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Regaining Body Image Positivity and Self-Acceptance: A Study on Social Gaze in Laura Dockrill's *Big Bones*

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Abstract: Body Studies has become prominent in the stream of humanities. Contemporary issues of femininity have pertained more on the way in which the Body image of women is fixed by the structured norms of culture and society. Anorexia Nervosa has become the strongest psychic ailment in the current society as like as hysteria during the early decades of twentieth century. Thus, adopting Body Image Positivity is mandatory to make oneself feel optimistic and to challenge the beauty standards pertaining to gender. Laura Dockrill's *Big Bones* unravel the story of Bluebell, a confident girl of teens and her strong views to question the ideologies of the society and the Medical Industry, when they nurture girls and women to adapt an image of female body related to social constructs. The study explores Dockrill's *Big Bones* by substantiating it with the perspectives of Naomi Wolf to provide a solution for the problems related to female Body Image. The objective of the study is to explore the fabricated conventions of female Body Standards, the ways to maintain Body Image Positivity and to achieve the freedom and individuality of beauty. The paper further unravels the factors attributed to family sectors and the pressure they place on young children to maintain the conventional beauty standards.

Keywords: *Body image positivity, self-acceptance, beauty standards, gender, societal constructs*

Introduction

Body Studies is a comprehensive field that overlaps with sociology, psychology, anthropology and cultural studies. In recent decades it offers predominantly to the stream of disability studies by embracing the vulnerability of the body irrespective of the rigid norms of society. The society has formulated a body image for each gender and those who fail to meet the same are judged, shunned and triggered emotionally. Thus, maintaining an accepted body image has become central to the modern society. The term “body image” was coined by Paul Schilder in his book *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (1999). Body Image, as far as Schilder’s view is concerned, is a picture that humans have about their own body in their mind. Schilder points that the body image is not static but is a continuous “inner self-construction and self-destruction” (16). An individual’s psyche is strongly shaped by the experience of the surroundings. Schilder has expressed this as, “experience of our body, image and experience of the bodies of others are closely interwoven with each other. Just as our emotions and actions are inseparable from the body-image, the emotions and actions of others are inseparable from their bodies” (16). The emergence and popularity of media have further contributed to the stream of maintaining a so-called perfect posture. Thus, upholding the ideology of Body-image positivity and the concept of self-acceptance is mandatory to enjoy self-love and preserve the mental state of humans.

Sandra Bartky in her article “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power” has connected the concept of panopticon with that of female body studies. Jeremy Bentham’s concept of panopticon focuses on the constant surveillance and the functioning of the power. It is a “state of conscious and permanent visibility” (27). Bartky has pointed out the way in which women endorse patriarchy upon themselves by making themselves fit within the norms of the society. Profound modernization has imposed several practices in achieving the notion of gender specificity. The prominent practices include maintaining a body of certain size by adopting various strategies of exercises and plans of dieting (27). Media circulates information stacked with way to lose weight and to maintain a figure. Dieticians and health practitioners have prepared diet charts designed specifically for men and women and that further bears several supplements to maintain an accepted figure. Maintaining body postures, gesture and movement has become yet another prominent element. It is segregated with patriarchal differences victimising women than that of men. In the modern society the institutionalised power has got shifted and it no longer appears to be imposed forcefully on women. It appears as it emerges from the power that lingers within them for years. “The disciplinary techniques through which the “docile bodies” of women are constructed aim at a regulation that is perpetual and exhaustive – a regulation of the body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and general comportment in space, and the appearance of each of its visible parts.” (41) says Bartky in her article, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power.”

Aim of Research

The study “Regaining Body-Image Positivity and Self-Acceptance: A Study on Social Gaze in Laura Dockrill’s *Big Bones*” primarily focuses on the problems that a teenager endures on her way of breaking all the fabricated norms of feminine body image. The paper explores the negative effects of bullying, one of the bitter traits of social gaze and the judgements formulated upon a body image that has failed to meet up the strategies of the society. The research problem that the study aspires to prove include: what are the factors that imposed upon a woman, even from her teenage, to maintain an accepted body-image? What are the ways to develop acceptance, love and care about oneself? What is the prominence in gaining body-image positivity, by gaining the strength to destroy all the bullying and the criteria structured by the medical field to produce an accepted feminine form?

