

**Perspectives on Fat Female Corporeality in
Select Literary Texts**

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To

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Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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The content of this dissertation has also been subjected to plagiarism check.

This work is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature.

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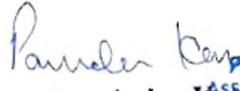
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This is to certify that the thesis titled "**Perspectives on Fat Female Corporeality in Select Literary Texts**" submitted to Sikkim University for the fulfilment of the requirement of the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by Priyanka Sharma, under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by her.

We recommend this thesis to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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“Perspectives on Fat Female Corporeality in Select Literary Texts”

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Chapter One

Introduction

Western philosophy has always made a distinction between the body and the mind. According to Cartesian Dualism, which has been inspired by the writings of the philosopher René Descartes, there is a distinction between the mind/head and the body where the mind has been associated with reason and intellect, whereas the body with emotion and excess. As a result, the mind is given the upper hand in this hierarchy between the mind and the body, with the body being seen as something that needs to be controlled and tamed because of its tendency for excess.

It is worth noting that this dualist axis of mind and body is gendered, with women being associated with the body. Men are thought to be driven by reason, intellect, and other qualities associated with the mind, whereas women are considered as beings more driven by emotions that are associated with the body. Elizabeth Spelman in her essay “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views” (1982) has noted: “...woman has been portrayed as essentially a bodily being, and this image has been used to deny her full status as a human being wherever and whenever mental activity as over against bodily activity has been thought to be the most human activity of all” (123). It is because of this reason that Eurocentric culture views women primarily in terms of roles played by their bodies – as reproducers, nurturers, and caregivers. At the same time, women’s body also becomes something through which they can be oppressed and controlled in the patriarchal setup. This is, at times, done by directly inflicting violence on the body, and at others by setting up limitations and expectations on how the body should appear.

Women are taught to be quite cautious in terms of how they present their bodies – they are expected to dress in prescribed ways, and follow certain fashion etiquettes. Moreover, a woman’s body should always be in control – it should be of a certain shape and size, not excessive and overflowing. All these factors serve as important markers of femininity. Susan Bordo in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) notes how corresponding to the culture and era, a woman has had “her feet broken and shaped into four-inch ‘lotuses’, or her waist straitlaced to fourteen inches, or her breasts surgically stuffed with plastic”- all in the name of femininity and control (22).

When it comes to fat female bodies, this category of body fails to fit into this particular requirement of always seeming in control. As a result, it is viewed as deviant, and in certain ways, not feminine enough. Moreover, patriarchy expects women to be discreet, to occupy as less space as possible, and to be as less visible as possible. On the contrary, fat female bodies occupy space, they are highly visible, and they somehow seem to pose a threat to the patriarchal control. Hence, they are labelled as transgressive and are pushed towards the margins of the social construct of femininity, and therefore desirability. Fat bodies defy all the rules that patriarchy has set for women’s bodies, as a result, various cultural discourses have negatively constructed fat women as has been noted by Samanta Murray in her book *The ‘Fat’ Female Body* (2008):

The “fat” woman is lazy, not willing to commit to change or live up to the dictates of healthy living. She is a compulsive eater, she is hyper-emotional, she is a physical and moral failure.

In short, then, the “fat” body is a site where numerous discourses intersect, including those concerning normative feminine beauty and sexuality, health and pathology, morality, anxieties about excess, and the centrality of the individual in the project of self-governance. (4-5)

Each society and epoch has its own set of beauty standards. Accordingly, what is regarded as the ideal body is culture specific and changes with change in the epoch. However, in today’s globalized era, the prevalent Eurocentric notion of beauty and body image has taken its grip over the entire world. Though the idealized shape and proportion of the body changes with changing fads and trends, the requirement since the last century has been a slim, slender body, with narrow waistlines, and long, slim legs. Writing in the early 2000s, Naomi Wolf in her “Introduction” to *The Beauty Myth* (2002) has stated: “The ideal of the time – a gaunt yet full-breasted Caucasian, not often found in nature – was assumed by the mass media, and often by magazine readers and movie watchers as well, to be eternal, transcendent. It seemed important beyond question to try somehow to live up to that ideal” (2-3).

The ideal standards of beauty only become increasingly unachievable and unnatural over time. The agenda behind this has been aptly noted by Wolf, “The stronger women were becoming politically, the heavier the ideals of beauty would bear down upon them, mostly in order to distract their energy and undermine their progress” (Wolf 3).

Our culture reveres and promotes this ideal female body, an ideal that becomes increasingly unrealistic with time, because of the capital that can be generated by preying on women’s insecurities and making them believe that this ideal

is something that all women should strive to achieve if they were to have truly successful and fulfilling lives. An entire economy has generated around the idea of the “ideal” female body, which includes the cosmetic industry with an estimated worth of USD 170 billion, the diet and weight-loss industry worth approximately USD 192 billion, and the booming market of cosmetic surgery worth USD 44.5 billion. Naomi Wolf has noted how cosmetic surgeons reclassify natural female body parts using problematic terms in order to ensure their industry’s functioning:

...cosmetic surgeons describe postpartum breasts...as “atrophied,” a term that healing doctors use to describe the wasted, dysfunctional muscles of paralysis. They reclassify healthy adult female flesh as “cellulite,” an invented “condition” that was imported into the United States by Vogue only in 1973; they refer to this texture as “disfiguring,” “unsightly,” “polluted with toxins.” Before 1973, it was normal female flesh. (227)

Similarly, female fat has been labelled as a disease by masking the fact that women, in general, have more percentage of fat on their bodies than men: “Whatever is deeply, essentially female—the life in a woman’s expression, the feel of her flesh, the shape of her breasts, the transformations after childbirth of her skin—is being reclassified as ugly, and ugliness as disease” (Wolf 232). It is because of this reason that the cosmetic industry is increasingly expanding not only in affluent Western countries but also in developing nations.

Though women’s bodies are specifically controlled and several limitations are imposed upon them in the patriarchal set up, fat bias is not restricted to a specific

gender. The use of such terminology as the “obesity epidemic” by medical science has served to categorize fat bodies as disabled and/or diseased. Margo DeMello in the book *Body Studies: An Introduction* (2013) has pointed out that “fat shaming and sizeism seem to be the last remaining acceptable forms of discrimination in the West” and that this discrimination is justified by “suggesting that not only are fat people lazy and gluttonous...but that they drain the health care system thanks to their sloth” (192). Fat bodies are marginalized and fat females are hence doubly marginalized – first because they are females, and secondly, because they are fat.

The emergence of the fat acceptance movement has sought to change the anti-fat stigma in social attitudes by eliminating the shame and discrimination aimed at fat people. As explained by DeMello, the fat acceptance movement “does not promote fatness but encourages people who are heavy to not obsess over their weight or engage in self-hatred. It also argues that excessive dieting, which often results in the regaining of that same weight, can be more dangerous than being overweight in the first place” (192). Similarly, the body positivity movement has advocated the acceptance of all bodies regardless of physical ability, size, gender, race or appearance. Fat activists prefer the word fat because they feel that the terms overweight, underweight and normal weight imply that there is an attainable ideal weight, when in reality there exists great diversity in weight.

The emergence of the interdisciplinary fat studies has brought about fresh perspectives on viewing fat bodies and has worked on normalizing fatness as mere bodily description such as tall or short, and petite or athletic. Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum in the “Introduction” to *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009) define fat studies as follows:

...fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body. The field of fat studies invites scholars to pause, interrupt the everyday thinking about fat (or failure to think), and do something daring and bold. Learners must move beyond challenging assumptions; they must question the very questions that surround fatness and fat people...Fat studies requires approaching the construction of fat and fatness with a critical methodology—the same sort of progressive, systematic academic rigor with which we approach negative attitudes and stereotypes about women, queer people, and racial groups. (2)

In the 21st century, fat studies has become the focus of research in literature, cultural studies, media studies, and the fine arts and scholars have examined fat characters in literature, television sitcoms, and films. It has its own international and interdisciplinary journal *Fat Studies*, published by Taylor and Francis and its first issue came out in 1994.

