



FIGHTING AGAINST BEAUTY STIGMA IN “*BIG GIRL*” (2022) BY MECCA J. SULLIVAN

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Abstract

This research is an analysis of the novel entitled *Big Girl* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan. The purpose of this research is to determine how beauty myth which constructs body stigma affects the main female character depicted in the novel. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method that uses the concept of Beauty Myth by Naomi Wolf, with data taken from the interpretation of sentences or phrases and context to dissect the content of the novel. The findings of the analysis show that the societal construction of body stigma is influenced by and occurs in the form of : social construction of beauty namely the idea that beauty standards are not natural but are formed by culture and society, beauty as social weapon namely beauty is used as a control of social structures to subjugate women, and economic exploitation of beauty namely beauty is used as a tool of commercialization and social control. In conclusion, the beauty myth produces body stigma and glorifies the ideal body according to societal standards that make women believe that their self-worth depends on their appearance.

Key words: beauty myth, body stigma, body acceptance.

A. INTRODUCTION

In today's society, women are free to refuse the conservative beauty standards and make independent choices about their appearance without needing to worry about cultural expectations, such as having slim body, light skin color or pointed nose in order to look attractive. Women who do not conform to these ideals, such as women of color or those with larger body shape, are often excluded. These ideals also continue to control women through appearance-based expectations with capitalist industries who took profit from women's insecurities. An example of this issues can be seen from the American singer, Lizzo, who had to face not only weight stigma but also racism because she is Black. Lizzo rejects these narrow beauty standards and is confident without hiding her body shape

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proving that fat Black women are also talented and attractive. She also raise awareness concerning the importance of body positivity and self-acceptance especially for fat Black women who are often marginalized.

However, despite the freedom to refuse, there are still many women who follow the beauty standards imposed on them. Women's choices especially about their physical appearance often influenced and even steered by the community they live with or through advertisement of beauty products. This standards required women to look impeccable and placed women on what defined as beautiful women especially about their physical appearance like having a slim body. This beauty norms leads to stigmatization around women's body shape.

This beauty standard lead up to the beauty myth term based on the concept of Naomi Wolf who claims that beauty myth is a constructed standard of beauty that pressures women by making them believe their self-worth depends on how they look. As stated by Wolf (1992 : 1) that the ideal was someone tall, thin, white, a face without flaws, someone wholly "perfect".

This beauty norms especially in the United States shaped by the Eurocentric characteristics such as thinness, light skin, and straight hair. Rooted from white supremacy, this standards are deeply interrelated with Naomi Wolf's beauty myth concept. White supremacy has historically justified racial and oppression towards non-white people. On the word of Baird, (2021) Black skin had been degraded so much and Eurocentric ideals exhibit the dominance of whiteness had on Americans beauty norms until at least the Civil Right Movement. Centering Eurocentric features as the ideal and superior, Non-European features such as dark skin and fat bodies have been marginalized and stigmatized.

The world has decided views on Black women. Besides growing up as a woman, being fat and Black was a lifelong and an uphill battle. At this point, Black women with large bodies gets stigmatized which causes the prejudgement to them like body-size stigma, obesity stigma and fatphobia. As stated by Mitchell Dove, (2021) the representation of Black people in mainstream media was infrequent because it was focused on the White people experience. Body-size stigma often experienced by people with fat body or obesity. Anderson & Bresnahan (2013) add body-size is constantly present and difficult to exceed it whether smaller or larger which lead to body dissatisfaction.

In the opinion of Alleva et al., (2021) body-size stigma or weight stigma is depicted by negative behavior against a person based on their body weight and size, specifically towards individuals who are perceived to be "overweight" or "obese". Weight stigma has been associated with maladaptive eating behaviours such as binge eating, loss-of-control eating, motivation to avoid exercise and lower levels doing physical activity as well as high-risk health behaviours, higher rates of depression and mortality.

Beauty myth interconnected with body stigma. The theme of body stigma is portrayed in the novel *"Big Girl"* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan. It portrays a girl named Malaya Clondon, a Black girl who is overweight. At a young age, Malaya has to live up to her family's expectations of what a woman should be and follow the standards set by society. Young Malaya feels burdened because other people think she is ugly because of her weight. Also her mother and grandmother who

demanding her to follow various programs to lose weight. This is a tough challenge for Malaya because apart from the problem of her physical appearance, she is also Black, which is a problem that is doubly bigger because she also lives around White people, namely in Harlem in the late 90s, where racism also often occurs and unfriendly towards Black women. In this novel, Malaya tries to fight against all the stereotypes and stigma she receives and her journey in accepting her identity and finding freedom over her own body.

