

# Abject Bodies Reclaiming Equality: Educating Fat Awareness through Uncomfortable Truths in Roxane Gay's Memoir *Hunger*

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## Abstract

The study examines Roxane Gay's memoir *Hunger, A Memoir of (My) Body* and its complicated portrayal of the feminine fat body through the critical lens of Kristeva's concept of Abjection. Using close textual analysis, the paper depicts how Gay, a sexual assault survivor who battles obesity, employs her personal narrative to challenge deeply rooted cultural expectations about fat women's bodies. Fat studies and concept of Abjection provide theoretical framework for understanding how her memoir *Hunger, A Memoir of (My) Body* depicts the psychological and physical impacts of traumatic experiences of being Fat. The paper argues how Gay's exploration of body politics, fatness, and body image issues may be examined through the lens of Kristeva's abjection. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection emphasizes the centrality of the repulsion caused by physical experience, and explains consequent sociological and environmental behaviors. Abjection, a psychoanalytical phenomenon is conceptualized as an acute state of revulsion and the subsequent rejection of disgusting source. The concept of abjection intersects with the phenomenology of being fat. *Hunger, A Memoir of (My) Body* moves beyond human experience to become an effective tool for fat social justice. This is especially pertinent in South Asia, where similar societal pressures and expectations regarding women's bodies persist. To empower South Asian women, educational programs can effectively use a framework that promotes self-acceptance and remove the strain of cultural expectations, as proposed by Gay's memoir.

**Keywords:** Memoir, Kristeva's Abject, Body Image, fat studies, fat Social Justice

Memoir is a direct mode of writing, a historical account or biography written from personal knowledge. Cat pause and Sonya Renee Taylor, scholars on Fat Studies maintain that “memoir has long been a powerful vehicle for fat stories.” (2021, 3) Roxane Gay’s memoir *Hunger, A Memoir of (My) Body* contributes to a similar deeper understanding of the cultural politics of fat bodies and the lived experiences of individuals who inhabit non-normative bodies. This demonstrates how important self-representation is to survival in a fat phobic society. Life writing has proven to be a fresh voice to buried traumas, and fat studies is one such example where one no longer fears to talk about the “super morbid obese body” (2017, 17) even. Here fat Studies has proven to be a compelling form of testimonial empowerment for those who are marginalized. Her memoir depicts how lived experiences of one can become a voice to save oneself from erasure and silencing. Fat Activists C. Saguy and Ana Ward aptly maintain that “Women are also the main producers of autobiographies chronicling their process of coming out as fat.” (2011, 61)

Roxane Gay starts her memoir with a powerful energy “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.” (2017, 11) Lauren Freeman states that “Roxanne Gay, feminist writer, social commentator, and author of the harrowing 2017 memoir *Hunger*, provides a snapshot of what it’s like to exist as fat”. (2020, 12) She further points out that “If you don’t believe that fat people suffer simply on account of existing in a fat-phobic, anti-fat world, then reading testimonies of fat folks might convince you. Similarly, Cat Pause also maintains that “Fat people sharing their stories is one of the key ways to disrupt the normative discourse of the obesity epidemic.” (2020, 175)

This paper aims to mobilize our perceptions about fat female bodies while drawing on Roxane Gay’s concept of her body. I will draw on Gay’s approach to the body as an addition to contemporary gender inequality and body shaming through her Memoir *Hunger, A Memoir of (My) Body*. Kristeva’s concept of Abjection has been used as a theatrical grid for an informed inquiry of fat as abject. The concept of the *abject*, as theorized by Julia Kristeva, gives another dimension to this memoir in several meaningful ways, especially regarding Gay’s relationship with her own body and society’s treatment of her fatness. Fat studies along with the concept of abject provide theoretical framework for understanding how Gay’s memoir *Hunger* depicts the psychological and physical impacts of traumatic experiences of being fat. It argues how Gay’s exploration of body politics, fatness, and body image issues, especially in *Hunger* may be examined through the lens of abjection. The theory focuses on how fat bodies are culturally constructed as abject and the social implications of body norms. It further provides a critical lens to examine how Gay addresses issues of body

image, fatness, and societal attitudes towards bodies that deviate from normative standards.

This paper approaches the abject as a vital critical category for understanding the fraught relationship between a fat body and its connection with abjection. For the purpose, the article's thematic grid is a unique blend of concept of abjection and fat studies. Esther D. Rothblum maintains that "Fat studies is a field of scholarship that critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance, and that advocates equality for all people with respect to body size. Fat studies seeks to remove the negative associations that society has about fat and the fat body." (2012, 3). This Memoir has not been analyzed through current debates on Abject, Fat studies, and Body Studies. This approach will allow for a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of *Hunger*, addressing both the personal and societal dimensions of her experiences.