The present research takes up three texts – *Lady Oracle* (1976) by Margaret Atwood, *Dietland* (2015) by Sarai Walker, and *Lighter Than My Shadow* (2013) by Katie Green – to shed light on the struggles of women with their bodies that are fat or they feel to be fat, and the consequences that arise as a result of this ranging from discrimination, stigmatization and self-loathing. The novel *Lady Oracle* by Margaret Atwood follows the life its protagonist Joan Foster as she struggles to keep up with her multiple identities – an overweight teenager, a writer of gothic romances written under a pseudonym, and an acclaimed writer of a book of feminist verse. This

research will focus mostly on her past as an overweight teenager, her experiences in her fat body, and the turning point in her life that caused her to lose weight. The research critically examines the trajectory of Joan's life post weight loss where she is constantly haunted by her past and the anxiety of her past as an overweight teenager being discovered, especially by her husband.

Dietland by Sarai Walker traces the journey of Alicia Kettle alias Plum, an overweight woman in her early thirties as she becomes involved with a feminist organization that consists of women who live life on their own terms. Meanwhile, she fights with her own personal struggles related to her life in a fat body. The research examines Plum's experiences during childhood and teenage which make her believe that her life would be worth living only when she loses weight, her decade-long struggle with weight loss, and her decision to resort to surgery as the fail-proof method of weight loss. It also examines her arduous journey of self-acceptance and unlearning about what a woman's body should look like in order to be deemed worthy.

Katie Green's graphic novel *Lighter Than My Shadow* deals with Katie's struggle with and recovery from two different eating disorders during her teenage and early adulthood. The research focuses on Katie's struggle with food and body image which arise as a result of her fat phobia, fear of losing control over her body, and her perfectionist tendency in order to feel adequate enough.

Along with fat studies, this research draws upon feminism because it talks about how women are oppressed based on how they appear or fail to appear, and their appearance becomes something by which they are controlled and policed in the

patriarchal society. It also draws upon body studies, an interdisciplinary study that takes up the human body as its area of interest. Body study focuses on how the human body is dealt with, represented, and understood by individuals and cultures.

Aims and Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

- To focus on the discrimination faced by the female characters, and the unprecedented problems that arise in both their private and public lives on account of their being fat.
- To examine the female characters' view over their own bodies and their constant battle to shape and mould their bodies in accordance with the prescribed norms.
- To shed light on the complex relationship of the female characters with food and eating.

Research Problem

Issues with regard to the female body and her agency such as reproductive rights, and legal protection against domestic, sexual, and physical violence have been actively taken up by feminist activists leading to several reforms. But the idealization of the slender female bodies leading to the othering and marginalization of fat bodies is deeply ingrained in the modern culture.

Weight bias and fat phobia are still largely prevalent in contemporary society. The visibility of fat females in media, advertisements, and popular culture is still very

meagre and these representations are, moreover, negative and stereotypical. Similarly, in literature, fat female characters have often been side-lined or cast into stereotypical roles such as bitter women desperate for love, or two-dimensional characters serving the purpose of comic relief. There are very few works of fiction that deal with the genuine experiences and struggles of fat women and even lesser research conducted on this area.

Research Statement

This research strives to investigate how the female characters develop a sense of hatred and rejection towards their own bodies by internalizing the notions of the ideal female body and fat phobia, and the journey towards self-acceptance and reconciliation with one's body is a complicated one which often involves fighting one's greatest insecurities and sometimes disorders which have developed as a result of desperately trying to achieve the ideal state of body, constructed by culture and society.

Research Methods and Methodology

The methodology used while conducting this research is interpretative, analytical, and qualitative. The research is conducted through a close reading of the primary texts where references from the text have been given to provide perspectives on the experiences of fat female characters in various aspects of their lives. Qualitative data has been collected from secondary sources like books, articles, journals, and other forms of publications of literature.

Literature Review

In ““Lady Oracle”: The Politics of the Body” (1991) Marilyn Patton explores the influence of Robert Graves’s work *The White Goddess* on Margaret Atwood’s work and her obsession with the image of the Goddess. Patton describes *Lady Oracle* as “a representation of the narrator’s attempt to act out the role of the Goddess”. This Goddess represents women’s fears of their bodies overpowering their minds, and the protagonist’s fear of her multiple identities being discovered. The Goddess also represents the cultural construction of women’s role which is associated with the female body by the essentialist notion which reduces nature to women and associates both with nourishment. Marilyn Patton focuses on both the published version of *Lady Oracle* as well as unpublished manuscripts of the work.

In “The Female Body in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*” (2008), Sofia Sancez-Grant has investigated Atwood’s treatment of the body/mind dualism and has dealt with the concept of female space, as well as the space of the female body itself. She also explores Atwood’s portrayal of the female appetite, taking into account its connection to power and identity. Grant sees eating disorders as deliberate behaviours and as act of defiance towards women’s culturally circumscribed experiences.

In “Simulacra of the (Un)real: Reading Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* as A Feminist Text of Bodily Resistance” (2018), Kimberly Michelle Dean highlights the ways in which the novel reflects the cultural construction of the female body in the age of simulacra, and also how reclaiming the mind side of the body/mind dualism allows the protagonist to reclaim her past as well as her body.

In “Obesity as Grotesque: The Inscribed Female Body”, Sangeetha Puthiyedath focuses on the fat female body as a site of resistance in Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* by highlighting the protagonist’s use of her fat body as a form of rebellion against her mother who represents the societal norms of beauty, as well as a shield against the male gaze. The paper also highlights the novel’s exposure to the patriarchal order’s treatment of the fat female body as unnatural and grotesque, causing immense anxiety to the protagonist with regard to her own body.

In “Beauty Obsession of the Main Character in Sarai Walker’s *Dietland*” (2018) Tuti Hanbayani focuses on the protagonist’s obsession with the prevalent beauty standards in the society and her struggle towards overcoming this obsession and being able to find her own beauty in a different way.

In “Representing Fat Female Bodies: A Fat Studies Analysis of Selected Literary Texts” (2020), Jessica Murray highlights the positive representation of the fat female body in Sarai Walker’s *Dietland*, Laura Dockrill’s *Big Bones*, and Mona Awad’s *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*. She further focuses on the fact that even while portraying fat women in a positive light, the novelists have situated their bodies within socio-cultural spaces in which systemic fat phobia prevails.

In “Reading Sarai Walker’s *Dietland*: Body Positivity and Power Feminism Through Chic-Lit Narratives” (2021), Shymasree Basu has explored how Walker has critiqued the representation and the circulation of ideal beauty standards in the media. Basu emphasises Walker’s use of Chic Lit tropes to show how a feminist solidarity model based on “power feminism” rather than “victim feminism” can effectively dismantle patriarchal discourses.

In “Fat Stigmatization and Gendered Experience of Fatness in Sarai Walker’s *Dietland*” (2022), Bincy Mole Baby and K. Balakrishnan have explored the issue of body shaming and misogyny in the novel *Dietland* by Sarai Walker. They have viewed the protagonist Plum’s decision to undergo surgery for weight loss as a final attempt in finding a way to shield herself from public ridicule and lead a happy life.

In “Feminine Famishment: Graphic Medicine and Anorexia Nervosa” (2018), Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Anu Mary Peter have rejected the biomedical approach in favour of a biocultural approach to view anorexia nervosa, according to which many complex societal challenges and tensions regarding femininity and subjectivity are manifested by anorexia. They further investigate how the medium of comics in Katie Green’s *Lighter Than My Shadow* and Lesley Fairfield’s *Tyranny* provides a broader perspective on anorexia.