Despite the tension of this beauty norms, there are also women who fight the stigmatization attached to women. Body positivity movement rejects narrow body ideals and focuses on self-acceptance and respect all body sizes (Westbury et al., 2023). Over the past few years, the term of body positivity have spread quickly in diverse types of media to create new feminist futures beyond Eurocentric therefore body positivity does not have the purpose of changing one's body (its appearance or behavior) but to transform the relation and perception of one's body (Sastre, 2016, as cited in Alm et al., 2021).

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The data was obtained from the novel '*Big Girl*' authored by Mecca J. Sullivan. The data analyzed using qualitative methods. The researcher read excerpts from *Big Girl* (2022) several times using the 'close reading' method and fictional devices such as setting, character, conflict, and plot as a step to analyze the deepest meaning in a text to obtain the interpretation of the novel text and also to ensure relevance after collecting data in the form of excerpts related to the main topic, then continued with the analysis process. The researcher analyzes the data using the concept of Beauty Myth by Naomi Wolf. Then the data presentation method presented in three large groups, to determine societal construction of beauty stigma in *Big Girl* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan, effects of beauty stigma in *Big Girl* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan, and fight against beauty stigma in *Big Girl* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan through Beauty Myth concept.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

The novel *Big Girl* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan analyzes beauty stigma experienced by main character through this research to reveal the problem of beauty stigma in this novel which can be determined from the forms of societal construction of body stigma, effects of beauty stigma, and fighting the beauty stigma.

a. Societal Construction of Beauty Stigma

1. Social Construction of Beauty

Beauty as social weapon align with the concept of beauty myth by Wolf (1992). The societal construction of body stigma creates foundation upon which beauty functions as a weapon to control and regulate women. In this system, beauty is weaponized by transforming women's insecurities into a means of control, which define what kinds of bodies are considered acceptable in society.

In Malaya's experience, since a young age Malaya was taken to Weight Watchers meetings by her mother, which shows how she was introduced to society's expectations of body control and thinness. These meetings taught her to count calories and restrict food intake, shaping her understanding that her body was a problem that needed to be fixed. It can be shown through this quotation :

"Malaya"—Nyela squeezed her hand in the drizzle and pointed her chin toward three women crossing the street in trench coats and umbrellas—"you see those women? Big as houses, over there? I hope you don't ever get that big." Malaya looked again, confused. Each woman could have looked like a house —she supposed it was true. The largest one sort of sprawled like a mansion, and the shortest was tight and round like a shack. "I won't," she said. "I hope you don't," Nyela continued. "People like that are very unhealthy. They lead very unhappy lives, and usually they die." It angered Malaya that her mother could doubt her on so sure an issue as this. Nyela had always seemed to regard her own weight as an irascible young sibling, something to be managed to the point of exasperation in private, and then, in public, defiantly ignored. But lately Nyela had begun to monitor Malaya's eating with a hawkish fastidiousness, and to harp on it in conversations like this. (Ch.1.Pg.11.,Ph.2).

The quotation above shows her mother's expectation that Malaya must maintain her weight so that her appearance is attractive because society has stigmatization towards those in larger bodies. This stigmatization emphasized in the sentence *"People like that are very unhealthy. They lead very unhappy lives, and usually they die"* which indoctrinated to Malaya to become thin so she can avoid negative attitudes since she is also a Black girl and carry a double strike against weight stigma. Malaya learns that being fat means being unworthy, unlovable, and destined for suffering. In a society where beauty ideals are centered on whiteness and thinness, Malaya's blackness and her large body become a social exclusion. This quotation reveals how societal beauty standards, reinforced by family expectations, operates as a form of control that dictates how Malaya should behave in order to be accepted.

2. Beauty as Social Weapon

Wolf (1992) argues that beauty is a social weapon used to maintain control over women in modern society. As women began to gain equality in education, work, and politics, patriarchy created a new form of oppression the beauty myth. Beauty myth manipulates women into believing that physical appearance is the key to happiness. In this sense, beauty becomes a weapon of social control through psychological conditions.

The form of beauty as social weapon can be seen from this quotation :

“I think happiness comes in pieces, My Ly-Ly. Money, looks, a quiet mind that don’t ask too many questions. Power. All those are pieces of what it takes to be happy. No exact science to it, but some things are just true: women are handed fewer pieces of happiness and pay more for ’em. Black women, that goes double. If you’re fat, then double that again. You take a fat black woman with a smart mouth, strange habits, and no sense of shame, and she doesn’t stand a chance, I can tell you.” She looked at Malaya frankly. “Might as well cash in what little happiness she has, go to the buffet, and just stay there. Some women do.” (Ch.19.Pg.211.,Ph.8).

