

# ROMANTICISATION OF GENDERED ABUSE AND TOXIC MASCULINITY IN COLLEEN HOOVER NOVELS; *UGLY LOVE AND NOVEMBER 9*

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of  
Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature

By

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

## SATHYABAMA

INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
(DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY)

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This is to certify that this Project Report is the bonafide work of **NANDITA GANESHAN (40010013)** who has done her project work. She has carried out the project entitled "*Romanticisation of Gendered Abuse and Toxic Masculinity in Colleen Hoover Novels; Ugly Love and November 9*" under my supervision from November 2022 to April 2023.

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## DECLARATION

I, **NANDITA GANESHAN**, hereby declare that the Project Report entitled **ROMANTICISATION OF GENDERED ABUSE AND TOXIC MASCULINITY IN COLLEEN HOOVER NOVELS; *UGLY LOVE AND NOVEMBER 9*** done by me under the guidance of **Dr. Sufina. K.** is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Bachelor of Arts degree in **English Literature**.

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PLACE:

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in blue ink. The signature appears to be 'Nandita' written in a cursive style.

SIGNATURE OF THE CANDIDATE

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis studies two works of Colleen Hoover, a prevalent romance fiction novelist of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, *Ugly Love* and *November 9*. The harmful tropes used in modern romance novels are identified in these two works and analysed. What makes these tropes harmful and how they are used are also explored. The second half of this thesis focuses on the male gaze and its use by a female author in two works written for women. A textual analysis method is employed to study these themes. Maas' (2020) "Virgin-Beast" Trope and Mulvey's (1975) theory of the "Male Gaze" are the focal theories applied in this thesis.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Romance Novel as the modern world knows it now originates with novels like “Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded” by Samuel Richardson in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and the many novels of Jane Austen during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. There were also the Gothic novels from this time, specifically those of Ann Radcliffe. These novels placed a higher focus on romance than their contemporaries; specifically romantic relationships rather than any other kind.

This would then progress to entirely romantic novels, where the plot would revolve around two love interests who meet and fall in love with each other throughout the course of the novel. By the end, they would start a relationship, which would then be considered a happy ending for the two of them. The most prevalent publication of this was Mills and Boons and Harlequins. “Harlequins can be traced back through the work of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen to the senti-mental novel” (Modleski 2007). Female authors sent formulaic love stories to be published to them, and they published short novellas. This is where the basis of all modern contemporary romance would stem from, though our contemporary collection of novels is more nuanced and less formulaic.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, romance novels have become extremely popular in the recent years, having sold over 19 million printed units over the last 12 months as of August 2022, and being titled the “highest-earning genre of fiction” (Curcic 2022). With this success came many a new author who boomed during this time. Series like *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer (2005) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James (2011) became sensational, even having film adaptations made. Following these, many more romance fiction novels and films came to be. Romance even bled into other genres as a subgenre, specifically into the Young Adult category. Works like *Shatter Me* by Taherah Mafi (2011) and *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare (2007) are dystopian fiction that have heavy romance leaning plots.

Colleen Hoover is one of the authors who gained notability during this time. She started off self-publishing her romance novels, debuting with *Slammed* (2012), a novel that follows a forbidden romantic relationship between a teacher and a student

in high school. She wrote and published more before getting picked up by a publishing house, especially as she grew in popularity.

Her writing style is accessible and her characters are relatable to a wide range of audience. Her novels are often aimed at a more mature audience, as they contain darker topics and explicit sexual content; even so, they fall under the Young Adult and New Adult contemporary genre. Her works contain themes such as domestic abuse, aftermath of arson, incest, romantic relationships between teachers and students and complicated relationships.

Though her works do not align with a strictly literary genre, being better described as a form of pulp fiction, there is a need to better dissect them in a literary sense. Having garnered a large reader base in the recent decade, Colleen Hoover is a perfect example of a writer to take when trying to find a proper representative of modern romance fiction. As previously mentioned, she is one of the most popular writers of today and because of this, one can infer that her works both influence readers as well as other writers. Such influence should be cautiously and critically analysed, and as such has become the very subject of this thesis.

In *Ugly Love*, the main character, Tate Collins meets airline pilot Miles Archer, her neighbour. They are attracted to one another, despite only having known each other for a very short period of time; in which they are less than friendly to one another. They come to a compromise; mutually casual sex with no strings attached. Their arrangement could be surprisingly seamless, as long as Tate can stick to the only two rules Miles has for her. She is to never ask about his past and to not expect a future with him. This leads to the multiple emotional conflicts they go through trying to avoid falling in love with each other. Parallel to this, Miles' complicated past is dispersed throughout the novel, slowly unravelling the trauma behind his avoidance of love and relationships.

Miles is a closed-off, emotionally unavailable man who is still heavily traumatised by his taboo and traumatic past. In the sections that show his past through his perspective, he is shown as a hopeless-romantic with rebellious notion who is extremely receptive to feelings, sometimes even drawing parallels to Tate in the present time frame. Through Tate's eyes though, he is cold, distant, hesitant and

mysterious. He also lacks the ability to properly communicate, often sending mixed signals to Tate and abandoning her whenever he feels fit.

Tate, on the other hand, is portrayed as an “every girl.” She is normal, wishes to focus on her career and studies. With Miles, however, she is starstruck, and is shown to be extremely sensitive to his actions and words, trying to figure him out as much as she can. She is attracted to him from the beginning, and with the language Hoover uses, it’s clear that Tate’s attraction to Miles is meant to mirror Miles’ attraction to Rachel.

Phrases from Miles like “Rachel is everywhere,” (Hoover) is brought up directly with Tate when she thinks “Miles is everywhere” (Hoover). This is possibly intentional, meaning to draw a connection between the way the two love or the intensity in which they do.

In *November 9*, Fallon, a former actress who lost all of her career prospects when she was burned in her father’s house, meets Ben, an aspiring novelist, the day before her scheduled cross-country move. Their untimely attraction leads them to spend Fallon’s last day in L.A. together, and her eventful life becomes the creative inspiration Ben has always sought for his novel. Over time and amidst the various relationships and tribulations of their own separate lives, they continue to meet on the same date every year. Until one day Fallon becomes unsure if Ben has been telling her the truth or fabricating a perfect reality for the sake of the ultimate plot twist.

Fallon’s biggest insecurities, her burn scars, play a huge role in this romance. They are what makes her hide within herself, what ultimately attracts Ben, and in the end, is even revealed to have been caused by Ben himself. She loses her future, and her dad’s affection towards her wanes. Ben ultimately tries to be a “manic pixie dream boy,” attempting to fix her constitution while slowly falling in love with her. He even sees her as somewhat of a muse.

Fallon is seen to be deeply traumatised, but mostly holding up to who she is. She also is shown to have an eye for details. Though she is unable to be completely confident, she is opinionated and is not always scared to speak up. That is, so far as Ben isn’t around. With Ben, she is written to become submissive, letting him do whatever he likes even if she is not at all comfortable with it. This is framed as Ben

trying to help her heal her trauma and come out of her bubble, but when examined under critical lens, there's a selfish malevolent intention behind his actions, something that he confesses. Because of this, a lot of the interactions they have are clearly non-consensual but is painted as a way for her to outgrow her fears.

Ben is portrayed as a pretentious, a bigger than life kind of character. He is charismatic, flirtatious and somewhat perverted. A lot of what he says is seen under a humorous light. However, he doesn't have any sense of boundaries at all, and feels completely entitled to everything. He urges and coerces her to partake in things she's not comfortable with, and makes decisions for her before she is able to have any say in it.

This can be seen from the very first time they meet; when Fallon is having breakfast with her father, having a rather heated conversation when he interferes, pretending to be her boyfriend. Without her consent, he kisses her forehead, holds her waist, introduces him as her boyfriend and then argues with her father on their personal issues. This is all written under the pretence of him being a kind gentleman that wanted to help Fallon stand up against her father. He does feel as though he intruded somehow, but his actions and this regret is pushed under the rug and Fallon herself overlooks this rather uncomfortable behaviour. He also continues to overly sexualise her, both in his mind and to her, as a way to validate her and rid her off her insecurities.

This thesis first aims to examine a set of tropes used in these two books. These tropes are commonly found in romance fiction novels, however, are seen to have harmful or sexist themes attached to them. In these two novels especially, there are problematic behaviour exhibited by the characters that are veiled under the tropes, which are often seen to be romantic. This is extremely harmful for a set of impressionable young readers, who may build up on their ideals of love and relationships based on the way it is explored through these tropes.

