



Stages of Grief as Cultural Narratives: Understanding Maternal Loss Through Qualitative Content Analysis

Tahapan Duka sebagai Narasi Kultural: Memahami Kehilangan Anak pada Ibu melalui Analisis Isi Kualitatif

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Article Info

Article history :

Received : 18-02-2026

Revised : 20-02-2026

Accepted : 22-02-2026

Published : 24-02-2026

Abstrak

Pengalaman duka pada perempuan merupakan proses emosional yang kompleks yang dipengaruhi oleh konteks relasional dan budaya, serta oleh cara pengalaman tersebut dinarasikan. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi representasi tahapan duka dalam narasi para ibu yang kehilangan anaknya sebagaimana digambarkan dalam memoar *Kisah Sejati Ibu yang Kehilangan Buah Hati* karya Xin Ran. Menggunakan pendekatan analisis isi kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan kerangka deduktif berdasarkan tahapan duka Kübler-Ross untuk mengidentifikasi ekspresi naratif. Data diperoleh melalui pembacaan teks secara intensif dan berulang dengan berfokus pada unit narasi bermakna yang merefleksikan respons emosional terhadap kehilangan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tahapan duka tidak direpresentasikan secara linear di dalam narasi. Tahap depression muncul sebagai tahap yang paling konsisten dan dominan, diikuti oleh denial, bargaining, dan acceptance, sementara anger tidak ditemukan. Tema tambahan berupa upaya berkelanjutan untuk kembali bertemu dengan anak serta ekspresi harapan juga teridentifikasi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa duka pada ibu bersifat subjektif dan dipengaruhi oleh norma sosiokultural yang membentuk ekspresi emosi dalam konteks naratif. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya memahami model duka sebagai kerangka interpretatif, bukan sebagai urutan emosi yang bersifat tetap, khususnya ketika menganalisis narasi yang terikat pada konteks budaya.

Kata Kunci: *Tahapan duka ibu; Tahapan duka Kübler-Ross; Analisis isi kualitatif.*

Abstract

Women's experiences of grief are complex emotional processes shaped by relational and cultural contexts as well as by the ways such experiences are narrated. This study explores the representation of grief stages in narratives of mothers who lost their children as depicted in the memoir *Kisah Sejati Ibu yang Kehilangan Buah Hati* by Xin Ran. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study applied a deductive framework based on Kübler-Ross's stages of grief to identify narrative expressions related to denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Data were obtained through intensive and repeated readings of the text, focusing on meaningful narrative units that reflected emotional responses to loss. The findings indicate that grief stages were not represented linearly across narratives. Depression emerged as the most consistent and dominant stage, followed by denial, bargaining, and acceptance, while anger was absent. Additional themes of ongoing efforts to reunite with the child and expressions of hope were also identified. These results suggest that maternal grief is subjectively constructed and influenced by sociocultural norms that shape emotional expression within narrative contexts. The study highlights the importance of understanding grief models as interpretative frameworks rather than fixed emotional sequences, particularly when analyzing culturally embedded narratives.

Keywords: *Maternal grief stages; Kübler-Ross's stages of grief; qualitative content analysis*



INTRODUCTION

China's one-child policy, introduced in 1979, was designed to regulate population growth and balance food production in order to reduce poverty (Cai & Feng, 2021). Although the policy contributed to demographic changes, it also generated significant sociocultural consequences for families. Research involving 237 families who abandoned their children during the 1980s and 1990s found that most abandoned infants were healthy baby girls, while a smaller proportion were boys with illnesses or disabilities (Johnson et al., 1998). Abandonment frequently occurred within the first six months of life, and many infants were left in locations where they could be easily discovered, such as hospitals or public spaces.

The phenomenon of child abandonment in China is closely related to patriarchal cultural values that prioritize male offspring as family heirs. Within the one-child policy context, the birth of a daughter could limit families' opportunities to have a son, thereby increasing pressure on parents to relinquish female infants (Cai & Feng, 2021; Johnson et al., 1998). Although the policy promoted smaller families and healthier births, it also conflicted with traditional Chinese values that emphasized extended family structures. Resistance to the policy was common, yet governmental incentives and sanctions shaped parental decisions, sometimes leading families to avoid official registration of children despite long-term consequences for access to education and social services (Johnson et al., 1998). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, stricter enforcement of the policy coincided with a significant increase in the number of children living in orphanages (Johnson, 1993).

Family dynamics within patriarchal systems also influenced abandonment decisions. Fathers were often identified as primary decision-makers, although in many cases both parents participated in the process, and mothers frequently experienced emotional distress and regret even when they agreed with the decision (Banghan & Liyao, 1998). Methods of abandonment varied, including leaving infants in crowded areas, near residential spaces, or arranging informal adoption placements (Johnson et al., 1998). Despite the prevalence of such practices, psychological research focusing on the emotional experiences of mothers remains limited, partly because these individuals are difficult to access for empirical studies (Yang et al., 2023).