This quotation powerfully exposes how the beauty myth functions as a social weapon that limits women’s access to happiness, power, and social acceptance—especially for Black women in larger bodies like Malaya. Here, beauty operates as a weapon because it defines who is allowed to succeed, to be loved, and to be happy. In a culture where thinness, whiteness, and femininity are valued, Malaya—being a fat, Black girl—starts from a position of social disadvantage. Ma-Mère’s words, though harsh, reflect a social reality where the more a woman deviates from the beauty ideal, the more she is excluded from the “pieces of happiness” society distributes. Beauty thus becomes a form of social currency—a gatekeeper for privilege, opportunity, and respect.

3. Economic Exploitation of Beauty

Wolf (1992) argues that beauty is not merely a cultural idea but also a profitable economic system that exploits women’s insecurities for financial gain. This pressure beauty industries— diet and weight-loss industry, cosmetic surgery, digital beauty industry has become an capitalist tool of control, where women are encouraged to consume endlessly to meet the beauty standards. This form of exploitation of beauty can be seen from this quotation :

“There’s a woman in the class, Cathy. Sweet lady, but big as a houseboat and slow as a barge. But Cathy don’t look like that anymore,” Ma-Mère said. “Been dropping weight so quickly you’d think she got in good with Deus or the devil, one or the other. Either way, she looks like half of herself every time she comes to class. So I asked her—politely as I could—what plan she was doing. But she said ‘gastric bypass.’ You ever heard of that?” Malaya had heard about this surgery on her favorite talk shows, Jenny Jones and Ricki

Lake. There had only been a few operations performed in the US. In Europe, the procedure had helped some people lose a lot of weight quickly, but others had died on the operating table. All of the people in these stories were twice Malaya's age, at least, and smaller than her. The procedure was relatively new and controversial, and most insurance companies wouldn't cover it. (Ch.10.Pg.117.,Ph.3).

In this scene, Ma-Mère's fascination with Cathy's drastic weight loss through gastric bypass surgery reveals how deeply society values physical transformation as a symbol of success and self-discipline. Her language—"big as a houseboat and slow as a barge"—dehumanizes Cathy and mirrors the way capitalist beauty culture encourages people to see large bodies as problems that must be fixed. When Cathy becomes "*half of herself*," she is praised, as though losing part of her body is equivalent to gaining worth. This shows how the beauty system monetizes body dissatisfaction, making women believe they must spend money, endure pain, or take health risks to achieve acceptance.

According to Naomi Wolf, this is what she calls the economic exploitation of beauty—a system where corporations, media, and medical industries profit by keeping women insecure. They create a cycle: women are made to feel inadequate through social pressure, then offered expensive solutions—diet programs, surgeries, products, and treatments—that promise transformation but often cause harm. In Cathy's case, her rapid weight loss makes her socially admired but also exposes her to life-threatening risks, showing how capitalism turns women's bodies into commodities that can be bought, reshaped, and sold.

b. Effects of Beauty Stigma

1. Loss of Self-Expression

According to Naomi Wolf's concept of *The Beauty Myth*, the loss of self-expression occurs when women's identities, choices, and creativity become restricted by society's obsession with physical appearance. The myth also uses shame as a weapon. Women who do not meet beauty ideals are made to feel inferior, leading them to hide parts of themselves—physically and emotionally. This sense of inadequacy limits their confidence to speak, create, or take up space. Wolf argues that this shame is a deliberate social mechanism to keep women quiet, compliant, and distracted. This actually worsened the condition of Malaya leading to delayed treatment of her weight. It can be shown through this quotation:

THE NEXT MORNING, Malaya couldn't get up. It wasn't just the usual longing not to go to school. This feeling was different. It was as though along with the weight of her body, there was another weight on top of her, a larger weight from the outside, pinning her to the bed, pressing on her from the hallway skylight,

pulling at her from the floorboards. Her skin felt heavy, her shoulders felt heavy, all the pulp of stuff from her head to her muscle to her bone and nails felt anchored, impossible to lift. It was like nothing she had ever felt before, and yet it was familiar, a deeper shade of a feeling she had known forever.
(Ch.11.Pg.128.,Ph.1)

Through Naomi Wolf's framework, this moment represents how the beauty myth suppresses women's individuality and self-expression. The myth convinces women that their worth depends on how well they conform to narrow beauty standards—thinness, whiteness, youthfulness. As women internalize these ideals, they lose connection with their inner selves; their energy and creativity are redirected toward shame, self-criticism, and attempts to “fix” their bodies. In Malaya's case, the external stigma has become internalized oppression—the “outer weight” has turned into an “inner heaviness,” paralyzing her both physically and emotionally.

c. Fighting the Beauty Stigma

1. Body Acceptance

Wolf (1992) contend that society uses beauty standards as a form of social control over women. The concept of body acceptance represents an act of resistance against patriarchal and capitalist forces that profit from women's insecurities. Body acceptance is an act to reject those definitions of beauty and emphasize that women's bodies are not objects.

