



## Morality, karma and obsession: An interdisciplinary analysis of Caroline Kepnes's *You*

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### Abstract

Novel, *YOU* written by Caroline Kepnes, an American author, former entertainment reporter, screenwriter questions the morality and obsession of the protagonist, Joe Goldberg, through a single narrative that fluctuate between passion, self-justification and deception. This paper explores the morality, immorality, and amorality in *YOU* through the lens of Indian philosophical ethos with the Concepts such as Karma, self-realisation, detachment and moksha. Joe's action demonstrates the irresistible consequences of karma, the cause of his actions is motivated by a wrong perception of dominance and love. Joe uses manipulation to defend his behaviour in order to keep his relationships with the characters in the story and with himself intact. His ridiculous actions, which disregard his feelings and compassion, also heighten the suspense throughout the book. This novel also questions the inability to understand and interrogate the questions of desire, lust, passion, control and his inability to understand the short comings of the actions. The researcher used a qualitative method to study the text from a stream-of-consciousness perspective by applying a textual analysis method.

**Keywords:** Self-realisation, infatuation, obsession, karma, liberation

### Introduction

There is a strong interrelationship between morality, obsession, and self-realization, which has drawn the interest of academicians in transforming areas of modern literature and digital technology. Caroline Kepnes's novel *YOU* offer an exciting case study to investigate through the lens of Indian philosophical ethos. We can see the adaptation of this novel as a web series named *YOU* in 2018, and the novel is further translated into nineteen languages. Following the first book, Caroline wrote three sequels: *For You and Only You* in 2023, *Hidden Bodies* in 2016, and *You Love Me* in 2021. In this thriller novel, *YOU* explore the psychological mindset of the protagonist, "Joe Goldberg," who is incapable of understanding moral boundaries between good and bad. Joe's thinking is shown to readers in the first-person narrative of the book, illustrating his desire for knowledge, his moral decay through self-justification after committing crimes, and the conflict between love and immorality. Using Joe's actions and justifications, this study applies Indian philosophical concepts such as Nishkama Karma (selfless action), Avidya (ignorance of reality), Atman (self-awareness), and Moksha (liberation) to understand his moral conflicts. The study compares his passion, self-delusion, and violence justification to Indian philosophy's detachment and enlightenment.

### Literature Review

The researcher has found several research studies that discuss the same novel, that the researcher uses in conducting this research. The researcher brought four previous studies and all of them used *YOU* as a primary data.

The first study was conducted by Nadha, who examines obsessive love disorder (OLD) in the book *YOU* through the figure of Joe Goldberg. She emphasized the drastic measures Joe took to have Beck in his life, including the murder of Beck's best friend Peach Salinger, who was

thought to be disloyal. Additionally, she described in her research various traits of OLD, including excessive jealousy, resentment, and stalking. (Nadha)

In Aslam's work this multifaceted picture of Joe serves to emphasize the troubles he experiences as he deals with a world that tends to obscure the distinctions between morality and self-interest. His failure to bond with others on an emotional level not only causes him to be alone but also powers his destructive behavior, and readers are left to question the source of evil and the reasons for such a shattered mind. The focus was on the portrayal of psychotic traits in the novel *YOU* with the theory of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. He explores the study of mental processes to understand the unconscious mind, reflecting in the character of the novel Joe Goldberg. The study shows that Joe faces difficulty in understanding right and wrong; he was not fully aware of the consequences of his actions; he lacks emotional apathy and justifies his murders with noble manipulation. As shown in the novel, the traits of any psychopath are: choosing immorality, compulsive behaviour, following their impulsiveness, talking to themselves, and making rigid opinions. Kepnes portrays Joe as an individual with a disturbed psyche, driven to commit wrongdoing. ("EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)").