Narrative texts therefore provide an alternative means of understanding maternal grief. One such narrative is the memoir *Kisah Sejati Ibu yang Kehilangan Buah Hati* by Xin Ran (2011), which portrays stories of Chinese women who lost or relinquished their children due to sociocultural pressures. Across multiple chapters, the book presents diverse maternal experiences, including mothers who consciously made the decision to abandon their children as well as those who lost their children under circumstances beyond their control. Previous analyses of adoption-related narratives suggest that storytelling practices may simplify emotional complexity and overlook the voices of birth mothers (Sun, 2021). Nevertheless, Xin Ran's narratives provide rich depictions of maternal grief, including persistent longing, emotional suffering, and in some cases suicidal ideation.

Scholars have argued that maternal loss can produce long-lasting psychological consequences because strong emotional bonds are formed during pregnancy and early caregiving (Lauderdale & Boyle, 1994; Lenhardt, 1997). Such losses may generate profound grief that persists for years or even a lifetime (Aloi, 2009). One of the most widely used frameworks for understanding grief is Kübler-Ross's stages of grief model, which includes denial, anger, bargaining, depression,



and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969, as cited in Aloï, 2009). However, contemporary research has criticized the model for assuming a universal and linear progression of emotional responses. Cultural context, emotional regulation, and social expectations may influence how individuals experience and express grief, and not all stages necessarily appear in every case (Ip et al., 2021; Rosenblatt, 2008). Recent critiques further emphasize that stage-based models should be viewed as interpretative frameworks rather than fixed psychological trajectories (Avis et al., 2021).

In addition, birth mothers are often encouraged to “move on” quickly after relinquishment, which may disrupt the grieving process and limit opportunities for emotional processing (Aloï, 2009). Social stigma surrounding adoption may also lead parents to conceal pregnancy or loss, reinforcing feelings of guilt and preventing open expression of grief (Watson, 1986, as cited in Aloï, 2009). These sociocultural factors highlight the importance of examining grief not only as an individual emotional experience but also as a narrative and cultural construction.

Given the limited exploration of maternal grief within both psychological and narrative literature, this study aims to examine how stages of grief are represented in narratives of mothers who experienced child loss in Xin Ran’s memoir. Using qualitative content analysis, this research seeks to explore the portrayal of grief stages while considering the broader sociocultural context in which these narratives were constructed.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using qualitative content analysis (QCA) with a deductive-directed approach. The analysis was guided by Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief framework, which served as an analytical lens to explore how grief experiences were represented within narrative texts. A deductive approach was selected because the study aimed to examine the presence and variation of predefined grief stages while remaining open to emergent themes beyond the theoretical model (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, as cited in Supratiknya, (2015)

Participant

The primary data source consisted of narrative accounts presented in the memoir *Kisah Sejati Ibu yang Kehilangan Buah Hati* by Xin Ran (2011). The narratives portray experiences of mothers who lost or relinquished their children due to sociocultural pressures. The analysis focused on eight female characters whose narratives of child loss were presented in the memoir. The unit of analysis was defined as meaningful narrative segments, including phrases, sentences, and descriptive passages that reflected emotional reactions, coping processes, or meaning-making related to child loss.

Data Measurement

Data collection involved intensive and repeated readings of the text to ensure familiarity with the narrative context. Relevant passages were identified and extracted based on their relevance to grief-related experiences. This process aimed to capture both explicit emotional expressions and implicit psychological meanings embedded within the narratives.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved several steps: familiarization with the text, deductive coding based on grief stages, grouping codes into thematic categories, and interpreting findings within



sociocultural contexts (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, as cited in Supratiknya, 2015). Analytical decisions were conducted iteratively, and coding consistency was maintained through repeated comparison across narrative units to enhance credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative content analysis identified four stages of grief represented in the narratives: denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The anger stage, which is part of Kübler-Ross's framework, was not identified in any of the analyzed narratives. In addition to the predefined stages, two emergent themes were found, namely ongoing efforts to reunite with the child and expressions of hope for future encounters.

Denial

Denial was reflected through delayed emotional awareness and the belief that separation from the child was temporary or reversible. The narratives suggest that denial functioned as an early coping mechanism that allowed mothers to distance themselves from the psychological consequences of loss.

One example appeared in the narrative of Green Mary, who described realizing the emotional impact only after returning home:

"We only realized what we had done after we arrived home. We began to think clearly again, but the nightmare had just begun. The peace and calm in the house were no longer the same as before she was born. Her photographs, her clothes, her toys piled up everywhere... it felt as if a huge hole had opened in my heart." (Green Mary)

Similarly, denial appeared in the narrative of Na, who believed that separation from her child could eventually be reversed:

"In the end, I decided to let my child be adopted because I thought I would be able to find her again in America." (Na)

These narratives illustrate how denial emerged through cognitive distancing and hopeful reinterpretation of reality.

Bargaining

Bargaining was reflected in recurring "what-if" statements and expressions of regret regarding past decisions. Characters frequently revisited specific moments that led to the loss of their children, imagining alternative outcomes had they acted differently. This stage was characterized by internal dialogue and self-questioning, indicating attempts to reconstruct meaning and regain a sense of control over uncontrollable circumstances.

