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The Dialectic of Weightism and Docile Body in Roxane Gay's *Hunger*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Roxane Gay's memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of the "docile body," highlighting how societal norms regulate and control women's bodies. Gay's narrative explores the physical, emotional, and psychological impacts of obesity and trauma, focusing on how fat bodies, especially those of women, are policed and marginalized. The analysis delves into Gay's personal experiences of body surveillance, internalized fat phobia, and the intersection of race and weightism. Gay's memoir critiques societal beauty standards, body shaming, and fat stigma, revealing how bodies become objects of scrutiny and control. Ultimately, this paper argues that Gay's resistance to societal norms through her storytelling reclaims her agency, challenging the notion of the docile body and advocating for body positivity and inclusivity. Through an analysis of both personal and societal dynamics, the paper illustrates the power of narrative in resisting body oppression and promoting diverse body representations.

Keywords: body surveillance, docile body, fatphobia, Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, weightism

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الجدلية بين التمييز ضد الوزن والجسد الطيع في رواية الجوع لروكسان غاي

فاطمة ظافر مدحي

كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة تكريت

و

أ.د. لمياء أحمد رشيد

كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة تكريت

المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث مذكرات روكسان غاي "الجوع: مذكرات (جسدي)" من خلال مفهوم "الجسد الطيع" الذي طرحه ميشيل فوكو، مسلطة الضوء على كيفية تنظيم المعايير الاجتماعية والسيطرة على أجساد النساء. تستكشف رواية غاي التأثيرات الجسدية والعاطفية والنفسية للسمنة والصدمات، مركزة على كيفية مراقبة وتهميش الأجساد السمينية، وخاصة أجساد النساء. يتعمق التحليل في تجارب غاي الشخصية فيما يتعلق بمراقبة الجسد، ورهاب السمنة الداخلي، وتداخل العرق مع التمييز ضد الوزن. تنتقد مذكرات غاي معايير الجمال الاجتماعية، والإذلال بسبب الجسد، ووصمة السمنة، كاشفة كيف تصبح الأجساد موضوعاً للتدقيق والسيطرة. وفي نهاية المطاف، تجادل هذه الورقة بأن مقاومة غاي للمعايير الاجتماعية من خلال سردها لقصتها يعيد لها وكالتها، متحدياً مفهوم الجسد الطيع ومدافعة عن إيجابية الجسد والشمولية. من خلال تحليل الديناميات الشخصية والاجتماعية، توضح الورقة قوة السرد في مقاومة قمع الجسد وتعزيز تمثيلات متنوعة للأجساد.

الكلمات الدالة: مفهوم الجسد الطيع، التمييز ضد الوزن، مراقبة الجسد، روكسان غاي، رهاب السمنة.

1. INTRODUCTION: OBESITY IN RELATION TO MICHEL FOUCAULT'S DOCILE BODY

Obesity has emerged as one of the most pressing public health challenges of the 21st century. In an era where convenience and sedentary lifestyles have become the norm, the prevalence of obesity has reached alarming proportions, affecting individuals of all ages and demographic groups. This epidemic does not only pose significant health risks but also it exerts a substantial economic burden on healthcare systems worldwide. As researchers and healthcare professionals grapple with the multifaceted nature of obesity, it is imperative to delve into the causes, consequences, and potential solutions for this complex issue.

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher and social theorist, best known for his work on the relationship between power, knowledge, and social institutions. In his influential book *Discipline*

and Punish (1977), Foucault explores how society's systems of punishment have evolved, particularly in terms of controlling and disciplining bodies. Foucault introduces the concept of the "docile body"—a body that is manipulated, trained, and shaped by social norms and institutions into compliance and productivity. He highlights the shift from physical punishment to more subtle mechanisms of power, focusing on surveillance and control as ways to instill discipline. Foucault's broader work examines how power operates not just through laws or force, but by shaping individuals' actions and perceptions, making them complicit in their own regulation.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents the concept of the docile body, emphasizing that the body is molded by enforced, systematized practices. According to Foucault, the docile body is an object that is "manipulated, shaped, and trained" to meet the demands of a system (Foucault, 1977). It is through this control that the body becomes a site of power relations, in which social systems dominate individuals. Docility sets in when constant surveillance removes the capacity to resist, turning individuals into submissive forms. The fear of punishment leads others to conform to the norms to avoid harsh consequences.

Body theory, as a sociological framework, addresses how the human body is shaped by cultural and societal forces. In the *Disability Theory* (2011), Tobin Siebers argues that biopower, a key concept for Foucault, determines how individuals experience their bodies. Siebers contends that the body does not exist independently but is created by social and ideological forces. This resonates with Foucault's analysis of power and its effect on individuals. The body is not merely a physical entity but a vessel that can be controlled, shaped, and disciplined by external forces. Foucault traces the shift in punishment from ritualistic physical pain to more administrative methods of control. The modern system of punishment emphasizes discipline, which is enforced through surveillance and control rather than brute force. In this sense, the body becomes a "docile body," subject to disciplinary measures that regulate its actions and movements. For Foucault, discipline is not just about control but about creating bodies that comply with societal expectations through subtle mechanisms of power. As he notes, society shifted from a "dream of a perfect society" to one where individuals are subjected to "permanent coercions" and automatic docility.

The example of the soldier's body exemplifies Foucault's ideas on docility. The soldier's body is marked not only by physical attributes such as strength but also by its adherence to discipline. Soldiers are trained to perform certain movements automatically, embodying the power that is imposed on them. These automatic habits reflect how power is exercised over the body at the level of its physical actions, shaping it to fit specific roles within society. Foucault emphasizes that such discipline is not limited to the military but pervades other institutions, including schools and hospitals.

