

Body as Burden: Representation of Normalized Oppression and Everyday Exclusions of Fatness in Roxane Gay's Memoir *Hunger*

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Abstract

*In recent decades, the discourses on the body have gained rapid momentum in both literary and non-literary spaces. Starting from television shows, commercials, movies, magazines, social media, and even novels reiterate that not all bodies are equal. With the emergence of social media platforms like Instagram, a body has been limited to its visual image and is seen merely as an object. A fit body is now a visually pleasing body and not a functional body. This paper delves into the various challenges faced by an individual who is considered "fat." The theorists of Fat Studies argue that being fat or obese is a socially constructed idea that oppresses people who do not meet the bodily expectations of the socio-culturally propagated body type. This paper aims to study the numerous levels of bias that a fat person faces in society and how they are "othered" in everyday life by doing a close textual reading of the memoir *Hunger* by Roxane Gay.*

Keywords: Fat Studies, Objectification Theory, Weightism, Sexual Assault

Introduction

More than ever, the body and the discourse around the body are gaining rapid momentum in the present times. With technological advancements, social media, and other media platforms, where human beings constantly look at different people's bodies, the understanding of the very word "body" has changed drastically over the years. The constant urge to look better and the continuous comparison of one body to another has led to the question of what body is considered fit to live and what is not. The rising number of people succumbing to eating disorders, people being dissatisfied with their bodies, and their constant struggle to fit into a particular dress to fit into the expected and accepted socio-cultural body type could be seen everywhere, across nations and ages.

Despite intellectual and scientific advancements, where women are giving primary importance to education and finding a profession that best suits their ability, the obsession over a woman's looks and

body and the pressure to look a specific way is more conspicuous now than in any other age. Though women are being educated and are seen working in professions that are not necessarily considered “womanly” or designated for them, they are still valued merely based on their bodies. A woman’s sense of worth is yet mainly restricted to the way that she looks, as “Women are not only associated with and defined by the “inferior” realm of the flesh (while men represent”mind “ or”spirit “)...” (Lelwica 24). Her intellectual abilities and competence are only secondary because a woman’s sense of very being is evaluated based on her physical appearance and body as dictated by the Kyriarchal System. Women are expected to be thin and slender; when their bodies do not meet the accepted and expected cultural demands, they are “othered.” In the essay “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks,” Fredrickson and Roberts state, “Empirical research demonstrates that how a woman’s body appears to others can determine her life experiences. Studies have demonstrated, for instance, that obesity negatively affects women’s, but not men’s, social mobility, with obese women showing lower educational and economic attainments than their parents” (Fredrickson and Roberts 178). Women’s bodies are sites of oppression and domination regardless of whether their bodies meet the expectations of cultural commands or not.

Fat Studies looks into the various ways how people who are considered “obese” go through life, facing various discriminations and humiliations in their everyday lives because their bodies are not what society deems fit to exist in this world. The stigmatization of the word “obese” both in the medical field and in general is contested by the philosophers of Fat Studies. In *The Fat Studies Reader*, the editors Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay delineate fat studies as “an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes and stigma placed on fat and the fat body” (Rothblum and Solovay 2).

This paper consists of four core parts. The first part discusses the author’s paradoxical understanding of her body, where it becomes a medium of defence and a challenge. The second part focuses on the prejudices as well as the humiliations that fat people are forced to go through as they are seen as a threat to society. The third part delves into the everyday reality of fat people and discusses the often neglected and more nuanced experiences of their lives. The fourth part brings out the inadequacy of medical equipment in the hospitals, which are not suitable and proficient enough to accommodate all body types, and it also discusses how even medical professionals discriminate against fat patients. The theoretical frameworks of Fat Studies and Body Studies are applied in this study.

