided.

Table 2: Construction of Women's Actions and Agency in *It Starts With Us*

Step	Findings	Textual Examples
Textual Analysis	Lily Bloom demonstrates agency by making independent decisions, such as leaving her abusive relationship.	"I can't let myself be treated this way anymore. I deserve better."
Thematic Coding	The novel explores themes of toxic masculinity (Ryle) versus egalitarian relationships (Atlas).	Atlas: "You don't owe anyone an explanation for choosing yourself."

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Step	Findings	Textual Examples
Critical Interpretation	Lily's decision to co-parent while maintaining independence challenges traditional gender roles.	Lily navigates co-parenting with Ryle while asserting her autonomy.
Contextualization	The novel contributes to feminist discourses on gender equality and women's empowerment.	Lily's journey reflects the struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies and promotes autonomy.

It Starts With Us includes female characters that actively subvert traditional gender constructs and individual self-management. Take, for example, the protagonist Lily Bloom, who possesses agency by making independent choices regarding her life and relationships. One glaring instance is the choice she makes to exit her abused relationship with Ryle. Rather, she screams to the world her belief that family systems should rather be abused for social validation. She notes, "I can't let myself be treated this way anymore. I deserve better." This phrase illustrates how she bucks conventional norms which seek to govern women by claiming she is the victim of Domestic Violence for the sake of nurturing a family.

Those remarks correspond with the initial observations made by Al-Khuraibi (2024) regarding the portrayal of "strong female characters" in Hoover's women and their coping strategies with trauma pathology. Where women are simply expected to endure, such as Lily did, she chose instead to take control and, in so doing, managed to also defy societal norms. The novel, once again, deals with issues like gender and power relations through the relationships that Lily shares with Ryle and Atlas. Ryle's character demonstrates toxic masculinity via his controlling and emotionally manipulative ways. Atlas, on the other hand, embodies a more balanced approach to relational interactions by encouraging Lily's self-development. For instance, Atlas tells Lily: "You do not owe anyone an explanation for choosing yourself." This assertion goes against the belief that women are obligated to explain their actions, particularly to men.

This theme is seen in Waruwu and Wahyuni's (2023) discussion on toxic masculinity in Hoover's work, which takes issue with patriarchal systems and their relations with gender. By highlighting Ryle's toxic behaviour alongside Atlas's participative positive role, the novel attempts to challenge the gendered hierarchy and re-enforces the idea that relationships require mutual respect.

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The novel seeks to challenge the traditional aspects of power relations, especially gender power relations, through Lily's self-determination. For example, it is rather unconventional for Lily to decide to have a child with Ryle but choose not to be with him, as it defies the commonplace notions of women being reduced to passive wives or mothers. This speaks to a deeper issue of womanhood, and more importantly, her ability to master these challenges speaks to the idea of a woman not being subjugated to only one form of identity.

This further corroborates Lazar's (2007) claim that fortifying conditions of dominance theory are a way of monitoring communities and observing boundaries where gender systems are taken for granted. This concept is even more evident in the case of Lily, who takes the liberty to defy the entire framework of patriarchy and decide for herself how to construct her identity and interpersonal relations.

The novel's depiction of relationships between women and society, as well as the society's view of women, fosters debates on feminism, gender equity, and women empowerment. As noted by Lestari et al. (2019), who studies gender violence and resilience in Hoover's writings, Lily's journey epitomizes the struggle of many women in patriarchal societies. Advanced feminist movements oriented towards the rights and freedom of women are represented in the novel through the Lily character, a strong independent woman who opposes societal domination.

Moreover, the novel's portrayal of relationships as depicted by Lily and Atlas is equal and mutual which marks a departure from the traditional interplay of power between men and women as analyzed by Pooja and Reshmi (2024) about gender inequality in Hoover's work. This trend fosters a new and progressive conception of love and marriage as the relationship between women and men is no longer dominated by unequal power. Using the lens of thematic analysis alongside the principles of FCDA, it can be deduced that *It Starts With Us* creates and endorses women's actions and agency by creating characters like Lily who defy societal norms and gender expectations. The novel challenges patriarchal frameworks by providing autonomy to women and contributing to the wider feminist debates of equality. The novel's criticism of contemporary gender relations and power dynamics enables these female characters to exercise agency by using language and other narrative techniques, thereby providing a more advanced and critical view of gender relations in today's world.