Roxanne Gay is a professional writer who expresses the plural experiences of fat embodiment. In *Hunger*, she narrates what it is like to live with a fat body as a black woman. She states, "And I remembered the result of being weighed and measured and judged, the unfathomable number: 577 pounds. I thought I had known shame in my life, but that night, I truly knew shame. I did not know if I would ever find my way past that shame and toward a place where I could face my body, accept my body, change my body." (2017, 15). Through brief chapterization, she analyses how she experiences and responds to the stigmatization of her body. The story of her rape is one of the first narratives she tells in *Hunger, A Memoir of (My) Body*, describing it as the "cleave" in her life--forever split into "before" and "after" (2017, 10). Her personal account of rape and later excessive weight gain sheds light on how bodies are culturally constructed, regulated, and experienced. By articulating her day to day painful experiences with her heavy body, she actually brings to light the relevance to issues of identity, power, and resistance. In quantitative terms, she describes her body as "super morbidly obese" and "unruly body" (2017, 17). It concerns a writing about her own body (a memoir of my body), but simultaneously about being a body in general (a memoir of body). This is the attempt where the analysis of lived experience is put central. Although her memoir narrates Gay's internal struggle with her body image, but she represents fat community in general.

Kristeva's conceptual frame of Abject can be applied to a concrete manifestation of fat embodiment. While presenting rich and compelling picture of the formless, Bois and Krauss maintain that "Abjection is not just a psychic process but a social experience. Disgust reactions, hate speech, acts of physical violence and the dehumanizing effects of law are integral to processes of abjection. Indeed, abjection should be understood as a concept that describes the violent exclusionary forces operating within modern states: forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the dregs and refuse of social life" (1999, 236).

Roxane Gay is a survivor of sexual violence, having endured a traumatic assault at the age of 12 by her boyfriend and his friends. This formative experience deeply informs her work, offering a lens into the psychological and physical ramifications of trauma. Through her narrative, Gay explores the intersection of trauma and fat embodiment, shedding light on how lived experiences of violence can manifest in both mind and body. Additionally, her work emphasizes the strong connection between childhood trauma and maladaptive coping mechanisms, framing her body as "abject" and illustrating how trauma can profoundly shape self-perception and physical identity. Through simple prose, repetition, at times contradictions and sensory depictions Gay demonstrates the intricate relationship between trauma, weight gain, emotional hunger and food consumption as maladaptive coping mechanism.

Self-expression is an important component of fat studies. (quote fat scholars here) Gay does not hesitate to 'come out as fat'. Saguy and Ward maintain that "coming out as fat involves a person who is easily recognized as fat affirming to herself and others her fatness as a non-negotiable aspect of self, rather than as a temporary state to be remedied through weight loss. (2011, 65). She knows by narrating those days she will have to re-live the times she was being mistreated, but she is brave to face and move on. She boldly states that "This is a memoir of (my) body because, more often than not, stories of bodies like mine are ignored or dismissed or derided" (2017, 16). Gay touches on the abjection of fat bodies in society, showing how they are silenced or treated as monstrous and unacceptable. Sauy and Anna (2011, 66) "In proudly coming out as fat, one rejects cultural attitudes that fatness is unhealthy, immoral, ugly, or otherwise undesirable. One claims the right to define the meaning of one's own body and to stake out new cultural meanings and practices around body size." She writes about her body in short chapters, every time differently—that does not reduce a body to a fixed meaning. Her text consists of eighty-eight short chapters, each of which is never longer than a few pages. Some are even much shorter. For example, chapter one consists of two sentences and chapter five of six short sentences. All chapters form completed entries, but sometimes it is as if every chapter involves a new beginning of the story. Instead of depicting a sequence of events, each individual chapter addresses a particular aspect of life with a fat body. Gay actually writes about how, why, and when she became "super morbidly obese", while also criticizing conventional attitudes about weight. As she tells her own story, she confronts the cultural and societal criticism, and assumption that obese people are simply weak-willed. She encourages readers to think in more complex ways about the actual experiences of obese individuals and about obesity's deep causes. Jenny Slatman, a scholar of Fat studies maintains that "Childhood abuse may lead to fatness, as is the case for Gay and many other women, but sadly enough, fatness is not always an effective protection since it easily incites new forms of abuse." (2021, 684).