Review of literature and Research Gap

Studies that are already been done on Body studies include: “Body Perceptions and Psychological Well-Being: A Review of the Impact of Social Media and Physical Measurements on Self-Esteem and Mental Health with a Focus on Body Image Satisfaction and its Relationship with Cultural and Gender Factors” by Mariana Merino and her colleagues focuses mainly on the media Gaze and its impacts on women. “The Rise of Body Studies and the Embodiment of Society: A Review of the Field” by Chris Shilling explores the general analysis on reading classical works and substantiated the reason behind the social analysis on body. “Positive Body Image: A Qualitative Study on the Successful experiences of Adolescents, Teachers, and Parents” by G Tort-Nasarre and team analysed the prominence in gaining body image positivity, while a negative perspective on one’s own self ruins the mental health. Research on exploring the negative impact on physical bullying and process of destroying the same to develop love for oneself has not explored so far. Thus, the current study “Regaining Body Image Postivity and Self Acceptance: A Study on Social Gaze in Laura Dockrill’s *Big Bones*” provides solution to the evil effect of bullying by analysing a modern girl Bluebelle, through the lens of Naomi Wolf and provides a study that is relevant for the current century. The study has explored a fragmented theoretical research gap by exploring the body image positivity theory of Naomi Wolf and Paul Schilder.

Methodology

The study undergoes qualitative research and furnishes the article in descriptive manner. Data is collected from the interviews conducted by Mental Health Foundation and the Body Image Report created by them has become a major source. Several articles by Sandra Bartky, Ms. Himanshi Tyagi and Dr. Mohammad Imran are analysed also the major theorists referred for the study are Paul Schilder and Naomi Wolf to provide a detailed analysis on Body Image.

Societal Relevance

The study is relevant for current society as even today, women's worth is judged based on their appearance. Job market hires women who appear physically structured by giving least importance to women who have higher qualifications. Women who are unable to fit within the formulated physical figure struggle hard to gain a secured stability within the society. Social institutions become a place for extreme bullying that has even reached a state of plundering a girl's education and making herself feel hatred. Thus, the research is prominent and relevant for the modern society by offering valuable insights to adopt self-love and acceptance when the whole society demands things that are unreal.

Discussion

Beauty standards for women have become crucial in all the streams of the world. Naomi Wolf, American feminist and controversy theorist has published a famous book *The Beauty Myth* (1991). The book details the way in which the concept of beauty has got created as a myth by making the patriarchal norms stronger. Even though the movements advocated for women preserved the feminine power and made them independent, the beauty myth has become a "violent backlash against feminism" (10). Wolf has provided strong statements that has destroyed the attitude of the society. Beauty myth considers beauty as a woman's embodiment (Wolf 12). Beauty is totally political and truly materialistic. It is not fixed or universal as far as Wolf's concept of beauty is concerned. Once women have achieved financial independence, their qualification or eligibility for the job was judged based on "Professional Beauty Qualification" (PBQ). The firms considered those institutionalised traits as prominent mainly to reject women and suppress them in another way. The women who fail to meet up the same are made to feel lowered through passing derogatory comments on them. Such bullying has also generated hunger related issues like anorexia nervosa and bulimia which are generally ignored as mere things. Dieting and "Self-inflicted Semistarvation" (193) has severe impact on a woman's future causing even fertility issues. Naomi Wolf has posited the institutionalisation of beauty myth as:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. (12)

Bluebelle in *Big Bones* by Laura Dockrill is an example of a modern teenager who is not bothered about achieving the fabricated norms of beauty standards. She is against the views of beauty standards opposing the rigid norms formulated decades ago. "Psychology and Body Image: A Review"

by G. K. Tiwari and Sanjay Kumar has reported that “the males and females differ in their levels of body satisfaction with females reporting lower body satisfaction as compared to males. The females want to lose their weight whereas males desire to increase muscle mass” (4) Bluebelle has stated that and feels very much annoyed when she was taken to the hospital by her mother to receive a satisfied body image. Satisfaction is no longer attained till she reaches the accepted body image even though she is satisfied with the same. Bluebelle says, “Boys see to want to be big. Full of bravado and banter and big and loud it seems the world want us girls to be tiny and petite and taken care of.... I embrace my body. It’s mine. And I live inside it” (21). The Mental Health Foundation has conducted a survey on adolescent female and came with a conclusion that nearly 37% teenagers feel upset and ashamed of their body types. One in eight are consistently suffering from suicidal thought about their body image (The Mental Health Foundation). The experts of the foundation feels that pressure from the family and society to attain “an ideal body type” (The Mental Health Foundation) has driven the young adults to such a state. This is evident when the nurse commented “most girls normally hate getting on the scales” (4) when Bluebelle appears to be not feeling embarrassed of her size.