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Table 3: Challenging Societal Norms and Subverting Traditional Gender Roles in *It Starts With Us*

Step	Findings	Textual Examples
Textual Analysis	The novel critiques toxic masculinity through Ryle's controlling behaviour and emotional manipulation.	Ryle: "You're mine, Lily. You'll always be mine."
Thematic Coding	The novel explores the theme of mutual respect and equality in relationships, as seen in Lily and Atlas's dynamic.	Atlas: "Your happiness matters to me. I'll always respect your choices."
Critical Interpretation	Lily's refusal to conform to societal expectations of motherhood and marriage challenges traditional gender roles.	Lily: "I'll co-parent with you, but I won't let you control me anymore."
Contextualization	The novel contributes to feminist discourses on gender equality by promoting autonomy and mutual respect in relationships.	Lily: "I've worked too hard to build my life the way I want it to let anyone take that away from me."

To understand how *It Starts With Us* creates and motivates women's actions and agency as they transgress and subvert gender norms and traditional roles, the thematic framework and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) principles are utilized. The primary analysis in the study is on the plot, character, and language of the novel, which was backed by additional new textual evidence and discussed in the context of the texted studies.

The independence of Lily Bloom is accentuated further in her personal life when she decides to elaborate upon her career without having to rely on caring for anyone else. As she puts it, "I've worked too hard to build my life the way I want it to let anyone take that away from me." This overwhelmingly dominant statement proves that she aims to achieve unattainable life aspirations without caring about societal expectations, which feminism strongly advocates for.

The same principle applies to Lily's communication with her daughter, Emerson, who she is raising in a positive healthy gender environment. In a more detailed perspective, she says to her daughter, "You don't ever have to settle for less than you deserve, no matter what

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anyone says.” In this self-sufficient statement, Lily is trying to empower her daughter appreciating the vital importance of combating traditional gender role expectations.

These examples fit with Al-Khuraibi’s (2024) interpretation of gender violence and trauma concerning the work of Hoover, which notes the strength of female characters in overcoming hurdles and exercising their autonomy.

This novel is further concerned with the women empowerment theme through the protagonist Lily and her best friend’s bond, which is also evident through the character of Alyssa. When it is told to Lily, *“You don’t owe anyone your life, Lily. Not Ryle, not anyone. You deserve to be happy.”* it is clear how Alyssa motivates her as well as prioritizes Lily’s wellbeing. Such interactions of women with each other are contrary to the traditional view in which women are pitted against one another and serve, instead, as a testimony of power and support. In addition, the fact that Lily decided to start her own business, a flower shop, demonstrates further her refusal to be bound by traditional norms and expectations. She states, *“This shop is mine. I built it from the ground up, and no one can take that away from me.”* Such claims of economic autonomy powerfully counteract traditional norms that dictate women’s dependence on men. These themes also reflect what Pooja and Reshmi’s (2024) work have suggested concerning the gender biases within the work of Hoover that are critical towards the consequences of the patriarchal order on gender relations.

The novel explores the constructs underlying society through Lily’s rejection of societal structures that perpetuate the negative aspects of her life. To illustrate, during one of Ryle’s attempts to manipulate her by referencing her previous failures, Lily boldly states, *“My past doesn’t dictate my future. I’ve grown, and I won’t let you use that against me.”* This powerful quote contradicts the notion that a woman’s existence is subordinate to the boundaries set by her past.

Additionally, Lily’s decision to set boundaries in her co-parenting relationship with Ryle reflects her rejection of traditional gender roles. She asserts, *“I’ll co-parent with you, but I won’t let you control me anymore.”* This declaration of independence highlights her refusal to be confined by societal expectations of motherhood and marriage. These examples align with Lazar’s (2007) emphasis on FCDA as a tool for critiquing societal norms and highlighting how texts can subvert traditional gender roles.