Discipline, in Foucault's view, operates as a form of power that is exerted directly on the body. It works by distributing and locating individuals within a system, determining how they are classified and treated. The body's movements, duration, and posture are all regulated by surveillance

and power relations. Foucault provides the example of students, whose bodies are positioned according to strict rules dictated by the teacher. This "instrumental coding of the body" exemplifies how power operates at the most detailed level, manipulating the body's actions and gestures to create disciplined individuals. Foucault's analysis of discipline culminates in his discussion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a prison design in which guards could observe prisoners from a central tower. As Mustafa Rodhan Abdullah claimed in his published paper *An Examination of Heba Al-Dubbagh's Just Five Minutes: Nine Years in the Prisons of Syria Through The Scope of Foucault's Theory of Power Relations* that the Panopticon is a concept originated by Jeremy Bentham in the last years of the 18th century, is an architectural and social arrangement that has generated significant scholarly attention and debate, notably in the research conducted by Michel Foucault (Abdullah, 2024). The Panopticon illustrates how visibility can be used to control individuals. Prisoners, not knowing whether they are being watched, adjust their behavior accordingly. This constant surveillance ensures the automatic functioning of power, turning individuals into self-regulating subjects. The Panopticon, for Foucault, represents a model of power that operates not just in prisons but in various other institutions, such as hospitals, schools, and factories.

Disciplinary power, unlike sovereign power, does not rely on overt domination but operates through the subtle interactions between individuals. It is not a top-down exercise of power but a set of relations that permeates the social body. In schools, hospitals, and prisons, disciplinary power regulates individuals by creating specific systems of knowledge, education, and punishment. This type of power is more insidious because it does not manifest as brute force but operates through routine practices that individuals come to accept as normal.

Foucault breaks down disciplinary power into four components: distribution, control of activity, organization of geneses, and composition of forces. The art of distribution ensures that space is efficiently organized to maximize productivity. Control of activity refers to the regulation of movements and timing, ensuring that individuals adhere to a strict schedule. The organization of geneses ensures that individuals progress through training or education in a systematic way. Finally, the composition of forces refers to the coordination of individuals within a system to achieve maximum efficiency.

2. RECLAIMING THE VOICE OF AN OBJECTIFIED BODY IN *HUNGER*

Society's stigma of weightism has led to the fact that words like "fat" and "obese" may evoke within many women a real storm of tangible emotions. However, Roxane Gay (1974), a black novelist, essayist, and columnist for The New York Times, presents ambivalent perspectives about fat and thin body in her most famous memoir *Hunger (2017)*. In this confessional work, as illustrated by Gay herself, she recounts the story of her body through

overwhelming experiences. She depicts the physical, verbal and spiritual violence, abuse and restraints that her body is subjected to in public as well as private spheres and how her body emerges, formed and interpreted in relation to sociocultural and contextual dynamics of docile body. *Hunger*, in more direct and simple words, is a story of a body that is shaped by life events, traumas, diet and activity practices. Quoting Gay:

I am tracing the story of my body from when I was a carefree young girl who could trust her body and who felt safe in her body, to the moment when that safety was destroyed, to the aftermath that continues even as I try to undo so much of what was done to me. (Hunger, 2017, p. 23)

Roxane Gay is a black contemporary American academic and writer who has numerous fictional and nonfictional published works. Her dynamic talent as a writer lies in her thought-provoking, raw, unapologetic yet compassionate storytelling style. Aiming at maintaining a sense of a positive relationship with her own body and others' bodies, she criticizes fat stigma and the assault on overweight people. Gay's works, including *Bad Feminist: Essays* (2014), *Difficult Women* (2017), and *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017), focus on the body as the main subject for analyzing modern social life. Gay is particularly intrigued by the body that resists adhering to the identity of being a representation of unruly bodies' fear. She skillfully acquaints the reader with the unpredictable nature of the body by highlighting the long-term imprints of personal relationships. Gay's writing explores a range of issues including emotional deprivation, loneliness, social isolation, trauma, addiction, desire, abuse, psychological and social defense mechanisms, and love. Throughout her work, the body is a central theme, as it experiences various forms of intimacy. One becomes acquainted with the ever-present body, which is never forgotten: "I am never allowed to forget the realities of my body, how my body offends the sensibilities of others, how my body dares to take up too much space" (Hunger, 2017, p. 165). As far as "unruly body" encompasses several aspects of embodiment, including race, gender, and sexuality, and how they are regulated in different ways of existence, Gay is best known for her writing on empowering minorities—especially women—by breaking down what she describes as the "cult of femininity." What she calls for and fights against make her one of the most important public intellectuals in analyzing and theorizing the current state of overweightness in its intersections with other prominent social forces.

Gay's background in Nebraska, her extensive experience living in rural Midwest areas, and her education and teaching positions at various Midwest educational institutions, including Michigan Technological University, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and Eastern Illinois University, as well as her current role as an Associate Professor of English at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, make her highly qualified to write about the region. Toward the end of *Hunger*, for example, Gay questions her belonging to Midwest, "I say that the Midwest is home

even if this home does not always embrace me, and that the Midwest is a vibrant, necessary place. I say I can be a writer anywhere, and as an academic, I go where the work takes me. Or, I said these things. Now, I am simply weary". (Hunger, 2017, p. 296)

Gay started writing essays during her teenage years, and her works reflect a profound impact of a traumatic experience she endured as a young girl: "I was 12 when I was raped by Christopher and several of his friends in an abandoned cabin in the woods where no one but those boys could hear me scream." Her body, after this traumatic experience, became a site of conflicting emotions, as she held it responsible for what she endured yet also felt a need to protect it. She concluded that the most effective defense and survival strategy would involve substituting her attractive body with a fat one:

I began eating to change my body. I was willful in this. Some boys had destroyed me, and I barely survived it. I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away. Of all the things I wish I knew then that I know now, I wish I had known I could talk to my parents and get help, and turn to something other than food.