Naomi Wolf then focuses on the media gaze on women. She has explored the ways in which feminist magazines edited columns supporting female independence and the same magazines publish advertisements of women maintaining ideal body image. Wolf suggests that such posture provoke “self-hatred in women” (73). “These makeup the beauty index, which women scan as anxiously as men scan stock reports.... Women are mis-informed and exaggerate the magnitude of thinness men desire” (73) says Wolf. All such misinformation is provided by the diet industry and the magazines promote it to maintain economic standards. Laura Dockrill presented the mental state of people who are considered to be over-weight, when they watch media projecting the roles of fat people as lazy or as those who eat excessively. Bluebelle expresses it as,

I always used to think in films and stuff when a fat actor playing a ‘fat’ character gets called ‘fat’ in the film or whatever – does it not hurt their feelings? But it’s a fact. They know they went up for an audition to play a big person. It’s not a shock to them the same way it’s not a shock if somebody is old. Or tall. It’s not just because I have eyes that I know I’m fat. It’s not even the fact that people think that because you’re fat your’re even the fact that people think that because you’re fat you’re also gross. As if being fat means you’d eat something off the floor or have B.O. or stinky feet or are really lazy. That you keep a line of crushed, damp Doritos under the flab of your breast rolls. Sleep with a baguette in the crease of your elbow, just in case. All of that annoys me but it’s not how I know I’m fat. It’s not even the fact that the sensors of my cat-whisker hips don’t work and my bum always ends up knocking ornaments off shelves in those weird little card shops or sends china salt and pepper pots flying in

restaurants as I squeeze past a table. And we all know we've squeezed in that little bit too far at a table to overly let the fat girl past. (236, 237)

Women are subjected to "Professional Beauty Qualification", even though they are intellectually fit for the job market. Through institutionalised Body Image under the norms of "Professional Beauty Qualification", they are made economically weak to again fall themselves under the shade of men. "Women accepted the professional Beauty Qualification more quietly than other labor pools have reacted to unreasonable, ricocheting, unnegotiated employer demands" (29) says Naomi Wolf. Laura Dockrill has shown Bluebelle losing her job just because of her obesity. Even though she does everything to get selected, she was denied of the job. Bluebelle expresses her mental pangs as "... It's different for me with wanting to be a boss or run a company or start a business or something.... Because, Dove, people don't like putting a fat person in a position of power – the addition is too obvious" (68). Eating habits of women are disturbed totally because of excessive "dieting" (193) habits and "semi-starvation" (193) activities. Wolf posits that if woman imposes herself into starvation to attain an ideal body image, then they "lose their ability to function in work and social contexts due to apathy, reduced energy and alertness, social isolation and decreased sexual interest" (194) Reducing food intake to attain an ideal feminine figure led to eating disorders like "anorexia nervosa and bulimia" (194).

Bluebelle is not that girl who wishes to attain an ideal feminine figure. But constant exposure to bullying and the rejection that she faces everywhere because of her physique naturally made her to hate food. She describes an incident "once a girl threw a chip at me on the top deck of the bus and sniggered, 'Eat it fatty' holding myself together until I got off and cried so hard I nearly died." (78) All such things make Bluebelle to hate food. A person who has more love for food started to hate the same. Such sudden aversion has shown the dilemma that Bluebelle has been carrying so long. Lauren E. Jones in his essay "The Framing of Fat: Narratives of Health and Disability in Fat Discrimination Litigation", explains the effect of bullying on children. They "are classified as obese and sixty percent more likely to be bullied" (8). It has severe effect on their life and education. Bluebelle decides to quit her schooling because of the bullying that she faces each day at school. Semi-starvation and dieting cause psychological problems. Naomi Wolf connects it with psychic disorder like hysteria. Eating disorders arise especially through dieting. Wolf says, "dieting itself may be a sufficient condition for the development of anorexia nervosa and bulimia" (196) Dockrill in the novel has portrayed Bluebelle as a victim of excessive bullying. She was constantly isolated by her classmates, judged and treated as a girl who is just born to eat. They tag her as "you have asthma because you are fat Anybody that looks like you in our photographs will ruin them... and that makes you disgusting" (281). All such comments once triggered Bluebelle and she forcefully vomited the food that she has by inserting a metal hanger inside her throat. "...now I've gone and eaten all this crap that I didn't even want for no

good reason whatsoever. It will stick to me, the new fat, calories clinging to my face like hamster cheeks. I have to get it out I reach for my coat hanger Urgently shoving the hanger down my throat so fast I don't even notice how it feels" (282).

