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Consuming the Body: Fat Studies, Gender, and the Politics of Appetite in Asako Yuzuki's *Butter*

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Abstract: Asako Yuzuki's *Butter* offers a powerful literary exploration of gender, food, body politics, and social control in contemporary Japan. Inspired by the real-life case of convicted serial killer Kanae Kijima, the novel examines the cultural anxieties surrounding female appetite, fatness, beauty, and desire. This article studies *Butter* through the frameworks of fat studies, feminist theory, Foucauldian body politics, and media studies in order to analyse how the novel critiques patriarchal constructions of femininity and bodily discipline. The article argues that Yuzuki dismantles dominant cultural narratives that equate female thinness with morality and fatness with excess or deviance. Through the character of Manako Kajii and the transformation of journalist Rika Machida, the novel reveals how food becomes a site of resistance against social surveillance and gendered expectations. *Butter* challenges neoliberal ideals of self-regulation through its exploration of pleasure, appetite, and embodiment, while also opening a space for reimagining body positivity beyond commercialized media discourse.

Keywords: *Fat Studies, Body Positivity, Body Politics, Gender Studies, Appetite and Embodiment*

Introduction

Contemporary discussions on body positivity and fat studies increasingly interrogate the cultural systems that regulate women's bodies through shame, discipline, and surveillance. Literature has become an important site for examining these anxieties because literary narratives often expose the emotional and psychological dimensions of bodily control more effectively than sociological discourse alone. Asako Yuzuki's *Butter* enters this debate through its unsettling portrayal of food, appetite, and femininity in modern Japanese society.

The novel revolves around Rika Machida, a journalist investigating Manako Kajii, a woman accused of seducing and murdering lonely men through elaborate home-cooked meals. Kajii is repeatedly described by the media as fat, unattractive, manipulative, and excessive. Yet Yuzuki gradually complicates these assumptions by exposing the misogyny embedded in media narratives and social expectations surrounding women's bodies. The novel moves beyond crime fiction and becomes a profound commentary on bodily politics, female hunger, and cultural violence.

Susan Bordo argues that “the body is a text of culture” (165), and Yuzuki's novel demonstrates precisely how female bodies become surfaces onto which society projects fear, morality, and discipline. In *Butter*, food functions not merely as nourishment but as a language of power, intimacy, rebellion, and identity. Kajii's unapologetic appetite directly opposes patriarchal ideals of feminine restraint. Her body threatens social order because it refuses invisibility.

This article examines *Butter* through the theoretical frameworks of fat studies, feminist literary criticism, and Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and surveillance. It argues that the novel critiques the cultural policing of women's bodies while simultaneously questioning media representations that construct fat women as morally dangerous. Through its treatment of food and embodiment, *Butter* reclaims appetite as a political and psychological force.

Fatness, Visibility, and Social Anxiety

Fat studies scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that fatness is culturally produced as a sign of failure, lack of control, or moral weakness. Kathleen LeBesco notes that “fatness has become a visible sign of irresponsibility” (3). This social logic is deeply embedded in *Butter*, where Kajii's body becomes more scandalous than the murders themselves. Newspaper reports obsess over her weight, eating habits, and sexual relationships, transforming her into a spectacle.

Yuzuki exposes the violence of this representation by revealing how media narratives reduce women to bodily surfaces. Kajii is not treated as an individual but as a grotesque cultural symbol. Her

body becomes a public text open to scrutiny and condemnation. The media repeatedly associates her appetite with corruption and criminality, reinforcing the assumption that women who consume excessively are socially dangerous.

At one point, Kajii remarks, “People can forgive a beautiful woman for almost anything, but not a fat woman” (Yuzuki 84). This statement becomes central to the novel’s critique of beauty culture. Thinness operates as social capital, while fatness produces exclusion and ridicule. Kajii’s observation exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal morality: society condemns women not because they are unethical but because they fail to conform aesthetically.

