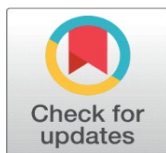
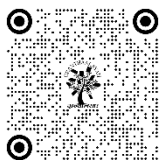


# FLESHING OUT MEMORY: ROXANE GAY'S HUNGER AS AN EMBODIED NARRATIVE OF SELF- PERCEPTION

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## ABSTRACT

Narratives of selfhood, encompassing diverse experiences, recount the multitude of unaddressed past event/s that have either shaped or ruptured the identity configuration of the subject in irreversible ways. Divided and marginalized based on gender identity and the societal distinction between the sexes, women -signaled as the second sex- have perennially found themselves positioned at the peripheries of socio-cultural representations. The situation exacerbates when addressing the aspects of differential treatment that women undergo due to multiple factors at work. The most prevalent form of modus operandi being that of perpetuating violence on women, women find themselves subjected to subjective and objective violence; the worst being the sexual or physical violence where their body is objectified. Body becomes a site of violence. The present paper titled “Fleshing Out Memory: Roxane Gay’s Hunger as an Embodied Narrative of Self- Perception” delves into the intricate exchange between body and memory as portrayed in Roxane Gay’s memoir Hunger. Challenging the heteronormative expectations, Gay enters into the discourse of recalling, remembering and recording her experiences, where her body becomes a repository of memories - both traumatic and empowering - and how these memories help shape her sense of self. Investigating how the author’s body functions as a vessel for memory, both individual and collective, and how the patriarchal gaze was destructive, this paper tries to locate how the author employs her memoir as a medium to challenge the societal expectations and promote a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of body, memory and self-acceptance to build a convenient space of her own in the patriarchal domain.

**Keywords:** Body, Memory, Patriarchy, Violence, Trauma



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literary narratives, from the ancient to the modern times, had provided varying manifestations of human experiences ranging from the ontological to the physical to the psychological realms. Such narratives, often exploring the socio-cultural roles in navigating the human experiences into multiple levels of identification, record the unpleasant realities of the mundane world. Narratives centered on issues of gender, race, class and psychological perspectives have contributed significantly to the literary corpus, enhancing our perception of the realities around us. Though we stand at the crossroads of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with increased philosophical and theoretical engagements in the discourse of the intersectional nature of gender, race, culture and society, certain grey areas persist, requiring serious attention. The world has moved beyond the concept of gender binaries to include a broader spectrum where all gender identities find social representation through LGBTQIA+ narratives. The problem, however, remains intact. The inclusive policies designed by the patriarchal agencies towards different gender orientations have, to an extent, been unable to shed their intolerant nature. The concept of the subaltern has to be re-contextualised and re-visualised from its earlier

denominations, since many more 'subjects' have been formed and the 'I' has to be addressed outside the preset terms and conditions of patriarchal structures.

Memory plays a crucial role in such narratives as it contributes to the construction of the subject by remembering the past events of her/his life. Often, the memories retrieved are traumatic and hence the interconnectedness of trauma and memory becomes almost an insoluble axiom around which most of the autobiographical terrain is structured. The narrative attains a disturbed echo when the subject undergoes a traumatic incident subjected to discrimination and unjust treatment on account of her gender, racial and social identities. The experience of trauma disrupts the subject from engaging in any meaningful embodied activity of self-perception and self-acceptance.

The body, which has been the point of mistreatment since the times of slavery, is often perceived as a site of violence. Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* observed that bodies are marked and regulated through social norms and power structures (GT 25; BTM 2). The female body is forced to be sexed and gendered (biologically and socially) thereby making it the problematic one. Kristeva's take on the abjected body reminds one of how the female body, when it does not conform to the socially accepted body discourse, is subject to acts of rejection, disgust and abjection, making it totally a matter of contempt and hence marginalized. The female body objectified stands as a symbol of desire and hence is subject to male gaze and voyeurism.

The discourse on female body specifically addresses the politics of marginalization in terms of how female bodies become sites of violence and marginalisation. Addressing the experiences of sexual violence and other such inhibitory practices, feminist discourse and narratives have been instrumental in unveiling the necessity of writing against the patriarchal power structures by challenging the traditional gender norms, thereby carving a female space in the male dominated society. While the discourse of female centered narratives have been able to construct a stand where subaltern can also speak in their own way from the margins, there are still some mechanisms which function discreetly or indiscreetly propagating the misogynist attitude of the hegemony. The female body not only becomes an object of sexual violence, but also a point of ridicule and fat shaming when the factor of body proposition is taken into account. The status quo being built around the ratio of what is desirable and undesirable; the inherent embodied experience of the female subject tends to remain unaddressed and rejected.