In “The Casual Cruelty of Fat Phobia: An Intersectional Analysis of “Unruly” Feminine Corporeality in Selected Texts by Anne Tyler” (2020), Jessica Murray analyses how the author Anne Tyler in her work utilizes fatness to belittle female characters, and how fatness, in general, implies negative assumptions about women who are unable to tame their “unruly” bodies.

In “Do Fat-positive Representations Really Exist in YA? Review of Fat-positive Characters in Young Adult Literature” (2016), Lindsey Averill considers the problematic issues that come up in the fat-positive young adult genre as a whole, such as the novels dealing with body acceptance still perpetuating the “thin thinking” that constructs thin as normal and fat as abnormal, marking of the fat female protagonists

as other, fatness still being cast as unacceptable in the novels' dominant social world, and the genre's inability to imagine a world in which thin-thinking does not exist and fatness is normalized.

Research Gap

In Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, considerable work has been done from the psychoanalytical perspective which deals with the protagonist's search for her own identity. In the case of research dealing with the female body, the focus is on the role of the body in shaping one's identity, which emphasizes that the way in which one perceives the world, as well as the way the world perceives them is directly influenced by the body that they inhabit. There has been no work focusing on the internalized fat phobia of the protagonist, and the series of events that make her aware of the way in which her body is somehow different from others, hence undesirable. The protagonist's obsession to erase or hide her past as an overweight teenager once she loses weight and assumes a different identity has not been sufficiently discussed.

In the case of Sarai Walker's *Dietland*, there are research works dealing with the protagonist's obsession with living up to the prevailing beauty standards and the author's portrayal of the fat female in a positive light. But there is a lacuna of research dealing with the protagonist's complex relationship with food and the immense psychological struggle experienced by her on her path to overcoming self-hatred and accepting her body the way it is.

In Katie Green's *Lighter Than My Shadow* the existing research investigates comics as the appropriate medium to provide a nuanced representation of anorexia nervosa, but there is a lacuna of research when it comes to the protagonist's obsession

with perfection (the perfect ideal which has been set by the society), in various aspects of her life including the shape and size of her body as well as the amount of food/calorie to be consumed which in turn results in her developing a love-hate relationship with food as well as two different eating disorders at different points in her adolescence and early youth.

Although there have been some discussions and research on the issue of the fat female body in literature, the issues that will be considered in this research by using the selected primary texts have not been examined elsewhere. There are some gaps in the research being conducted in the selected texts, and the chapters of this research work intend to fill these gaps.

Research Questions

The research has attempted to answer the following questions related to the research:

- How has the notion of slenderness as the norm served to position the fat female at the margins of femininity?
- What is the relationship between the norm of slenderness and the development of eating disorders such as compulsive eating and anorexia nervosa?
- Is it appropriate to assume the fat female body to be necessarily diseased, disabled, and socially dysfunctional?
- Is the slender female body as a rule always healthy and free of any disease and disorder?

Scope and Limitation

The research examines, scrutinizes and interrogates the prevalent perspectives on fat female bodies, taking into account their socio-psychological experiences and a variety of issues experienced by them ranging from eating disorders to wishes of self-obliteration. The scope of this research is confined to three literary texts which provide genuine expressions of the issues experienced by females with regard to their bodies – the novels *Dietland* by Sarai Walker, *Lady Oracle* by Margaret Atwood, and the graphic novel *Lighter Than My Shadow* by Katie Green.

Chapter Division

Chapter One: Introduction

The first part of the chapter introduces the topic of the research, providing a background on the development of slenderness as the norm for female bodies resulting in the marginalization of fat females. The chapter takes the socio-economic perspective of the female body into account by throwing light on the economy that has generated around the idea of the “ideal” female body, including the beauty and cosmetic industry, diet and weight-loss industry, and the booming market of cosmetic surgery. This part also introduces the texts that will be examined in the next chapters. The remaining portion of the introduction deals with research questions, research statement, aims and objectives, scope and limitations, methods and methodology, and chapter plan.

Chapter Two: Seeds Sown: Beginnings of Dissatisfaction with One's Body

This chapter traces the roots of women's dissatisfaction with their bodies by examining the various factors and incidences in the three texts that result in the female protagonists' development of fat phobia and in turn dissatisfaction with their own bodies. Women are indoctrinated with the idea that their bodies need to look a certain way if they are to live a truly fulfilling life and this process of indoctrination begins in childhood. This argument is supported by providing examples of the protagonists' early experiences in the three texts. These experiences range from bullying to fat shaming, to simply being part of conversations or activities that reinforce the idea of how a woman's body should look like. All three protagonists have had experiences of getting bullied in childhood with Joan in *Lady Oracle* being bullied by the girls at the Brownies that she attends and Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* being bullied by boys in secondary school who call her "Neil" and a man. Plum in *Dietland* gets stood up by a boy during her high school prom and later in college a boy liked her but was afraid to get involved with her because of her size. The chapter also discusses the role of popular culture and mass media in establishing and disseminating the image of the ideal female body. Plum gets exposed to such images right from her childhood via television and advertisements, and Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* is shown reading the teenage magazine named *Girlz*. All of these culminate to deepen the protagonists' dissatisfaction and hatred toward their own bodies.

Chapter Three: Food, Hunger and the Female Body/Mind

This chapter deals with the complex relationship that the female characters share with food and hunger, which in turn has a direct effect on their body as well as mind. Joan

in *Lady Oracle*, who had been an overweight teenager, lacks cooking skills and does nothing to improve them because she wishes to present herself as someone for whom food and the requirement to eat hold the least significance. At the same time, she resorts to comfort eating whenever confronted by a stressful situation or overwhelming emotions. The protagonists of *Lighter Than My Shadow* and *Dietland* undergo intermittent periods of binge eating and severe starvation. Though they wish to transcend the necessity of having to eat, they are never able to transcend their hunger, which remains a major preoccupation throughout. Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* from being a picky eater during childhood to developing anorexia and compulsive eating later in life shares a love-hate relationship with food, and trusting her body and mind with when and how much to eat becomes the biggest struggle of her teenage and early adulthood.

Chapter Four: Erasing the Fat Past/Body

This chapter talks about the obsession of the protagonists to mould and transform their fat bodies that they have come to believe to be the root of all their problems. They believe that the quality of their lives would drastically improve once they become the idealized versions of themselves. They start believing that the time spent in their present body is only temporary and that their real lives would begin once they transform their bodies. The protagonist of *Dietland*, Plum desires to erase her fat body first through dieting and starvation, and when everything fails she decides to resort to surgery so that her thin, true self, hiding behind all the folds of fat can finally come to the fore. Likewise, Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* strives to achieve perfection in everything including her body. She is petrified and distressed to see even a few extra folds or lumps of flesh in her belly or thighs. Her obsession reaches such an extreme

that she gets diagnosed with anorexia and in turn, starts wishing to escape her body by being able to erase it completely. The protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* Joan Foster, who was overweight as a teenager and has been able to lose weight is constantly haunted by her past. Because of her internalized fat phobia, she is obsessed with erasing/hiding all the evidence of her past as an overweight teenager from her present circle of acquaintances. The idea of the body as a text is evoked in the attempts of the protagonists to morph their bodies in different ways through various methods including surgical interventions so that their bodies acquire meaning as beautiful and socially acceptable.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The chapter provides a summary of the preceding chapters by highlighting the various issues raised. It offers a summation of the research with respect to the research questions and presents the findings of the research.

