"Does Anyone feel Comfortable in Their own Bodies": an Analysis of Roxane Gay's Hunger

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ABSTRACT

Body constitutes an integral part of identity. Female body is always under the scanner of the rigid socio-cultural set up. Even though these ideologies and construct are very transitory in nature, female body have always been an object of oppression through the ages. This paper tries to analyze Roxane Gay's heart wrenching memoir, *Hunger* in which she fights with herself to be in peace with herself and her overweight body. She questions the society, magazines for creating this obsession towards thin body and making the overweight the "other", and made them to hate themselves and their body. This paper also attempts to raise question against the patriarchal setup that restrict women attaining freedom, in their desired way. Gay's memoir *Hunger* gives us an insight how she faced this obsession to be slender and thin and confirm in to the society and how she failed and struggles find peace with her own body. She expresses, her struggles with body shaming, familial pressure, and peer pressure and finally how she started coming in terms with her body and accepting herself. This paper draws theories from cultural theorist such as Mary Douglas to analyze the social construct of body. This paper also draws theories from feminism to analyses the patriarchal set up.

KEY WORDS: BODY, PATRIARCHY, FREEDOM, SLENDER, BODY SHAMING, FEMINISM

INTRODUCTION

The concept of beauty is very gendered, there are different standards of beauty for men and women, but in the case of women, in this modern society, female body is always under vigilant eyes and are held to higher, and impossible beauty standards. As Andrea Dworkin points out "in our culture not one part of a women's body is left untouched, unaltered....From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of the body, is a subject to modifications". Even though the idea of beauty is very transitory in nature, it is varying according to culture, region etc... the female body is always under the scanner. For a long period of time, women with broad hips and bigger body were considered beautiful as they showed the sign of fertility. In modern society ruled by cosmetic companies and advertisements the beauty standard set out for women is rather unattainable, most of these are

created by men, but are not applicable to them as they are defined by wealth and status.

Roxane gay one of the important sounds in the present world, depicts the hardships and trauma she faced with her "overweight body" through her heart warming memoir *Hunger*. Roxane Gay writes how she was gangraped by "a boy I thought I loved, and a group of other boys" at the age of twelve, and how overeating was her solution to the after effects of that incident. For Roxane gay 'being fat' became a place "where no one can get you" her own safe zone. But 'being fat' had other side effects, the constant pressure from each and every one right from the family members to strangers that one encounter in a bus to lose weight and confirm in to the standards. The beauty standards today is so unrealistic, even super models tries hard to achieve it, their pictures for magazines and social media are heavily edited. An average working woman finds hard to attain these unattainable and unrealistic beauty standards, in spite of their accomplishments they are considered to be a failure. The psychological effects of this failure include low self-esteem, negative body image, eating disorders, stress and anxiety.

FAT BODY- AN "ABNORMAL" BODY: Hunger opens with Roxane Gay's confession about herself how she weighed five seven hundred pounds and six feet tall, and how, along with her father she went to Cleveland clinic in

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order to lose weight. she writes the cost from fat to be “normal” according to the standards is heavy, “it was a good news bad news scenario. Bad news: our lives and bodies would never be the same (if we even survived the surgery). Good: we would be thin” (8) even though she never got this surgery there were many others who were willing to pay and risk their lives to look thin and slender. She clearly depicts the trauma of being “judged”, “weighed” and “measured”. Over the years, doctors, dieticians, have been talking and discussing obesity as defined by body mass index. if one’s BMI is 18-24.9 that person is “normal”, if it is over than 25 one is overweight, if the BMI is over 30 as Roxane gay writes one is “obese”, if it’s over 40 “ morbidly obese”, if it’s over 50 “ super morbidly obese”.

Roxane Gay defines the term “obese” In her memoir, in a literal sense and figuratively, “obese is an unpleasant word from Latin meaning “having eaten until fat”..... But when people use the word “obese” they aren’t merely being literal. Thy are offering forth an accusation.... That modifier “morbidly” makes the fat body a death sentence when such is not the case.” (13). Mary Douglas in her work *Purity and Danger*, says that body is a “symbol of society”(*Purity and danger* 116) and “ body is a complex structure” , “ the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system”. The society can regulate, monitor the body sizes and control it. Compared to the male body, “ Female body” is assuredly a socio cultural construct. Our society being inherently patriarchal these norms are always set by men, in order to please their wishes, and it certainly cannot accommodate fat bodies, as it takes up space and woman’s presence and body shouldn’t takes up space, as gay writes this “ and most of the woman know this, we are supposed to disappear”, if they takes up space it should be pleasing to men.