Rihi's studies Joe Goldberg, as a narcissistic antisocial who judges others and justifies his acts. Joe Goldberg kills people around Guinevere Beck, claiming he was justified in doing so. Joe's twisted rationalization shows his deep-seated concerns with control and possession, emphasizing the risks of unbridled narcissism. Her study shows how Joe's warped worldview causes violence, manipulation, and emotional abuse. (Antisocial and Narcissistic Personality Disorders Shown by Joe Goldberg in Kepnes' *You: A Psychological Study* - USD Repository).

Hidayat investigates Joe's deception and manipulation. His study was Unravelling Joe Goldberg's character in Caroline

Kepnes's *You*. Joe appears to be a nice, intelligent bookstore worker with a lot of information without formal education. Still, he was a lunatic stalker who wanted to repair Beck's life and fit in with her, so he gathered her information from social media and stalking methods.

The second issue is Beck-Joe dispute. Joe blames Beck for her possessions being at his house instead of taking responsibility. He keeps Beck in a cage and accepts all his murders in front of her, calling them acts of love. He finally kills Beck out of impulsivity and blames Dr. Nicky for her murder by manipulating evidence and tricking police. (Hidayat)

In contrast to earlier studies, this study examines morality, immorality, and amorality in the novel through karma, self-realization, detachment, and moksha.

### Theoretical Framework

The foundation of Indian philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita which is a sacred Hindu scripture that is part of the great Sanskrit poem, the Mahabharata argues that detachment is required for acts, which is consistent with Krishna's teachings on 'Nishkama karma', or acting without egotistical wants (Radhakrishnan, 1948) <sup>[6]</sup>.

In this study, the researchers analyse the Joe Goldberg character using the Indian ethical framework. In the novel, he was found to be a cunning guy who is narcissistic and makes evil decisions to keep Beck, the subject of his obsession, while tricking people and murdering them. He justifies his actions as an act of supreme thing by stating that he is helping society to be free from these idiots, who are a burden for the community, and in his mind, he was doing this to protect Beck, the love of his life, who cannot take her stand and get easily manipulated by people around her; in Indian theory, this is referred to as Avidya—pain caused by ignoring reality. According to his rationale, he assures that by eliminating those he deemed unworthy people from the society, he is creating a better and more comfortable world for Beck, shielding her from the influences he found so corrupt. Yet, deep down, he grappled with the very Avidya he sought to combat, blinding himself to the true consequences of his actions and the love he claimed to protect (Upadhyaya).

Atman (self-realization) means self-being. Indians consider it the eternal self (Maaya). Infinite awareness deals with plenty, while finite consciousness deals with limitation. Karma brings people into this world because their lower selves are stuck in materialism. The higher self is unrelated to this world. Indian philosophy states that to liberate oneself, one must be free from materialistic cravings and aspirations (Thango).

Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita,

Those who believe Ātman is a slayer or a killed are stupid, as Ātman neither slays nor is slain. Unborn, eternal, permanent, and primordial. Destroying the body does not destroy the Ātman. (2.19-20)

In the novel, Joe uses violence to protect Beck, showing he doesn't know himself; murdering the body doesn't entail killing the soul. His lack of self-control and morality implies madness. He knew his acts, but not their implications, which could trap him in life and death. Self-realization is without needs or wants, but Joe always wants Beck.

According to Chatterjee and Datta (1984) <sup>[1]</sup>, Joe is unable to achieve full self-awareness or detachment because he is still caught in his illusions, unlike the jnani (one who attains

knowledge and wisdom) portrayed in Vedantic philosophy. But he is aware of himself as he states 'The wound on my face is stubborn but there is progress and I am less of a monster every day'. He is aware of his sins yet he tries to justify his ways. A basic question is brought up by this tension: If Joe's self-examination lacks genuine refusal, can he ever find punishment or moksha? Joe Goldberg is a deeply flawed and morally corrupt character in the novel whose harsh actions contrast with the Bhagavad Gita's concept of moksha. The Indian philosophical concept of Moksha is free from worldly desires, fake illusions, stubborn ego, and the cycle of pain, but Joe is deeply trapped in obsession, control, and self-delusion. The story portrays Joe as a person who lacks understanding of love and moksha. According to him, killing a body is an act of liberation; however, when he killed Benji, he defined that action as an act of social welfare. According to the Bhagwat Geeta, liberation means freedom, but Joe's quest to be with Beck while committing crimes bonded him in the circle of death and birth. His knowledge of liberation is delusional.