Acting out her trauma was manifested in the way she exposed her body to the collective distaste for fat bodies. This collective tendency is embodied through various kinds of oppression such as horn effect and lookism, types of cognitive bias that happen when one makes a sarcastic judgment about someone on the basis of certain negative trait. Horn effect and lookism are expected to trigger related behavioral actions like self-objectification and body surveillance. These two feature the extent to which individuals spend much time in monitoring their physical appearance to ensure complains with social beauty standards and cultural body. (McKinley & Hyde, 1996)

How a woman's fat body is encoded by body surveillance system has a significant impact on how this fat woman will be treated in certain situations. In relation to this context, one may recognize that Gay's oeuvre writes back fat politics and "traces the political consequences of an ideology that equates thinness with virtue and fat with vice. Indeed, this ideology drives both the science and culture of our national obsession with weight and weight control." (Campos, 2004) As a representative of fat people in general and fat black women in particular, Gay reacted against the oppressive power embedded in beauty social standards surrounding her fat body; she argues against fat-shaming and raises her voice aiming at reducing fat negativity:

Today, I am a fat woman. I don't think I am ugly. I don't hate myself in the way society would have me hate myself, but I hate how the world all too often responds to this body. It would be easy to pretend I am just fine with my body as it is. I'm a feminist and I

know that it is important to resist unreasonable standards for how my body should look. (Hunger, 2017, p. 24)

Gay's acceptance of her body is an attempt to erase the questions many women ask themselves: "Will I be taken seriously at work if I look 'too feminine'?" "Will I be listened to at all if I look 'too plain'?" "Am I 'bad' if I gain weight? 'Good' only if I lose every ounce?" (Wolf, 2002, 15). While Gay identifies herself as a feminist, she declares in her collection of essays, *Bad Feminist* (2014), that she strongly embraces the label of bad feminist because she has "certain . . . interests and personality traits and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, but I am still a feminist. I cannot tell you how freeing it has been to accept this about myself" (7). Feminism is based on an existential demand that ensures one's visibility. This meets the feminist aspects Gay finds in herself. She does not want to be a knowledgeable and perfect Feminist (with capital letter F) figure and thus placed in a "feminist Pedestal;" instead, she wants to be a feminist (small letter f) whose writings are marked by intellectual hegemony that would support the choices of women even if they would not make certain choices for themselves. She advocates that women engage with the contradictions that inevitably arise as part of the experience of everyday life, recognizing that no one has all the answers and realizing that engaging with the messiness will ultimately broaden and strengthen feminism. Gay, furthermore, wants to be an intersectional to consider all the other factors that influence women's identity and how they move through the world. In her "Theses on the Feminist Novel" (2014), Gay reflects on the aim of the feminist novel with reference to her novel *An Untamed State* :

A feminist novel does not shy away from that which makes its protagonists or its readers uncomfortable. It can often be about what has been taken away from us—about the ways women often feel a sense of loss. A feminist novel is not afraid to make the reader hurt. I have written a novel [*An Untamed State*] that many have suggested is a feminist novel though that was not necessarily my intention. I wanted to tell a compelling story as fiercely as I could. I wanted to tell a story about how all too often, women pay the price for the decisions of men. My intention was to write a story about trauma and what it takes to recover from trauma and how a full recovery is often a futile hope. (9-10)

As a woman Gay is highly preoccupied with her body. Bodily obsession, as Gay identifies it in "Reaching for Catharsis: Getting Fat Right (or Wrong) and Diana Spechler's *Skinny*," is a human condition one cannot escape. Because of its relatedness to humanity, it is not confined to thin or fat people; these two share the desire to dominate parts, if not all, of it. Freda L. Fair in her "Unruly Intimacies: The Body and the Midwest in the Works of Roxane Gay" (2018) illustrates:

Drawing topically on popular feminist critiques of beauty norms, Gay examines the cultural fixation on the appearance of the body, weight in particular, as a regulatory regime mobilized through gender as an institution of social power. Gay discusses femininity, weight loss, and binge eating as they intersect in *Skinny: A Novel* by Diana Spechler. Referencing the book's offering that: "self-absorption is different from self-love" (2014, 111), Gay delineates the unruly body in the context of simultaneous privilege and illness as one that is self-centering as much as self-effacing. (p. 120)

Before being raped, Gay perceives her body as "nothing" but "just meat and bones." After rape, by contrast, her fat body motivates her feminist orientations in unexpected ways. It expanded her empathy for and acceptance of diverse body types. It offered her the power of presence and forced her to be more mindful of how people with fat bodies must move through the world. It is not only her body that offered her power, there are also reading and writing. She writes (2014) in her *Bad Feminist*: "Reading and writing have always pulled me out of the darkest experiences in my life. Stories have given me a place in which to lose myself. They have allowed me to remember. They have allowed me to forget. They have allowed me to imagine different endings and better possible worlds." (p. 115)

Interestingly enough, Gay's focus on subjects related to the body, such as sexual abuse and weight reduction, prompts a reconsideration of the feminist differentiation between the individual experiencing something and the thing being experienced. While the subject-object dichotomy remains a useful tool for challenging the objectification of women in media and society as a whole, Gay's recognition of the complexities within identity complicates the traditional notions of subject and object. This sheds light on situations where self-negation can lead to productive outcomes. In other simple words, Gay reflects on writing about fat experiences and illustrates the difference between writing about such experience by a fat woman writer and a thin one. She underscores in her essays collection, namely *Bad Feminist* (2014), that she would seriously read books about fat experiences if they were written by a fat writer, "someone corpulent, wallowing in rolls of flesh, someone who would truly *know* what being fat is like, the overwhelming omnipresence of it, and be able to write that experience authentically" (p. 99). Gay believes that in order to really comprehend the authenticity and trustworthiness of tales about fatness, it is important to go into the writer's own history and trace the ancestry of obesity. Failing to do so would leave the reader mystified and unable to fully grasp the credibility of the story. A reader's response, whether sympathetic or empathic, needs an explanation for the factors contributing to a fat woman writer's loss of control over her body. This explanation should include if she comes from a family with a predisposition to obesity, whether she has any specific medical conditions that affect her relationship with food, or whether her struggle with food is just due to a lack of willpower.

