



Reading the Starved Body: A Study of Corporeality in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*

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Abstract : This research paper attempts to examine the intricate relationship between body and identity through the lens of embodiment and corporeality. Laurie Halse Anderson's novel offers a harrowing portrayal of Lia, a teenage girl grappling with an eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, whose fragmented sense of self is reflected through her deteriorating body. By utilising the theoretical frameworks of embodiment and corporeality, this study explores how Lia's physical suffering becomes a language through which her emotional trauma and desire for control are expressed. The analysis highlights how Anderson transforms the starved body into a metaphorical and material space where identity, guilt, and resistance inscribe themselves.

IndexTerms - Corporeality, embodiment, eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, Judith Butler, Vicky Kirby.

Wintergirls is a heart-rending novel written by Laurie Halse Anderson that follows the journey of a young girl named Lia as she struggles with her eating disorder, anorexia nervosa. This paper will attempt to study the novel through the lens of embodiment, a theoretical approach that emphasizes the importance of the body and physical experience in shaping human cognition, identity, and understanding; and Corporeality, in order to gain a deeper insight into how Lia's bodily experiences impact her emotional state, relationships, and journey toward healing. In other words, how the body is used as a site of inscription would be studied in detail.

The novel provides a nuanced exploration of Lia's internal struggles with her body, identity, and relationships, all of which are deeply intertwined with her corporeal experiences. Corporeality, or the study of the body as a site of cultural, social, and individual meaning, offers a framework for understanding how Lia's bodily experiences shape her narrative. It focuses on the significance of the body in literature, emphasizing how physical experiences shape an individual's understanding of themselves and the world. In literary studies, the body is examined not only as a biological entity but as a site of inscription of social, cultural, and psychological meaning. Corporeality helps us understand how character's bodies influence their identities, emotions, and narratives.

The novel delves into Lia's internal battle with her eating disorder, grief, and complex relationships with her family and peers. The story begins with Lia waking up to the news of her best friend Cassie's death, which deeply affects her. Lia is haunted by the fact that Cassie called her thirty three times the night before she died, but Lia did not answer her calls. She feels that had she answered the call, Cassie might still be alive. The guilt from this event exacerbates Lia's eating disorder and self-destructive behaviors, including self-harm. As a result, Lia uses her body as a site of punishment and penance. Judith Butler's seminal work, *Bodies That Matter* and Vicky Kirby's essay, 'The Body as the Scene of Writing' discusses how a body is a site of inscription, a site of writing and the body is not something to be relegated to the shadows, rather it is at the forefront of all enactment.

The guilt becomes so overwhelming for Lia that she starts to get hallucinations of Cassie's ghost. As the novel progresses, Lia's relationships with her family and friends get even more strained due to her deteriorating health and emotional state. She faces pressure from her father and stepmother to seek help for her disorder, but she resists their efforts. Lia's journey toward healing is fraught with several challenges as she struggles to reclaim control over her life and body.

There is a very specific parallel that exists in the novel, *Wintergirls* wherein it can be seen that as the protagonist's guilt enhances, her oppression of her own body also increases. It is imperative to note that in the novel, when Lia gets haunted by the ghost of her dead friend, Cassie, the haunting seems to increase as and when her anorexia worsens. Therefore, there is a direct correlation between the guilt and Lia's body. Thus, the body is being used as a site to inscribe the guilt on itself.

Lia's body is also a site of inscription of psychological trauma and she participates in it herself. The guilt prominently manifests itself in the protagonist's body. It is towards the end of the novel, when Lia finds herself at the hospital and decides to take care of her health and not follow the path of self destruction that she takes control of her body. Interestingly, that is the exact moment where the haunting also leaves her. Therefore, the haunting is not just representative of the social control, patriarchal control or the body

image of women, the haunting is also representative of guilt which she has created for herself. Herein, one can see a clear embodied picture of the mind of Lia and the guilt in her body. Thus, Lia's body as a site of inscription is visible to us.