Kristeva's abject, then, refers to that which is cast off or is rejected, evoking repulsion. Abject is "apprehensive, desire turns aside, sickened, it rejects . . . it is like an inescapable boomerang" (1982, 1). It disrupts the boundaries between self and other, and often represents the marginal space between order and disorder, life and death. She further defines abject as "A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me, not that. But not nothing, either." (1982, 2) The abject is connected to the body, especially in its "unacceptable" forms—such as bodily fluids, excrement, or the grotesque body that defies societal norms. Like Kristeva's Abject is "radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (2). Moreover, Kristeva maintains that "The abject has only one quality of the object- that of being opposed to I." (1982, 1). Gay narrates her personal experiences and renders her body as Abject. "This is the body I made. I am corpulent—rolls of brown flesh, arms and thighs and belly. The fat eventually had nowhere to go, so it created its own paths around my body. . . . The fat created a new body, one that shamed me but one that made me feel safe, and more than anything, I desperately needed to feel safe." (2017, 19). Gay's depiction of her body is central to the memoir, and her fatness is often treated by society as something grotesque or outside the acceptable boundaries of what a body "should" be. Not only this, society's reaction to fat bodies is one of rejection and disgust, marking them as abject. "In relationships, I never allowed myself to make the first move because I knew I was repulsive" (2017, 157). Gay herself expresses complex emotions of shame, discomfort, and vulnerability regarding her body, which can be seen as internalizing the abjection imposed by external societal standards.

An abject body creates blurring of boundaries between self and the other, life and death and inside and outside. Abject creates an ambivalent space, a grey zone where boundaries blur and identities are trapped. Gay states that "I am trapped in a cage of my own making. I am the cage" (2017, 13). This quote captures Gay's feeling of entrapment within her own body. Her body is both part of her and yet something she feels alienated from, a staple point of the abject where boundaries between self and other are blurred. At another instance she states that "I feel like my body is a cage of my own making, and I cannot escape it" (2017, 9). Here, the body is depicted as a prison, a form of abjection where the body is experienced as something to escape, something not related to "I".

Not only this, the abject is that which crosses boundaries, and Gay's body, as portrayed in *Hunger*, defies the societal boundaries of acceptable size and shape. She states, "Shame is a difficult thing. People certainly try to shame me for being fat." (2017, 124). In various moments, Gay talks about how her body is seen as too large to fit into conventional spaces—both physically and metaphorically. This violation of boundaries makes her



alienated, again a key factor in abject experience. “I was disgusting because I had allowed disgusting things to be done to me. I was not a girl. I was less than human” (2017, 38). This clearly indicates that she has been denied the stature of a human. At another place, she states that “I hate how people treat and perceive me. I hate how I am extraordinarily visible but invisible. I hate not fitting in so many places where I want to be.” (2017, 102). And then she states “there is how strangers treat my body. I am shoved in public spaces, as if my fat inures me from pain and/or as if I deserve pain, punishment for being fat. People step on my feet. They brush and bump against me. They run straight into me. I am highly visible, but I am regularly treated like I am invisible. My body receives no respect or consideration or care in public spaces. My body is treated like a public space.” (2017, 137)

“At least I am not so repulsive, so abject, that no one will spend time with me. At least I am not alone.” (2017, 158). It is clear from above quote that she does not want to be called an abject body, she is not happy with the thought that she has been excluded as repulsive and abject. But this is the harsh reality she has been forced to accept. She states, “I ate and ate and ate in the hopes that if I made myself big, my body would be safe. I buried the girl I was because she ran into all kinds of trouble. I tried to erase every memory of her, but she is still there, somewhere” (2017, 21). This quote ties the abjection of her body directly to her trauma, emphasizing the body as a manifestation of the traumatic past. The act of eating to make herself bigger is both a form of protection and self-abjection, as her fatness becomes a shield and a rejection of her former self. This is the very objective Gay wanted to have by gaining weight. She recalls those extra pounds and turning her body into a fortress, a revolting body that would both conceal her secret and shield her from sexual attention. “I was hollowed out. I was determined to fill the void, and food was what I used to build a shield around what little was left of me. I ate and ate and ate in the hopes that if I made myself big, my body would be safe,” she writes. (2017, 19) At her heaviest, Gay writes, she “weighed 577 pounds at six feet, three inches tall”. (2017, 14) While Kristeva’s abject is when “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. (1982, 3) Gay sees this as evidence that the doctors, at best, could reduce her to her weight, which seemed irrelevant to her diagnosis disregarding the intricate puzzle of its causes. She describes bouts with depression, poor body image, extreme diets, excessive exercise, and disordered eating—binge eating, and bulimia. These themes are consistent with contemporary understandings of adverse childhood experiences and their long term health consequences. She states that “I fell back into the familiar embrace of self-loathing. I blamed myself. I blamed my body.”(2017, 77). A fat body is a social performances of abjection as it is a living body that produces and animates them.