The cultural fear surrounding fat women emerges from anxieties about excess and autonomy. Fat bodies challenge neoliberal ideals of discipline and productivity because they appear to reject self-control. Michel Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power becomes useful here. Foucault argues that modern society regulates bodies through surveillance and normalization rather than direct force. He writes that “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (26). Kajii’s refusal to discipline herself threatens precisely this system.

Unlike conventional representations of women who internalize shame regarding food and appearance, Kajii embraces pleasure unapologetically. She refuses dieting, calorie counting, and bodily self-hatred. Her confidence unsettles both men and women because it undermines the cultural economy of female insecurity. As a result, her body becomes politically disruptive.

Food, Appetite, and Feminine Transgression

Food in *Butter* functions as more than domestic labour; it becomes an expression of female agency and emotional power. Historically, patriarchal culture has associated women with cooking and nourishment while simultaneously restricting women’s own appetites. Women are expected to prepare food for others without indulging themselves.

Yuzuki subverts this contradiction through Kajii’s culinary philosophy. She insists that pleasure is essential to life and rejects the idea that women must shrink themselves physically or emotionally. “If you deny yourself butter and soy sauce,” Kajii says, “you deny yourself happiness” (Yuzuki 112). The statement appears simple, yet it carries significant ideological weight. Butter becomes a symbol of pleasure, abundance, and resistance to bodily regulation.

Feminist theorist Sandra Gilbert famously argued that women in literature are often divided into binaries of the “angel” and the “monster” (812). Kajii occupies the role of the monstrous woman because she refuses passivity and restraint. Her appetite destabilizes traditional femininity. She cooks

lavish meals, consumes rich foods, and manipulates social expectations surrounding domestic femininity.

The novel also critiques the gendered politics of dieting culture. Rika initially embodies neoliberal femininity: overworked, undernourished, emotionally exhausted, and constantly conscious of her body. She survives on convenience-store meals and performs discipline through self-denial. Her life reflects what Bordo calls “the tyranny of slenderness” (185).

As Rika begins eating Kajii’s recipes, however, her relationship with her body slowly changes. Food becomes associated with pleasure rather than guilt. Cooking enables her to reconnect with her emotions, desires, and memories. The transformation is psychological as much as physical.

One of the novel’s most striking moments occurs when Rika realizes that “eating well was not indulgence but survival” (Yuzuki 176). This realization challenges neoliberal health culture, which often disguises body policing as wellness discourse. Yuzuki suggests that deprivation does not produce liberation; instead, it produces alienation from the self.

Media Representation and the Construction of the Monstrous Woman

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes toward female bodies in *Butter*. Kajii is sensationalized not merely because of her alleged crimes but because she contradicts dominant ideals of femininity. Her fatness becomes inseparable from media portrayals of danger and manipulation.

Fat studies scholar Roxane Gay argues that “fat people are seen as lacking discipline and self-respect” (14). Yuzuki’s novel dramatizes this prejudice through journalists, television commentators, and online discussions that portray Kajii as grotesque and deceptive. The media constructs a narrative in which fatness itself appears criminal.

The novel therefore critiques what Laura Mulvey terms the “male gaze,” which transforms women into visual objects regulated through patriarchal standards of desirability. Kajii resists this gaze because she refuses to seek approval. Her indifference to beauty norms becomes threatening.

Rika’s own career as a journalist implicates her within these systems of representation. Initially, she participates in sensational reporting. But, her growing relationship with Kajii forces her to confront the ethical violence of media discourse. She gradually recognizes that the public obsession with Kajii’s body reveals deeper cultural misogyny.

Yuzuki demonstrates how media narratives erase complexity. Kajii becomes a caricature rather than a human being. Even when discussing murder investigations, reporters focus obsessively on her eating habits and physical appearance. Such representation reflects what bell hooks calls “the oppositional gaze,” where marginalized individuals challenge dominant visual structures and reclaim agency (116).

The novel ultimately exposes how body shaming functions as social control. By humiliating fat women publicly, media culture reinforces conformity and self-surveillance among all women.