Detachment is explained in the Bhagwat Geeta: free from emotions like ego, desires and material needs, but Joe is entirely seen as a person who is full of ego and his illusions of love. Joe's actions force him to suffer at the end and his definition of moksha means killing people with good justification. At the end of the novel Joe states

You don't respond. You are as flawed as all the books in the store; you have ended and left me and you are gone, forever. You will never leave me in the dark ever again and I will never wait for a response from you ever again. Your light is out for good now and I take you in my arms. (Kepnes 413)

According to the following lines, Joe did not feel terrible about killing Beck. His passion keeps him imprisoned, unable to let go of what drove him to such extremes. This absurd sense of ownership over Beck's life and death shows his mental agony as he struggles with his actions and longs for her approval. He blames Beck for abandoning him. He discloses Beck that she can no longer leave him and that his approval of her ends here because she is dead. Joe's existential detachment dehumanizes Beck by comparing him to literature. The lines "Your light is out for good" indicate that Joe was content to take control of her life by killing her, but he was unable to break free from his desires. Instead, he remains trapped in a cycle of obsession, unable to let go of the very thing that drove him to such extremes.

### Analysis of the Text

In the novel *YOU* we can see the heinous actions committed by the protagonist, "Joe Goldberg," starting with stalking Beck in front of her house and on the internet by searching her Twitter profile

"Guinevere Beck

@TheUnRealBeck" (Kepnes 11).

He makes judgments about Beck's family, the names of her siblings, her lifestyle, and other factors.

"you're an attention whore who has no standards and will give an audience to any poor schmuck who says hello?" (Kepnes 13).

Joe learned a lot about Beck through Twitter. He first criticized Beck's home, pointing out that it featured two open windows that made it easy for passers-by to gaze at her. He eventually justified her decision, though; by pointing out that Beck had been raised in a bigger house with a front yard and a backyard. She also keeps the windows open because she enjoys having space.

By the lines,

“Your apartment is small as hell. You were right when you tweeted: I live in a shoebox. Which is ok bc I don’t blow Benjamins on Manolos. @BrownBiasedNYC #Rebel My #BrownUniversity mug is bigger than my apartment. @BrownBiasedNYC #realestate #NYC There’s no kitchen, just an area where appliances are shoved together like clearance for samples at Bed Bath & Beyond.” (Kepnes 17) Joe feels the reason Beck didn’t admit to Columbia University was because she was busier tweeting than writing.

“Columbia rejected you: Rejection is a dish best served in a paper envelope because then at least you can tear it up or burn it. #notintoColumbia #lifegoeson” (Kepnes 18).

He was comparing Beck with his ex-girlfriend Candace and recalling how he reached her by using a person’s email ID; his name was Peter, and he mentioned that it was Peter’s idea to use his account and pretend to be him. He didn’t feel bad about using Peter’s name because, according to him, sometimes a guy has to play around with the facts to get the girl. He justifies his stalking with the help of romantic comedies and American actress and singer Kate Hudson. When he told the truth to Candace though she was mad, but he justified his act by saying that girls are never satisfied with any man’s actions. And later, when he was finally in a relationship with her, he blamed Candace’s brother for their breakup. That trouble with Candace prepared him for Beck, so he doesn’t regret it.

Just to stalk Beck properly, he used a gas leak as an excuse to enter her house and invade her privacy, and used her laptop, from which he got to know that Beck dated two guys earlier: Charlie and Heshel, and he knew Heshel, not personally but because he sold his books in the shop; Heshel is a writer, and after discovering that Heshel was her boyfriend, he considered burying every book owned by Heshel in the basement. That reveals Joe’s immaturity.