Malaya begins to finding confidence and pleasure in her body even from small acts of recognition where her body is not a problem to solve and let herself enjoy what she truly wants. This can be seen in the following quotation :

NO ONE SEEMED TO NOTICE the changes that mattered. The way Malaya cackled loudly now at chewing gum and concealer ads on the bus, sound pouring out bright and brassy from her mouth. The way she let her arms sway and her hips bop as she sped down Broadway, racing against her own breath. How she let herself crack jokes at dinner, no matter whether Ma-Mère would approve, no matter whether anyone would understand. Now she chose to go places if she wanted to, even if it meant requesting a seat that fit her. Now she talked about her father. Now she touched her mother. Now she let herself do the big, outrageous thing more often than not. But no one saw. What people noticed was the weight. You slimming down, huh? . . . Looking good! What program you doing? . . . I was worried about you . . . How many pounds you lost so far? I know your mama's happy.

Look at the new you! Just don't get too skinny now, ha-ha. A man likes some meat on his bones.(Ch.19.Pg.207.,Ph.1)

From the quotation above it can be seen that Malaya is abandoning standards about how women should behave. Malaya realizes that her body is truly belong to her and a source of freedom to enjoy it in her own way. Her body is no longer an object to be accepted or rejected by others.

Malaya fully embracing self-acceptance as liberation. She refuses body stigma to dictate her life. It can be seen from this quotation :

What Malaya needed was space, and the freedom to move through it. She felt it now, her teal braids wet and flapping in the air while the girls sang and laughed, clapping as she whirled through the rope to the rhythm. Space— movement—was the thrill. And Malaya had a right to be thrilled. She knew it like the taste of her tongue. The hugeness of living was not just for rich or wispy or butter-colored girls. It was not just for thin, white women, or the men who made the rules. The spark, the speed, the bigness of living was for Malaya, too. Hers as much as anyone's. And anything that wanted to stop her from gulping the hugeness of life had to be stepped on, stepped over, or kissed carefully and left behind. (Ch.19.Pg.215.,Ph.3)

Malaya no longer sees her body as a burden or limitation; instead, she experiences it as a source of freedom, joy, and self-expression. When the narration says, "*What Malaya needed was space, and the freedom to move through it,*" it symbolizes her breaking away from years of confinement—both physical and social. Throughout her life, she has been suffocated by beauty standards, body stigma, and societal expectations that told her her body was too big, too wrong, or too much. Now, she claims the right to take up space, to move freely, and to exist without shame. The quotation above is a powerful declaration of Malaya's self-liberation no matter what society says about her body. This quotation also emphasizes that Black girl also has the right to feel joy with their body shape because beauty is not only belong to thin girl or White girl. Black girl has the same right of joy and stigma also prejudice can not take that away.

2. Discussion

The novel '*Big Girl*' offers a narrative that interrogates how body size, beauty standards, and society expectations shape individual identity which aligns with Naomi Wolf's concept of beauty myth. Through the main character Malaya Clondon, the novel depicts how societal pressures particularly those related to fatphobia and beauty myth, manifest in everyday experiences. The novel

highlights the emotional burden of these societal expectations, showing how external stigma becomes internalized and affects self-worth.

The novel *'Big Girl'* reveals how the novel serves as both a critique of oppressive beauty standards and a narrative of empowerment. Through Malaya's journey, Mecca J. Sullivan highlights the impact of beauty stigma while also celebrating the resistance.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In the novel *"Big Girl"* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan the researcher through the discussion revealed how the beauty myth shaped social construct to control women and to maintain women to focused on dieting and self-surveillance instead of pursuing freedom towards their own bodies. This novel focuses on body stigma that is experienced by the main female character and how she fought back the stigma.

The novel demonstrates that societal beauty standards rooted in Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth function as tools of control women's bodies and limiting their access to freedom, joy, and opportunity. The body stigma intersects with beauty myth and can have an negative impact for individual in larger body because society have always had a concept of beauty that sets a standard for the body such as light skin colour, thin bodies and straight hair. The definition of beauty standards causing a pressures to women because they may feel dissatisfied about their bodies because beauty standards judging women appearances and curb women from expressing their versions of beauty.

Through this research entitled 'Fighting Against Beauty Stigma in *"Big Girl"* (2022) by Mecca J. Sullivan, the researcher hopes that in the future the next researcher's attention to the topic of beauty myth or body stigma through this novel will be elaborated. The next researcher can analyze the novel *Big Girl* (2022) by applying other theory, or analyze the Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth theory using different object and different approaches. Furthermore, the very new research conducted on the novel *"Big Girl"* is expected to provide a better and more concerned about the phenomenon of beauty myth in this novel.

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