As Lamiaa Ahmed claimed in her published research "*The Portrayal of Human Chaotic Behaviors as Exemplified in Chuck Palahniuk's Choke*" on how chaotic individuals, particularly the protagonist Victor Mancini, navigate their unpredictable and disordered lives as a response to past

traumas and societal norms. (Ahmed ,2024) Examining the reason that motivates Gay to deconstruct and write back the collective discourse of fat bodies, fat shame, and fat negativity may lead one to think about her traumatic experience which produces a fat woman writer whose body, on the first level, and writings, on the second level, provide with "an opportunity for soul searching and truth-telling." Her engagement in writing , in very simple words, is " a step towards healing" her wounds. Therefore, writing about the theme of fatness, though tragic in all its details, relates to her mind more than to her body. This may lead one to think about people, including herself, whom Gay writes about, one may question whether they are happy or not and what is happiness according to them. Gay explains, "sometimes, and especially as a writer, I feel like I have no idea what happiness is, what it looks like, what it feels like, how to show it on the page. I have no problem with darkness, sorrow, pain, or unhappiness. I have no intention of straying from these themes in my writing." (2014, p. 109)

Gay's insistence on writing about tragic themes springs from the traumatic memories of "gang-rape" which are difficult to survive neither physically nor emotionally. She believes that she cannot delude herself that rape after effect can be easily washed away as it is on mass media, TV and in movies where the victimized is painstakingly traced. Therefore, she emphasizes her responsibility as a writer to criticize and illuminate the realities of rape culture and sexual violence without ignoring the material realities of rape, its impact and its meaning. This requires a careful use of language that would, Gay underscores, enable the reader , on the one hand, to leave his body behind and enter imaginatively into the location of violence and "restore the actual violence to these crimes and make it impossible for men to be excused for committing atrocities" (2014, p. 116) on the other hand.

Talking about Roxane Gay cannot easily reach its limit because her writing blends the personal and political, revealing details of her own experience – as a black woman, as a writer and professor, as a sexual assault survivor – in ways that demonstrate the complexity of the larger systems in which all humanity operates.

The current paper argues that Gay's *Hunger* examines individual and social treatments of fat female body in association with food and body surveillance—a matter that leads Gay to articulate the issue of having more self-conscious when things are related to being the center of public gaze. Though Gay advocates body positivity, she, on the other hand, underscores that no one can escape the lashes of the demanding dominant agenda of beauty standards. This thematic concern is represented by through certain fictional elements that reflect the novelist's experience and its overwhelming nature.

This paper presents an informative, descriptive, and analytical plethora of different aspects that place *Hunger* in its narrative, cultural, and theoretical background. These aspects, categorized under umbrella of the cultural significance of fat female body discourse, entail body positivity, beauty myth, the psychology of eating, empowering fat body and diet culture. This paper, furthermore, introduces Roxane Gay as a fat woman, feminist, and novelist whose experience of society's

misconception of obese people makes her practice the impact of being a double-outcast: first, as a victim of rape and secondly as an excessively fat woman. By the end of this paper, it becomes apparent that Gay's obesity impact not only her physical appearance; but also her mental well-being.

3. RECLAIMING THE VOICE OF AN OBJECTIFIED BODY IN *HUNGER*

Gay's *Huger* comes across different issues that appeal to many women and even men around the world. *Huger* is not only a recount of a story of one woman but rather of all women who went through the abuse of rape and discrimination for their body shape. In cultural hierarchy, overweight bodies are often seen as the result of their own lack of willpower, stubbornness, without moral consciousness, and neglecting their responsibility to manage their weight. As emphasized by Biber (1997), "Slenderness represents restraint, moderation, and self-control—the virtues of our Puritan heritage. But our culture considers obesity "bad" and ugly. Fat represents moral failure, the inability to delay gratification, poor impulse control, greed, and self-indulgence" (4). If we want to examine the micro essence of the text, we must come across its macro one and analyze the title itself first. The memoir is entitled *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* in for a specific reason—as to highlight the writer's hunger for reconciliation, reconciliation with the traumatic past that is marked by the "Something terrible [that] happened" (Gay, 2017, p. 33). She longs to let go of the past and move on in a way or another. Yet, Gay underscores that she is haunted by it and the past will never be past:

So many years past being raped, I tell myself what happened is "in the past." This is only partly true. In too many ways, the past is still with me. The past is written on my body. I carry it every single day. The past sometimes feels like it might kill me. It is a very heavy burden. (Gay, 2017, p. 34)

Reflecting on the title, the writer moves further to recount the traumatic experience that she encountered as a result of a sexual violence at a young age. She was a victim of a gang-rape at the age of twelve by a boy she liked, that she named in her memoir Christopher and his friend. As a matter of fact, she uses writing as a means of healing as well as to educate the public and change their perspectives regarding fatness and fat people. Gay mentions:

Writing this book is a confession. These are the ugliest, weakest, barest parts of me. This is my truth. This is a memoir of (my) body because [...] stories of bodies like mine are ignored or dismissed or dried. People see like mine and make assumptions. They think they know the why of my body. They do not. (Gay, 2017, p. 11)