Paul Schilder discusses the way in which a person's perception of a body-image changes as per his/her contact with the external world. He says, "The postural model of our own body is connected with the postural model of the bodies of others. There are connections between the postural models of fellow human beings. We experience the body-images of others. Experience of our body-image and experience of the bodies of others are closely interwoven with each other. Just as our emotions and actions are inseparable from the body-image, the emotions and actions of others are inseparable from their bodies" (16). In *Big Bones*, Bluebelle loves the way she is initially. But the influence of the society and the impact of the bullying that she faces made her to hate herself. "No matter how much I'd like to say it doesn't bother me, I do sometimes flirt with the idea of being thin and how much easier that might make my life" (123). Parents are driven by the idea of ideal feminine image, thus they make their children adopt a certain way of life and habits to achieve the same. Bluebelle expresses that sufferings as:

If you think I'm fat, just say. If you want me to get to the gym because you think I'm fat, then just tell me. Don't pretend it's because it will make you look like a bad mum if I don't go. Sorry I'm not a skinny-minnie like you and Dove, sorry I can't eat a whole burger and chips like you two and not feel the fat physically attach itself onto me, sorry that people laugh at me and point at me and make comments about me, that I'm embarrassed whenever I point you out as my mum and have people stare back at me in disbelief and make cruel jokes about me because I'm so BIG. That YOU pushed ME out. That it's a miracle that I didn't break you. I hate it that I can't share clothes with you and Dove. That we can't even go shopping together because I don't want people to comment on us. That some shops don't have my size, even. That I tower above you. That I can't even get on some rollercoaster rides, that people describe me as "big", that they assume I'll want a "large" of everything, assume I'm a liability, that I'm a whale, that I'm not a girl, that I can't be gentle, or feminine, or myself. Because that's all I'm being, Mum, myself. Or I'm just trying.' I can't help it: the tears roll down my cheeks fast now and my voice cracks and trembles. (196, 197)

The solution for all the problems related to body-image is to have an acceptance of his/her own body type. The reason behind all such issues is the "lack of choice" (272) One should love oneself and should not blame for having a certain body-image. Everyone should adopt a positive body-image and self-acceptance. "Blame is what fuels the beauty myth; to take it apart, let us refuse forever to blame ourselves and other women for what it, in its great strength has tried to do" (275). Such acceptance has elevated the life of Bluebelle when she starts to do things for herself and begins to perceive and accept

things as they are. Bluebelle decides to continue her schooling once she was rejected from her job. She understands that people who judge her with her body type is present in all areas. “Self love needs reminding. Needs activating and strengthening. You have to love yourself. It’s the start of everything, the rest will follow naturally” (340). Bluebelle’s worries about her body-image have changed once she has open conversation with her family and friends. They accept her as the way she is, when they find her with clear ideologies and love for herself. “And if I could talk to little me now, I would tell her that she’d matter more to me than anybody will ever matter. Look at you now, Bluebelle, Just look” (374). Believing one self by not feeling bothered about the fabricated ideologies about the body-image gradually helps one to approach the world with great confidence.

Conclusion

The findings of the study state the harmony in accepting oneself irrespective of all the strategies advertised to maintain an accepted body image. One has to prioritise one’s health over the beauty conceptions. Sacrificing health by consuming the beauty supplements charted by the media may produce negative effects that are hard to be resolved. People should be able to understand that the advertisements to have a so-called perfect figure is for economic reasons. Media publicise and encourage such advertisements to improve their financial standards. Thus, self-love and self-acceptance helps individuals especially women to hold Body Image Positivity. Blaming or having regrets about one’s own body image will lead to extreme stress and hatred. Cherishing the life by prioritising one’s health is the option for happiness, optimism and love. Social gaze is unable to change instead body positivity awareness can be given to the society. But, loving and accepting oneself over the negative judgements is the major step to furnish and execute the solution.

Limitations

The study is limited to the concept of body image positivity. It has analysed the factors regarding the same and has explored the impact of beauty standards politicised by media among teenagers. The research is restricted to the theorists Naomi Wolf and Paul Schilder. It has not analysed any other theorists to derive the results.

Scope for Further Research

The research can further be done by comparing Laura Dockrill with Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to analyse the concepts of disciplinary practices and gender performativity respectively. A study on food theory can also be done to analyse the effect on food and a woman’s psyche on her verge to maintain the structured beauty standards. Concept of feminism can also be applied to analyse the impact of patriarchy expressed through media and generally on society.

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