Joe was questioning his actions

“I’m the weird one just because I followed you here. And that’s the problem with this world, with women.” (Kepnes 36)

Despite Joe’s self-awareness that stalking and following are not beneficial actions and are illegal, he still persists in them. But he couldn’t stop himself because he enjoys doing it, and it gives his life a purpose; he has a noble explanation for all his actions, or else he has an immoral urge built in himself, from which he couldn’t stop himself from doing these actions, which are against the law. When Beck, the girl, attempted to contact her lover, he was watching her closely and passing judgment on both of them.

“And Benji, he ignores the fuck out of you. He is more passionate about blowing you off than he is about being inside of you and this is what you want?” (Kepnes 36)

Joe wasn’t trying to save Beck; he was only following her when he saw that she had fallen on the train track, so he went to help her. He has his own way of loving Beck,

“I want to tie your shoelaces. They’re undone. And you’re too drunk to be standing so close to the tracks.” (Kepnes 34)

“You’re too close to the tracks, Beck, and you’re lucky I’m here, because if you fell or if some sicko had followed you down, some derelict rapist, you wouldn’t be able to do anything. You’re too drunk.” (Kepnes 35)

Although he recognizes Beck’s need for Benji’s attention, he wants to replace him since he believes he is a more suitable option. But we also find out that Beck’s obsession with Benji is problematic; even her friend Chana attempts to prevent Beck from seeing Benji.

“Listen, Beck,” Chana rails on. “Some guys are assholes and you have to accept that. You can buy him all the books in the world and he’s still gonna be Benji. He’ll never be Benjamin or, God forbid, Ben because he doesn’t have to, because he’s a permanent man-baby, okay? He and his club soda can fuck o and so can his stupid ass name. I mean seriously, Benji? Is he kidding? And the way he says it. Like its Asian or French. Ben Geeeee. Dude, just fuck off.” (Kepnes 33)

Additionally, he unconsciously picked up this stalking technique from Mr. Mooney; when working with him, he misplaced a signed first-edition copy of “Franny and Zooey.” Joe tried to find the woman who had stolen the book, which was an exciting and enjoyable undertaking.

“Sometimes I think the thief died in one of the Towers, karma. But most of the time I think she’s probably out there, alive, reading”. (Kepnes 51)

Joe was talking about karma, twice in the novel. ‘Karma’ literally means ‘action’ in Sanskrit. According to Hinduism ‘Karma’ is the law of cause and effect. Joe believes that every action has a reaction and he keeps thinking and reflecting upon his behaviours as well as analysing others’ actions and feels that people get what they deserve. Karma is the notion that our deeds, our real, moral, and ethical choices, have an impact rather than a kind of retaliation. According to Indian religions, the choices we make and the actions we perform create our future, a future that may be played out across many lives.

Most of us live our lives in ignorance since we don’t know how creation operates.

We observe a person living a life of virtue but who suffers greatly. We observe another person living a selfish and immoral life but who appears to enjoy only happiness and comforts. Life

is obviously a combination of ups and downs but we do not observe what makes it so, and it does not seem to make sense. This is where learning the principle of karma can assist. Karma is cause and effect, action and reaction - what we plant we harvest - jesi karni vesi bharni as the Punjabi people would say, or “what goes around comes around”. Karma is the law of creation that holds us responsible for every single action we take. Two significant events occur in the novel: the first is when the book was stolen from him and the second is when Curtis and his pals beat Joe and he felt it was karma.

“I will not feel sorry for myself. I did have this coming. There are things I have done, bold things; I remember Benji’s red badge of courage. Of course, at some point, I would have to suffer”. (Kepnes 260).