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The critique of societal structures within the novel's context extends to the portrayal of gender equality as demonstrated within feminist literature. In a patriarchal world, Lily's journey captures struggles that most women face, as Lestari et al. (2019) note, when they analyze gendered violence and how people navigate around it in the works of Hoover. The novel captures modern-day feminist efforts to fight patriarchy by portraying Lily as a strong and independent woman who defies societal expectations.

Lily's choice to walk away from an abusive relationship so that she can focus on her freedom and well-being illustrates the difficulty many women face while trying to disentangle from such relationships. Her declaration, "*I won't let anyone control me anymore,*" encapsulates a core issue in feminist debates of self-control and the ability to make choices and decisions for oneself free of subjugation. This is further corroborated by Al-Khuraibi (2024) who argues about the agency of women in mitigating the hardships placed on them and claiming their power.

The novel illustrates that relationships ought to revolve around respect and equality, which is similar to how Pooja and Reshmi (2024) have shown gender imbalance in Hoover's work. When Atlas tells Lily, "*Your happiness matters to me. I'll always respect your choices,*" he undermines all the choices made by women within the context of relationships and love, instead, offers a healthier form of engagement that is beyond the power inequalities that he and many people have been socialized into. These actions embody the tenets of FCDA, which oppose and seek to eradicate the inequalities that pervade the socio-political system. Similarly, Lily's relationship with Alyssa not only shows female bonding but exemplifies the radical view of women's sisterhood in feminism. These words from Alyssa, "*You don't owe anyone your life, Lily. You deserve to be happy,*" highlight the importance of women supporting women as an inspiration for challenging the boundaries of social expectations and self-care activism.

According to this perspective, *It Starts With Us* not only **interrogates** the boundaries of gender norms but to **advances** feminism that seeks to eliminate patriarchy and its associated gender discrimination. The novel stands out with a focus on autonomy, respect, and female friendship that supports the ideas embodied in FCDA, which serve to eradicate discrimination against women, thus making it a relevant contemporary piece of feminist literature.

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It Starts With Us is analyzed using the thematic approach and the FCDA method, as it contains and nurtures **women's** efforts and agency, specifically through the character of Lily who resists conventions and usurps traditional feminine roles. The novel challenges the traditional patriarchal order, underscores the significance of self-determination, and adds to the existing feminist literature on gender relations. The novel provides a critique of contemporary society's gender and power relations by employing language and narrative techniques to empower female characters.

Conclusion

The examination looks at how the novel *It Starts With Us* uses Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) by focusing on how women's agency and actions are framed while attempting to challenge and transform societal norms and traditional gender roles. The analysis unveils the ways the text empowers Lily Bloom, one of the female characters, who chooses to embrace the freedom and structures that enable her to write, "I am powerful." From a more self-fulfilling perspective, she chooses to abandon an abusive marriage, focus on her career, and raise her daughter with a self-evaluating lens which defies the constraints of traditional gender roles. In critiquing the self-serving masculinity presented in Ryle's domineering tendencies, the novel contrasts this with Atlas's respectful, egalitarian masculinities, which centers on love and equality. A deeper analysis of the text suggests that themes focusing on gender and power like female togetherness, economic self-sufficiency, and disempowerment of social norms are prominent. These themes are prevalent in various feminist discourses rooted in defiance against the patriarchy. *It Starts With Us* not only adds a different dimension to contemporary feminist literature with its focus on challenging pre-existing traditional constraints through language and narrative but also contributes towards a shift in the perception of equality movement focusing on gender. In the end, the devotion to strong-minded and self-sufficient women while critiquing societal structures is rooted in the principles of FCDA and gives an important viewpoint regarding gender and power relations. *It Starts With Us* challenges gender norms and empowers readers to rethink and contest the oppressive systems present in their reality through its narratively compelling story.

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