The sexual abuse impacted her relationship with her body in the sense that she lost the sense of safety and trust in the world and marked her psyche with an ineffaceable scare. In response to this,

she began to use food as a way of defense mechanism in order to provide the necessary control and protection for her body. She started consuming large amounts of food intentionally to make herself fatter which means being less desirable and thus— being safer from any other forms of sexual violence or abuse. She even started wearing like men as if she wanted to build a physical shield to be away from any further kind of harm, "I made myself big because I wanted to be seen. I wanted to keep everyone out. I was repellent. I repelled men because I didn't want to be hurt again. I wanted to be invisible. I made myself invisible" (Gay, 2017, p. 195). She uses food not only as a kind of self-protection but also as an act of becoming stronger and more solid. She uses food to underscore that through eating she could take up more space which means being able to protect herself and remove any potential threat of hurt. This assault created a complex relation between the writer and her body. Once she perceives it as a safe shield and a physical barrier that prevents any further experience of pain when she indicates "I made my body a safe harbor, a place to hide, and I made sure I was never vulnerable again." (Gay, 2017, p. 45) On the other hand, she describes her body as a cage of her own making: "My body is a cage of my own making. I am still trying to figure my way out of it. I have been trying to figure a way out of it for more than twenty years" (Gay, 2017, p. 20). She describes it as a cage because she feels as if she is trapped in it. It prevents her from doing any regular activity normally, in her life— every physical action is hard for her and causes physical pain. This image of the cage illustrates how she is helpless in front of the restraints imposed on her because of the heavy weight.

Gay's attempt of shaping her body in a certain shape goes along with what Michel Foucault called the docile body. According to Foucault (1977), the docile body refers to the disciplined and regulated body that conforms to societal norms and expectations. It is a body that is subjected to surveillance, control, and manipulation through various techniques such as observation, examination, and training. Gay made her body docile multiple times as to show that her body is not only a passive recipient but also an active participant in the embodiment of social norms. Accordingly, her body is a passive recipient in a sense that she objectified it and practiced a certain kind power on it. She controlled her body when she started overeating as an attempt of providing a sense of protection to prevent any possible hurt or pain. She made her body docile as a result of her fear. She changed her appearance and made herself less desirable and less attractive so men cannot get to her again. This is exactly what Foucault talked about when he said; a docile body is "something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body [from which] the machine required can be constructed". (Foucault, 1977, p. 135)

Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, body size has been used by many intellectuals as a significant indicator, alongside gender, color, ethnicity, and sexuality, to assess an individual's eligibility for the rights and authority associated with full citizenship. The significance of these concepts regarding body size remains relevant, as the discrimination against fat individuals creates a division between those who are accepted and those who are not, those who receive praise and those who are ridiculed, those who are entitled to superior treatment and those who are expected to settle for inferior treatment, those who have the potential to become president and those who may not. In

this sense, Roxane Gay struggles with two types of conflicts, an internal that is against her body and an external that is her body against the society. In addition to the fact that her body prevents her from engaging in the usual activities of her daily life, she also struggles with her own self-image as a consequence of the societal beauty standards. The need to confirm these standards comes as a disturbing social phenomenon. It can be primarily driven by major commercial patriarchal organizations manipulating women's concerns about their physical appearance. Food, weight reduction, and cosmetic industries flourish by taking advantage of the purchases made in the pursuit of achieving physical perfection. The slim and flawless cover girl is a symbol created by a capitalist agenda looking for a primary aim that is generating wealth. Though many women hold this as a high regard dogma, Virgi Tovar's *You Have the Right to Remain Fat* (2018) underscores the right to the ownership of the body: "My body used to belong to me." (p. 5) Emphasizing this right, Tovar claims, is related to personal and collective stories of many American fat women. It is the same story of many women who do not dare to celebrate their fat bodies and obliged to replace it with a thin one so as to meet the cultural standards that glorify thinness. Roxane is a victim who yearns to be redressed and liberated from thus societal injustice, she underscores, regardless of what you are; people "forget that you are a person. You are your body, nothing more, and your body should damn well become less" (Gay, 2017, p. 82). She strives to be accepted and to be seen as a normal human being instead of being asked "Why are you so big" (Gay, 2017, p.115). This desire demonstrates the burdens and the influence of societal norms of beauty and the way she deals with her body. This conflict contributes to be become a source of scrutiny and making her body policed by others. Throughout the memoir she shares hard encounters. Her body size is being under judgment and used as a subject for the public commentary, "When you're overweight, your body becomes a matter of public record in many respects [...] You may do whatever you have to do to survive a world that has little patience or compassion for a body like yours." (p. 82)

Gay talks about how her size attracts unwanted stares and comments that is dehumanizing and disturbing. Usually these comments manifest as advice of how to lose weight, discrimination, or harassment. She describes these incidents where people, mostly strangers stop to comment on the size of her body, which reflects the societal belief that fat people represent a serious problem that needs to be solved. "There's no shelter or safety or escape from the cruel stares or comments, the too-small seats, the too-small everything for your too-big body." (p. 120) She is tired of being constantly objectified in which it leads her to a sense of exposure as well as vulnerability. Gay believes that this policing hurts her and anyone who tries to deviate from these standards. "I'm afraid to live in a city where, at least in my mind, everyone is thin, athletic, beautiful, and I am an abominable woman." (Gay, 2017, p.191). She always addresses the recurring themes of shame of being overweight and societal expectations throughout the text to highlight frequent impact of them on her psyche that lead to a disorder of emotional eating that in the end causes extra weight gain and thus creating a low self-esteem and a low sense of self-worth. Furthermore, her intersectionality in identity as a fat and black woman adds another layer of complication regarding the societal norms. She is controlled and discriminated additionally because of the stereotype and the prejudice against her race and size. She adds: "As I was a black student [...] the white students didn't quite know what

to do with me. I was an anomaly, and I didn't fit their assumed narrative about blackness." (Gay, 2017, p. 48) She addresses how this interseccionality influence her way of embracing her body and identity.