In both instances, he invokes the concept of karma when his desires are not met. When he was doing wrong, like, he never mentioned deeds. Joe’s constant monologue with himself depicts the ‘stream of consciousness,’ which was introduced by psychologist William James in his book Principles of Psychology (1890), which refers to describing how people experience consciousness as a continuous flow of moments like a river or stream. However, he rarely expresses his thoughts or emotions to those around him. His constant contemplation of those around him, coupled with a sense of superiority in the way he judges and looks down upon them, makes his character both intriguing and captivating to the readers. Though he is a school dropout, he has still self-educated himself through books and writers of different genres and ages, like Crime and Punishment by

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Desperate Characters* by Paula Fox, *The Dragon riders of Pern* by Anne McCaffrey, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, and so on. This makes him a learned man, and the same fact attracts Beck despite he is being younger than her. Joe as a character is very intellectual, not academically but cognitively as he says

“I didn’t go to college, Beck, so I don’t waste my adulthood trying to recapture my time in college.” (Kepnes 28)

Joe disguises himself thrice in the novel: first when he uses the identity of Nathan Herzog, who is a food critic at *Vulture’s* new *Eats* section, to kill Benji; secondly, he uses the identity of Spencer Hewitt when he follows Beck and Peach to her house, even though he was wounded by Curtis, but his obsession to be with Beck pushed him. While monitoring Peach's house, Joe encountered "Officer Nico," a police officer, who transported him to the hospital, and Joe deceived him into believing he was lost and his GPS was malfunctioning. Thirdly, he used the identity of Dan Fox (son of Paula Fox and Dan Brown), and he is a coffee shop manager. He used this identity to track Beck’s therapist, Dr. Nicky Angevine, and he came to meet with a problem of OCD. These incidents demonstrate Joe's obsession with being with Beck.

The irony is that he encourages Beck and Benji to read, think, and learn. The cage was used to store first-edition books at a standard AC temperature so that their pages would be kept for eternity, according to the strange description of the cage. He murders Beck and Benji in this cage.

“Only a monster would lock a bird in here and call himself an animal lover. Our cage was only for books” (Kepnes 47). Beck, Peach, and Joe are all puppets of their passion and financial desires. Beck was aware of Benji's drug use, his flirtation with women, and his attraction to a dancer named Monica, still she craves for Benji’s also, her physical and mental needs were not being met by Benji, as evidenced by her masturbating after having sleeping with him and by Benji's negligent treatment of her, which included ignoring her calls and messages. Additionally, Benji informs Joe that Beck is a gold digger and that a girl like her would never fall in love with him when Joe kidnapped him. Later, when Joe killed Benji, he gives a very casual description as if it was very normal to kill a person

“Benji wasn’t lying; he is, was, allergic to peanuts. He died educated. He died with new confidence and new pride and who says a life has to take eighty years to be lived? He learned, you know? How many people get to go out feeling like they’re just hitting their stride? Most people die old, full of pain and regret. Or young and full of drugs and self-indulgence—or sheer bad luck. But Benji had the ultimate privilege; he died with an opening heart, and an improving mind. Benji wasn’t any good at being Benji, Beck. You know that, above all people. Look at the way he treated you and look at the way he treated his body. The trap I set for him was a relief from the trap he was born into. I created a world where he couldn’t steal, where his counterfeit words didn’t count. I took his drugs away”. (Kepnes 153, 154)

However, Joe finds out Beck photos at Peach's house which proves that Peach is also a puppet of her impulses. She is a complicated combination of unrecognized romantic emotions, control, jealousy, insecurity, and narcissism that fuels her obsession with Beck in the novel *YOU*. She never expresses her love for Beck directly, but her behaviour

conveys a strong passion. To keep Beck emotionally dependent on her, she manipulates the situations to keep Beck near her and writes about her in an unduly loving way. She controls Beck's life by taking her social networks, money, and self-worth which makes Beck feel obligated to her. A very obvious illustration of her possessiveness is her constant attempts to sabotage Beck's sexual connections, especially with Joe, whom she views as a direct challenge to her dominance. Despite having huge wealth and social status, she suffers from deep-seated loneliness, and only Beck provides her emotional support and a sense of direction and acceptance. She sees Beck as an extension of herself that she must have at all costs because of her narcissistic tendencies, which forces her to see Beck as an independent individual. Joe and Peach both desire to fully control Beck, but Joe resorts to violence while Peach uses psychological manipulation. Joe sees Peach as a ferocious enemy as a result of these similarities, which ultimately leads to her death.