The tropes that are to be examined in this paper are Friend-with-Benefits to Lovers, Brooding male love interest, Insta-Love, and Beauty and the Beautiful Beast (Diamond 2011).

Mulvey's (1975) theory of the "Male Gaze" is also explored in these novels. Male gaze refers to the way things are perceived from a perspective that is exclusively

pleasurable for men. This theory is applied to both the novels, specifically to how the men perceive the woman in these books and how the women perceive themselves in the books. This is to highlight the way women are sexualised to pander to the male gaze even in romance novels written for women by women.

There are sexist tropes and archetypes, as well as an underlying internalised male gaze that influences the tones and narratives used in Contemporary Romance Novels written by female authors living in a patriarchal society. This claim is further explored in this thesis. These tropes are to be each analysed to point of their harmful themes. What aspects of these tropes are harmful? How are they specifically harmful in these novels? These are some of the questions this thesis aims to build on. This study also aims to look further into the male gaze that is evidently present in these novels and highlight them for further study.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Tanya Modleski in her work *Loving with a Vengeance* details a brief history on mass publication of Romance Fiction, the early catalyst for contemporary romance fiction of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Detailing the then already existing obscured abuse found in these romance novels, her first chapter

With the *Twilight Saga* having been a huge franchise that catapulted the romance genre further for a younger audience, this series has also been examined and studied for the themes and tones it uses. In *Romance and The Female Gaze Obscuring Gendered Violence in The Twilight Saga (2014)*, Jessica Taylor examines the inherent violence present in this Young Adult series, and the way this violence and abuse is re-coded as reassuring. The paper also studies how the “female gaze” may play a part in concealing the violence, and further portray the male body as desirable.

*Love Hurts?: Identifying Abuse in the Virgin-Beast Trope of Popular Romantic Fiction (2020)*, Maas and Bonomi discuss the fairly popular trope of the “submissive/virginal female character” and the “aggressive/beastly male character.” They further examine how this picture of heterosexual relationships can be problematic as it romanticises a form of power imbalance. They apply the ‘Abuse Litmus Test,’ which will also be used in this thesis, on popular romance fiction films like *Twilight*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. They denote that the male characters exhibit toxic traits such as intimidation, treats or stalking to control a subordinate or virginal female partner, who spends the length of the film trying to “tame the beast” or “fix him,” ultimately being harmed in the process.

In *Beauty and The Beautiful Beast: Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight Saga and the Quest for a Transgressive Female Desire (2011)*, Fleur Diamond interprets Meyer’s *Twilight* saga as a rewriting of the “Beauty and the Beast” fairy tale, where the heroine searches for sexual subjectivity and agency that is not available to her in the mainstream heterosexual discourse, and is instead subjected to normalised abuse from her main love interest as well as her secondary love interest.

In *Happily (n)ever after*, Julie Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin analyse how Disney constructs “Love” as a “happy object” that women should aspire to acquire. They

use the term “cruel optimism” to describe the phenomenon of getting attached to fantasies that are hard to attain, and can be detrimental trying to attain. They find this cruel optimism in Disney Princess Films, which incite impossible ideals of love to pursue and reinforces white heteropatriarchal family ideals, while keeping everyone attached to a conservative way of living. Ultimately, this limits female agency and impedes social progress.

In *Blood, lust and love*, Meenakshi Gigi (2012) interrogates the construction of gender dynamics in the *Twilight Saga*, both the novels and the films, specifically the issues of implicit and overt gender violence. A combination of ideological analysis, semiology, and feminist critique is used to examine the verbal and visual codes at work in these texts. Five focal themes are explored: the representation of violence as an inherent characteristic of masculinity, the portrayal of male violence as a justifiable by-product of heterosexual relationships, the definition of masculinity in terms of a dualism wherein “good” boys repudiate their own “instinctive” predilection for violence and “bad” boys allow it to go unchecked, the continual imperilment of girls in situations from which they are rescued by boys, and the assertion of control by boys over girls’ crucial life decisions. Gigi concludes that *Twilight* ideologically and visually coaxes audiences to expect boys to be violent and girls to be compliant in regard to violence in the context of heterosexual relationships.

In *The Abuse Litmus Test: A Classroom Tool to Assess Power and Control in On-Screen Relationships* (2017), Bonami details a questionnaire-type tool that can be used easily by students to identify abuse and power imbalances in On-Screen Relationships.

Male Gaze is a term that was coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). The paper applies Freud’s Psychoanalytic theory on Media from a politically feminist perspective. Here is the origin of the Male Gaze theory, indicating that in media, women are the passive objects at which men are to actively gaze on. This paper discusses these gender dynamics, relating to Freud’s theory of how scopophilia is an active sexual instinct, and thus how this can be seen in Hollywood cinema.

## CHAPTER 3

### TROPES

The use of tropes in Romance Fiction has always been prevalent. This is not anything unique to only romance fiction, and exists in all genre of fiction. *Ugly Love* and *November 9* both make use of various romance tropes. In recent years, however, popular and pulp fiction media has started leaning heavily on tropes and full novels are now marketed solely based on the tropes that they have.

While tropes are only a basic component to a story and can either enhance or diminish the overall appeal, there can also be tropes that are fundamentally damaging. These tropes are those that mask or excuse abuse, and these kinds of tropes are found all throughout modern romance fiction.

These tropes come with a pre-set of conflicts that add drama and angst to the stories. These conflicts can seem pretty entertaining to readers, even when it's quite formulaic.

The trope of Friends-with-Benefits to Lovers refers to the narrative of two love interests beginning a mutually sexual relationship

“The beauty and the beautiful beast” is a concept derived from a paper written by Fleur Diamond (2011) that goes by the same name. This trope describes a demure, conventionally attractive female character who is attracted to what is portrayed as a dangerous and uncaring (though often with a “hidden soft” side) male character. This means that the male character is often ambiguous with his courting of the female love interests and exhibits unkind behaviour that are portrayed as barriers which the female love interest must overcome in order to love him.

Insta-love is the trope concerning an immediate connection and love between two characters upon their first meeting. This is often present in movies aimed towards children. Disney is the best example for this. “Disney Princess films represent love, we examine how feminine subjectivities are constructed through Disney’s ideal of “true” romantic love, which provides life’s magical meaning, requires suffering and transformation, and is inevitable. This romantic ideal, coupled with our enduring emotional attachments to that ideal, reproduces traditional gender roles and heteronormative relationship standards that are grounded in ideologies of white

middle-class American heterosexual domesticity and child rearing.” (Garlen 2017, Sean Griffin 2000).

Additionally, Bonami’s (2017) *The Abuse Litmus Test* will also be used to further highlight how each of these tropes, and their usage in the respective novels may indicate abuse and harm behind the guise of romance. The test is a questionnaire that is used to find and recognise abuse in on-screen fictional relationships, and will be adjusted to be used on the chosen novels instead. The questionnaire has questions regarding the power dynamics, contentment and consent that can help identify if the said relationship is truly mutual and free of abuse.

### **3.1 FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS TO LOVERS**

This trope refers to characters who begin with a simple “friends with benefits” relationship which proceeds into a more romantic one as the narrative progresses.

The main problem of this trope is how its premise hinges on breaking one’s boundaries and sending mixed signals (along with some other abusive elements like bread crumbling, love bombing and such). Often, the female characters is seen trying to push all of their love interest’s set boundaries, and the male characters exhibiting previously stated abusive behaviour.

In *Ugly Love*, this is shown clearly between the two lead characters, with Tate constantly questioning Miles and herself, clearly insecure with her place in the relationship, as he reprimands her for crossing his boundaries but don’t seem to follow them himself. This unhealthy characteristic, however, is clearly romanticised, as Tate’s long monologues of unsurety mirror that of Miles’ six years ago, when he was in a more mutually romantic relationship.

In *November 9*, though sexual intercourse is only initiated much later on in the novel, their primary “Friend-with Benefits” is more akin to romance, with boundaries. In all of the 6 Novembers, however, both of them, mostly Ben, push, prod and break down each other’s’ boundaries.

In *Ugly Love*, the plot follows a “friends-with-benefits” relationship between the main character and her neighbour. Tate and Miles come to an agreement where they would indulge in mutually casual sexual intercourse without any romantic connotations attached. Throughout the course of the novel, they grow to battle their

growing romantic attachments for one another, while Miles heals from a past trauma; in the end, they decide to pursue a romantic relationship and get married.