Hence, Fat and the Un- civilized Body are among the thematic concerns that feature ethnic discourse, they are linked to the primitive, to the female, to the African, to the Hottentot.¹ White European-American exploited the aspects of white thin body to enhance the justification for colonial and slavery discourse. Farrel underscores year "Fat, African, and overly sexual were all traits assigned to the lower levels of the evolutionary scale, a triage of characteristics that continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries" (p. 120). One of the earliest stereotypes of the Black woman is that of the Black 'mammy'. This classic portrayal of Black women is said to have originated in the Southern states of the United States during the Civil War, a period characterized by the widespread enslavement of Black people in both the United States and the Caribbean. (Collins, 2000) The Black "mammy" is portrayed as 'fat and dark, with "nappy" hair and a booming voice. She is 'ever-nurturing, though virtually sexless' (Williamson, 1998, p. 66). Through this image of Black women, a contrast between Black and White femininity is set up. While White female beauty is defined in terms of slenderness and fragility, producing a body unfit for physical work, the Black female body is depicted as large and strong, yet not in terms of male strength and dominance, but as indicative of its potential for low-status physical work and subservience. The emergence of the 1960s Black power movement in the United States critiqued such depictions of Black women as undesirable and made popular the slogan 'Black is beautiful' (Mercer, 1994, p. 98). This challenge to the notion of beauty prompted Black women to celebrate their natural attributes – including a larger body size and shape, and non-European hair texture and facial features – as a challenge to racism. The mammy stereotype in its historical and contemporary forms suggests the notion of strength which is linked to a large Black female body. Body size comes to represent the strength to undertake physical manual tasks, to persevere through hardship, to care for the family, to challenge negative representations of Blackness and to be comfortable in one's own skin. Thereby, in the process of accepting or resisting particular stereotypes, the large Black female body is central to this symbolism of Black women and strength (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003).

Gay also critiques the interconnected influence between the public and the media and how media portrays fatness and fat bodies as something negative "These commercials drive me crazy. They encourage self-loathing. They tell us, most of us, that we aren't good enough in our bodies as they are." (Gay, 2017, p. 90) She underscores that, this reinforces a negative stereotypical image and stigmatizes anyone who doesn't conform to the societal beauty norms which in return influences the public perspective regarding fatness and fat people. All this affected her relationship with her body to the extent that she says "I hate myself. Or society tells me I am supposed to hate myself," (Gay, 2017, p. 98)

² In its ethnic sense, *Hottentot* had developed its connotations of savagery and primitivism by the seventeenth century; colonial depictions of the Hottentots (Khoikhoi) in the seventeenth to eighteenth century were characterized by savagery, often suggestive of

Assessments of one's physical appearance inevitably locate women on a hierarchical scale that measures and evaluates their attractiveness, thereby influencing their social influence. In this regard, representation of fat female bodies in social media, T.V and advertising channels is often characterized by unattractiveness, ridiculousness, contemptibility, and even offensiveness. Even among those who acknowledge this issue, it is often understood that the widespread opposition to fat bodies is not simply a superficial problem, but rather a manifestation of deeper biases fueled by stereotypes, misinformation and mythical beliefs. This can be illustrated in suffragist literature which frequently represents, contrastively, thin suffragists in relation to “unevolved” female anti-suffragists.² It is intriguing to note that the suffragists employed a similar typology to that found in anti-suffrage propaganda. They used the motif of fatness to symbolize a primitive, undeveloped, and less civilized body. In suffrage literature, on the other hand, it was the anti-suffragist who was seen as hindering progress with their outdated ideas, representing a force that impeded forward movement. Amy Erdman Farrel in her *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (2011) explains:

Suffragists chose to latch on to the “older,” “fatter” typology to represent the anti-suffragists, I would argue, not because that’s how the antisuffragists actually looked. Rather, those two physical characteristics—old and fat—could be powerfully harnessed to “say” that the anti-suffragists were out-of-date, regressive women whose points of view threatened progress. Being older meant that one was outmoded. Being fat meant that one had degenerative characteristics. (p. 102)

The degrading that society exerted against fat bodies echoes what Foucault called the normalization. Foucault's opinions of normalizations includes establishing standards that each individual is expected to meet. Those who do not meet these standards and instead deviate from them are likely to be marginalized (Foucault, 1977). Gay discusses how cultural and societal norms regarding body size and shape contributes to marginalizing those individuals who do not conform these standards, resulting in excluding and discriminating them.

The prejudice and bias against fat bodies continues to reach even the medical institutions. Roxane Gay sheds the light on how medical institutions deals with fat bodies in bias, claiming that health problems are due to overweight which creates an insufficient care and causes more stigmatization. "Doctors are supposed to first do no harm, but when it comes to fat bodies, most doctors seem fundamentally incapable of heeding their oath" (Gay, 2017, p.180), this quote

²The Suffrage Movement refers, specifically, to the seventy-two-year-long battle for woman's right to vote in the United States. Rooted in the abolition of slavery, the movement promoted civic action among newly enfranchised women through organizations like the League of Women Voters and the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Famous suffragettes Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. In 1919, the U. S.

articulates how medical professionals treat them as ignorant inferiors how are buried under their fatness. This adds a sense of discipline in which that fat bodies must go through diets to be disciplined and regulated. This meets what Foucault highlights as disciplinary practices, namely medicalization and regulation of behavior. He thinks that they are used to produce a docile body (Foucault, 1977). Gay in fact expresses and describes her experience with diet and medical interventions. She underscores that these experiences are like forms of discipline that aimed to control her body and reshape it as to fit the societal expectations. The book mentions several attempts of dieting and losing weight. She indicates that these attempts are driven by the societal pressure on her to conform its ideals of thinness. She is demanded to control and shape her body to match a narrow perfective norm of beauty.

