



EMBODIED HUNGER AND THE POLITICS OF SELF-DEFINITION IN ROXANE GAY'S *HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY*

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Abstract

Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* is a powerful exploration of the intersections between fatness, trauma and gender. *Hunger* resists dominant cultural narratives that frame fat bodies as sites of failure, pathology or lack of self control. Instead, Gay foregrounds the complexities of fat embodiment, revealing how fatness can function as both a form of self-protection and a deeply contested site of identity. The paper examines the work through the lens of fat studies, focusing on how Gay's narrative challenges the medicalization, moralization and dehumanization of fat bodies. Scholars such as Kathleen LeBesco, Charlotte Cooper and Amy Erdman Farrell argue that fatness is not merely a personal or medical issue but a deeply political and cultural phenomenon shaped by systems of oppression, including racism, sexism and capitalism. Gay's memoir directly engages with these issues, illustrating how fatness is both hyper visible and erased in contemporary discourse- seen as a spectacle yet denied full humanity. This paper explores how fat body is projected, both by herself and by society, in ways that highlight the tensions between visibility and invisibility. This paper argues that the work is a foundational text in contemporary fat studies, offering an embodied and deeply personal critique of fatphobia while also resisting simple narratives of self-acceptance.

Keywords: Fat, Trauma, Fat Feminism, Fat Acceptance, Food, Weight Loss , Identity.

Roxane Gay in her *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* states every body structure has a story and a history behind it. Fat characters in literary canon is always subjected, diminished and suppressed to the low level. Roxane Gay writes this memoir, not about her weight loss journey but how she tackled her body to live with it. She considers her body as a demon, as she lived with it for more than forty years. Gay's self-perception aligns with fatphobic cultural narratives that construct the fat body as excessive and grotesque. Kathleen LeBesco in her *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* argue that fat people are often framed as revolting – both in the sense of being disgusting and in the sense of resisting societal norms. Gay admits that, she wished to write about peace and loving herself at any size but while writing this memoir, she forced herself to look inwardly like the weight she gained and the difficulties that her body has endured. Gay's fatness is deeply connected to the sexual violence she experienced as a child. She describes how she gained weight intentionally as a form of self-protection, making herself invisible to avoid further harm. This aligns with trauma studies perspectives, which suggest that survivors of violence often experience body alienation- feeling estranged from or betrayed by their own physical forms. In psychoanalytic terms, Gay's description of her body as a 'Unseen' could be interpreted as an externalization of trauma. The monstrous body becomes a projection of pain, shame and survival mechanisms. Julia Kristeva introduces the concept of abjection in her work, *Powers of Horror* which refer to the feeling of horror when confronted with bodily excess, contamination, or things that challenge social

order. Fatness, as excessive and uncontrollable, is often framed as abject- a violation of bodily norms that must be disciplined or expelled.

Roxane Gay says, admitting her own weight is a shame. With heavy heart, she admits that she weighed 577 pounds at six feet and so her parents took for an orientation session for Gastric bypass surgery. Physicians admits, it is the only way to get rid of her fat and live like a normal people. Obesity is medicalised as a serious issue and the patients are not treated as unique person. To them, it was a body that requires repair. Fat feminism advocates for bodily autonomy, meaning that individuals should have the right to make choices about their own bodies without external judgement. While many fat activists oppose weight loss surgery as a tool of medicalized fatphobia, Roxane Gay's decision should also be understood within the context of personal agency in a world that systematically devalues fat people. Charlotte Cooper, one of the fat activists argues that fat activism should focus on structural oppression rather than individual choices. In this light, Gay's surgery is not a betrayal of fat activism but rather an example of how even the most vocal critics of fatphobia are not immune to its pressures. Bariatric surgery is often framed as a personal choice, but critical fat studies scholars argue that this choice is deeply shaped by fatphobic medical and social pressures. Gay has spoken about struggling with physical discomfort and the challenges of being in a world that doesn't accommodate her body. From a disability studies perspective, one could argue that instead of changing her body to fit the world, the world should change to accommodate different body sizes. However, the lack if systemic change leaves many fat people with few options.