Chapter Two

Seeds Sown: Beginning of Dissatisfaction with One's Body

A majority of women are dissatisfied with their bodies and the way they look. This dissatisfaction with one's body and the reason that makes women dislike their bodies that have sustained and nourished them right from the moment they were born has deep-rooted socio-psycho-cultural implications. This dissatisfaction is not innate but gradually develops as a person is inducted into the society and gets accustomed to the prevalent practices and beliefs about what is regarded as the norm. The person (in this case the female child) gradually learns what is considered the norm in terms of how the body appears, and what is acceptable and desirable according to the standards of both society and culture. Even in non-European countries, the combination of the colonial past with the present globalized era dominated by social media and the internet has resulted in the hegemony of the Eurocentric way of thinking, and culture has inevitably come to imply Eurocentric culture. So women, while assessing their bodies and physical attractiveness tend to ignore what is regarded as beautiful in their native culture, and apply Eurocentric yardsticks to measure their level of beauty. The same thought process has resulted in the fairness obsession in South Asian countries like India and South Korea, taming of the Afro hair using various hair straightening techniques, and globally, the popularity of makeup techniques that make the nose appear narrower and pointed, and gives an illusion of double eyelids to monolids (eyelid shape seen in people of Asian descent). All these practices move towards a common aim – achieving features that are more similar to the White woman. There is a similar tendency when it comes to the female body. Different cultures have their

concept of the ideal bodies, with some cultures regarding women with voluptuous and fuller figures as beautiful. Also, genetics play a great role in determining a person's physical attributes, including the shape and size of their body. Nevertheless, the European ideal of the slender body with dainty waistlines is pursued globally by women originating from diverse cultural backgrounds. Naomi Wolf terms this belief that women need to look a certain way to assert their womanhood as "the beauty myth" in her work of the same name.

As the girl child moves from childhood to adolescence and then to adulthood, she realizes that the requirement to look a certain way becomes more of a compulsion rather than a matter of choice as many aspects of her life depend on it – both professional and personal. Many career options specifically require women to look a certain way. Even in jobs that have nothing directly to do with glamour, physical attractiveness in the female employee is considered a positive attribute. Many highly competent women are not given their due credit or sometimes denied the opportunity to progress in their career and in a few instances even denied job opportunities only because their bodies do not fall into the category that is regarded as the norm. Naomi Wolf, in her book *The Beauty Myth* (2002) terms this as the "PBQ" (professional beauty qualification), and citing the example of television journalism, she exposes the gendered aspect of the PBQ which applies to only one gender presenting a "double image" – the male news anchor being usually an older man, "avuncular" and "distinguished", accompanied by a female who is much younger, "nubile", "heavily made-up" with "professional prettiness level" (34). She goes on to reflect on the hypocrisy of the PBQ: "If a single standard were applied equally to men as to women in TV journalism, most of the men would be unemployed" (34). According to Wolf

this situation of the older, distinguished man accompanied by a pretty female junior has become the paradigm of the man-woman relationship throughout the workforce and the position of the working woman was made clear:

The most emblematic working women in the West could be visible if they were “beautiful”, even if they were bad at their work; they could be good at their work and “beautiful” and therefore visible, but get no credit for merit; or they could be good and “unbeautiful” and therefore invisible, so their merit did them no good. In the last resort, they could be as good and as beautiful as you please—for too long; upon which, aging, they disappeared. (35)

Many women in their personal lives are made to believe that they are undeserving of love and acceptance only because they fail to look a certain way. At the same time, women’s obsession with appearance is often trivialized and often made fun of in popular discourses. Hence women are caught in this double bind – they are forced to work hard and obsess over their bodies because their financial security and the quality of their lives depend on them, on the other hand, they are dismissed as being too trivial and superficial for doing so. Susan Bordo, in her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), has rightly termed this as the “politics of appearance” (27). Bordo argues that women are compelled to appear a certain way, and they are not simply “cultural dopes” (30) for blindly adhering to the norms:

Although many people *are* mystified (insisting, for example, that the current fitness craze is only about health or that plastic surgery to

“correct” a “Jewish” or “black” nose is just an individual preference), often there will be a high degree of consciousness involved in the decision to diet or to have cosmetic surgery. People *know* the routes to success in this culture... Often, given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it. (30)

The requirement for all women to strive to achieve the ideal state of the body may appear innocent, but it has deep political agenda behind it. It is a way of regulating women by putting restraints on the way women’s bodies are supposed to appear. This is not very different from various practices in the past and in cultures where women had not yet achieved political liberation – practices such as corseting in the Victorian era and foot-binding in imperial China. Bordo notes how the female body is a politically inscribed entity, “its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control—from footbinding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy...” (21). This process of indoctrination about the “proper” way that a woman should look and behave begins right from childhood, the formative years of the female’s development. This is reflected in the case of the protagonists of all three texts – *Lady Oracle* (1976) by Margaret Atwood, *Dietland* (2015) by Sarai Walker, and *Lighter than My Shadow* (2013) by Katie Green. All the three protagonists internalize the concept of the ideal female body starting from their childhood, and this process of internalization is achieved through various processes, such as the criticism of mothers or other family members at home, peer pressure, and experiences of getting bullied at school and outside the home.

In Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster shares a turbulent relationship with her mother as well as her own body. Joan's mother becomes the first critic of Joan's size and appearance and has high expectations and standards for what her daughter should be like. This is reflected in her choice of name for her daughter whom she had named after Joan Crawford, an actress. The reason behind her mother's choice of name for her had always been puzzling for Joan because even as a child Joan knew that there was nothing common between the two of them. The starkest difference between the two was that the actress Joan Crawford was slim whereas Joan was not, and according to Joan, "this is one of the many things for which my mother never forgave me" (Atwood 41). So in the case of Joan, it is her mother who first makes her aware that her body is somehow different from others, and not in a good way. It is a cause of disappointment for her mother as it does not live up to the image of the ideal female that she has indoctrinated. Describing her childhood photographs Joan remembers that she had been a plump baby who would be considered a healthy baby as she was not much heavier and larger than other babies. The photos recorded her growth chronologically till a certain point. Though she did not "become much rounder", the problem started when, as Joan recalls, "I failed to lose what is usually referred to as baby fat. When I reached the age of six the pictures stopped abruptly. This must have been when my mother gave up on me, for it was she who used to take my growth recorded. She had decided I would not do." (Atwood 41)

In the hope that Joan would lose weight, her mother enrolled her in a dancing school when she was seven years old. But her mother's expectations of Joan becoming slimmer were not fulfilled. Instead, it is through her dancing class that Joan's awareness about her body being different in an undesirable way was

strengthened. Here she had her first experience of being fat-shamed even though she was too young to understand the intensity of the situation then.

A major event organised every year by the dancing school that Joan went to was the annual spring recital. Joan was passionate about dancing and had been extremely excited about the performance of her group in the recital, especially one of the numbers called “The Butterfly Frolic”: “It was my favourite and it had my favourite costume too. This featured a gauzy skirt, short, like a real ballerina’s, a tight bodice with shoulder straps, a headpiece with spangled insect antennae, and a pair of coloured cellophane wings with coathanger frames...” (Atwood 44).

Since the costumes for the dance were supposed to be sewed by the mothers of the girls, it was this costume that Joan’s mother had the most difficult time constructing in a way that would look good on Joan.

The problem was fairly simple; in the short pink skirt, with my waist and legs exposed, I was grotesque...with my jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where breasts would later be and my plump upper arms and floppy waist, I must have looked obscene, senile almost indecent, it must have been like watching a decaying stripper. I was the kind of child, they would have thought back then in the early months of if 1949, who should not be seen in public with so little clothing on. (Atwood 45)

When both Joan’s mother and Miss Flegg were unable to make the dress work for Joan, Miss Flegg came up with the plan of changing the dance a little by casting Joan as a mothball instead of a butterfly, since she could not see her choreography

“being reduced to something laughable and unseemly by the presence of a fat little girl who was more like a giant caterpillar than a butterfly, more like a white grub if you were really going to be accurate” (Atwood 46). Joan who had been eyeing for the chief butterfly spot, had secretly been wishing for the girl who was supposed to perform it to fall sick, and had memorised the girl’s part along with her own was extremely excited and easily agreed when Miss Flegg approached her asking her whether she would like to take up the “special” role in the dance which she had decided to change a little. Her protests and cries were of no avail when she realised that she was to become a mothball instead of the chief butterfly and that she was to have no wings. Her humiliating experience at the dance with the audience roaring with laughter during her performance, her not getting the opportunity to become a pretty butterfly with wings even after being as competent in dancing as the other girls in her class, and the undesired attention that she received because of the size and shape of her body has a profound impact on her and the realization dawns upon her that she would always be less likable, less deserving of concern and sympathy from others just because of her size:

At first, every time I repeated this story to myself, underneath my pillow or inside the refuge of the locked bathroom, it filled me with the same rage, helplessness and sense of betrayal I’d felt at the time. But gradually I came to see it as preposterous, especially when I thought about telling it to anyone else. Instead of denouncing my mother’s injustice, they would probably laugh at me. It’s hard to feel an undiluted sympathy for an overweight seven-year-old stuffed into a mothball suit and forced to dance; the image is simply too ludicrous.