Conceptually, thinness is the core feature of diet culture. There are certain beliefs exist within the framework of diet culture. Size and eating, for example, decide the priority of a person's value and morality. There are additional pervasive beliefs that always prioritize weight loss over body respect—a matter that leads to poor relationships with food. Diet culture perpetuates the belief that altering one's physical appearance, including changes in eating habits, is directly linked to improvements in health, even if there is a potential for people to experience enhanced well-being based on their look and adherence to certain diets. Diet culture, in other words, perpetuates a mentality that has resulted in a cycle and a perception that restoring health requires both weight loss and total physical change. Moreover, diet culture contributes negatively to self-esteem . As such, women who are dissatisfied with their bodies constantly weigh themselves, skip meals, perform excessive physical activities, and try to control excessive food intake in order to lose weight. Sharlene Hesse Biber's *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity* (1997) identifies the term "The Cult of Thinness" that reflects on diet culture and the dilemma of eating disorder which is much more common among women. Biber underscores:

Being female is the primary criterion for membership in the Cult of Thinness. The object of worship is the "perfect" body. The primary rituals are dieting and exercising with obsessive attention to monitoring progress—weighing the body at least once a day and constantly checking calories. The advertising industry and the media provide plenty of beautiful body icons to worship. There are numerous ceremonies—pageants and contests—that affirm the ideal. (p. 10)

Thus, she puts herself at an extreme level of measurement and self-discipline. Her experience with diet culture reveals the psychological and physical pressure she goes through only to reclaim a sense of belonging. She raises a question that says " What does it say about our culture that the desire for weight loss is considered a default feature of womanhood?" (Gay, 2017, p. 91) by raising this question she attacks the food commercials that consider the desire of losing weight like a lack of self-discipline.

Throughout the book, Gay comes across another aspect of her life, namely, her experience with surveillance. She highlights this aspect through pointing out to her everyday encounters with people and the healthcare institutions. She says that this surveillance is once self-imposed and one other time is from others. It serves as an important aspect of her life as both as fat and black woman. She is exposed daily to public scrutiny through describing situations, where people at restaurants or airplanes dare to stare and make comments, or even showing obvious discomfort when she is around. This surveillance makes her feels more alienated increasing and pushes her to hide herself.

Tragically, women are trapped in a society that has an intense prejudice against fat individuals; it has a collective distaste for fat bodies. This society consistently succeeds openly and shamelessly to ridicule, intimidate, humiliate, and marginalize obese women. Accordingly, the quest for being viewed by others as pleasing and appealing plays a very considerable role in the lives of the majority of women, influencing and directing an important part of their daily endeavors. Being recognized as beautiful encompasses more than just attracting potential partners; it also entails being regarded as likable, trustworthy, knowledgeable, and commendable, all of which enhance women's success in many areas.

Additionally, in healthcare settings, Gay shares her frustrations with doctors and other medical professionals who focus excessively on her weight rather than her overall health. This medical gaze scrutinizes her body, often ignoring her actual health concerns and reducing her to her size, leaving her feeling dismissed and dehumanized. "There is the constant shaming of fat people and the medical professionals who take every opportunity to crow about how near death these obese contestants are." (Gay, 2017, p. 86)

Gay reflects on how societal expectations lead to a form of internalized surveillance, where she monitors her own behavior to avoid drawing negative attention. This self-policing includes eating in private to escape judgmental glances and comments, highlighting her acute awareness of societal scrutiny on her eating habits. "I am told. I take up space. I intimidate. I do not want to take up space. I want to go unnoticed. I want to hind. I want to disappear until I gain control of my body." (Gay, 2017, p. 17) The internalization of these societal standards results in constant self-criticism and body shame. Gay describes a pervasive sense of inadequacy, attributing it to the relentless pressure to conform to societal ideals of thinness. This internal surveillance, driven by external scrutiny, reinforces her struggles with body image and self-esteem. These acts practiced by society convey a distinct message that there is a certain body image that a woman must adhere to in order to be recognized . The cultural message is consistent across several major social sectors and organizations: a woman who is thin is considered to be highly valued woman:

how many bumper stickers have you seen that say 'No Fat Chicks,' you know? Guys don't like fat girls. Guys like little girls. I guess because it makes them feel bigger and, you know, they want somebody who looks pretty. Pretty to me is you have

to be thin and you have to have like good facial features. It's both. My final affirmation of myself is how many guys look at me when I go into a bar. How many guys pick up on me. What my boyfriend thinks about me. (quoted in Biber, 7)

In the digital realm, Gay discusses how online interactions amplify surveillance. She describes the vitriol she faces on social media, where people feel emboldened to comment on her body without restraint. This virtual surveillance adds another layer of public scrutiny that is persistent and pervasive, exposing her to relentless criticism and harassment. Social media becomes a platform where the judgment she experiences in physical spaces is magnified, further intensifying her sense of being constantly watched and judged. She critiques how media representations of fat bodies contribute to the culture of surveillance, reinforcing societal judgments and the policing of bodies that do not conform to the thin ideal. She highlights the limited and often negative portrayals of fat people in media, which perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to the constant surveillance and judgment fat individuals face in their everyday lives. These negative stereotypes in media reinforce societal standards of beauty and desirability, making it difficult for fat individuals to escape the cycle of scrutiny and judgment. The aforementioned examples of surveillance highlights Foucault's perspectives on surveillance. According to Foucault, constant surveillance causes individuals to be more aware of the societal norms, hence it leads them to watch and regulate their behaviors (Foucault, 1977). Gay notes that how she tries to understand and somehow follow the societal beauty standards which results in scrutinizing her body and leaving only feelings of insufficiency and shame.

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, 2017, p. 15)

Fat women, throughout various cultural histories, internalize fat negativity, and this results in responding to societal norms by striving to reduce their body mass or body satisfaction. This fat negativity is exactly what body positivity movement aims to challenge. Social in its nature, body positivity movement focuses on promoting the functionality and health of all bodies, rather than solely emphasizing physical appearance. Anne Eaton, in her "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression" (2016), underscores, "We live in a fat-hating world, that regularly refuses to accommodate fat bodies; that openly and unabashedly teases, bullies, shames, and stigmatizes fat people...and that discriminates against fat people in a variety of ways." (37). As such, body positivity emphasizes the belief that confidence and self-worth should not be determined by one's body size. Furthermore, it provided fat people with a significant communicative space through which they advocate for equality, recognition, deconstructing "civilized body," and fat-pride.