Embodied with expectations and conceptualized by examples of prominent ideal bodies and measurements, there is always pressure to construct one’s body in to the expected norm. Television, movies, songs are full of women who are thin, the woman who is fat as often a sad friend or “funny best friends”, and women are constantly criticized for their bodies not able match the expectation. Magazines discussing and promoting dieting and “healthy” life style to be thin and slender and posting images of super skinny models. In this memoir we can see Roxane gay avidly watching television reality show *The Biggest loser* and many other shows and how she felt it fulfills the ultimate “fat girl fantasy” – “you go to a ranch for a few months and under the pressure of intense personal trainers dangerously low calorie intake, the manipulations of reality tv producers and the constant surveillance of television camera, you loose the weight you ‘ve never been able to loose it to your own”(109)

Roxane Gay shares her experiences of the impact of tv reality shows had on her that the fat on her body is something “contagious and to be eradicated”. Even though she hated these shoes she vividly watched it, and it revealed painful experiences of loneliness and

depression and evoked anger, and it also revealed the ultimate truth that there this world cannot “accommodate fat bodies”.

Roxane Gay never lost weight, in a drastic way but she had lost some pounds by doing exercises and following a diet, she had followed all sorts diets available either by doctoral supervision, or by browsing internet, she had starved herself and was always on a diet. Restricting oneself from food hence creating some room for another disease is a common phenomenon while losing weight. Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder in which the sufferer has a body image and leads them to undereat something, or starve themselves to death. Dieting is one of the most often writeups promoted magazines and cosmetic, brand sites. The inability to get the suitable dresses for fat people, from basic departmental store is a problem. Likewise, Bulimia nervosa is also an eating disorder where the sufferer binge eats, and throws up lately in order to get rid of the excessive calories. The availability of small or extra small sixes via online and offline stores showcases their negligence towards over sized bodies.

Her Roxane Gay have two wardrobes, one for shirts and other for dress explains the problem, for many years she wore only shirts as she thought she could disappear from the society and eyes especially from men, she still wears shirt, the other wardrobe where she keeps her dresses, colorful dresses, even though she finds the size, she dares not wears those dresses as the society cannot handle fat people showing confidence and femininity. Roxane gay had suffered Bulimia, she used to binge eat food and later on she shoved her fingers deep in the throat and throws up. She had continued this for the longest time for her life and caught red handed by her boyfriend, she had mastered to do this secretly. Eating disorders are often associated with lazy girl issues, the other side of the problem is often neglected. As Becky Thomson writes the “range of traumas associated with the origins of eating problems, including racism, sexual abuse, poverty, sexism emotional or physical abuse”. Here Roxane gay over ate everything and her constant “ hunger” was as a result of her rape that happened when she was twelve, that incident still haunts her, that boy once she thought she loved is still with her, every moment.

CONCLUSION

Human Body is not just biological, it exists in the social context as well. Even though an individual’s body completely belong to them, it is a site for society as well as the owner of the body to intrude. In that a female’s body is more prone to that intrusion. The tall, slender and preferably white is always the stereotyped notion of a perfect normal body. All bodies other than this are always the abnormal ones. Here Roxane Gay, a mixed race, fat , bisexual woman strives hard to be at ease at her body. As Roxane Gay writes, loving her body as is still a task, coping up and accepting herself the way she is, was the greatest task ever. She started accepting her body at her forties, before that she was a “mess”. In the

end she poses a vital question “does we feel comfortable in our own bodies” and “what luxury must hat be”(252). She writes “every woman I know is on perpetual diet” (252). She is equipping herself to “challenging the toxic cultural norms that dictate far too much of how woman live their lives and treat their bodies”. She uses this memoir to showcase her own ferocity of her hunger to be seen, heard and also as the voice of millions of women who hate themselves and their bodies.

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