Though this is a pretty common formula for this trope, the problematic aspects of this trope come in the way the two main characters approach this sort of a relationship. They both don't hesitate in manipulating one another and cross each other's boundaries repeatedly.

Miles states that though he yearns for sex, he doesn't want love. "Most people can't have one without the other, so I find it easier to give up both" (Hoover 81). With this, he initiates his first boundary; he doesn't feel comfortable with relationships or love. He indicates that he's held up celibacy for the past six years for this very reason. Tate understands this concern of his, and even reiterates his exact request back to him; to which he affirms positive.

Tate, at first, suggests this friends-with-benefits arrangement to him to which he reciprocates her desire. She notices that he seems to feel hesitant about it all, even showing traces of guilt in his action. However, instead of understanding this concern of his, she seems to conceal her true intention;

"He laughs, but I can tell he feels guilty. Maybe he's afraid I can't handle this. He might be right, but I'm not about to let him know that. If he thinks I can't handle this, he'll retract everything he's saying. If he retracts everything he's saying, that means I don't get to experience another kiss like the one he gave me earlier" (Hoover 85)

With this, it's clear that Tate is holding back an important part of her intention, muddying the consent given by both parties. She is unable to understand that this expectation she creates in her head is the very reason that he's hesitant in starting new relationships. She crosses his boundaries, albeit without his knowledge, from the beginning itself. She disregards his feelings for the sake of her sexual desire and potential romantic ones.

They both reiterate this boundary in this initial stage and agree unanimously and Tate still doesn't follow through, something that only readers are able to see. This reaffirms a dangerous message for readers, normalising withholding important feelings and crossing boundaries in relationships, as long as it's done in silence.

"I'm nervous because I'm not so sure that just sex with him is possible. Based on the way I'm drawn to him, I have a 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)

This inability to respect boundaries is not unique to Tate, as Miles himself does so multiple times. Despite being the one who reiterates more times than her that he is not searching for love, despite him clearing affirming the same anytime she or anyone else directly brings this topic up, he contributes to the blur the lines between their arrangements. He attempts to be quite possessive, romantically flirt with her, develops a friendship with her and continues to "raise her hopes up."

She is seemingly always worried with her words and her actions, in fear that they might imply that she's developed feelings for him; feelings he's much too eager to dispute despite being the one to continuously act with romantic connotations. When Miles states that despite loving his job, he hates that it keeps him away from "home," Tate gasps, with a flood of thoughts about how this could mean that he's quite happy to be around her. Almost immediately, she's hoping that he doesn't take those words back just because she gasped and that he doesn't begin yet again to dispute any hope for a future between them.

"His eyes meet mine in a flash, and I can see him wanting to backpedal. He wants to take back what he just said, because there was hope in those words. Miles doesn't say things like that. I know he's about to apologize. He's going to remind me that he can't love me, that he didn't mean to give me that inkling of false hope." (Hoover 2014 222)

After this, however, his response is to call out her name and passionately kiss her. This action conveys to her that he is interested in something more, that there is romantic desire within him for her as well. However, in the very next moment presented, he is wilfully ignoring her and wouldn't care to hold her back when she holds him. This constant back and forth leaves Tate in a confused state, where she is often lost in long monologues with herself about what trauma he could have faced for him to avoid love, whether she can hope for it at all or not, and even that of scolding herself for continuing to entertain him and falling deeper and deeper for him.

Tate expresses more than once on how she is merely just pretending that she's okay with the agreement that she had proposed, wanting to break the rules he set

at any given time possible. This becomes a part of her constant internal rambling, as she is unable to move away from this feeling, and it becomes a repetitive affirmation to her true feelings on the matter.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Miles. I don’t know if I can follow rule number two, because I suddenly want to climb into your future more than I want to climb into the backseat with you.” (Hoover 98)

He also makes significantly romantic gestures, such as kissing her forehead, complimenting her under a romantic context, to kiss her without sexual intention, and even fights her battles for her against Dillon, after which he brought her things to make her feel more comfortable. He also invites her to help him pick out things to decorate his house with, a place symbolic of his own feelings. In the beginning, when Tate first enters Miles’ house, she sees that the place is barely furnished and doesn’t have any real personality to it. She brings it up to him, to which he attests that he didn’t bother decorating it since he didn’t bring home any company. Later, soon after their arrangement, he begins decorating it, with the help of Tate herself. She recognises that this feels far too romantic for their arrangement, feeling too much like “something couples do.” This incites in her a “cruel optimism” (Garlen 2017), where she hopes for something more and clings on to her current situation for that future.

She, however, only shares these thoughts internally, often brushing it off to him. This could be attributed to her feeling insecure on how he may respond, and thus chooses to instead contemplate all his actions in regards to what he may feel for her; if at all he might feel a fraction of what she feels for him.

“I should say no. Picking out curtains is something couples do. Picking out curtains is something friends do. Picking out curtains is not something Miles and Tate should do if they want to stick to their rules, but I absolutely, positively, most definitely don’t want to do anything else.” (Hoover 129-130)

Additionally, he buys the decoration that she likes and prefers, again under a cryptic subtext that leaves Tate wondering what this could mean in the context of their relationship with one another. Right after this, Miles flirts with Tate and kisses her, before saying “I like kissing you, Tate.” (Hoover 135) This is a parallel to what he says to Rachel in the previous chapter when she questions their intentions for their illicit affair. Though Tate is unaware of the true underlying meaning of the confession

Miles has made, this is a statement that she takes quite seriously, and fuels her already ignited feelings for him.

In this way, though Miles seems to stick to his own rules on paper, he has really only made it so that he can shift the narrative and dynamic between them however he wishes, while Tate is unable to do the same. However, not all blame for this can be placed on Miles, as Tate agreed to the agreement knowing that she was not suited for such.

In *November 9*, their situation is a little different. They confess they're attracted to each other, and they do not fully explore a sexual relationship in the beginning. They simply state that they will remain in a complicated, once a year relationship until they've turned twenty-three, the age Fallon's mother had stated was the right age to consider serious relationships.

However, they do willingly participate in a semi-sexual and entirely romantic relationship, with the agreement to meet every year on the same day at the same restaurant, without any prior contact at all. This is a mutual agreement. The only one who really sets a boundary is Fallon, when she reiterates her mother's words; but she pulls back on these terms whenever the situation changes, so it isn't a concrete agreement.

The worrying elements of this trope is seen with how often the both of them are unable to comply with the arrangement at all; shifting back and forth between wanting to remain in this sort of relationship to not wanting to. It is also seen in the rather unconventional manner in which Ben is portrayed, taking down Fallon's reservations on the world little by little, withholding information from her, disregarding her consent and such, as extremely manipulative. They both also constantly make decisions for each other, in the name of being caring friends who love each other, but this action only further hurts them.

In regards to Ben's behaviour with Fallon in terms of this trope, he overrides her wishes any chance he gets. As a "friend" as well as a lover, he gives little regard to her feelings until and unless it's something he can manipulate. Throughout the novel, Fallon goes from being extremely insecure of her scars to becoming quite confident with her scars; this is largely attributed to Ben and his constant compliments and encouragements. Yet, Ben does plan to write about these

insecurities and her new found peace with them in his novel, fictionalising her trauma for his own gain.

“I want to do the book justice, and your injuries are something I have to talk about. So, you should let me see it. We’ll consider it research.” It feels like his words just backhanded my heart. “What?” My voice is so unsteady, it sounds like I’m crying. But I’m not. Yet. “What do you mean you’ll have to talk about it in the book? You aren’t really writing about my scars, are you?” (Hoover 2015)

She shows clear disinterest in having this part of her discussed in his book and yet he is quick to shut her down any time she brings this up. He dismisses her insecurities constantly, sometimes blaming her for them. He blames her for being the reason people hesitate to stare, something that leaves her feeling both vulnerable and hurt. When in this state, he undresses her under her dubious consent. This lack of a real understanding of boundaries hurt Fallon a lot, who has to weather through the things Ben does to alleviate her insecurities.

### **3.2 TRAUMATISED MALE LOVE INTEREST**

This trope describes the use of male love interest with a disturbing or life altering incident from his past that turns an otherwise “kind and caring” man into a hollow, sadistic and cold man who is hostile towards everyone, including the female love interest in the beginning, but begins soften as the novel/narrative progresses.