Throughout the story, Lia grapples with societal expectations of beauty and thinness, which contribute to her eating disorder. Her internal monologues in the novel reveal the depth of her self-loathing and how intensely she feels pressurized to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty. Lia's journey toward recovery is marked by moments of self-discovery and reconciliation with her family. Eventually, towards the end after her attempt to commit suicide fails, she slowly begins to take steps toward healing, confronting her grief, and envisioning a healthier future for herself.

Ultimately, *Wintergirls* is a poignant and thought provoking novel that explores the complexities of mental health, body image, and the struggle for self-acceptance. Anderson's portrayal of Lia's journey is both haunting and hopeful, offering insight into the challenges of overcoming trauma and eating disorders.

The central theme in the novel is Lia's body image which acts as a reflection of her low self-worth and negative self-perception. Her obsession with her weight and appearance is highlighted throughout the novel wherein the reader can see how obsessively she keeps track of her calorie intake and how that reveals her internal struggle with self-acceptance and her identity. To quote a few lines which explicitly describe this aspect, "I eat ten raisins (16) and five almonds (35) and a green-bellied pear (121) (= 172). The bites crawl down my throat" (Anderson 10).

Throughout the story, Lia is obsessed with her body image, constantly scrutinizing her physical appearance. Her internal monologues are filled with negative self-talk and comparisons to others which further contribute to a distorted perception of her own body. This negative body image that she has inculcated for herself leads her to adopt harmful behaviors such as extreme calorie restriction, self-harm, and withdrawal from social interactions. She ends up with the Anorexia nervosa (AN) which can be characterized as a self-starvation syndrome. The major sign of the syndrome is emaciation caused by deliberate restriction of food intake. In addition, there is an intense fear of becoming fat or gaining weight, which the sufferer may describe explicitly or may express implicitly as behavior aimed at preventing weight gain.

There is a long philosophical tradition that views the body and mind as distinct entities. Furthermore, the notion that the self has existed within or is equivalent with the mind is at its core. The view of the self as a cohesive whole is provided by embodiment. Since the body is the self in this context rather than the self existing independently of the body, every conflict with the body is also an existential conflict with the pain of being a self. In addition, the body is political, and women's bodies bear the consequences of their oppression in their historical and social contexts.

The body plays a part in eating disorders and despite the fact that this is evident, eating disorders do not arise and flourish in a vacuum. They can be viewed from a number of perspectives and exist within a certain social environment. The work is unquestionably critical of the sociopolitical forces that affect the social construction of the body, and women's bodies in particular, when viewed through a feminist lens.

As time passes, our bodies may feel less "our own" and more like an object to be viewed, evaluated, caressed, used, and owned, depending on the stage of life, the situation, the necessity, and the decision. This makes our human bodies' tension visible. The depth and complexity of human existence, the body, our ties to our own and other people's bodies, and our conceptual knowledge of the "body" are also hinted at.

The construct of Body Image in the novel, *Wintergirls* helps to better understand the body-self relationship through the character of Lia. Body image is a person's thoughts, feelings and perception of the aesthetics or sexual attractiveness of their own body. The theories of body image differ as to what is included in the umbrella term of body image and what is not. Thomas F Cash defined body image as the "multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one's physical appearance". He further expanded the definition of body image to "one's body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors".

It is believed that a person's body image is a product of their own subjective ideas and feelings, however research suggests that a person's perception of their own looks is influenced by the sociopolitical environment in which they live. Some appearances are more valuable than others, and some are even excluded and repressed. The way that people perceive their own bodies and the emotions that follow can be significantly influenced by the signals that are conveyed about desirable bodies. We learn how to assess our look and compare it to other standards depending on our surroundings and what is deemed nice or ideal.

The novel exemplifies the above through several instances. Lia and Cassie make a 'thin pact' which is a classic example of how the popular images of what a desirable body is has impacted these young girls' psyche. Moreover, Judith Butler's idea of how gender is inscribed on the body, how it is something that comes into your performance and how it is never an individual performance but an iterative one exemplifies this aspect. The bombardment of such images has led to these social constructions of what an ideal body or appearance is.

Unfortunately, Lia evaluates her body image according to the dominant sociocultural notion of an ideal body. It is imperative to note that Lia's internalization of cultural norms around thinness and beauty can be seen as a performative enactment of societal expectations of a compliant woman.