Researches have been done on the fat representation in the popular media and Contemporary Fiction, where the researchers have interrogated whether the media, as well as the writers, have faithfully depicted the mistreatment and hurdles faced by fat people or whether they have been misrepresented and stereotyped. Such works pave the way for young readers to comprehend that fat people are also a part of society and how the socio-cultural prejudices they face should be reflected on and eradicated. They also look into how some of these texts showcase protagonists who are fat and utterly comfortable about their weight and body, where the central issue for them is not being fat. Though the fiction that deals with fat representation underlines the numerous prejudices one faces about being fat, the autobiographical accounts add more nuance to this understanding. This paper will probe into the memoir *Hunger* by Roxane Gay to investigate how, in myriad little ways, a fat body faces humiliations which in turn oppresses them in their everyday life and how easily they are overlooked. It also demonstrates how in order to overcome such discrimination, one has to realize that the very structure of society needs to be modified to accommodate bodies of every size so that they can live equally.

In Roxane Gay’s memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017), the struggle one faces being “fat” is portrayed honestly and bluntly, with a burning rage. The author has always been tall and

weighed more; therefore, when she gained weight, her body became an object to be scrutinized as she took more space. The memoir talks about how an “unruly” body, a body that is not disciplined according to cultural expectations, goes through either a series of humiliations or complete ignorance according to the whims of the world. The liberty that people take in commenting about their bodies, giving unsolicited advice, calling names, and demeaning them is discussed. Fat people’s experiences of being seen as different and alien, not being able to live and move around in public spaces rightfully, the complete indifference shown against them and the way their weight is seen as a “problem” and promoting the idea that being thin or becoming thin will ultimately lead to happiness are delineated in the book.

The Body as Cage and Fortress

The memoir begins with Gay sitting in a clinic where she is going through an orientation program for gastric bypass surgery. The doctors play a video detailing the procedure of the surgery, describing the various precautions they need to take and how their bodies will be altered forever after the process. Gay also points out the exorbitant money they were required to pay for the surgery. At the onset of the memoir, she mentions that she is 577 pounds, with a height measuring six feet and three inches and she points that at one point that was the truth of her body and life. She goes on to narrate the story of her life, of her body, her sexual assault and how it scarred and mapped the rest of her life.

From the beginning of her memoir, Gay reiterates that her life and experiences living in this world are drastically different from that of other people who are commonly considered “fat”, she describes, that the journey of her body is starkly different from other bodies that are considered fat because she was “three or four hundred pounds overweight.” The prejudices one goes through when they are 100 or 150 pounds overweight are distinct from the people who are over 200 pounds from their “required” weight. She goes on to discuss how people are quick enough to judge and make assumptions about a person who does not meet their standard of ideal body, they assume that they know the “why” of their bodies, and they take it upon themselves to often school them regarding it, without making an attempt to understand their situation from an unprejudiced stand. She mentions how people like her are looked at with accusations for letting their bodies become “unruly.” The word “unruly” could be seen repeatedly used by the author to insist on how society has pressurised and tried to discipline their bodies, “While working on her book, *The Forbidden Body: Why Being Fat Is Not a Sin*, Shelley Bovey “found fat people described as transgressors, sinners, socially deviant, sick, irresponsible, [and] weak-willed” (as cited in Lelwica 25). Fat people are made to live in a state of persistent guilt and embarrassment as, culturally and religiously, there exists a preconceived notion that fat is either having no sense of control, succumbing to physical pleasures or being a rebel. Normalcy and being fat never seem to go hand in hand. When Gay mentions that other people know the “why” of her body, she precisely means that people believe she is solely responsible for letting her body become something that defies their beliefs of how a person should look. People like her are labelled “irresponsible” for letting their bodies go “out of control”, showing complete ignorance and utterly disregarding their life experiences.

Roxane Gay, a Haitian-American woman, was raped by her boyfriend and his friends when she was twelve years old. Food became her coping mechanism, and her understanding of the body completely changed after her sexual assault. Her slender body was powerless; it could not fight against her perpetrators. Therefore, she made her body her “fortress”. She describes how she it was a necessity for her to “feel like a fortress” because she wanted to feel safe. The troubled relationship with food for Gay started after her body was violated. She states that she began eating to “change” her body. In the process of making her body the “fortress” she ended up with what she calls a “cage of flesh”, because that is how she was perceived in the society.