But if I described myself as charming and skinny, they would find the whole thing pathetic and grossly unfair... If Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her? Why is it that the girls Nazis torture on the covers of the sleazier men's magazines are always good looking? The effect would be quite different if they were overweight. The men would find it hilarious instead of immoral or sexually titillating. However, plump unattractive women are just as likely to be tortured as thin ones. More so, in fact. (Atwood 51)

This incident has such a deep impact on Joan that she decides to discontinue her dancing classes even though she loved dancing. Since her mother's plan of making Joan lose weight by enrolling her in a dancing school failed, she now makes her join the Brownies when she reaches the age of eight. But her experience in the Brownie too is not so pleasant. Firstly, she did not have any friends, and later after Joan's mother had arranged with the mothers of three other girls from Joan's locality who went to the same Brownie to commute the distance to and fro the Brownie camp together, the girls were extremely mean to her, bullied her and often ran away leaving her to cover the journey alone: "Sometimes they would claim that their running off was a punishment, deserved by me for something I had done or hadn't done that day; I had skipped too heavily in the fairy ring. I hadn't stood straight enough, my tie was ruffled, I had dirty fingernails, I was fat" (Atwood 58-59). Joan was not able to share the experience of her being bullied by the girls with her mother and possibly bring it to an end because she believed that no matter what her mother would have said when she learnt about the bullying, her sympathies would lie with the girls and not her own daughter. In one incident, on the pretext of finally including Joan in their club and

making her perform the ceremony necessary for her initiation into it, the girls blindfolded her, tied her up to a post at the end of a bridge, and ran away.

All these incidences had made Joan well aware that she would always be considered less and be loved and cared for a little less than others solely because of the size of her body and the way she looked. Still, her internalization of fat-phobia was not complete, which came to a full circle during her teenage years. By the time Joan was a teenager and was still not able to lose any of her weight, Joan's mother became even more obsessed with her daughter's body. Her entire energy was focused on the sole purpose of making Joan lose weight and moulding her body into what she believed to be the ideal. Joan, on the other hand, used her body as a form of rebellion against her mother and in other to defy all that her mother strove for with regard to her body: "The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body" (Atwood 71). Joan's mother tried every possible tactic in order to make her daughter lose weight – leaving diet booklets on Joan's pillow, promising to bribe her with elegant dresses if she lost weight, sometimes ridiculing her size, and at other times begging her with pleas about her health, sending her to a psychiatrist to even secretly mixing laxatives in her food. On the other hand, Joan blatantly defied her mother and ate as much as she possibly could because she wanted her mother "to see and recognize what little effect her nagging and pleas were having" (Atwood 73). By the age of fifteen, when she had reached her maximum growth of five feet eight and weighed around two hundred and forty-five pounds, though she gained pleasure by using her body as a form of rebellion against her mother, she had started becoming conscious about it in the presence of strangers:

I no longer attended my mother's dinner parties; she was tired of having a teenaged daughter who looked like a beluga whale and never opened her mouth except to put something into it... On my side, much as I would have welcomed the chance to embarrass her, strangers were different, they saw my obesity as an unfortunate handicap, like a hump or a club foot, rather than the refutation, the victory it was... (Atwood 76)

It is revealed that Joan's excessive eating was not solely to deny her mother, but she also ate from panic. Once while her parents were arguing, she had heard her mother call her an accident, which at times resulted in her recurring fear which made her feel that she was not present. So she wished to become as solid as a stone so that her mother would not be able to get rid of her.

When Joan reached high school, her mother started giving her a clothing allowance with the hope that she would be encouraged to reduce. She expected her to buy clothes that would make her look less conspicuous, but Joan did the exact opposite by buying violently coloured and over-the-top clothing: "...I was especially pleased with a red felt skirt, cut in a circle, with a black telephone applique onto it. The brighter the colour, the more rotund the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn't going to let myself be diminished, neutralized by a navy-blue polka-dot sack" (Atwood 90).

By this time, Joan had developed a distaste for her fat body, and this is reflected in her description of fat women: "I was quite fat by this time and all fat women look the same, they all look forty-two. Also, fat women are not more

noticeable than thin women, they're less noticeable, because people find them distressing and look away" (Atwood 84). Besides the unpleasant experiences and bullying faced in childhood, Joan was once more a witness to discrimination faced by fat women when she started working part-time. She was unable to get pleasant or long-term jobs because "[e]mployers as a rule didn't want to hire anyone so fat, but some were too embarrassed to turn [her] away completely, especially when they'd advertised" (Atwood 100). Her employers welcomed her as cheap labour and she worked several jobs short term as a theatre usher, cashier, and dishwasher. Her most pleasant job had been at the Sportsmen's Show, where she was in charge of the archery booth, renting arrows and pulling out arrows from the straw target after the barrels of arrows were almost used up by the customers. But there was no way to ensure that all the arrows had been shot before she went collecting the arrows from the targets. So one day, when Joan had bent over to adjust a target after collecting all the arrows, a customer shot her in the left buttock and let out a screaming laugh. The sight of her "moonlike rump has probably been too much for him" (Atwood 124). The discrimination faced by Joan in the work front can be explained by what most people have been indoctrinated to believe about fat bodies versus slender bodies as noted by Susan Bordo in her work: "for most people in our culture, slenderness is indeed equated with competence, self-control, and intelligence, and feminine curvaceousness (in particular, large breasts) with wide-eyed, giggly vapidness" (55).

Joan had also learnt that fat women are seen either as ungendered creatures who are not feminine enough hence not worthy of romantic or sexual desire or as highly desperate, sexual beings. This is seen in the reputation that two other fat girls who attended the same school as Joan had. One of them was Monica who was a year

senior to Joan. She was tomboyish and hung out with the boys and the boys accepted her as one of them, and not as a woman. The other was Theresa, who was the same year as Joan. She was shy, reserved and had few friends. But there were rumours surrounding Theresa that “she would ‘do it’ under the right circumstances” (Atwood 98), because of which the outspoken boys at school would shout out suggestive remarks at her.