The reason for his cold exterior is described to be due to those past events causing him to put a shield around him. He is withdrawn, unlikeable but beautiful, and tragic. He is cold or far too nonchalant, always maintaining a distance from the rest of the world. Usually, beneath this façade is a pained man, who is then healed off this trauma by the end of the novel and gets his happy ending with the female love interest. Many examples of this exist in mainstream romance fiction media, such as Damon Salvatore (The Vampire Diaries), Edward Cullen (Twilight Saga), Christian Grey (50 Shades of Grey), Aaron Warner (Shatter Me), Rhysand (A Court of Thorns and Roses) and more.

This trope tries to bring out a nuanced male character but instead pushes him into a bildungsroman narrative with a much more static and simple female character, who will usually have to play his therapist. His mental unwellness is one of the components about him that is meant to be perceived as attractive. The event is

meant to add to his character, making him dynamic. Additionally, the female character's role as his saviour, as the undoer of his unwellness is also highly idealised, and is a further reason this trope is romanticised.

However, in many cases, this trope is used specifically to make him easier to sympathise for while having the back story as a place to fall back to when his terrible behaviour is questioned. "These obstacles are part of the transformation that must occur in order for true love to be acquired and maintained, which limits female agency to that which can be achieved within the true love relationship. Once fate brings Prince Charming into the picture, we learn that the princesses can control the behaviors, values, and emotions of men both through the transformation of the self and through acting upon the love partner." (Hayes 2014)

Ben, though not as withdrawn or cold as Miles, is extremely disturbed by his past actions, setting fire to Fallon's house on the same day he loses his mother, and this leaves him disturbed. He seems quite harmless at first, apart from his constant sexualisation of Fallon. However, he soon begins to push her boundaries in semi-violent ways, such as when he undresses her without her proper consent and while she was in a mentally vulnerable state, or when he interrupts her while she's on a date with someone else and then provoking her date. He also makes decisions for Fallon, such as when he books them a dinner reservation or when he decides to inform Theodore, Fallon's date, of his feelings for Fallon and an implication of her mutual attraction.

In a previous version, any prints before the 2015 print, contained a non-consensual scene of intercourse between Fallon. This has since been removed from the novels however can serve to further prove that Ben doesn't care for Fallon's boundaries at all. He also doesn't respect her boundaries, he lies, he's coercive and yet, this is all forgiven because of his own melancholy which grants him forgiveness.

Ben also exhibits some stalkerish behaviour, having sought after Fallon on the second anniversary of the fire, and then later on, when she stands him up, to go searching for her at her old apartment. After this, he even goes so far as to follow her to the bathroom and beg her to let him take her home, despite her having not replied affirmatively. He also joins in on her time with Theodore and speaks in ambiguous language, referring to her alone. This again shows the kind of power he

holds in this situation, as he decides when to reveal his motivations and the consequences that will find Fallon as a result of such.

“She’s not here with me,” Ben says. “In fact, I was actually stood up by her today. Waited for over four hours but she never showed.”

Miles also falls under this category. He is portrayed as a broken and cold man who is less than friendly with everyone. Though he is not always uptight, when his boundaries are threatened, he withdraws and becomes rude.

The problem that comes with this trope is how all bad behaviour exhibited by the male love interest is forgiven or overlooked because of his past. They are excused or justified, and in some instances, are romanticised and becomes desirable. When the inherent violence in his actions and words are framed in rose-coloured glasses, that can convey an extremely dangerous message to impressionable readers.

With Miles, his hostile behaviour is seen from the beginning. The first instance they interact when he’s sober, he is seen invading her private space, expressing anger without much provocations. Tate states, when she wakes up to Miles staring her down from her bedroom doorway “This guy is intimidating. This guy is angry.” (Hoover 24)

This is not an isolated incident. Often, when there is no clear indication on how Miles is feeling or what Miles is thinking, Tate perceives him to be angry or frustrated. Tate narrates “Miles is staring at me, and I can’t quite judge his demeanour, because he still looks pissed.” (Hoover 31) This anger he radiates is one of Tate’s constant worries; she hopes to not further infuriate him and keeps rethinking her words in case it might result in Miles’ anger.

Miles also demands Tate to do things, in the guise of protecting her. “It’s not a request. It’s a demand” Tate remarks on Miles’ tone (Hoover 44 2014). As a twenty-three-year-old woman, Tate is stolen of her autonomy in the presence of Miles in this way. When a mutual friend of his and Corbin makes passes at Tate, though she is able to reject him and his advances quite successfully, Miles feels the need to step in and stand protective, in the process, infantilizing her. Miles gets close to Tate, stating that he (Miles) is not fine with Tate studying in her brother’s apartment and commands her to go to his room to study. He then, without her further consent,

slides his keys into her front pocket, in a rather suggestive manner as Tate interprets. (Hoover 45 2014)

However, Tate is frequently dismissed any time she tries to advance their relationship

Both the male characters, in the end receive their happy endings after being forgiven for their actions while the female characters are convinced that they've also received a worthy ending, after spending the whole novel trying to earn it.

### **3.3 MEET CUTE/INSTA-LOVE**

This trope refers to the attraction or “love” two characters may come to share immediately upon being introduced to one another. It is “Love at First Sight,” but on mutual terms, as both characters feel this way. It is a very common trope, often found in children’s media, such as in Disney or Barbie, but often also bleeds into more mature content. A great example of this would be the Disney princesses, Snow White and Aurora. They both are singing, longing for a lover, when a stranger overhears them and joins them in their song. They seem hesitant at first, but ultimately reciprocate the attraction and fall in love. By the end of their movies, they are both with the strangers, who turn out to be princes. This ending is sold as a happy one, where they have overcome evil, have been rescued and found “true love.”

This trope hinges on the “meet-cute.” It is also incredibly romanticised, with the “pining after one another after they first meet” being seen as rather romantic. It also dispels any natural human emotions upon seeing an attractive person such as lust or awe, and rather presents itself as something passionate and romantic, with sex being only second to the romance.

Over the recent years, the general public and Disney themselves have begun to satirize this trope, with their movies like *Enchanted* and *Frozen*, yet, this trope remains commonly used. Both romance movies and novels make use of this, and the two chosen novels of this study are no different. Both of the novels’ characters find themselves extremely attracted to one another within a short period of time, and feelings of “love” appear much early into the novels. “These instant romances offer little insight into how relationships are formed, suggesting that love might be won by

wearing pretty dresses, maintaining a flowing head of hair, and keeping an impossibly small waist.” (Garlen 2017) Though, in these works, the equivalent of the “impossibly small waist” become being conventionally attractive or relatable.

In *November 9*, Fallon and Ben are seen having an instant attraction. The two of them meet the day Fallon is moving from Los Angeles to New York, and thus only spend the remainder of the day with each other. During this time, they pretend to be lovers, as Ben had pretended to be Fallon’s boyfriend to her father in the beginning. They play into this joke for the rest of the day, setting up a date and introducing each other to their friends as their partner.

From Ben’s perspective, it is quite clear that he is more intense in his feelings about her than she is, as she is still reluctant due to her own insecurities and her mother’s caution against falling in love before the age of twenty-three. Miles narrates, “Things really are going to change. I knew that for a fact the moment I laid eyes on Fallon today.” (Hoover 54) He pushes for their meeting to mean more than it does, glorifying it and justifying this on the basis that he is inspired to write based on this encounter. Fallon, on the other hand, is still navigating the basics of their relationship, being inexperienced and insecure.

However, as mentioned in the previous section, there is a metatextual awareness between them. As he’s a writer, and she’s an avid reader of romance fiction, they both regularly bring up various tropes and poke fun at them. One such is the “Insta-Love” trope. They bring this term up verbatim, and Ben even repeatedly describes their relationship as such;

““Cliff-hangers,” I say immediately. “And insta-love.” He makes a face. “Insta-love?” I nod. “When two characters meet and supposedly have this great connection right off the bat.” He raises an eyebrow. “Fallon, I think we might already be in trouble if that’s one of your least favourite things.”” (Hoover 2015)

This is an intentional theme that Colleen Hoover herself has placed in the novel. Fallon is meant to despise this trope and yet fall into it unknowingly, making an ironic contrast between her beliefs and her actions. The trope itself is also satirized, as Fallon mocks its usage and affirms that she isn’t so fond of it. Ben doesn’t seem to dislike it though, as he finds it to be romantic.