Judith Butler has discussed how the mandates of the heterosexual world are executed through bodies which are working as material agents of the entire gender construct. The hegemony is carried forth through this regulatory form which is ascribed to sexes.

Butler said that bodies are shaped and materialized in a manner that they end up executing exactly what the heterosexual norms are. Similarly, the sociocultural context that women live in and in this particular case, a western teenager, Lia, her body becomes a site where the societal, socio-political and cultural forces are at play.

When Lia decides to reclaim her body towards the end when she wakes up in the hospital after a failed suicide attempt, that is the moment where she gives up both the social control as well as the guilt inside her head. Therefore, she gets rid of not only the outside control but also lets go of the turmoil inside. Thus, Lia's body becomes in a way the site of inscribing both social patriarchy as well as her own sense of guilt or her own sense of being. Moreover, when Lia takes the sleeping pills in the end and is found in the hospital, it's essentially a moment where the body sort of reboots itself and that rebooting takes her to the point of giving up that complicity with the patriarchy which she and Cassie had for a long time.

The novel begins with the news of Cassie's death and no information about her trauma or suffering has been given. The only piece of information we have is that she died of Bulimia. The thin pact that both these girls become a part of leads Cassie to completely fall as a victim to the social patriarchy and the idea of the body image. Lia seems to struggle with it for a very long time along with her guilt, however, it is only towards the end of the novel that she manages to reclaim her body. Therefore, both the bodies of Lia and Cassie become a site of struggle as well as a site of reclamation.

Vicky Kirby in her essay 'The Body as the Scene of Writing' discusses how when a man's labour is supposed to be described, it is usually associated with mind and consciousness. Whereas, whenever a woman's labour is supposed to be ascertained or calculated it's her body which seems to be the site of the gradation. The gendering of a woman is associated with embodiment deeply. Also, with women the idea of gender performativity is something that is very closely associated with Corporeality.

Lia follows the performative script of her gender by chasing after unrealistic beauty standards as that is what the society deems makes a woman worthy of acceptance. She tries her best in order to fit into the set mould provided by the patriarchal society by becoming a compliant woman who follows the performative script religiously, for fear of rejection.

Furthermore, it is quite ironic that for someone who is unfamiliar with the socio-political factors which contribute to the development of eating disorders, they may at first interpret that woman as vain or maybe judge her preoccupation with her appearance as a form of moral failure. However, if this is considered through the lens of feminism, it would not be true as the person with the eating disorder is actually the compliant woman. She is being who the culture wants her to be, what the appearance based socio-cultural rules of femininity, demand. It is crucial to understand that eating disorders are a disorder of the society rather than of one individual.

It is the compliant woman who diligently monitors her diet and weight and she does this not out of vanity or empowerment, but rather in subservience to the patriarchal dictates. Lia, the protagonist of *Wintergirls* is a character who is a slave to the condition that she is surviving in. The very idea of being thin and the pact of thinnest girls which Cassie and Lia make is infact something that is dictated by the society and the patriarchal image of women and beauty. Lia becomes complicit in the act of ensuring that her body is enslaved under the patriarchal system. It is a complete form of slavery wherein the slave is participating in self surveillance and self discipline. This disciplined monitoring of her diet is an excellent way to see how Lia is being controlled by the society. Lia is not only participating in her own enslavement, she is also accepting it and at the same time using her body, that is, matter as a means to further that victimization.

Lia's anorexia is her way of writing down her compliance with the social system in the first place, then it is her way of writing down her guilt and finally it is her way of writing down her resistance to the patriarchy as well as to the guilt. Throughout the novel, the body of Lia is a kind of a parallel text where one text is by the author of the book, Anderson and at the same time there is a parallel text where Lia is writing her body. Moreover, in her writing of the body different elements are participating, for instance, the society which she is complicit with, the entire idea of female beauty that she is complicit with, her own guilt which she is burdening herself with whether it is justified or unjustified and finally, her body becomes a site of rebooting the system, that is, placing her in control or in charge. The entire journey of the body of Lia as a site of victimization, as a site of punishment or penance, to the body as a site of resistance is depicted within the novel.

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