Though Joan had developed an aversion towards her own fat body and fully realized the difficulties faced by women of her size, she had not yet taken any step to mould or transform her body in any way. But things changed suddenly and drastically after the death of her Aunt Lou, with whom she was the closest and the most attached since her childhood. She was the only person whom she thought to have understood her, loved her unconditionally, and accepted her the way she was. Aunt Lou left her a sum of two thousand dollars, on the condition that Joan would get it if she lost weight of hundred pounds. Joan was at loss about how to interpret this situation. She was unable to decide the reason her dearest Aunt Lou had set the condition for her to lose weight in order to acquire the money – whether it was because she too had not fully accepted her the way she was or was it because of practical considerations, believing that Joan’s life would become easier if she became thinner. The realization that her dearest Aunt Lou too thought that her life would be difficult on account of her body size combined with the fear that she too had not fully accepted Joan the way she had been was the last straw for Joan. For the first time, she looks at her own body and sees it as something grotesque and undesirable:

I didn’t usually look at my body, in a mirror or in any other way; I snuck glances at parts of it now and then, but the whole thing was too

overwhelming. There, staring at me in the face, was my thigh. It was enormous, it was gross, it was like a diseased limb, the kind you see in pictures of jungle natives; it spread on forever, like a prairie photographed from a plane, the flesh not green but bluish-white, with veins meandering across it like rivers. It was the size of three ordinary thighs. I thought, That is really my thigh. It really is, and then I thought, This can't possibly go on. (Atwood 129)

Hence Joan's internalization of the fatphobia that she was exposed to right from the age of seven is completed. Joan decides that she has to get rid of her fat in any way possible without considering the adverse effect that it might have on her health: "I started taking my mother's miraculous remedies, all at once: a couple of fat pills in the morning, a dose of laxatives, half a box of Ayds, a little RyKrisp and black coffee, a waddle around the block for exercise" (Atwood 129). Despite the alarming side effects that she undergoes including blinding headaches, stomach cramps and accelerated heartbeats due to the combination of several remedies taken at once, Joan is determined to stop only after she has lost the required amount of weight because, for her, the sight of her body is more revolting than the side effects and the possible health hazard that she has to undergo.

In Sarai Walker's *Dietland*, the protagonist Alicia Kettle, who is more popular by her nickname Plum, at the very beginning of the novel is seen leading a routine existence as an overweight adult with a plan to undergo bypass surgery in order to lose weight with the belief that becoming slender would drastically change the quality of her life. In the case of Plum too as in the case of Joan Foster, this hatred for her

own body, resulting in striving for the thin self has its origin in her experiences during childhood and adolescence.

During one of the summer vacations, when Plum was still a child and her parents were on the verge of getting divorced, she, along with her mother had gone to stay in her great aunt Delia's house in Harper Lane. This house where Delia now lived with her second husband had previously belonged to Myrna Jade, a silent film star of the 1920s, as a result of which tourists, mostly Europeans constantly drove by to have a look at the house. Plum was unaware of this, but as she played around the house during the day, she noticed people stopping their cars near the house, hurriedly taking a photograph, and quickly driving away. Several people did this throughout the day and some even managed to sneak inside the boundary walls or peep through the windows. Plum, who had always felt that she had been different from others, as a result of which she was being constantly watched, came to believe that these strangers were taking her photographs, staring at her and some even laughing at her. She felt that she was the subject of the strangers' curiosity because certain actions of people toward her had made her feel that she was different from others and not in a positive way:

Before we moved into the house in Harper Lane, I had feared there was something wrong with me. Back home when we visited cousins, they would laugh at me and call me Miss Piggy, until a chorus of mothers went Shhhhhh. In the first grade, in Mrs. Palmer's class, the two girls who sat next to me, Melissa H. and Melissa D., told me they weren't inviting me to their Halloween party because I had fat germs...I didn't

know what other people saw when they looked at me. In the mirror I didn't see it. (Walker 36)

This feeling of being under constant surveillance for being different was not limited to her stay in the house in Harper Lane alone. She was a victim of bullying at school the methods of which ranged from notes being taped on her back that read "Do me a favour, pop me!", to nasty remarks being aimed at her, like the girls at the self-defence classes commenting, "Who'd want to rape her?" (Walker 39) when Plum arrived at the class, to a boy asking her to accompany him to the homecoming dance during the sophomore year but himself not going to the event making Plum wait for him for an hour in the parking lot. The effect of being bullied during the vital years of her growth makes Plum come to the conclusion that she was under the constant scrutiny of everyone around her because she was big, hence, each action that she took was visible to everyone. This makes her want to become smaller so that she would not be so visible and seen by everyone around her. She believes that if "[she] was smaller they wouldn't stare. They wouldn't be mean" (Walker 40).

Plum's fear that she would be under constant surveillance because of the high visibility of her body is only confirmed by the time she reaches adulthood. At the beginning of the novel, when Plum realizes that a girl has been following her and observing her activities for the last several days, she reflects, "I was used to being stared at, but that was by people who looked at me with disgust as I went about my business in the neighbourhood" (Walker 4). During the course of the novel, Plum is on the receiving end of fat-shaming on a daily basis such as people passing remarks like, "Go on a diet", or making "oink and moo sounds" while she is out in public space, performing her daily activities (Walker 106). Whenever she had to attend her

“Waist Watchers” meeting, she had to take the long route in order to avoid the boys who assembled at the end of her block and passed rude comments. It is revealed that Plum no longer travels by air because of an unpleasant experience four years back where the flight attendants could not find an extension for her seat belt which caused the flight to be delayed. Earlier, while on a plane, the person seated next to her asked to be moved to another seat because according to him Plum “spilled into his seat” (Walker 107).

On one occasion, Plum is punched by a guy at a subway station when she confronts him for passing comments on her. On another, a young man named Mason tries to flirt with her at a bar as a joke because of a bet with his friends. Plum is aware of the practice called “hogging” which Rubi has explained to her as an act of “picking up fat women for an ulterior purpose” (Walker 282). Men take part in hogging because they either think that fat women are so desperate and that they will easily provide sexual favours without much effort on their part or in some cases they are secretly attracted to fat women but do not want to acknowledge it out of fear of being made fun of by their peers. In the essay “Fat Women as Easy Targets: Achieving Masculinity Through Hogging” (2009) Ariane Prohaska and Jeannine Gailey describe “hoggers” as “groups of men who hang out at bars or parties and try to pick up fat women for sex or make bets with their friends about who can pick up the fattest or most unattractive woman” (158). Gailey and Prohaska discuss hogging as a tool used by men to create and maintain masculinity, and according to them, this act is “similar to other sexual acts pursued by men to prove their manhood” (159) and they draw two conclusions from their study: “(1) men view fat women as ‘easy targets’ for sexual encounters, which gives men status in their peer groups; and (2) men use hogging as

an ‘excuse’ for either their insecurities about their ability to date ‘thin’ women, their drunkenness, or their attraction to fat women” (164). Mason too had approached Plum for either of the two reasons listed by Gailey and Prohaska.

Sometimes people were not explicitly rude to her or commented directly on her weight, but their unintended actions or thoughtless remarks too caused deep distress to Plum, like in college her four roommates who were all thin girls constantly asked Plum whether they were looking fat. It implied that none of them ever wished to look like her. This made her reflect, “I was already fat. I was the worst that could happen” (Walker 127). Recalling her meeting for her job position at *Daisy Chain*, a teenage magazine owned by the Austen Empire, where Helen Rosenblatt from the Human Resources department commented that Plum would be perfect for that job because she would have an insight into the problems that girls faced since she was “different” from others who were being considered for the position. When Plum questions, “What makes you think I’d have such an insight? You don’t even know me”, she replies, alluding to Plum’s size, “I’m guessing” (Walker 23). Plum hated when people alluded to her size because it implied that “they were confirming that there was something wrong with [her] when [she]’d hoped they hadn’t noticed it” (Walker 23).

By the time Plum joins the Baptist Weight Loss, in the summer before her senior year at school, Plum has fully internalized fatphobia and hatred for her own body. It is reflected in the way Plum feels uncomfortable when Janine, the only other member at that Baptist Weight Loss branch who was the same size as Plum sat down next to her on their first day there. Plum had been indoctrinated into the concept that fat women should dress as subtly as possible and in dull colours so that they would

not be noticeable, so Janine's radiant attire shocked her "as much as if she'd been naked", and she felt that surrounded by all other people who were dully dressed, "[l]ooking at Janine was like looking directly into the sun" (Walker 47). She felt that both of them seated together looked like "two Humpty Dumpty's" (Walker 48). Plum rejects Janine's overtures of friendship and declines her invitation for a cup of coffee after the meeting, reflecting, "I had never had a fat friend and I didn't want one" (Walker 48). At the end of their meeting when Janine loudly disagrees with some of the methods adopted by Baptist Weight Loss and leaves, she seems to Plum a "loud, angry woman, disagreeable and huge, what none of [them] wanted to be" (Walker 49). Plum's desperation to become smaller is reflected in what she wanted to tell her father when he complained that she was not going to visit him because of a diet: "If I was fat, no one would want to marry me. I wanted to tell him this, to explain that this wasn't just a diet, that everything in my future...depended on it, but I couldn't say the words" (Walker 53).

