



# DECONSTRUCTING THE IDEAL BODY IN THE SELECTED FICTIONS

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**Abstract:** Body shaming continues to be a significant issue in today's society, which involves humiliation and discrimination based on a person's body type. The patriarchal ideas of beauty over brains forced female characters to conform to the social expectations of beauty. Traditionally, fat female characters served as comic relief and sidekicks. Modern novels, however, have begun to criticize these conventional fatphobic attitudes. This study aims to identify how contemporary literature reacts to the social construction of the ideal body image. Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* (2015) and Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017) are the two texts examined in this paper to examine how these texts disrupt the narratives of fatness rooted in shame to challenge the conventional social expectations of beauty.

**Key words -** Body shaming, Fatphobia, Feminism, Trauma, Dumplin', Hunger

Under the context of feminism and gender studies, the body is a key topic of discussion in many different contexts. The whole world is behind perfection, especially on looks which demands every human being to fit into the mould of the so-called ideal body. Women are under more pressure than men to adhere to this 'physical figure'. Fat women are degraded and are viewed as inferior. The sexual bodily disparities between men and women are emphasized in the writing of French feminist authors like Cixous and Irigaray, with admiration and value placed on women's bodies as a unique source of female empowerment (Pilcher & Whelehan 7).

Literature has played a significant role in shaping the beauty concepts of different ages throughout history. The way people perceive beauty has changed over time, and it has been a crucial factor in influencing these changes. The Renaissance literature had a significant impact on the standards of beauty of the time. This view was reflected in the art and fashion of the time. Similarly, during the Victorian era, it again played a key role in promoting a particular standard of beauty. Writers like Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte idealized a specific type of woman - one who was delicate, fair-skinned, and feminine. This view was reflected in the fashion and beauty trends of the time, which emphasized modesty, simplicity, and a natural appearance. In more recent times, books have continued to influence beauty concepts. The rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s, for example, was reflected in literature, which began to challenge traditional beauty standards and promote more inclusive definitions of beauty. Writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker explored the complexities of beauty and its relationship to race, gender, and identity, paving the way for a more diverse and inclusive understanding of beauty.

Traditional fiction reduced fat female characters to sidekicks. In Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" (1813) the character of Miss Bingley, is described as being "plump" and having a "red face." Also, she is portrayed as being snobbish and vain and is often depicted as being jealous of Elizabeth Bennet's beauty and intelligence. Austen's portrayal of Mrs. Bennet as a satirical depiction of an uneducated, obese woman who reinforces unfavourable preconceptions about obese people was criticized. While the novel "The Bell Jar" (1963) by Sylvia Plath is considered a classic, its portrayal of the protagonist's weight gain as a sign of her mental decline also faced criticism. In some adaptations of "Cinderella", the stepsisters are portrayed as being overweight and unattractive, and their behaviour is often depicted as mean and selfish. In other depictions, Cinderella is featured as skinny and conventionally appealing, and her transformation into a beautiful princess is considered to be the key to her happiness and achievement. These portrayals of women characters promote a narrow and unrealistic standard of beauty and perpetuating negative stereotypes about overweight people as being less attractive and less deserving love and happiness.

Cesare Lombroso draws a link between obesity and prostitution in his 1897 book "The Female Offender", by comparing the weights and measurements of obese prostitutes with those of skinny. defined the thin women as 'morally upright' and concluded that promiscuity and antisocial behaviour are closely related to fatness. Quick (2008) examined how obesity and bodily perception were depicted in five books for teenagers that were published between 1998 to 2003. According to his investigation, the majority of the characters in the novels experienced a "happy ending" only after weight loss. (Quick)

Many studies opposed and supported fat-shaming messages. Despite the numerous research that have been conducted, social stereotyping still persists. There is a shift from “Cinderella” and “Snow White”, two fictional characters who were slender and regarded as the pinnacle of beauty, to “Red Shoes”, a story with a chubby female protagonist. There have been changes in how people view the body, particularly in regard to nature and culture. This study employs qualitative methodologies such as close reading and critical content analysis. This research paper analyzes how contemporary literature rebels against this stereotyping and thus provides a positive solution.

The humiliation of one's physique is a form of harassment in which someone's physical attributes is the target of insults or criticism. Social conventions are ingrained in every individual right from childhood. They are taught that a women's physique is ideal if she is tall and thin. The stereotypes alter as men are expected to be stout and women to be sleek. This division between the sexes further intensifies differences in society. Even reality television displays a range of content and enjoyment according to cultural demands as they present attractive contestants in accordance with the standards of stereotypical ideas of society. The media's presentation of slim models and cultural standards established by the society surrounding the ideal female appearance have raised the demand among women to attain an ideal physique. Most of the literary works tend to project the central characters according to social expectations. The physicality of each character could predict their role as protagonist, the antagonist, sidekick, comic, etc. But modern literature has begun to question such stereotyping and has the potential to influence marginalized people to realize their beauty.