Emerged in the 20th century particularly in 1967 when an event was organized in Central Park to burn diet books and pictures of fat people, the roots of body positivity movement can be traced back to various social and cultural movements, including fat acceptance movement, feminism, and disability rights activism. These movements have all contributed to challenging traditional beauty standards and promoting acceptance and equality for people of all body types, genders, abilities, and identities. This meets what Megan Jayne Crabee tackles in her *Body Positive Power* (2017). Crabee attracts the attention to the social performative policy that pushes many individuals towards certain beliefs regarding their bodies:

We've been convinced that changing the way our bodies look should be our ultimate goal in life, and although women have been the primary target of these messages for the past century, these days nobody is safe...People of all sizes, all ages, all genders, all colors, and all abilities are being affected by body-image issues. We're too fat, too wrinkled, too masculine, too feminine, too dark, too pale, too queer, too different. We're always 'too' something, compared to the ideal body. The pressure becomes too much for us to handle. Our societal self-hatred is spreading like wildfire, slowly but surely, we're all being set aflame in the pursuit of perfection. (p. 12)

In this sense and despite the pervasive surveillance, Gay explores her acts of resistance. By writing *Hunger*, she reclaims her narrative and challenges the ways in which her body is perceived and judged. This act of storytelling is a form of resistance against constant surveillance, asserting her right to exist in her body without shame. Gay's memoir becomes a powerful tool for reclaiming space and advocating for body positivity. She encourages the acceptance of diverse body types and critiques societal norms that enforce narrow standards of beauty. Through her advocacy, she inspires others to resist the internal and external pressures to conform, promoting a broader understanding and acceptance of all bodies. She notes: "I am working toward abandoning the damaging cultural messages that tell me my worth is strictly tied up to my body. I am trying to undo all the hateful things I tell myself." (Gay, 2017, p. 196). Her act of resistance advocates for positive movements that call for the acceptance of diverse sizes of bodies such as body positivity when she asserts that it is so important for woman to feel comfortable in their bodies, without wanting to change every single thing about their bodies to find that comfort. In fact, her resistance suggests also that she is an active participant in the embodiment of the societal norms as it is mentioned earlier. She uses her docile body to expose the harsh treatment that fat individuals go through just because they do not match the idealistic beauty standards. She changes the way she looks at her body from a safe shelter to a weapon, that she uses to resist and stand against her society's demands of perfection.

Alongside the reflective themes, Roxane Gay's memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* is remarkable for its honest and direct language. The memoir explore the themes of trauma, societal beauty norms, and disturbed body image. Her use of language reflects both, the internal conflict and the external that she faces as a result of the societal pressure. She uses the first person narrator all along the memoir as if she creating a dramatic monologue by making herself the sparker and the readers are her silent listener.

Gay's writing is honest in a way that she invites the readers directly to live and share her experiences. She is not embraced to talk about different topics or bring about uncomfortable truths. This is evident from the very beginning when she presents the complex relationship that she has with her body: "I ate and ate and ate in the hopes that if I made myself big, my body would be safe." (Gay, 2017, p. 22) This sentence illustrates her attempt to protect herself from any other hurt through her body. She uses repetition with a straightforward language to indicate the intensiveness and the desperation of her actions.

In addition, Gay's language is evocative in a sense that it paints a vivid picture of her physical and emotional experiences. When she says, "The bigger you are, the smaller your world becomes." (Gay, 2017, p.139) she uses paradox to convey a sense of isolation as a consequence of her weight. This phrase sums up how her social life and the opportunities around her are getting smaller as she gets bigger, emphasizing the societal restraints put on individual how do not simply fit the ideal body standards.

Throughout the memoir, Gay uses a thoughtful and critical tone as to examine societal influences that affected her personal experience. We see her frequently criticizing the idealistic beauty standards and how they affect individuals, mostly woman. She writes:

This is what most girls are taught—that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society. And most women know this, that we are supposed to disappear, but it's something that needs to be said, loudly, over and over again, so that we can resist surrendering to what is expected of us. (Gay, 2017, p. 17)

This quotation does not only highlight her personal feelings regarding the unrealistic beauty norms but is also serves as a commentary on how society oppresses woman and degrades them by making them inferior to men just because the way they look.

Repetition is also a prominent stylistic feature in Gay's writing. It reinforces the constant struggle and pressure that she encounters always. Due to the traumatic experience she went through she keeps on repeating words and phrases. For instance, she keeps repeating that her story is not a story of triumph but rather a story of a body: "The story of my body is not a story of triumph." (p. 11) She repeats the same sentence in the same page: "This is not a story of triumph but this is a story that demands to be told and deserves to be heard" (Gay, 2017, p. 11). This repetition suggests that people who went through trauma, need to revisit the experience and often struggle to make a meaning out of it.

4. CONCLUSION

To put it briefly, in examining Roxane Gay's *Hunger* through the lens of Foucault's concept of the docile body, it becomes evident that Gay's narrative serves as a powerful critique of societal norms that seek to regulate and control women's bodies. Gay's memoir is not merely a personal recount of her struggles but a broader commentary on how society's oppressive standards create bodies that are constantly surveilled, judged, and disciplined. Through the repetition of phrases and the detailed account of her experiences, Gay underscores the relentless pressure to conform to an ideal that is both unattainable and harmful. This analysis reveals the intricate ways in which power operates on a bodily level, enforcing conformity through subtle and overt means of control. By reclaiming her voice and narrating her experiences, Gay resists the objectification and marginalization imposed upon her, thus challenging the docility expected of her body. Her work encourages a rethinking of the societal values that perpetuate weightism and body shaming, advocating instead for a more inclusive and accepting understanding of diverse body types. This study, therefore, not only highlights the personal ramifications of these societal pressures but also calls for a collective reassessment of the standards by which bodies are judged and valued.

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