To Gay, *Hunger* is a story not of slightly overweight but who is super morbidly obese. Her story is deeply personal, yet it speaks to broader cultural issues, particularly the ways in which women's bodies are policed, controlled and defined in relation to the male gaze. Gay's fatness is not just a biological condition but a social and psychological experience shaped by trauma. After being sexually assaulted at the age of twelve, she began gaining weight as a way to make herself invisible and undesirable, hoping to shield herself from further violence. In this sense, her body becomes a barrier, a protective armour against male gaze. However, this protection comes at a cost. Society demonizes fatness and Gay experiences relentless fatphobia-both systemic in medical atmosphere, public spaces and personal especially judgement from family, peers and strangers. This paradox, using fatness as protection but suffering because of it, illustrates how women's bodies are always subject to external control, whether they conform to beauty standards or not. Gay critiques the cultural expectation that women must be physically attractive to be valued. The male gaze, a term popularized by Laura Mulvey in film theory, suggests that women exist primarily as objects for male pleasure, rather than as autonomous subjects. Gay's body as a fat body, disrupts this expectation. She is hyper-visible yet erased, seen as grotesque rather than desirable. She describes the way fat women, especially Black women, are often denied femininity and desirability, a theme also explored in intersectional feminist and fat studies. Fatness, becomes a rebellion against the demand for smallness and silence-yet, paradoxically, it also isolates her, reinforcing the idea that only thin women are worthy of visibility, love and attention. Gay's memoir also speaks to the way fatness silences women. Fat are either mocked, dismissed or treated as objects of pity. Fat women are frequently told that they should fix themselves for good future, they are not allowed to express their wish or desire, their bodies are public property, subject to unsolicited advice, harassment and scrutiny. Gay remarks about her body in *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* as:

I'm a feminist and I believe in doing away with rigid beauty standards that force women to conform to unrealistic ideals. I believe we should have broader definitions of beauty that include diverse body types. I believe we should have broader definitions of beauty that include diverse body types. I believe it is so important for women to feel comfortable in their bodies, without wanting to change every single thing about their bodies to find that comfort. I (want to) believe my worth as a human being does not reside in my size or appearance. I know, having grown up in a culture that is generally toxic to women and constantly trying to discipline women's bodies, that is important to resist unreasonable standards for how my body or any body should look. (15)

Gay's parents, particularly her father, are portrayed as supportive but unable to understand the depth of her struggle with trauma and fatness. Their love is evident in their actions, but it is also shaped by concern, frustration and implicit desire for her to conform to societal norms regarding weight. Her father, a Haitian Immigrant who achieved the American dream, embodies a certain aspirational mindset-one that sees discipline and achievement as pathways to success. Within this framework, Gay's fatness becomes an obstacle that must be overcome. Her parents enrolls her in various weight-loss programs, encourage dieting and express concern over her eating habits. While these actions come from a place of care, they also reinforce the societal belief that thinness is synonymous with health, success and self worth. Gay internalizes these messages, which complicates her relationship with her body and her sense of self. She

oscillates between wanting to be the daughter they wish for – thin, healthy, conventionally acceptable-and asserting her own bodily autonomy.

Gay's memoir is structured around a before and after- her life before the traumatic rape at age 12 and the profound ways it reshaped her body, self-perception and relationship with the world. Her memoir can be critically examined through the lens of self-objectification theory, in which it explains how individuals internalize societal standards of attractiveness and surveillance, leading to body shame, anxiety and dissociation from one's own body. Before sexual assault, Gay describes herself as a happy, normal child, moving through the world with an unconscious relationship with her body. Like many children, she existed without excessive self-surveillance, experiencing her body as a part of her rather than an object to be judged. At age 12, Gay was gang-raped by a group of boys, an event that shattered her sense of bodily autonomy. This trauma became a pivotal turning point, fundamentally altering the sense of self, her relationship with body, and her engagement with world. Her response to the trauma was to use food and fatness as a form of protection, making herself larger and less desirable to shield herself from male attention. This was an act of self-preservation, but it also resulted in a lifetime of fatphobia, medical discrimination and internalised shame. Gay's experience before and after gaining weight illustrates how rape culture and fatphobia intersect. As a thin, she was vulnerable to sexual violence because of male entitlement to her body and as a fat woman, she became socially invisible but not free from harm, experiencing fatphobia, medical discrimination and dehumanization. Her story exposes the flaws in society's perceptions of sexual violence, where only certain victims are seen as credible, and others especially fat women are excluded from the narrative. Gay's memoir dismantles the dangerous myth that sexual assault is tied to attractiveness, exposing it instead as an act of power and control that affects people of all body types.