Gay’s weight gain is closely tied to her trauma, specifically her experience of rape at a young age. “These inner disturbances eventually

cause a psycho-emotional overload, triggering a cascade of weight gain-inducing effects including maladaptive coping strategies such as eating to suppress negative emotions, chronic stress, appetite up-regulation, low-grade inflammation and possibly reduced basal metabolism” (Hemmingsson, 2014, 769). The abject often emerges in relation to trauma, as traumatic events shatter the normal boundaries of experience. For Gay, her body became both a site of protection and pain—a manifestation of her unresolved trauma. Consequently her obese body is a maladaptive coping mechanism. The physicality of her body is an embodiment of this trauma, and in this way, her fatness can be understood as a form of abjection. Recalling her traumatic rape episode, she states that “I remember their smells, the squareness of their faces, the weight of their bodies, the tangy smell of their sweat, the surprising strength in their limbs. I remember that they enjoyed themselves, and laughed a lot. I remember that they had nothing but disdain for me.” (2017, 36) But this weight gain also becomes traumatic for her. It has been aptly noted by Sturges and Stinson (2022, 1) that “Weight stigma is also a traumatic experience that disrupts fat people’s embodiment by diminishing feelings of attunement to and appreciation for their bodies.”

In *Hunger*, Gay describes numerous instances where society’s gaze casts her body as unacceptable, revolting, or deviant. This parallels the way Kristeva describes the abject as something that evokes revulsion or fear. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to endure another such violation, and so I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away. Even at that young age, I understood that to be fat was to be undesirable to men, to be beneath their contempt.” (2017, 17). Gay’s narrative of being othered due to her size is a lived experience of abjection, where her body is marked as “other” and unfit within the ideals of femininity and beauty. Lechte, John defines abject in *Key Contemporary Concepts : From Abjection to Zeno’s Paradox* as “decidedly not desired; it thus has a strongly negative status attached to it. It is what an identity rejects because it instils horror.” (2003, 10) Gay accepts that “When you’re overweight, your body becomes a matter of public record in many respects. You’re constantly aware of how others perceive it. People project assumed narratives onto your body and are not at all interested in the truth of your body, whatever that truth might be” (2017, 111). This quote highlights the abject experience of her body being constantly othered, where her fatness becomes a spectacle of public interest—simultaneously feared and desired in its non-conformity. Gay also discusses the ways in which her body is simultaneously feared and desired. The abject is often linked to both repulsion and an unspoken attraction. I have been told, too many times to count, that my body is a cage. I understand this sentiment, but it is wrong. My body is not a cage. It is a fortification” (2017, 19). This statement reflects how her body, while often cast as abject by others, also serves as a form of protection. It encapsulates the duality of

abjection, being both repelled and drawn to her own body. While talking about the abnormal status of a fat body, Krystal A. Smalls states that “Most of us hear it at some point in our lives, or its cousin “Black and ugly,” as a way of naming the worst kind of body one could have: one that is too fat (by culturally relevant standards), one that is too Black (Blackness itself is not a problem, but being too phenotypically or unrespectably Black is), and one that is ugly (by virtue of the first two attributes)” (2021, 17) Unfortunately Roxane Gay had to face all forms of shame associated with stereotypes.

The abject is central to understanding *Hunger* as Gay navigates her relationship with her body, society’s rejection, and her internal struggles with trauma and identity. She says, “I hate myself. Or society tells me I am supposed to hate myself,” (2017, 98) but at the same time she states, “But I also like myself, my personality, my weirdness, my sense of humor, my wild and deep romantic streak, how I love, how I write, my kindness and my mean streak.” (2017, 98)

This blurring and contradiction and negation is the essence of abjection. Her fat body becomes a symbol of abjection, rejected by society yet ever-present, forcing the reader to confront the discomfort and complexity surrounding bodies that do not conform. She states, “I worried that if they didn’t like me, they would make fun of me, mocking my weight, and I was not at all sure how to make them like me when I felt so very unlikable, and always had.” (2017, 74). At another place she affirms, “I deny myself the right to space when I am in public, trying to fold in on myself, to make my body invisible even though it is, in fact, grandly visible. I deny myself the right to a shared armrest because how dare I impose? I deny myself entry into certain spaces I have deemed inappropriate for a body like mine” (2017, 96)