The existing and inherent idea that a fat body is repulsive is something that can be witnessed everywhere in today's world. The commercialisation of a thin body and propagation of it in movies, magazines, television media, and social media instils in people's minds that to be otherwise is unacceptable. Gaining weight just to escape from another assault proves how women's bodies are nothing more than mere objects that are susceptible to being taken control of. In actuality, a body that is defined as "obese" or "morbidly obese," as Gay claims how the medical professionals refer to her body, might or might not escape from sexual assaults. Still, they certainly do not go invisible or unnoticed. These bodies are questioned for being what they are; they are constantly made to live a life full of shame and guilt, along with constant fear of judgment and humiliation.

The word "shame" has been repeated numerous times in the text. The weight of the word does not go unnoticed by the readers, Gay states:

And I remembered the result of being weighed and measured and judged, the unfathomable number: 577 pounds. I thought I had known shame in my life, but that night, I truly knew shame. I did not know if I would ever find my way past that shame and toward a place where I could face my body, accept my body, change my body. (Gay 8)

Ordinarily, one is supposed to feel a sense of shame while doing something wrong and realizing that it is bad, but feeling shameful for merely existing in the world is something that numerous people are made to go through for various reasons such as race, poverty, unemployment, and unquestionably, being overweight. Shame does affect the quality of life; it hinders everyday activities, often restricting a person from showing their potential. In the essay "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks", while discussing the sense of shame, Fredrickson and Roberts state "Shame generates an intense desire to hide, to escape the painful gaze of others, or to disappear, alongside feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness" (qtd. in Fredrickson and Roberts 183).

While recounting one of the incidents that Gay faced in the later part of her life, she discusses how shame has been a difficult thing in her life. People have tried to bully her and shame her for being fat, they think that they have the right to insult them by using inappropriate words because her body did not cater to their "gaze." It is often observed that people who are overweight usually feel a sense of shame in every facet of their everyday life, but in reality, they are forced to feel ashamed of themselves. This eventually leads them to monitor their bodies closely and "discipline" them to conform to societal expectations. They often keep to themselves to escape the shame, detaching themselves physically and emotionally from the external world, trying to be "invisible" and break free from external monitoring. The feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky draws on Foucault's idea of discipline and asserts that the "disciplinary practices" that men and women face are distinct from one another, "Women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is particularly feminine" (Bartky 27).

The women who fail to discipline their bodies are considered not feminine or womanly enough. Gay, in her memoir, claims that she built her body to keep the predatory men out of her way. She did not want to "cater" to the needs and desires of the "male gaze", and in hoping to do so, she started "hiding" her body in dark-coloured denim clothes, hiding her curves, hiding her female identity, and ultimately hiding her entire sense of being. But people who are considered "fat" never really go invisible. They are called out for their "reckless" and "riotous" body because, generally, a fat body is viewed as a threat to society in both political and apolitical senses:

According to the government statistics, the obesity epidemic costs between \$147 and \$210 billion a year, though there is little clear information as to how researchers arrive at that overwhelming number. What exactly are the costs associated with obesity? The methodology

is irrelevant. What matters is that fat is expensive and therefore, a grave problem. Fat people drain on resources, what with needing health care and medication for their all too human bodies. Many people act like fat people are reaching directly into their wallets, the fat of other people a burden on their personal bottom line. (Gay 114)

In the essay, “Juxtaposing contested bodies: What can be learned from the politics of weightism and of women’s exclusion”, it is discussed that in the United States, fat people affect the economy of the country negatively, “As Sharon Stanley and Kathryn Hicks have shown, fat subjects allegedly “drain the GDP, burden the state with mounting debt, and unfairly increase the tax burden on more responsible citizens” (qtd. in Tirosch 209). The apolitical lens foregrounds the psychologically distorted understanding and image of “fat” in the society. Gay discusses how there is a never ceasing anxiety in the minds of the people that fat is a disease, and being in close quarters with a fat person would make them prone to fatness. Going through life as a “fat” or an “obese” person is compared to living with disability by Gay:

I don’t know if fat is a disability, but my size certainly compromises my ability to be in certain spaces. I cannot climb too many stairs, so I am always thinking about access to space. Is there an elevator? Are there stairs to the stage? How many? Is there a handrail? That I have to ask myself these questions shows me a fraction of the questions people with disabilities must ask to be out in the world. (Gay 273)

Everyday Life as Trial

The memoir goes into the details of how difficult it is to navigate public spaces when one is overweight, as they are not accommodating to all sizes when they actually should be. Fat people never go unnoticed, but their bodies are never considered when it comes to public spaces where signs of consideration and inclusivity to accommodate people of all sizes can rarely be seen. Every individual has a right to exist in this society unapologetically, but people who are overweight go through a series of examinations; they are judged for their choices of food while eating in public, and their shopping carts are evaluated by the people standing next to them in line. They are offered advice to discipline their body regardless of where they are. Gay states that even when America is deemed to be a nation with the most obese people, there are very few options available for them, starting from places to shop for dresses to travelling comfortably in an aeroplane.

Gay talks about how a simple activity such as sitting in a chair can cause anxiety for people who are considered fat, be it in a classroom setting or any other public place. Even while going to a restaurant, she googles the images of that place to see what types of chairs are available there, whether they will be sturdy or not; these types of questions and apprehension might be unfamiliar to half of the populace, but to the other half, live with it every single day of their lives. In their essay “Sitting Pretty: Fat Bodies, Classroom Desks, and Academic Excess”, Hetrick and Attig draw on the idea of Bartky, who claims that classroom desks are part of the “disciplinary practices” and they describe how “desks can threaten fat students’ very identities as students; if their bodies cannot fit into structures that signify their intellectually receptive status, then they are, symbolically at least, unable to learn” (Rothblum and Solovay 199). It is plain enough to understand that the fat people’s sense of worth, their intellect and even their identities are dwindled to their physical appearance. The injustice lies in the fact that they are evaluated and recognised solely based on their body and are put to shame also because of their body.

Gay details the experiences of normalised fat oppression she has faced in her day-to-day life. For instance, at certain events, she was invited to provide herself with chairs that were too small for her. She had to sit through the entire event with a constant fear of breaking the chair in her mind. The world is too hesitant to be inclusive and just towards such people, though “inclusivity”

is a term propagated everywhere today. She elaborates on how she refrains from going to theatres and musicals even when she enjoys watching them just because the chairs are too uncomfortable. She also, in detail, discusses the subtle yet cruel discrimination she faces while travelling in an aeroplane, where people generally hesitate to sit beside her. Once, a man was anxious because her seat was near the exit row, and he felt it might somehow lead to an accident. Therefore, when she started purchasing two tickets, while travelling by plane, the people who were earlier hesitant to sit beside her, scared of their bodies touching as if fatness is a transmissible disease, started keeping their bags in that empty chair, conveniently using it to their advantage.

Prejudices in the Medical Environment

Rothblum and Solovay in *The Fat Studies Reader* state, “Fat people are at risk in the medical setting itself. Imaging equipment like MRIs or CT scans often have weight limits. Finding machines that accommodate higher weights is left to patients” (Rothblum and Solovay, foreword). Hospitals and medical institutions are generally supposed to be better equipped to pertain to the needs of individuals. While narrating her experiences of going to the doctor for emergency care for a sore throat, the doctor diagnosed her first for “morbid obesity” and later for the throat. Doctors and people in general assume that fat people do not know that they are “obese” or “morbidly obese”; they make it a point to insist that whenever they can. Gay has pointed out multiple times in the memoir about how her body was healthy, even if it was fat. The only trouble she faced was excessive sweating and shortness of breath when she walked for a long time. There was nothing “morbidly” affecting or harming her body because of her weight. Yet, the gastric bypass surgery that the doctors suggest to such patients can have numerous complications during and after the surgery, and sometimes, it can also lead to death. The author highlights the general misconception that all fat people are unhealthy. The inadequacy of medical instruments is also discussed in the memoir, drawing on issues like how the weight scales do not generally weigh patients who weigh over 350 pounds and how it is difficult for many people to climb onto the examination table.