“I can’t believe my luck as I flip through all sixteen beautiful, revealing photographs, all pictures of you. Peach is quite the photographer, as it turns out”.

Peach loves you. Peach wants you. (Kepnes 179)

Joe planned to kill Peach after learning that she was also in love with Beck.

“Because I was going to grab her by the neck and make her stop running once and for all” (Kepnes 185)

Finally, he kills Peach.

“I hit her head with the rock and she is quiet, at last”. (Kepnes 287)

He justifies Peach's murder as necessity as he sees peach as a barrier to his relationship with Beck. Joe contrives the incident to look like a suicide in order to support his idea that he is acting in Beck's best interests. He goes into great detail about how she died, including her physical condition, the manner her corpse falls, and the way he sets the scenario. He continues to believe that he is in charge and that getting rid of Peach was an essential part of his hunt for Beck. Joe is self-aware and self-conscience when he thinks about Karen Minty the woman whom he uses to get over and move on with his obsession he has this fear that if he is successful in moving on Beck would also move on as he believes in the concept of Karma as at the time of going out with Karen Minty he was not aware of Beck’s relationship with Nick.

Joe is also afraid of his past and he acknowledges his mistakes and accepts his guilt which takes the form of overthinking and insecurity and he is self-aware as he acknowledges his past but still believes in reinvention through his actions contradict this idea. He says ‘The problem with books is that they are too good. They make you believe you can be ‘whoever you want to be’, that you can do anything. ‘They make you think that if you just try hard enough, you can escape your past.’ He is aware of what is moral and immoral but he has his own twisted justification for taking control of people’s fates yet he believes that actions do have consequences.

‘You can’t just let people go when they hurt you because they’ll keep hurting you. They’ll keep getting away with it, and the world will just let them. And that’s not fair.’

As he constantly cheats and avoids her, leaving her unable to move on. Her ‘daddy issues,’ which she accepts in the later part of the novel when she is asked to reflect upon herself and to analyze the behavior of Joe, the researcher

used the Indian ethical concept of Karma, where he committed many immoral actions for a girl named Guinevere Beck, with whom he was obsessed, and that obsession led him to stalk, judge, manipulate, and justify murders. His actions in the whole novel are based on his past trauma and his self-righteous justification that he is loving and protecting Beck from the world where good and bad have no static law.

### Conclusion

YOU by Caroline Kepnes is a gripping examination of obsession, self-justification and morality that draws on both Indian Philosophical and modern psychological perspectives. By showing a protagonist who wanders between self-awareness and moral blindness, Joe Goldberg's actions challenge the traditional ethical dichotomies. Joe Goldberg's behavior in YOU is a sharp contrast to the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on moksha and self-realization. While the Gita focuses on detachment, self-knowledge, and release from desire, Joe is stuck in his delusions, unable to overcome his compulsive desire for control and possession. His rationalization for violence as a way of defending Beck is indicative of Avidya, ignorance of reality, and propels him further down the path of moral corruption instead of spiritual liberation.

Indian philosophy says moksha is achieved by overcoming materialistic desires and ego. Joe's blind devotion to Beck only deepens his agony. He misunderstands self-realization by thinking removing perceived hazards liberates. The Bhagavad Gita defines moksha as inner serenity and insight, which Joe lacks.

Finally, Joe's journey is not a journey of spiritual transformation but one of self-torment. His warped understanding of freedom brings him further into moral corruption, substantiating the belief that in the absence of true self-realization and detachment, one is trapped in the vicious cycle of ignorance, craving, and destruction.

Joe's action seen to be hurdles of his personal growth, which makes him detach from the people around him and because of that he lacks emotions like sympathy and empathy. and his concept of moksha is very blur, also he has seen a person who is fully attach with his desires of lust, crave for sex and attention, and couldn't help himself to free from that. and his concept of moksha means filling his void by committing more immoral actions.

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