*Dumplin'* (2015) by Julie Murphy is a novel featuring a fat female protagonist, Willowdean. Murphy presents her protagonist as a confident girl who confronts new challenges to her self-esteem. She is in a conflict with her insecurities and her own hopes for herself. The novel is set in a beauty pageant-obsessed town in Texas. Willowdean enrolls herself in the annual beauty pageant and inspires other usual candidates to enroll as well. She became the voice for those who did not fit in the mould of society. Murphy identifies self-acceptance and self-love as a weapon to subvert the social construction of the ideal body image. She presents the concept of a swimsuit body: “A swimsuit body is a body with a swimsuit on it.” (Murphy). “Every body is a swimsuit body.” (Huber). Thus, *Dumplin'* sets out to spread positive body image and battle against plus-sized stereotypes.

In *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) body* (2017), American author Roxane Gay explores what it means to be overweight in a culture that rejects unruly bodies. Gay presents the struggles and trauma that she had to face due to her complicated relationship with weight. She was a victim of a brutal gang rape at the age of twelve. Later she found comfort in excessive eating and disguised herself into a huge body that could shield her from sexual attraction. She considers her body as an armor to face the world and even assures that the armor is indeed. “I am working toward abandoning the damaging cultural messages that tell me my worth is strictly tied up in my body.” (Gay 275) She thus criticizes the society that is unable to see the value that goes beyond a body.

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how contemporary literature reacts to the social construction of the ideal body image. Additionally, it emphasizes the role of feminism-inspired modern literature in fat activism or the fat acceptance movement. The paper seeks to alter how people view body size by exposing the emotional agony and trauma caused by victimization and mockery. The study is focused on the human body, and can be connected to the Biopolitics coined by Foucault. Thus, it aims to empower obese individuals and demonstrate how they can protest and resist fat shaming messages in order to increase awareness of Fatphobia in popular culture.

Literature frequently depicts a limited number of characters with bodies that deviate from the “ideal” or “ordinary” shape. In the majority of the works, these characters continue to be marginalized and oppressed. Writers often ignore existing misconceptions about a person's body or physical appearance. But a few writers have come up with their works addressing this issue of self-identity and tend to portray characters who have no special heroic characteristics but just unattractive physical figures. It is a fact that society rejects and ignores physically unattractive characters, even fictional characters are expected to be the epitome of perfect physicality.

*Dumplin'* by Julie Murphy challenges the thin thinking of society through the character Willowdean Dixon. Sixteen-year-old Willowdean enrolls herself in a beauty pageant infamous for its swimsuit competitions which emphasize on having a perfect body, without losing any weight. This aspect is revolutionary and proves that she is more than just a fat girl. The subject is distinctive since almost all of the characters in traditional stories are thin and not overweight. The story becomes unique and unusual as it features a love tale involving a straight-sized boy named Bo and a big-sized girl. The novel focuses on other characters like Hannah, Millie, and Aunt Lucy as well. These characters are marginalized as they are unattractive according to the social beauty standards. Hannah is marginalized due to her buck teeth and queer identity. She dresses like a man, and has short hair which makes her different from the so-called normal beautiful women in the society. Though Millie is also mocked for her body she is confident unlike Willowdean and proves her talent and beauty in the pageant. Willowdean and her mother Rosie Dixon, the former beauty queen, serve as the vehicle through which Murphy explores the complicated relationship between an overweight daughter and a thin mother. At the novel's conclusion, as Willowdean is eliminated, her mother simultaneously learns the fact that she must embrace herself as the dress she wore for the past twenty years is no longer a good fit. From the beginning of the novel, Willowdean was shamed by everyone including her mother which is evident from the nickname “Dumplin’”.

Dolly Parton's songs have an important role throughout the novel. She has raised her voice against the body image issues faced by young girls where the celebrities and stars are glorified for their beauty and body. On her interview in a magazine, says “people should be allowed to be who they are and we should accept them for that.” Murphy uses the perfect figure of Dolly Parton in the novel as an inspiration for Willowdean. Through *Dumplin'*, Murphy tries to rebel against society's attitude towards an individual's body. She says “All my life I've had a body worth commenting on and if living in my skin has taught me anything it's that if it's not your body, it's not yours to comment on. Fat. Skinny. Tall. Short. It doesn't matter.” (Murphy 33)

In her memoir, Gay pictures her traumatic journey and people's attitude towards her fatness. In the opening chapter itself, she states that: "The story of my body is not a story of triumph. This is not a weight-loss memoir." (Gay 2) Gay is bold enough to reveal her body mass index, which is an incomprehensible figure, but the terrible reality of her body. Although she didn't feel ashamed or insecure about it, she endured it because of how other people perceived her body. The memory of the brutal gang rape haunted her and wounded her deeply. She had to find comfort in eating. This intense eating habit made her bigger and unattractive, which makes her feel safe and secure from sexual violence as well as the male gaze. Gay uses the term "unruly body" to describe her own body. She is oppressed by the social norms, but is certain about freedom without having to lose weight or have the approval of the society. The popular cultural messages turned her body into a cage that she couldn't escape and people viewed her body as a horrible crime. She believes that males seldom express lusty feelings toward an unattractive woman and instead adopt an offensive and critical attitude towards her. Gay prefers to remain hidden and avoid drawing attention to herself, as she feels free to be undesirable to men. (11) Thus, Gay upholds self-respect and identifies a new way of freedom through her plus size. According to Ann Patchett, "Roxane Gay shows us how to be decent to ourselves as well as decent to one another".