In some ways, along with the use of the trope suggesting satire, it also plays a level of caution against it. They both do not know each other well enough before they fall in love; they just feel a connection they decide to trust. This decision on both their part does punish them greatly; Fallon more so than Ben.

Fallon finds Ben's manuscript for a story he had been working on and figures out that he was the very person that set fire to her house when she was sixteen, resulting in all the scars that costed her her career. These scars were also the beginning of the dissolution of her relationship with her father, who had started to avoid her and then abandon her after this incident; out of both guilt of having forgotten her inside the house during the fire and of knowing that his daughter now cannot become an actress like he had hoped she would. Finding out that all of this was because of Ben, she starts to realise that she doesn't know him at all, not as well as she thought. There's a level of danger she feels from him after this. Additionally, on a more trivial note, her actions done for the sake of Ben doesn't align with what he needs at all, and instead only further hurt both of them; such as when she makes the decision to leave him on their 4<sup>th</sup> November.

For Ben, he does know of Fallon much before she knows him. Being the one who cost her her livelihood, he is more familiar with her. This gives him an advantage over her, something that he uses quite frequently. In fact, he is somewhat attracted by her insecurities, even admitting that they are what made him approach her, as he knew they would allow for him to have a chance with her. This "Insta-love" situation gives him much of a leverage, as she dispels most of her reluctancies when he adjusts his behaviour to allure her in.

"I was so relieved," I tell her. "Because I could tell with that one simple movement that you were really insecure. And I realized—since you obviously had no idea how fucking beautiful you were—that I just might actually have a chance with you. And so, I smiled. Because I was hoping if I played my cards right—I might get to find out exactly what kind of panties you were wearing under those jeans." (Hoover 36)

Like so, he portrays himself as an enthusiastic and open suitor, when really, he was using her insecurities as a tool to get close to her, knowing that she craves validation over all. In his own perspective, this is not what he states explicitly, he even believes that he is helping but this is simply not the case. He only pulls her in with his compliments as a way to play at her insecurities.

When Fallon is able to realise his deception and manipulation, there is a sense of caution here; it seems like a lesson against “love at first sight” and trusting against one’s better judgement. This is a surprisingly welcome perspective in this novel. When she leaves him after this, there is an instance where the tone of the novel goes from being a romance novel to a cautionary tale, albeit with conflicting tones. These are tones of romanticised angst, applied merely for drama and conflict in their relationship, as though it’s a trivial setback to walk back from.

This is exactly how it ends up playing, as Fallon returns once she finds out that there had been a “misunderstanding.” That his reason for causing the fire had been out of trauma, and that he hadn’t thought of setting the very house she was in on fire at all. She comes back and they rekindle and become lovers from once and for all, earning a happy ending. This defeats both the tones of caution and satire as a whole, as they seem to have not really learned anything from their toxic experiences at all, and only further promote their own situation.

For all the harmful things Ben does throughout the book, this ending comes out to be tone deaf and hurtful, as Fallon’s abuse become just tribulations and misunderstandings they were meant to overthrow as they come to know each other.

In *Ugly Love*, this is seen more implicitly. From Tate’s perspective, the reader is able to gather that she has started to develop an interest in him pretty early on. This is hard to see in Miles’ perspective, as he only narrates his past and Tate’s narration on him is only her interpretations of his words and actions. However, combining the way Miles narrates his past and his falling for Rachel, and how he confesses his attraction to Tate quite early on in the novel, one can conclude that the both of them, Tate and Miles, form an attachment mutually within their first few meetings.

He also suggests that he does have feelings for her, though not outright. With confessions like, “I just don’t want to like you. I don’t want to like anyone. I don’t want to date anyone. I don’t want to love anyone. I just . . .” (Hoover 2014, 87), he does indicate that to some extent he likes her, something that she picks up as well.

In contrast, Miles and Rachel are also a derivation of ‘Insta-Love,’ as they fall for one another within minutes of meeting each other, and even risk incest to continue their affair as the story progresses. Miles is extremely attracted to her from the moment they meet, prophesizing that they will fall in love with each other.

“I’m gonna fall in love with you, Rachel..... You’re gonna fall in love with me, Rachel.” (Hoover 21)

Miles repeats this phrase multiple times, each reprise changing depending on their situation or their feelings. This sentiment, however, stays strong. They are extremely passionate towards one another from this very first instance and his view on love and relationship is wholly shaped by what he feels here for Rachel.

In a way of establishing their characters, Miles’ monologues about Rachel and the love he feels for her are mirrored by Tate is the way she views Miles and feels for him. Their words have parallel to one another, to signify that Miles is to Tate who Rachel was to Miles. Phrases like “(Rachel)’s everywhere,” (Hoover 54) as thought by Miles is reprised by Tate in phrases like “(Miles) is everywhere.” (Hoover 59)

Their lack of familiarity with each other leaves Tate in a place of insecurity. She’s left searching for traces of his past because they seem to influence the way interacts with her heavily. He forbids her from prodding him about his past, but she tries to find out anyway, if only to start knowing and understanding him better. The readers see her struggle to make sense of his actions when he crosses the very lines he puts down, and this comes from not knowing each other well enough to be comfortable in their actions.

Apart from this seeming discomfort, there is no inherent harm that comes from the trope of “Insta-love” alone, as many other factors affect their relationship and cause Tate to experience the abuse that she does throughout the novel.

### **3.4 BEAUTY AND THE BEAUTIFUL BEAST**

This trope describes an often hostile and rude yet beautiful male love interest who exhibits abusive behaviour and slowly “tames” a rather subdued and inexperienced female love interest. He is rude, controlling, manipulative and is always in control of the narrative while the female character is left with uncertainty. Taylor quotes, “when a heroine is misunderstood, then manhandled and mistreated by the hero, then suddenly loved and cared for, the novel is informing the reader that the minor acts of violence they must contend with in their own lives can be similarly reinterpreted as the result of misunderstandings or of jealousy born of “true love.” (Taylor (2012, 394), Radway (1984, 75))

In this way, romance is sold hand in hand with the violence, with one complimenting the other. One becomes a standard for the other, and this is normalized entirely. An impression is then left on readers that any abuse they may face in a romantic relationship is merely “acts of love” they must learn to accept.

“Romantic literature performs a crucial function in assuring us that although some men may actually enjoy inflicting pain on women, there are also “bullies” whose meanness is nothing more than the overflow of their love or the measure of their resistance to our extraordinary charms.” (Taylor (2012, 396), Modleski (1984, 43))

Modleski is shrewdly arguing that romances subtly imply that women should stay in violent relationships in order to determine which category of violence their partner falls into. If he is merely a “bully,” then the woman in question may be denying herself an emotionally fulfilling relationship by quitting the relationship early.

The abuse and manipulation he delivers are both romanticised and sexualised, and are core to his very appeal. His persona is often attributed to some past traumatic events or is justified by him being “misunderstood.” His behaviour is also only appealing and attractive because he is physically seen as an attractive man. His visual pleasantness is the reason his beastliness is given leeway and his behaviour adds to his appearance. The arrogance and hostility he administers is seen somewhat as masculine, a raw essence of his gender and increases his sexual viability in the eyes of the lead female character as well the female reader base.

In *Ugly Love*, Miles is as described above. He is cold, distant, verbally hostile and manipulative towards Tate. The first time Tate sees him sober is when he approaches her, angry, the morning after he attacked her drunk, asking for his phone. This anger is always there underneath it all, anger that is framed to be towards himself for his mistakes from his past.

This is seen clearly in Miles’ and Tate’s relationship, where Tate feels that she has to tread carefully in fear of angering Miles, meanwhile, he crosses all lines he wants and steps back whenever he wishes to.

There is also this worrying perception from Tate, who till her full admission of being attracted to Miles was more autonomous, becomes more dependent on Miles. She starts to describe herself in a more subdued and subordinate manner, while he is

described to have full power over her. She iterates “He leads. I let him. Because he’s a solid and I’m a liquid, and right now, I’m just his wake.” (Hoover)

This contrast between Miles being solid and Tate being liquid is how she perceives their dynamic. This is portrayed as romance and love. Her giving up her full autonomy, her satisfaction, her peace of mind, her feelings and herself up to a man that clearly stated that he didn’t want anything serious to progress between the two is idealised, as her one-side love feels somewhat like forbidden one. She is hurt any time his decisions don’t align with her wants and needs, but plays them off cool as she still wants to keep any fragments he’s willing to give. In this way, Miles becomes the one with steady power and active control in the relationship while Tate “flows” with him, hoping that he would change his mind about his initial wishes.