So when the readers meet Plum at the beginning of the novel it is understood that by this stage she would be desperate to lose weight so that she no longer has to lead a life where she is tormented and shamed on a daily basis because of the size of her body. She had concluded that because of her size, she would never be desired or loved by anyone. She believed herself to be "outside of things" (Walker 112) and that she would never be able to experience certain things in life such as dates and romantic relationships. Her fat phobia is so ingrained that she was unable to use the word "fat" to describe herself when she has a conversation with people: "I couldn't say the f-word, I couldn't say fat; I never said it out loud, hating the way it sounded. I preferred a variety of euphemisms: overweight, curvy, chubby, zaftig even obese, I had once

described myself as having a dress size in the double digits, but never as fat” (Walker 88).

Having tried every possible remedy and method, Plum is now left with the option of undergoing bypass surgery, which guarantees weight loss despite the risks involved, unlike other methods tried by Plum that had all failed.

In the very first panel in Katie Green’s graphic novel *Lighter Than My Shadow*, the readers can see Katie standing above a weighing machine. This is indicative of the fact that her weight and the shape and size of her body are going to be Katie’s major obsessions throughout the course of the novel. The first time Katie is shown being distressed by the way she looks is when she tries on her uniform just before starting secondary school, which marks a milestone in her life as she also transcends from childhood to puberty. This is also the stage where most girls are indoctrinated into the idea of having a perfect-looking, beautiful face and body that is inevitably thin. Earlier, Megan, Katie’s best friend, had come up with the idea of trying on her mother’s makeup as she was bored of always playing children’s games. When Katie had hesitated and stated that she was not interested in makeup, Megan had replied, “At secondary school, everyone’s going to be into make-up, clothes...boys...” explaining to Katie that they “can’t keep playing kid’s games for ever”, and questioning her, “Don’t you want to grow up?” (Green 41). This moment marked Katie’s initiation into the beauty myth which later culminates in hatred for her own body, and a long struggle with the desire to transcend her body.

Like Plum and Joan, Katie too is bullied in high school, but unlike them, it is not for being fat. In fact, Katie is shown as being slender and taller than her peers. But

unlike them, she is uninterested in styling herself and applying makeup. One of the bullies asks her what her name is, and then the other replies “His name is Neil”, implying that Katie is not feminine enough, making the other comment, “You look like a man!” (Green 48). In another instance, one of the bullies points out her unshaven legs, questioning, “Oi Neil. Won’t your dad let you borrow his lawnmower to shave your legs?” (Green 51).

Gradually Katie becomes more aware of her body, and eventually, as all her friends start finding boyfriends, Katie withdraws, believing that there was something wrong with the way she looked and that nobody would find her desirable. During one of the sleepovers with her friends, Katie stays busy trying to complete her math homework, while the other girls start comparing their bodies with each other, observing themselves in the mirror, and discussing diets and exercises. One of the girls wishes to be anorexic, “to be able to just not eat” so that she would be able to become skinnier (Green 68). When Katie refuses to join the other girls, one of them comments, “You won’t find a boyfriend in your math book”, resulting in Katie deciding to go home. When one of the girls states that it would be unsafe for Katie to walk home alone since it was dark outside, another comments, “Who’d want to rape her?” (Green 70). This comment is similar to the comment passed on to Plum when she arrived at the self-defence class. Unlike Plum, even though Katie’s body is slender, this comment makes her believe that her body is still not feminine, desirable, or slender enough.

The immediate effect of this incident is that Katie gets determined to “look right, to fit in” (Green 79). She shaves her legs, rolls her school skirt up to make it shorter, convinces her parents that she needs a fashionable bag and shoes for school,

and spends hours perfecting her hair. In this way, Katie finally gives in to the beauty myth. But this does not give her satisfaction, which results in far-reaching long-term effects. Even when her friends compliment her new look, she feels that she would still be ugly compared to them. So in order to compensate for her low self-esteem, she strives for perfection in everything, in her studies as well as the shape and size of her body. She gets increasingly conscious about her shape, with even compliments from people like “You’ve really blossomed...a fine hourglass figure”, or a remark from the person taking her measurements for her ballet dress, “Quite wide in the hip, aren’t you?” (Green 88) resulting in her obsessing over her appearance and standing in front of the mirror, observing how her body looks. She also compares her body with that of other girls and feels that all of them are perfect, having bodies that fit a certain type – “skinny”, “curvy” and “sporty” – with only her body seeming “somehow out of proportion” (Green 89).

Eventually, she begins to believe that she is fat and whenever she looks in the mirror she can only focus on stretch marks and bulges of fat on different parts of her body. During the period of Lent, when Katie’s friends plan on giving up on individual food items such as chocolate or fizzy drinks, or sweets, Katie decides on giving up all junk food and eating in between meals. During this period, she manages to lose some weight and feels good when she receives compliments about her healthier look or about her discipline. But things take a negative turn when she is unable to eat those food items even after the end of Lent. All the girls get together to celebrate the end of Lent by eating the food items they had given up. But when Katie struggles to consume a bar of candy, she lies to her friends about not liking the taste anymore. Katie’s struggle and emotional turmoil when she is trying to eat anything

that she considers unhealthy and conducive to weight gain are represented by a black cloud. The more intense her struggle, the bigger the size of the cloud, and at times, she is engulfed entirely by it. She has a sleepless night, and she can only visualize bulges of fat on her body when she closes her eyes. Later after Katie consumes a piece of chocolate, she is overcome with the same negative feeling of extreme guilt. She feels so bad about consuming it that she immediately tries to throw up. When she is unable to do so, she walks obsessively counting her steps in order to compensate for the extra calorie that she had consumed.

Katie soon starts measuring everything she eats and counting every calorie that goes into her food. Her behaviour eventually takes a pathological turn, when even after following such a strict diet, she is unable to view her whole body in the mirror. As Katie confesses: "I only saw parts of myself. The parts I hated" (Green 118). This poignantly reflects the hatred that she has developed for her body, the seeds of which were sown the moment she was introduced to the beauty myth. Her nightmares consist of images where she has transformed into an extremely round inflated version of herself because she is unable to control her appetite. Her fat phobia is different from that of Joan or Plum because she is herself not fat, but her fear of gaining weight overpowers her to such an extent that she reaches a point where she is unable to consume food, hence getting diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

The predicament that Joan, Plum, and Katie find themselves in points toward a cultural compulsion for women to look a certain way and engage in certain activities through which they get approved as being morally commendable and acceptable. This behaviour is then emulated by much younger girls, hence the beauty myth has its more vulnerable targets among the younger generations, who are easily indoctrinated

into its belief system. Susan Bordo has aptly described the cultural situation in which most girls find themselves:

This is a culture in which rigorous dieting and exercise are being engaged in by more and younger girls all the time – girls as young as seven or eight... These little girls live in constant fear—a fear reinforced by the attitudes of the boys in their classes—of gaining a pound and thus ceasing to be “attractive”. They jog daily, count their calories obsessively, and risk serious vitamin deficiencies and delayed reproductive maturation. We may be producing a generation of young, privileged women with severely impaired menstrual, nutritional, and intellectual functioning. (61)

All three protagonists of the three texts – Joan, Plum, and Katie engage in some form of dieting or exercise or both. The fear of getting fat and ceasing to be unattractive is reinforced not only by boys in their class/school as in the case of Katie but also by mothers as in the case of Joan or by friends and peers or even complete strangers in public spaces. Joan and Plum are even denied the opportunity of ever feeling attractive as long as they are in their current fat body. The struggle of obsessively trying to fit into the societal expectations of bodily beauty comes with its own share of adverse physical and mental effects which are reflected in varied ways in each of the three protagonists.