These two books show some connection between them to an extent. Gay witnesses the complicated relationship between a fat daughter and her thin mother during one of her shopping (165). This complicated relationship can also be seen between Willowdean and her mother, who is a Texas beauty queen. These mothers consider fatness being unhealthy and unattractive. While *Hunger* criticizes the show "The Biggest Loser", which considers fat as an enemy to be destroyed, *Dumplin'* mocks the "The Miss Teen Blue Bonnet pageant" which offers damaging cultural messages about weight loss and thin-thinking. While others viewed Willowdean's participation in the beauty pageant as 'brave', she just wanted it to be 'normal'. These shows about unruly bodies spread the message of making it disciplined according to the social norms to gain happiness and acceptance in society. People use different labels to indicate the problem areas of body parts such as thunder thighs, love handles, double chins, saddlebags, beer bellies, etc. Such labeling serves as a reminder to obese people that their bodies are not normal.

Obesity stigma primarily affects women as they are constantly treated as objects of beauty. In *Hunger* Gay says that "My fat body empowers people to erase my gender. I am a woman, but they do not see me as a woman. I am often mistaken for a man." (Gay 233) It is very clear that in our patriarchal society, obese women represent everything that is deemed inappropriate for women. As a result, we can consider fat shaming a feminist issue. In this male-dominated society, men judge or evaluate women in public settings and events, such as beauty pageants. Murphy's character strongly rejects the notions of beauty pageants as she says: "I'm entering this pageant because there's no reason I shouldn't. I'm doing this because I want to cross the line between me and the rest of the world. Not be someone's savior." (Murphy 155) Beauty contests and pageants play an important role in shaping the beauty concepts of age. It is a fact that those who do not conform to the ideal shape are excluded from these events. The truth is that fat women experience double marginalization simply because they do not conform to contemporary ideas of beauty. No woman is praised or valued for her morals or dignity.

Media plays a major role in objectifying women. Mulvey (1975) asserts that women are fetishized, objectified, and solely placed in relation to male characters, and that their agency is based on their gender and outward appearance. John Berger effectively captures the underlying contradiction in images of women produced for the patriarchal 'male gaze' in his work "*Ways of seeing* (1972)". As this study is based on the human body, it can be connected to Foucault's "Biopolitics". The human body is utilized as a political tool. Human anatomy and biological characteristics are valued excessively in the current era for the notion of Biopolitics to have much application. Ultimately, it advances this study as it centers on the expanding significance of the human body. Biopolitics is the study of human behavior through the lens of a political strategy, which aims to force individuals to regulate themselves.

Many news reports claim that concerns about body image issues lead people to depression and even suicide: Suicide notes that were left behind appeared to suggest that many people took extreme measures as a result of being the victims of body shaming. (22-year-old Kills Herself, Note Hints at Body Shaming | Delhi News - Times of India, n.d.) In a survey, by the "Mental Health Foundation of 4,505 adults, thirteen percent had considered taking their own lives because of concerns relating to body image". (One in Eight Adults Experience Suicidal Thoughts Over Body Image, 2019) Studies reveal that teenagers who believe they are overweight or too thin are much more prone to suicide ideas and attempts. Teens who were overweight or underweight had a minor edge over teens who were of average weight in terms of suicidal intentions. This was based on teens' reported height and weight, which were used to calculate real body size. (*Body Image Issues and Teen Suicide*, 2005) In this scenario, the social trend known as "fat acceptance" ("Fat Acceptance Movement - Wikipedia," 2023) is extremely important as it aims to eradicate the social stigma of being overweight from social attitudes by drawing attention to the social challenges that fat people experience. Today, contemporary literature along with contemporary films tend to display fat activism as a weapon against body shaming.

This study is an important step in understanding the changing notions and attitudes about body politics operating in contemporary literature. The patriarchy that operates in society imposes the burden of ideal beauty on women. Even the most unconventional heroines nevertheless seem unable to escape the specter of tradition. The study proves that women are more succumbed to sexual violence and body shaming than men. *Dumplin'* and *Hunger* lay out the topography of fat hatred that operates in a society stressing the importance of learning to love oneself. The paper reveals the role of these feminist-inspired literary works in fat activism or fat acceptance movement. The path that these books hint at in their concluding pages is the new way of seeing oneself and the world that results from rethinking the fat body. There is beauty in every body. We should train our minds to see the beauty in every person, regardless of size. Whether someone is overweight, thin, tall, or short has no bearing on how they live. Beauty lies in the heart and not the body.



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