When putting their situation up against the Abuse Litmus Test (Bonami 2017), the answers to questions concerning equal power and control become rather dubious. They indeed do not share equal say in the matter of their relationship, with Miles having full control of the narrative as well as the power to make complete decisions. There is also a show of a lack of identity that slowly forms in Tate as the novel progresses, taking on his trauma instead of

Miles is also good friends with her brother and even visits her parents on Thanksgiving Day, leaving him in a position where he procures any information about her should he wish for it. Meanwhile, she doesn’t share this same privilege and in fact quite terrified of learning anything about him despite wanting to, for the simple fact that he might leave her should she try. Her brother volunteers information about her but the same is not done the other way.

It is also to be noted that while Miles set rules in the relationship, she doesn’t. She does try to, in the beginning, but realising she wants more out of Miles than what was agreed in the beginning, she doesn’t set any rules. She also implies that though she doesn’t like his rules, she’s will to go with what he wants, yet again describing herself to not be Tate while around Miles, but rather, liquid.

“His eyes focus on mine for several seconds. “Don’t ask about my past,” he says firmly. “And never expect a future.”

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'll 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.

Flow." (Hoover 2014)

Tate becomes compliant to Miles' wishes to get at least some of the things he offers, but wishes for much more. This also introduces a power imbalance. Miles unknowingly holds a lot of power in their relationship and is able to shift the narrative to his whim and his needs while she's a compliant damsel to them. There is arguably some level of agency with her, as she specifies that what she wants to do is "Flow" when it comes to Miles. It is also to be noted that it is her, not him, that withholds information regarding their needs in their relationship in this way. In this sense, one can theorize that she is responsible for much of the hurt caused by her decisions, and in fact, she chose these circumstances for herself.

This would be right, as she constantly reminds herself that things are not going to end well if they continue the way they do; without her getting her feelings about him and emotions in check. However, it is this very choice she makes that is romanticised by the novel. Her wanting to give up her agency and needs for Miles, her wanting to slowly understand him and heal him while waiting slowly for the day he might reciprocate her feelings for him, that she must endure any psychological or verbal abuse she may incur from him in order for her to earn her right to her happy ending. This turn of conflict is normalised and even idealised as the ideal passionate romance.

As Bonami denotes "The romantic and sexual experiences that occur in *Beauty and Beast*, *Twilight*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* tend to be presented in a way that emphasizes that danger is always present and suffering is inevitable, portraying aggressive male romantic partners and harm as the norm" (Bonomi et al. 2013; Happel and Esposito 2010; Towbin et al. 2004), this is precisely the underlying sentiment of this trope in this novel. It is okay that she is not on equal footing with Miles, and it is okay that she suffers, because it is normal to do so when in love; this is what the narrative informs the readers.

The name of the book, "*Ugly Love*" in and of itself plays into this notion. Love is often thought of as a pleasant feeling, often lighting up its subjects' life. So, to describe it

as “Ugly,” it creates a contrast within the phrase. This contrast, however, implies a romance; in a similar way to roses with thorns. The “thorns” are meant to highlight a dark side to the beautiful flowers, and in this contrast portrays a raw and passionate form. The same is to be said about the novel. The name implies that the love between the protagonists is not conventional, it’s not pretty. It’s dark, it’s full of conflicts and it’s ugly. However, this ugliness about their love is the very point of attractiveness. The ugliness brings out their passion and is thus meant to be coveted. The love and relationship between the two protagonists are a thing to be desired.

There is also a gendered outlook to this. Predominantly male descriptors are used to describe his metaphorical actions towards her while she takes a subordinate role to him. She gives up her agency to him even when they are not in a mutual relationship with one another. Even when one of the parties expressed much dismay at romance at all.

“He’s just invading my thoughts and my stomach and my lungs and my world. That’s his superpower. Invasion. The Invader and the Infiltrator. They pretty much have the same meaning, so I guess we make one screwed-up team.” (Hoover 2014)

The above quote from Tate sums up the way their dynamic works. There is a very obvious power imbalance between the two, and she knows this. She accepts it, however, and by calling themselves out with the “one screwed-up team,” she pokes humour at their situation and further normalises this.

This is also seen with Ben and Fallon, however, instead of presenting as a hostile male character, he is more insidious. He is kind and charismatic and but obsessive and stalkerish. He doesn’t, even in the end, feel that his creepy behaviour towards Fallon was wrong at all.

There is also physical assault from Ben’s side, in two very distinct instances. Both of these times, his actions are read by Fallon as uncomfortable and painful but are overall framed by the novel as actions made in order to help her grow her confidence and self-esteem. Though he doesn’t leave any physical scars during these encounters, he is seen actively harming her in the name of helping her, whether his intentions were genuine or not.

In the first instance, Ben strips her off her clothes while she cries, stating that she only has herself to blame for her shame. That she is indeed attractive but that she does not allow others to indulge in her attractiveness. She freezes, unable to stop him further than a few whimpers of protests, and in the end, he merely compliments her body, touches her and then proudly proclaims that he got to find out what colour underwear she was wearing. This instance is again, never brought up and definitely not framed as an act of active violation.

During this second encounter, Fallon confides with Ben about her feeling unattractive. She feels as though this is a private and rather an embarrassing detail to share but trust Ben enough to do so. His response is anger, at Fallon's low self-esteem, and rolls on her, covers her mouth and firmly admonishes her. He then tells her beautiful and remarks that he can't make her pretty in the book.

His words seem to convey positivity, something to help Fallon. This is also how it is treated; an extreme way to instil in her that she is indeed attractive and that her scars don't take away from this. This framing, however, is both deceiving and harmful. It is an act of violence, as she clearly expresses pain and discomfort. She is smothered by him, which is not acknowledged further than this but it's a reminder that he's much stronger than her, and that his opinion weighs over hers, as shown literally. This sudden act of violence is brushed over as a cute moment, the violence implicitly seen as a necessary evil.

"Ben immediately rolls on top of me and covers my mouth with his hand. He inhales a deep breath in preparation for what seems like a fight. He releases it quickly, his jaw twitching with irritation. "You listen to me," he says, keeping his hand secured over my mouth so that I can't interrupt him. "It pisses me off that you allow something so trivial to define such a huge part of you. I can't make you pretty in this book, because that would be an insult. You're fucking beautiful. And you're funny." (Hoover 2015)

She is seen almost crying afterwards, having experienced a form of violation during a vulnerable moment. She is barely able to catch a breath, and she's shaking, implying that this event has left her physically shaken and weak. In this moment, Ben affirms further that Fallon "deserved" this, which she agrees with. This is a good example of how physical violence and abuse is not just brushed off, but idealised as something helpful and necessary. Readers are

meant to find this part intense, cute but mostly romantic. This also encourages the narrative that sometimes people have violent ways of showing love, that violence and affection can go hand in hand.

Fallon's subdued response to this also shows that she bends to his ways and thoughts, that she feels that she must simply accept whatever she is subjected to, even if it's at the cost of her own peril.

"My chest hurts. I can't breathe. He removes his hand from my mouth and when he does, I gasp for breath. My eyes rim with tears and I can't stop myself from shaking as I try to suppress them. Ben lowers himself completely on top of me, cradling my head in his hands. He presses his lips to the side of my head and then whispers, "You deserved that, Fallon." And I nod, because he's right. He's right." (Hoover 2015)

Fallon accepts his abuse despite suffering under it. She accepts it as it looks like help and validation. However, what she'd experienced in the given except is not help at all, but violence. A sudden burst that is portrayed as an act of affection and tough love.

Ben also holds no regards for Fallon's lifestyle. The beginning of the novel spends a lot of time convincing the reader that Ben, in contrast to Fallon's father, is someone that pushes Fallon to her full potential. That he even dismisses his own desire to have Fallon remain close to him just so she could go out there and explore her options in life, after having become rather reclusive. However, this trait of his slowly vanishes as the novel progresses, with wanting to move to the city she lives in to actively demanding her to be with him.

After Fallon and Ben call off their arrangement after he falls in love with someone else, Fallon moves on with her life as much as she can while mourning their relationship. In this time, she finds herself another partner, who she is not entirely happy with but she is seemingly developing a slow relationship with. However, Ben soon shows up when she's slowly moving on from him and forces his presence on her. He barges into a conversation between Fallon and her new partner and shifts the control of their narrative back to himself. He indirectly guilt trips her while also professing his feelings for her, slyly beckoning her back to him. When Fallon slips away with a feeling of discomfort, he follows her and coerces her before starting make sexual

advances towards her. When she doesn't consent, he only further coerces her to do so until she becomes too indecisive to not consent.