Heteronormativity, as an insidious social construct, not only establishes a normative structure for sexual orientation but also contributes to the binary division of society into rigid categories of male and female. Reinforced by societal biases and exclusionary policies, this binary thinking along the preset rules and conformation of the heteronormative structure, remains intolerant to those who do not fit to the category of what is deemed as normal according to the societal expectations. Recalling Foucault's exploration of normalcy and deviance (though Foucault focused on the medical realm), it could be perceived that the binary between normal vs. abnormal has permeated deep into the socio-cultural fabric that anything outside the parameters of being normal is categorized as abnormal and hence abjected. Human body, against the backdrop of disability studies, also has been identified and compartmentalized as able bodied and disabled, where the criteria of equating a body as abled or disabled depended heavily on how the exclusivist approach of the society worked. Racial and casteist discrimination further compound the stigmatization of human body and are marked as the invisible and the untouchable ones, as in the case of the African Americans as well as the Dalits in India, within the social hierarchy. Thus, human body, specifically female body has been subject to graded discrimination and marginalization along the intersecting axes of sexual and gendered identity.

While Spivak's engagement with the seminal issues faced by the subaltern in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raised an increased awareness and consciousness with regard to the nature of epistemic violence which the subalterns had to live through on the one hand and Mohante revisited the tenets of western feminism critiquing its failure to include the problems of the third world women in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" on the other hand, we still stand at the crossroads of self doubt and introspection wherein the question of what is patriarchally sanctioned remains the status quo. Going against the grains, the feminist discourse have made tremendous impact and brought in a remarkable change to the dominant ideologies, and writers like Roxane Gay have addressed the issues related to body structure through her memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*; a narrative which has been read along the lines of fat studies, body shaming, visual bullying and so on. The memoir has not been perused for locating how the female body, which had been traumatized by means of explicit sexual violence, has been employed in a transformative mode, to reorient and "challenge fatphobia and reconstitute fat stigmatization into self-empowerment" (*Lizzo's Black*, 3). For Gay, the journey of expressing herself and her experiences were fraught with many difficulties, mainly resulting from the insecurities she had with her not so normal body. Taking recourse to her past with the aid of her memory, Gay uses

her body as the tool to express her self; her body being identified as a repository of those memories which are evocative of the traumatic past she struggled with throughout her life.

Gay, opens her memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* thus: "Every *body* has a story and a history. Here I offer mine with a memoir of my body and my hunger" (My emphasis, 1). Locating her body as the trope for asserting her big, fat, black female body in a highly judgmental world of male gaze, Gay unearths her past via the thread of memories she employs to map her journey towards self-acceptance. Emphasizing that the narrative is more about her body and her hunger, Gay acknowledges her body for what it is and not for what it ought to be according to the standard beauty ideals. By not assigning a success parameter to the narrative, Gay confesses her struggle of recording her encounter with the attempt of disciplining her undisciplined body (with a high BMI), according to medical terminology.

Gay's narrative centering her body as an active site of memory unfolds the traumatic events of her life. Recounting her journey to obesity is however replete with one of the traumatic incident she experienced when she was 12 years old; she was gangraped by her boyfriend and his friends. More than the incidental trauma inflicted upon Gay, what is to be addressed is that Gay, being one who had internalized the patriarchal notion what is normal to the male gaze had accepted that a girl with a sleek, slender body is the desirable one and she fitted into the norms when she was raped which is ironical. Reading through the visibility factor which Gay is addressing here also attests to the fact that being a black person she ought not to be visible and hence she divides her life journey into two – "there is the before and the after" (9). The stigma factor which envelops Gay, Black, fat, and female, which was expected to function as discredited identities is addressed in a resilient mode. Gay notes that she wanted to be over visible through over eating so that her over visible obese body would challenge the male gaze through the politics of visibility.

The memoir, oscillating between her present and the past, also offers the space for recording the harsh realities of the world. While the undesirableness attached with a fat body gave Gay to save herself from similar chaotic moves in her life, it had its own echoes which she finds in the uncomfortable feeling she develops with her body. Equating her body to that of a cage, Gay painfully accepts that her life after rape was not good, "My memories of the after are scattered, fragmentary..." (15). Her body inscribes her pain, the trauma she lived with. Her memories of her childhood recorded in the photographs her mother captured serve as a signpost of how her life turned from comfort to being uncomfortable. Recounting how she was fearful of making new friendships and relationships during her educational phase, Gay takes her narrative to reveal the ordeals and the realizations she experienced and how the reality shows tracking on size transformation were constantly reminding her of the toxic nature of how fatphobia rules the world.

Fatphobia, very prevalent in the West, shames those who are on the healthier side of body proposition. What accompanies fatphobia is the forced acceptance of hatred, which Gay also experiences in her own life. Moving from heterosexual relationships to live in relationships to homosexual ones, unable to find a comfortable zone, and aggravated by the medical myth of thinspiration, Gay begins to hate herself for everything that led her to be how she was. However, the hunger which Gay was having, was one of recognition and acceptance. She wanted to be treated as normal but she was afraid of the looks she received from others, "Looks matter. Bodies matter" (119).