For example, Xin Ran expressed bargaining through repeated self-questioning:

"Where are you, Little Snow? If only... if only I had not gone out of town for that assignment. This regret is heavier than any stone I carry." (Xin Ran)

Depression

Depression emerged as the most prominent and consistently represented stage across all narratives. Emotional manifestations included intense sadness, persistent longing, feelings of



emptiness, and self-blame. Mothers frequently described recurring thoughts about their children, indicating a sustained psychological attachment despite physical separation. Green Mary described intrusive thoughts and persistent attachment:

“Not a single minute passes without me thinking of my baby. Sometimes when a bus leaves, I imagine she is inside it. I pile her toys beside me in bed and spend the night half-awake, half-dreaming.” (Green Mary)

Behavioral expressions associated with depression were also evident, including social withdrawal, silence, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. Narratives portrayed prolonged emotional suffering, with some characters describing their lives as being defined by waiting for an uncertain future. The prevalence of depressive themes suggested that grief was portrayed as a deeply internalized and enduring emotional state.

“She was the one who failed to give an heir to the family. When her husband left for work in the city and never returned, she believed she was the cause. Her parents wanted to cast her aside, saying she had brought misfortune to the family.” (Kumei)

Depression was represented both through emotional language and through symbolic imagery, such as holding the child’s belongings or imagining encounters with the child in everyday situations. These narrative elements illustrated the intensity and persistence of maternal grief. The narrative of Na illustrated emotional numbness despite deep sorrow:

“All night I clutched my baby’s remaining clothes against my chest. I did not cry. My feelings were strange, as if an unbearable pain had drained all my tears.” (Na)

Acceptance

Acceptance appeared less frequently compared to other stages and was primarily characterized by self-reflection and emotional reorganization. Characters who demonstrated acceptance expressed a willingness to coexist with their pain rather than eliminate it. Acceptance was reflected in narratives emphasizing personal growth, meaning-making, and a redefined sense of identity. Na described acceptance as the ability to live alongside enduring pain:

“The pain I carry is part of who I am, and I have grown used to bearing it on my own.” (Na)

Some mothers reframed their experiences as opportunities to help others or to share their stories, suggesting a shift from self-blame toward self-compassion as shown by Xin Ran:

“Among all the mothers who lost their daughters, I feel the most fortunate because I can tell those girls what their mothers truly felt.” (Xin Ran)

However, only a small number of characters reached this stage, indicating that acceptance was not a universal outcome within the narratives.

Additional Themes: Effort and Hope

Beyond the predefined grief stages, two additional themes emerged from the analysis.

Effort to Reunite

Many narratives described continuous efforts to locate or reconnect with the lost child. These efforts included searching through government institutions, visiting orphanages, and seeking



information through various channels. Such actions reflected ongoing emotional bonds and suggested that grief extended beyond internal emotional processes into active behavioral responses. For example, Waiter described searching through various institutions:

“She ran like a madwoman from one government office to another—from the neighborhood office to the city administration, from the planning department to the demolition department—but no one could tell her where the orphanage children had gone.” (Waiter)

Hope for Future Encounters

Expressions of hope were present even among characters who experienced intense depression. Mothers articulated wishes to see their children again, to witness their growth, or to be understood by them in the future. Na expressed a strong desire to meet her child again:

“I want to see her with my own eyes and hold her. I want to watch her grow up and live happily. I even want to hear my daughter speak a little English fluently.” (Na)

Hope appeared as a persistent emotional thread throughout the narratives, indicating that grief was intertwined with expectations for future reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how stages of grief were represented in narratives of mothers who experienced child loss as depicted in *Kisah Sejati Ibu yang Kehilangan Buah Hati*. The findings indicate that grief was not portrayed as a linear progression through Kübler-Ross’s five stages. Depression emerged as the most dominant and consistent emotional experience across narratives, while the anger stage was entirely absent. In addition, not all characters demonstrated denial, bargaining, or acceptance, suggesting that maternal grief within the narratives was diverse and context-dependent.

These results support contemporary critiques that stage-based models of grief should be viewed as interpretative frameworks rather than universal emotional sequences. The narratives illustrate how sociocultural factors, particularly patriarchal norms and emotional regulation within Chinese society, may shape how grief is expressed and internalized. The persistence of hope and ongoing efforts to reunite with the child further highlight that grief may coexist with meaning-making processes rather than progress toward definitive emotional closure.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to psychological discussions by demonstrating that classical grief models require contextual interpretation when applied to culturally embedded narratives. Practically, the findings suggest that practitioners and researchers should avoid assuming uniform emotional stages when understanding maternal loss, especially in contexts where grief may be hidden or socially unrecognized.

This study is limited by its reliance on narrative texts, which may reflect editorial framing rather than direct psychological experiences. Future research is encouraged to explore empirical accounts of mothers who have experienced child loss in diverse cultural settings to further refine psychological understandings of grief.

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