““Stop,” I tell him, my voice louder than it's been all night thanks to the distance from the music. His hand is right back where it was before . . . grazing the edge of my panties . . . forcing my eyes shut like it would even make a difference in here.

“I'm trying,” he whispers, threading the hand that isn't up my skirt through the strands of my hair. He grips the nape of my neck. “Ask me again.” I open my mouth to say it again, but I'm met with heat and tongue and lips that know just how to make it all work together. Instead of the word stop coming at him, all he gets is a moan and a hand in his hair, pulling, pushing, indecisive.” (Hoover 2015)

The above excerpt shows Fallon's dubious lack of consent. In previous versions, Ben sexually assaults Fallon as she pleads with him to stop, though this has since been removed. This scene shows Ben's lack of any real regard for her agency or well-being, only wanting to push forward for his own needs. The mask quietly falls off in this way. When this is questioned with the use of The Abuse Litmus Test (Bonami 2017), Ben is exhibiting clearly abusive behaviour by coercing Fallon into sex. He is also expecting her to go home with him, implicitly asking her to end things with her new partner. She is expected to change her decisions in life in order to do as he pleases.

Ben is persistent. When Fallon doesn't do as he wishes, he makes alarming moves to get her to, the only exception of a time being when he chose to become a family with his nephew and his sister-in-law. Glenn, a minor character, admits that, “(Ben) showed up our apartment today looking for Fallon.” (2015) This action further proves that Ben feels somewhat entitled to Fallon, and feels that only he can fulfil her needs; a position that he creates and fills by himself throughout the novel.

## CHAPTER 4

### MALE GAZE

Gaze plays a huge role in any kind of medium. Every narrative is told through a perspective, and gaze and its distinctions allow for a perusal on what lens the narrative is being conveyed through, and for which audience this is intended.

According to Mulvey (1975), “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” This is to mean that women are objects upon which men are to gaze on and project his “phantasy.” Women become an ornament that perform within heterosexual structured narratives to be looked at. In this way, she loses her identity and becomes something of an iconography, a sexual being to have one’s desires wrapped upon. The concept of “internalised male gaze” signifies that women who grow up in a patriarchal society where the “male gaze” is a default, they start to view their sex and themselves similarly; as objects to be gazed upon. This influences the depth at which one perceives themselves and other women.

The “Male Gaze” is a theory was coined by Laura Mulvey in her work “Visual Pleasure and Media.” In this, Mulvey explains that // quote her here // .

There are numerous instances in both the novels where this framing is present. Despite being written by a female author, and targeting a female audience, they contain these elements and tones.

The male gaze refers to seeing things from the eyes of a man, from his perspective. In film, this is the default perspective, and is present heavily in mainstream. A very popular example for this is the way Megan Fox is presented in the Transformers franchise.

Though the novels are written by a woman for women, mostly centring around female protagonist, it is evident that a lot of elements are written through a “male gaze” lens. That is to say, the women in these books are looked at through a man’s ideal lens, and they are portrayed, to some levels, as the objects of men’s desires.

This is done on physical, emotional, and behavioural stance. In terms of the physical stance, the women in these books are conventionally attractive and seen and described as such. On an emotional level, they feel and express their feelings in a

way that caters mainly to the men in the novels. Finally, in terms of their behaviour, both the male and the female characters carry out traditional gender roles, and comply with conventional gendered expectations.

In *Ugly Love*, Tate is considered to be beautiful by multiple male characters in the novel. Either by their actions towards her or the way they look at her or their direct confessions to her, this is heavily implied. It is in this way that the readers are able to infer that she is conventionally attractive. This becomes one of her only real traits throughout the novel, with nothing else notable described about her. In this way, Tate exists solely to induce the “male gaze” validation for the readers and to act as object that appeases all of Miles’ needs.

The “looks” have a sort of masculine trait to them. For instance, Tate states “He’s looking straight at me. Invading me,” (Hoover 2014). Invading is a very masculine descriptor, as the word is synonymous with penetration. There is a male sexuality behind his gaze when he sees her, a possible explanation for him wanting a purely sexual relationship with her. Again, his gaze and words iterate that he finds her attractive, that she appeases a basic instinct in him that calls him to her, both only at a physical level.

She also acknowledges that he mainly focuses on her looks and her body, and even feels slighted by this. However, she decides to take these as compliments, and as something that she can offer Miles until he slowly falls in love with her. This use of her body can be seen as agency of sorts. But this is immediately brought into question when one realises that she never initiates their sexual rendezvous and she runs to him any time he wants his needs met. In this way, her use of her body becomes less of a confident stance and more of her trying please him in any way she can. She becomes an object for his needs, and whether he starts to develop feelings for her throughout the novel or not, this is simply the way he is seen treating her.

Miles also looks at Rachel and immediately decides for himself that she is to be his sexual partner as well as the mother of his children. Before she is given an identity beyond her name, she becomes a symbol of Miles’ desire. Additionally, Miles shares pictures of her with his friend, Ian, in order to share his intentions and thoughts on her. These two boys look at this girl before she really notices them and discuss what

she will be to one of them in the future, seemingly reducing her identity to what she becomes to him.

“You’re gonna fall in love with me, Rachel” “She’s mine” “I send the picture in a message to Ian that says, “She’s gonna have all my babies.” Miles (Hoover 2014)

This is rather crude behaviour that is framed as cute or relatable. This is also normalised, playing further into the “boys will be boys” motto, as it is truly dehumanizing Rachel and then excusing it because Miles is seen doing this out of affection.

Later in their relationship, heavy gender roles are present. Miles and Rachel become mere puppets acting out sexist archetypes, and this is framed as a cute romantic relationship that came to an end due to a tragedy.

“We play house. We pretend it’s ours. We pretend it’s our kitchen, and she cooks for me. I pretend she’s mine, and I follow her around while she cooks, holding on to her. Touching her. Kissing her neck. Pulling her away from the tasks she’s trying to complete so I can feel her against me. She likes it, but she pretends not to.” (Hoover 2014)

In the above excerpt, the presence of the male gaze becomes absolute. It narrates the male fantasy, of a house wife that serves and becomes the object of the husband’s sexual fancies. This portrayal is extremely harmful. Especially with the phrase “She likes it, but she pretends not to,” which plays into the common myth that women only play hard to get, but they want everything they say they don’t. In other words, “no” doesn’t really mean “no.”

Miles admits to derive pleasure from merely gazing upon Rachel. Rachel’s every action becomes merely a thing that caters to Miles’ desires, and even an act as innocent as reading becomes something that Miles sexualises.

“Rachel wants to sunbathe while she reads. I want to watch Rachel sunbathe while she reads.” (Hoover 2014)

Ben is more open and direct about his sexualisation. He frequently looks at Fallon with sexual intentions, and goes through lengthy monologues on his desire to see more of or do more to Fallon. In these thoughts, he goes into deep length about her body parts and how she should reveal more. These parts are meant to play into a wish fulfilment fantasy for the readers; his sexualisation of Fallon becomes a form of validation.

Fallon is beautiful in his eyes, and as a result is seen as attractive. This validation is perceived as extremely valuable to Fallon, who is severely insecure due to her burn scars. However, this does not end with Fallon alone, as readers who also feel insecure in their looks and body, those who see themselves in Fallon, also perceive these descriptions from Ben to be highly validating.

This shallow validation, however, only further encourages the default male gaze and catering to it. Fallon becomes beautiful because she's beautiful in Ben's eyes, and because she is sexually viable to him. Their sexual prospects are what amplifies her attractiveness, covertly, and this plays right into appeasing the male gaze.

Furthermore, Ben both thinks to himself and tells her that she is to dress to cater to his stare. That she is to wear something where he can see more. Though there is a humorous undertone behind this sentiment, he does seem to imply that he does truly wish this. This is reflected in his future actions, when he actively encourages her to wear clothes that covered her less and when he rewards her with kind words when she does so. This is done under the guise of slowly erasing her fear of showing her scars but he is also admittedly hoping for visually sexual benefits from this.