The memoir begins with Gay considering going through a gastric bypass surgery to reduce her body weight. The actual procedure would include removing the vital organs from the body, and her stomach would be reduced to the “size of a thumb” so that her appetite would come down. Medical professionals are generally considered to prioritise health and well-being, but today, even the definitions of “health” and “well-being” equate to thinness. There is a general misconception that people who are overweight are more prone to diseases and are at a greater risk of losing their lives when, in reality, that is far from the truth. Excess weight does not immediately mean poor health. In *The Fat Studies Reader*, Marilyn Wann states, “In comparison, Katherine Flegal, PhD, a researcher for the National Centre for Health Statistics at the Centers for Disease Control, published a methodologically unassailable study of actual deaths in various weight categories and found a much lower figure—111,900 more deaths—among the alleged “obese” than in the “normal weight” category” (qtd. in Rothblum and Solovay, Foreword). Being thin is a currency; to be otherwise is punishable.

The reasons for a person being overweight are varied; it could be genetics, it might or might not be related to a health condition, and sometimes it could be a consequence of physical, mental or emotional trauma, as in Gay’s case. The real problem is not the weight; the doctors’ primary concern is the body weight, not its actual cause. The gastric bypass surgery involves a lot of risks, with the possibility of even the patient losing their life during the process. Still, medical professionals dismiss that because their career will only be profitable when “fat is a disease”. Fat people are asked to give away their wealth and health to become thin; being thin means happiness and success. As Gay states, even with all the sacrifice, their bodies will only be “next to normal”, never normal enough.

Conclusion

In a world where thinness is admired and seen as a currency, to be anything otherwise is looked at with contempt. Women have always been prey to the various demands of their bodily expectations, which have been diverse throughout the ages and geographical areas. Roxane Gay turned to food for comfort, as she could not fathom what happened to her. Even when she had a loving and supportive family, she could not disclose to them the sexual assault she went through. Food for her was safety and the only thing within her grasp. There was constant guilt in her mind; she felt she was responsible for her rape; for not being a “good Catholic girl”, and therefore paying the price for it. Even after the assault, she still went back to her boyfriend because she did not know what to do with herself; she felt empty and hollowed out from the inside, and later in life, she could not forgive herself for returning to the person who destroyed her body and will. The profundity of the violation and its realization took a long time to sink in. Throughout her life, she had unhealthy relationships, relationships where she was treated like an object, disrespected and humiliated since she believed she did not deserve anything better.

Fat people are judged very quickly; they are not considered “fit” to live in the world rightfully. However, as discussed earlier, there might be numerous reasons for an individual to be overweight and not have the expected BMI (which is unreliable and has been questioned multiple times). But there could also be no reason other than the person just being fat. Fat is not a disease, and fat people do not necessarily have something wrong about them or need not have a traumatic past. When an individual is labelled as “fat” and is judged for their weight, a grave injustice is being done to them; as Gay states in her memoir “No matter what I accomplish, I will be fat, first and foremost”. Fatness becomes the identity, engulfing their personhood. In the Foreword to the text, *The Fat Studies Reader*, Marilyn Wann states that “American culture is engaged in a pervasive witch hunt targeting fatness and fat people [a project that is rapidly being exported worldwide]”. Memoirs like Roxane Gay’s *Hunger*, pave the way for the public to understand with empathy and consideration the oppressive lives lived by the fat people. Texts like these could be groundbreakingly impactful if they are widely read and discussed in academia and popular media, which might lead to the normalization of fatness, and people of all body types will be able to live rightfully and not apologetically.

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