The effort to control an unruly body was a mess whenever Gay attempted to do so. Nevertheless, cooking on her own made her realize that she was capable and worthy of taking care of herself. Having experienced a plethora of disappointments, breakdowns, humiliation and rejection, Gay sets on the path to accept her body and her worth. Criticizing how others disrespected her body and mistreated her as a man, Gay observes that she is erased of her gendered identity as well as of her femininity. The feeling of being loved while she was admitted at a hospital for her ankle injury gave Gay a new insight to her self: "The most profound of those realizations was that part of the healing is taking care of your body and learning how to have a humane relationship with your body" (200). Living with her body, Gay finally realizes the power her body holds for her: "My body offers me the power of presence. My body is powerful" (214).

The unpolitical side of learning and unlearning the experiences of her body begins the moment Gay decides to overcome the trauma by forcing her body to be oversized. The act gains more relevance when Gay decides to express the experiences in black and white while accepting the fact that writing about her body was not an easy task. The writings of Elaine Showalter, Helene Cixous and Virginia Woolf too argued for constructing a space for woman where they could express themselves without any inhibition. Cixous was right when she said: "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies [...] Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own involvement" (875). Speaking for

herself and writing about herself is an essential response towards claiming their subjectivity deviant from how the patriarchal norms had objectified them. Gay notes in her memoir:

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, more often than not, stories of bodies like mine are ignored or dismissed or derided. People see bodies like mine and make their assumptions. They think they know the why of my body. They do not. This is not a story of triumph, but this is a story that demands to be told and deserves to be heard. (2)

The taboo associated with what should be expressed and what should not be equally goes well with how Gay narrated her embodied experiences about her body. Her attempt at defying the social judgment about obesity or fatness is linked with her urge to claim her identity in the society as an individual. She writes, "People see bodies like mine and make assumptions. They think they know the why of my body. They do not. . .this is a book about disappearing and being lost and wanting so much, wanting to be seen and understood. . ." (2). She continues thus:

My fat body empowers people to erase my gender. I am a woman, but they do not see me as a woman. I am often mistaken for a man. I am called "Sir," because people look at the bulk of me and ignore my face, my styled hair, my very ample breasts and other curves. It bothers me to have my gender erased, to be unseen in plain sight. I am a woman. I am large, but I am a woman. I deserve to be seen as such. We have such narrow ideas about femininity. When you are very tall and wide and, well, I guess the tattoos don't help, you too often present as "not woman." Race plays a part in this too. Black women are rarely allowed their femininity. (75)

Roxane Gay expresses unabashedly of the politics which runs on the discourse of body,

how being slim is associated with being happy and how being fat implies unhappiness, which if perceived through an objective lens stands no ground. The complexities which Gay went through could be seen as a consequence of the popular culture messages where Gay was attacked with body shaming. However, Gay's narrative positions itself as a mode of resisting such stereotypes and subverts the baneful side of beauty myth: "There is a price to be paid for visibility, and there is even more of a price to be paid when you are hyper-visible. I am opinionated, and as a cultural critic, I share my opinions regularly. I am confident in my opinions and believe I have a right to share my point of view without apology" (180).

Exploring the nuances of living in a fat body, constantly being judged and challenged of her body contours, Gay addressed how her unruly body was a site of torture, trauma, body shaming, cultural challenges, social stereotyping, marginalization and rejection. Opening up her encounter with the unaccommodating society and culture, Gay structures her memoir to record the complexities of acceptance and rejection and seeks to argue for those fat people who fall miserably into invisibility. The fatphobia that she faced is culturally driven since "the culture puts a lot of energy into forcing people to stay in that sad place of unquestioned fatphobia" (Tovar 18). Writing about her journey to become oversized and the challenges she had so as to accommodate her body was not an easy effort as Gay herself claims in her memoir. The hunger she had was for an oversized body which would keep her away from any outside harm. But Gay's hunger is more than what the society could accept and Gay's activism towards fat studies is in itself a resistance to the hegemonic practices and belief systems. Gay's *Hunger* could thus be read as a counter-hegemonic narrative in the field of cultural studies.

Roxane Gay's memoir, *Hunger*, in the broader context of feminist discourse, thus encourages introspection and a re-evaluation of the patriarchal norms that perpetuate violence, discrimination, humiliation and marginalization of the other sexes. As Gay confronts the struggles and triumphs of her body, re-imagining her body as a powerful entity, the path is paved for a more inclusive perception of how bodies are diverse, challenging the ingrained notion of fatphobia and advocating for self acceptance. Fleshing out the bitter truth of her past thus, Roxane Gay through her memoir is championing the call to redefine the societal standards and avowing the need to embrace the differences not as differences but as something which can enhance and empower the self worth of an individual.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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