"I seem to have a one-track mind, and that track leads straight to the two things I shouldn't even be thinking about right now. Her boobs. Both of them. I know. I'm pathetic. But if we're just going to sit here and stare at each other, it'd be nice if she were showing a little cleavage, instead of wearing this long-sleeved shirt that leaves everything to the imagination. It's pushing eighty degrees outside. She should be in something a lot less . . . convent inspired." (Hoover 2015)

In the excerpt above, it becomes quite clear that he objectifies Fallon in his mind at any given time, and is very self-aware of this as well. Though Fallon is seen sitting upset after having an unpleasant interaction with her father, Ben is only able to see and think of her for his own pleasure. This is a common theme with Ben. This is also intended to make the readers find Ben appealing; both because of his raunchy immaturity as well as for the constant reassurance that he finds Fallon incredibly attractive.

Ben also uses this sexualisation of Fallon to his advantage. As seen in the previous chapter, Ben is a character that holds back and reveals information quite strategically, in such a way that he gets what he wants. He also finds a way to apply this to the way he sees her, as he decides to be open about his attraction to her. He

is vocal about his stare; about the body parts he likes or what he imagines and ponders about. He does this in response to Fallon questioning his intentions. When she wonders if he simply feels pity for her because of her scars or is actively playing a joke on her, he combines his immature humour with his blatant objectification of her and reiterates this to her, as a further proof that he is indeed attracted to her, physically.

“The first time you walked past me— before I interrupted your lunch date with your father—I stared at your ass the whole time you were stomping away. And I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of panties you had on. That’s all I thought about the entire time you were in the restroom. Were you a thong girl? Were you going commando? Because I didn’t see an outline in your jeans that hinted you were wearing normal panties.

In this way, he doesn’t really dismiss her physical appearance as an important factor in his being interested in her. If anything, he places a greater importance on her outward appearance, almost admitting that he becomes attracted to her from this very thing. Though he says that he’d heard her talk to her father before he saw her, and he’d liked what he’d heard, this is not what he mentions first. In fact, his comment about her personality is more of a throwaway comment, and throughout the novel, he is only really able to refer to her being funny and sassy as her prominent traits. By mentioning her physical appearance and his attraction to the same first, he is only propelling her own obsession with her appearance and insecurities further. This is why, even at a later chapter, when she is shown to be almost completely absolved of her insecurities, she still craves his validation.

Ben continues, and states more concerning analogies. He compares personality to the content of a book and the outward appearance to the cover of a book, and implies that it is generally desirable to have a well-written book with a pretty book cover rather than a “shitty cover.” This line further puts his own bias towards looks at the forefront again. He is saying that he would only be able to develop on his interest and feelings for someone, in this case, Fallon, if they were to be physically attractive as well.

“Before you returned from the bathroom, I started to get this panicked feeling in my stomach, because I wasn’t sure if I wanted to see your face. I had been listening in on your conversation and already knew I was drawn to your personality. But what about your face? People say not to judge a book by its cover, but what if you

somehow read the inside of the book without seeing the cover first? And what if you really liked what was inside that book? Of course, when you go to close the book and are about to see the cover for the first time, you hope it's something you'll find attractive. Because who wants an incredibly written book sitting on their bookshelf if they have to stare at a shitty cover?"

Her insecurity is something that Ben uses to get to her; his validation of her making her feel safer around him. He even acknowledges this, in the very beginning. This is not brought up afterwards, even as he is sub-consciously manipulating her using his constant compliments on her physical features.

"You were almost to my booth at this point and that's when my eyes fell to your cheek. To your neck..... I was so relieved," I tell her. "Because I could tell with that one simple movement that you were really insecure. And I realized—since you obviously had no idea how fucking beautiful you were—that I just might actually have a chance with you. And so, I smiled. Because I was hoping if I played my cards right—I might get to find out exactly what kind of panties you were wearing under those jeans."

Ben is portrayed in contrast with all the other boys in the novel, specifically Fallon's other minor love interests. These minor love interests all look at Fallon as one of their sexual conquests, wishing to have intercourse with her. The difference comes in that they wish to have intercourse with her body while trying to avoid her scars, almost to pretend they aren't there. They want her for sex but don't necessarily find her attractive. This is how Fallon interprets their actions. This is in complete contrast with her situation with Ben, who also wants to have intercourse with her but not only for the instinctual reason, but also because he finds her attractive; scars and all.

She is incredibly perceptive to this notion. This is a kind of validation she likes but feels that she doesn't get anywhere else. She enjoys being gazed upon by Ben, that she is able to be attractive to him the way women conventionally are to men when they cater to their gaze. This forms in her a comfort towards him that she doesn't find anywhere else. The source of this comfort is rather dubious, as it all comes down to the way Ben sexualises her. There is much proof that this type of validation has gotten to Fallon. She feels the most "desirable" when she's around him. His gaze and his words are the very reason for this.

"I've missed his touch so much, and even though I've made the effort to go out and try to get over Ben, I'm not sure I could ever find this kind of physical connection with another person. No one makes me feel as desirable as Ben does. I've missed it. The

way he looks at me, the way he touches me, the way he makes it feel as if my scars are an improvement rather than a flaw. It's hard to say no to this feeling, no matter how hurt I've been over what transpired last year." (Hoover 2015)

The excerpt above shows how even she is quasi-aware of this. That his look and touch validate her. This incident takes place a year after Ben chooses her brother ex-wife and their child over Fallon, a decision that hurt both of them heavily. However, she brushes past this with ease when he acts on his attraction towards her, because this feeds her need for this form of validation. Her first thoughts upon being touched is not of any pleasure she feels from it, but of how it makes her self-esteem feel; how attractive it makes her feel.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This thesis analysed two works of Colleen Hoover, *Ugly Love* and *November 9* to further study the tropes used in these books and identify the sub-conscious male gaze present in them. Tropes like “Friends-with Benefits to Lovers” and “Virgin-Beast” are commonly used in both traditionally published romance novels as well as those published on the web. To moderate these rather influential mediums is required, and these novels were chosen as an emblem of contemporary romance novels on all platforms for this reason.

Internalised male gaze was also theorised to be present in these books, despite the writer and the target audience being widely female. This was studied to be uncovered and acknowledged, as these ideals and notions would be taken in by the readers subconsciously and further feed into the prevalence of the male gaze in the present society.

The harmful tropes that were used in both the novels were “Friends-with-Benefits to Lovers,” “Traumatised Male Love Interest,” “Meet-Cute/Insta-Love” and “Beauty and the Beautiful Beast.” The claim was made that these tropes hold themes of inherent violence that were portrayed under concerning romantic lens. These tropes were argued to be awful examples of relationships that were sold as normalised and idealised situations. This could prove harmful to the very large impressionable reader base Hoover has accumulated.

These claims were proven; where the tropes were in use in the novels, substantial proof of violence or underlying abuse was found.

There was a constant presence of male gaze throughout the books, mostly used to validate the main female protagonist on her attractiveness. Rather than being attractive because of her character or even any feminine characteristics, she is instead found most attractive because the men around her find her to be. Her sexual viability dictates her value in their lives to a great extent. Both Miles and Ben would have never pursued their respective love interests had it not been for their physical attractiveness, a fact that is indirectly admitted time and time again throughout the books.

The Abuse Litmus test was used to find the real power dynamic in both the fictional relationships studied in this thesis, which showed that in both cases, the male love interest carried more power and control than that of their partners. There were also traces and indications of abuse being present with the kind of actions and emotions exhibited by the female love interests.

Previous studies pertaining to these topics were also taken, specifically for the tropes, to identify and label the tropes. These articles also show other prevalent works of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century romance fiction that contain these tropes, proving to be just as harmful in those as they are in this.

There were limitations to this study, namely a lack of academic resources surrounding this author. There were also unexpected factors that came into play while researching that were not initially considered when this topic was chosen. One of these is the presence of female gaze. Though a relatively novel idea, the concept of female gaze refers to the perception of things, people and situation through a primarily female set of eyes. This seems to be present in the ambitions of the female characters, their choice of agency to pursue their male love interests and the way the male characters are described when they do not act in an abusive manner. This poses questions for future researchers; Why are these specific characteristics attractive to women and what role does this play in combination with the other harmful themes found in these books?

Another question to investigate in further research is what are the factors that may be in play when authors incorporate these tropes and elements in their novels? Are they following a trend and a line of easy profit? Or is it a more sociological issue?

Comparing these novels to other novels that deal with these themes in a more mature and accurate manner is another suggestion. To highlight the differences between the two can help in identifying where they both deviate and why.

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