Body Positivity Beyond Consumer Culture

While *Butter* critiques body shaming, it also complicates contemporary body positivity movements. Much mainstream body positivity discourse has been absorbed into consumer culture, where self-love becomes a marketable identity rather than a political challenge.

Yuzuki avoids simplistic empowerment narratives. Kajii is neither idealized nor morally purified. She remains manipulative, contradictory, and unsettling. The novel insists that bodily autonomy cannot depend upon moral perfection. Women should not have to become socially acceptable in order to deserve dignity.

This complexity aligns with contemporary fat studies scholarship, which critiques the commercialization of body positivity. Sonya Renee Taylor argues that liberation requires rejecting systems that profit from bodily shame. She writes, “No one profits from your self-love” (41). In *Butter*, food represents an alternative ethic grounded in pleasure, care, and embodiment rather than punishment.

The relationship between food and memory further deepens the novel’s political concerns. Meals connect characters to childhood, intimacy, and emotional history. Cooking becomes a form of communication that resists the isolation of urban capitalist life. One particularly significant line appears when Kajii tells Rika, “The people who fear butter are usually afraid of life itself” (Yuzuki 214). *Butter* symbolizes fullness, desire, sensuality, and emotional openness. The fear of food therefore reflects a broader fear of female autonomy.

The novel also critiques contemporary work culture, especially its impact on women’s bodies. Rika’s exhaustion results from a system that demands productivity while denying emotional fulfillment. Her gradual recovery through cooking suggests that nourishment is both physical and psychological.

Feminist Resistance and Embodied Agency

Yuzuki's novel ultimately redefines resistance through embodiment. Rather than presenting political rebellion through overt activism, *Butter* locates resistance within everyday acts of eating, cooking, and refusing shame.

Judith Butler argues that gender norms are maintained through repeated performances (191). Kajii disrupts these performances by refusing feminine modesty and bodily restraint. She refuses invisibility. Her confidence destabilizes cultural expectations surrounding how women should consume space, food, and desire.

The politics of appetite become especially important because patriarchal culture often equates feminine virtue with self-denial. Women are expected to minimize themselves emotionally and physically. Kajii's unapologetic hunger therefore becomes politically radical. Yuzuki avoids romanticizing fatness. She, Instead, exposes the violence of a society that turns bodies into moral indicators. The novel insists that women's worth cannot be measured through size, beauty, or discipline.

This argument becomes especially relevant in contemporary digital culture, where social media intensifies bodily surveillance. Images circulate rapidly, producing impossible standards of beauty and wellness. In this context, *Butter* becomes a literary intervention against cultures of shame. Rika's transformation throughout the novel reflects a gradual rejection of patriarchal self-policing. By learning to cook and eat differently, she begins reclaiming her emotional and bodily autonomy. Her journey suggests that body positivity must involve more than self-esteem; it requires dismantling systems that equate thinness with virtue.

Conclusion

Asako Yuzuki's *Butter* offers a compelling critique of body politics, media representation, and gendered expectations in contemporary society. Through its exploration of food, appetite, and fatness, the novel challenges dominant cultural narratives that associate female worth with thinness and self-restraint. Kajii's body becomes a site of ideological struggle because it refuses discipline, invisibility, and shame.

Using insights from fat studies, feminist theory, and Foucauldian analysis, this article has argued that *Butter* exposes the cultural mechanisms through which women's bodies are monitored and controlled. The novel demonstrates how media representation transforms fat women into spectacles while simultaneously revealing the psychological violence of bodily regulation. *Butter* reclaims

appetite as a form of embodied resistance. Food becomes a language of pleasure, memory, intimacy, and political defiance. Yuzuki ultimately suggests that liberation begins when women reject systems that demand self-erasure in the name of beauty, discipline, or social acceptance. Far from being a simple culinary novel, *Butter* emerges as a profound meditation on gender, desire, and the politics of embodiment in the modern world.

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