Gay’s stable identity formation is most evident in her attitude towards fat acceptance movements. She not only indicates that these movements do important work that forms “a necessary corrective to our culture’s toxic attitude toward women’s bodies and fat bodies” (2017, 140). She also believes that she does not know where she would fit in with communities of fat people.” I believe we should have broader definitions of beauty that include diverse body types. . . . I (want to) believe my worth as a human being does not reside in my size or appearance.” (2017, 20) She further states that “Living in my body has expanded my empathy for other people and the truths of their bodies. Certainly, it has shown me the importance of inclusivity and acceptance (not merely tolerance) for diverse body types.” (2017, 194)

Even though Gay started her book with the statement that her story is not a story of triumph, she concludes on a rather positive note. She describes that by living in her body she has developed greater empathy for others and the reality of their bodies. By being a revolting body herself, she is able to understand the plight of abject bodies. “My body has forced me to



be more mindful of how other bodies, of differing abilities, move through the world” (2017, 195). In the final chapter, she forcefully claims: “I don’t want to change who I am” (2017, 198). However, at the same time, she also indicates that she wants to change something: “I no longer need the fortress I built. I need to tear down some of the walls, and I need to tear down those walls for me and me alone, no matter what good may come of that demolition. I think of it as undestroying myself” (2017, 199).

Gay refuses to redirect her narrative away from her body. She embraces it with open heart that she is morbidly fat now. Through her own experience, Gay puts forward the concept that although the systemic oppression has changed, appearing in new and different forms, but remained frighteningly the same. Fat studies is an attempt to resistance, an attempt to erase trauma and resist annihilation. Resistance can be created by challenging established norms and expectations that emerge in many performative venues. Within these venues, some of the authors challenge esthetic norms related to appearance and beauty, coming out as fat is the first meaningful performance of revolting bodies. Gay is one of them.

## Conclusion

Given the multifaceted nature of *Hunger*, a fat studies approach proved to be a comprehensive and generative in that the concept of abject together with fat studies offered a deep understanding of both the personal and cultural dimensions of Gay’s experiences as a fat body. It provided insights into the psychological impact and narrative aspects of her trauma, contextualizing her experiences as ‘super morbidly obese’ woman within broader societal attitudes towards bodies. I particularly chose fat studies as a theoretical grid as it has activist orientation and this component, advocating for the rights and dignity of fat people, challenges societal norms that pathologize and devalue fatness. But Gay never considered her fatness as her disability. Despite being ‘doubly disabled’, for being Black and Fat, she feels more empowered after living through the trauma, the stigma of being fat. Bailey and Mobley state that “This is not a project of posthumously assigning people a label that they wouldn’t have chosen for themselves but looking critically at the context of a life and thinking through disability as an equally powerful force in shaping a person.”(2019, 34)

This paper intends, in general, to help readers translate obesity into a twenty first-century context to interrogate the ways systemic oppression has changed (or has not changed so to speak), appearing in new and different forms, and also remained frighteningly the same. Viewing *Hunger* within a nineteenth-century permissive culture and narrative tradition lends the memoir a fresh complexity. This memoir is not so much about remembering as this is about expanding memory to include histories beyond experience to create new understandings of a self and its possible futures. This is the high

time to mobilize the way we think and write about women fat bodies while interpreting Gay's memoir through the conceptual lens of Trauma and Fat Studies.

Through her work, Gay created a space to speak for overweight people how they experience their being fat in a fat-phobic society, rather than remaining petrified of having a massive body.

This is especially relevant to South Asia, where similar societal pressures and expectations regarding women's bodies persist. To empower South Asian women, Pakistani women in particular and educational programs can effectively use a framework that promotes self-acceptance, fat-acceptance and removes the strain of cultural expectations, as proposed by Gay's memoir. Fat studies as a theoretical grid has particularly been chosen as it has activist orientation. This component advocates the rights and dignity of fat people challenges societal norms that devalue fatness. *Hunger, A Memoir of (My) Body* is not only a personal note but moves beyond human experience to become an effective tool for social justice. It advocates body acceptance, especially among women who are obese, while questioning the commodification of the feminine form. There are various instances where Gay asserts agency over her body and challenges societal norms. She resists the dominant narratives that devalue her body while at the same time she accepts her revolting body. Gay's memoir, however, is far from being an account of life.

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