Food is an immediate comfort zone for fat individuals. It creates a sense of warmth and fullness that replace the feeling of emotional emptiness. Roxane Gay says being fat is one's own responsibility and fault as it is curated by them unintentionally. Food plays a crucial role in her narrative- it is both a source of comfort and a means of survival, but also a site of struggle and shame. Gay discusses how food became a coping mechanism after experiencing sexual violence at a young age. Eating allowed her to build a physical barrier against the world, as she associated fatness with safety. Over-eating eventually led her to be scattered and fragmentary. Though the society is not ready to accept her, she accepted her. This aligns with fat studies perspectives that recognize how fatness can serve as a response to trauma and societal pressures, rather than just a matter of willpower or health. Gay highlights how society moralizes food and equates fatness with failure. She reflects on how people judge what fat individuals eat and the shame attached to consuming too much or the wrong foods. The title of the novel itself acts as a metaphor and signals multiple signals, not just for food, but for love, acceptance and a sense of belonging. Gay's fatness is tied to these unmet needs, showing how hunger in her memoir is not simply physical but deeply emotional and psychological impact.

Gay describes how people view her body as a prison, reinforcing cultural narratives that equate fatness with limitation, lack of freedom and excess. This aligns with the pathologization of fatness in dominant discourse, where the fat body is framed as inherently tragic, in need of correction, or a burden. The metaphor of a cage also reflects Susan Bordo's argument in *Unbearable Weight*(1993) that western culture constructs the ideal body as disciplined and controlled, while the fat body is seen as excessive and out of control. Gay admits that she could not walk fast with her friends and her fabric gives damp smell when its sweating. Her difficulty in walking fast and how others react to her movement reflect spatial discrimination against fat bodies. In Fat Studies, scholars like Kathleen LeBesco and Charlotte Cooper have argued that public spaces-whether seating, transportation or walking paths-are designed for thin or normal sized bodies. When Gay struggles with movement, it is not just a personal experience but a confrontation with an infrastructure that excludes fat people. The mention of fabric and sweat evokes Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, where the fat body is marked as leaky and improper. In a society obsessed with bodily containment and hygiene, fat bodies are often perceived as excessive and repulsive. The damp smell becomes another way that Gay's body is judged. This is also tied to Deborah Lupton's work on disgust, where fatness is associated with a failure of self-regulation.

Roxane Gay's experience at Camp Kingsmont, a weight loss camp she attended as a child, can be examined through Foucauldian discipline theory. Weight-loss camps function as institutions of bodily discipline, where children are trained to conform to cultural body norms through regulated eating with counting calories of intake, strict exercise regimes and surveillance which is similar to Foucauldian Panopticism, where subjects internalise the gaze and discipline themselves even when not being watched. Gay's time at Camp also connects to research on negative psychological effects of childhood dieting. Gay's experience reflects the pattern like she lost weight at camp but eventually regained it, reinforcing feelings

of personal failure. This cycle is common in people who go through childhood weight loss programs, as they are set up to believe that thinness equals success. Instead of fanning Camp Kingsmont as a positive transformation, she exposes the psychological harm of such programs, resisting the idea that thinness equals happiness.

Gay admits loneliness remained her constant companion. Gay's loneliness aligns with Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, where fatness is framed as a socially undesirable trait that leads to exclusion. Gay's isolation connects to the cultural construction of the fat woman as unlovable. In media and literature, fatness is often depicted as something that prevents romance, friendship and belonging. Fat women are represented as either comic relief or tragic figures, reinforcing the idea that their fatness makes them unworthy of deep emotional connections. Gay internalizes these cultural messages, shaping her own sense of self-worth. Lauren Berlant's concept of slow death, the idea which reflects fat bodies as failure and decline explains how fat people may withdraw from social life to avoid judgement. Gay's loneliness, then, is not just about others rejecting her- it is also about how fat people are conditioned to withdraw from social settings to avoid scrutiny. Despite her loneliness, Gay's memoir itself is an act of fat activism. By sharing her experience, she resists the idea that fatness should be hidden or ashamed. In writing about her loneliness, Gay turns it into a form of connection for other fat readers who have felt similarly isolated.

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