Though the seeds of dissatisfaction with one’s body are sown predominantly via a young woman’s experience of being bullied or made to feel inferior for possessing a certain type of body or by observing and absorbing the prevalent beliefs

and attitudes, it is not the only way a woman learns to be dissatisfied with the way her body looks. In this era dominated by widespread communication with the aid of technology, mass media and popular culture play a major role in propagating beliefs and ideals. We are exposed to a multitude of images on a daily basis which influences our belief system by reinforcing ideas of how things are supposed to be. The dominance of certain kinds of images over a period of time serve to establish ideals. For example, if only a certain category of woman is represented in cinema, advertisement clips or posters, music videos, magazines, etc. for a certain period of time, the general public who is exposed to these images come to believe that this is what an ideal woman is supposed to be/look like because that is the only image of womanhood that is available to them. We live in an era of “hyperreal”, a term coined by Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), where we are unable to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality. These representations of the ultimate feminine beauty in popular discourses such as cinema and advertisement provide a simulation of what femininity or womanhood is supposed to look like. Since they represent only one picture of it, it is not what real womanhood is like, and as stated by Naomi Wolf, “[t]he average model, dancer, or actress is thinner than 95 percent of the female population” (185). We are flooded with such a multitude of images of this particular brand of femininity and womanhood, that we have come to regard it as real and as what all women should be/look like. This phenomenon has been discussed by Wolf in her work:

But since we as women are trained to see ourselves as cheap imitations of fashion photographs, rather than seeing fashion photographs as cheap imitations of women, we are urged to study ways to light up our

features as if they were photographs marred by motion, acting as our own lighting designer and stylist and photographer, our faces handled like museum pieces, expertly lit with highlights, lowlights, Light Effects, Frost n' Glow, Light Powder, Iridescence, and Iridience. (105)

Since the majority of real women look no way like the women in these representations, they spend a huge portion of their time, energy, and money trying to look like them. Representations of feminine beauty in popular culture establish the image of the ideal female, and advertisements exploit these images in two ways. The first category of advertisements only features women who fall into the category of the ideal in order to market their products. Since the majority of women are different from women featured in these advertisements, the second category of advertisers market products that claim to make their viewers look like the women that they feature – ranging from shampoos and soap bars to fairness creams, to special breakfast cereals, health beverages, and green tea, to exercise equipment.

What adds to the problem is that these representations of the ideal female body/beauty are not constant. They keep changing every decade, or even every few years. Over time these ideals have become increasingly unrealistic, unachievable, and more unlike what the majority of women look like, and the result is that “as the ideal has grown thinner and thinner, bodies that a decade ago were considered slender have now come to seem fleshy” (Bordo 57). Previously, what the advertisements targeted was excess weight, but in the present, any sort of bulge or softness is seen as grotesque, unwanted, and disorderly. The kind of body that was “acknowledged as an extreme required only of high fashion models is now the dominant image that beckons to high school and college women” (Bordo 154). Bordo notes that in this

culture, our disgust towards body fat has reached such an extreme that the ideal body now requires not just being slender, but the total absence of any kind of bulge or soft, loose areas even on extremely thin bodies. An ideal body is the one “that is absolutely tight, contained, ‘bolted down’, firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control” (Bordo 190). In order to achieve this, even people of “normal” weight take the help of techniques that are not totally safe, such as liposuction which sucks out unwanted bulges. It is gaining increasing popularity among people of normal weight as it is not safe enough to be recommended for obese people.

These images of ideal feminine beauty and womanhood also play a major role in arousing fat phobia and their resultant hatred towards their own bodies in the case of the protagonists of the three texts. In Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster’s mother is so influenced by the popular representation of feminine beauty that she names her daughter after the actress Joan Crawford, with the hopes that her daughter too would embody the same ideal femininity as done by the actress. Joan is constantly reminded by her mother that nobody would want to marry her if she fails to lose weight. Her internalization of the beauty myth through her consumption of the representation of the ideal woman in popular culture has taught her that “no female can achieve the status of romantic or sexual ideal without the appropriate body” (Bordo 154). Bordo, in her work, argues that the representation of beautiful, slender women in popular culture is done in a way to present them as empowered women, who have achieved the highest degree of personal freedom and success in life. Contrarily, in real life, “female bodies, pursuing these ideals, may find themselves as distracted, depressed, and physically ill as female bodies in the nineteenth century

were made when pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity, and delicacy” (Bordo 184). The incessant pursuit of these ideals is in fact the cause of greatest distress in a woman’s life, and this is exemplified in Joan’s description of the process of her mother’s beauty ritual, or what she terms as her mother “putting on her face”:

Some of the things she did seemed to be painful; for instance, she would cover the space between her eyebrows with what looked like brown glue, which she heated in a little pot, then tear it off, leaving a red patch; and sometimes she would smear herself with pink mud which would harden and crack. She often frowned at herself, shaking her head as if she was dissatisfied... Instead of making her happier, these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate... (Atwood 67)

Later in life when Joan starts writing romances, she too creates heroines in the image of the ideal female, possessing the desired features and slender body, thus contributing to the continued hegemony of the representation of a certain category of femininity in popular culture that all women must aspire to mould themselves into.

In Sarai Walker’s *Dietland*, the representation of the ideal female in popular culture plays a major role in influencing public opinion about how a woman should look like. The Austen Media, an empire that publishes magazines and books, runs a range of websites, broadcasts two lifestyle channels, and also owns the teenage magazine that Plum works for, i.e. *Daisy Chain*. The Austen Media has a great role in providing entertainment options for American women and as it targets and entertains

women, it also serves to provide role models for them who are mostly fashion models with perfect faces and bodies whom they frequently feature in their various channels, magazines, and websites. The lifestyle channels owned by Austen Media run shows that teach women “how to pose for photographs so that your hips will appear slimmer” or to “camouflage” (Walker 82). Plum is in charge of replying to the correspondence by the readers of *Daisy Chain*, who are all teenage girls, seeking the advice of the editor Kitty Montgomery.

The content of some of the letters shows the extent to which women, especially young minds are influenced by mass media and popular culture and the image it portrays of the ideal female. In one of the correspondence, a girl confesses to cutting her breasts because she hates them and she feels they are not normal as they are small and mismatched, in contrast to what she has seen on porn websites. A girl seeks advice on whether to use the five thousand dollars that her grandmother would be giving her upon her graduation from high school to go to Italy to look at art since she plans on studying art history, or to use them to get breast implants since she is really insecure about her extremely small breasts. Another girl confesses to throwing up every night after dinner in order to control her weight, another girl asks her whether she should quit the swim team because her legs look fat in a swimsuit. Girls confess about not liking their certain body parts or features, they inquire about how to achieve a thigh gap or to get rid of FUPA (fat upper pubic area), and a girl even attaches a photograph of herself in the mail and enquires if she looks fat. Analysing all these problems that the readers of *Daisy Chain* write about and seek advice for, what becomes clear is the extent to which they are influenced by the representation of the female body in mass media and popular culture and their desperation to emulate

those images as closely as possible. As trivial as beauty rituals and practices may appear, some of the problems that the girls write about are genuine, creating in them a low sense of self, and some even life-threatening problems like self-harm and eating disorders; and all these arise due to the fact that their bodies are different from the representation of the ideal female body that they are exposed to on a daily basis. In relation to the activities of the radical group in the novel named “Jennifer” that resorts to violence in fighting against discrimination towards women, there is also a mention of a British newspaper *Daily Sun* that printed photos of topless young women on page three, thus objectifying women, as well as influencing its reader’ opinion on how a desirable woman’s body should look like.

Another important medium that propagates the concept of the perfect female with the ideal body in the novel is television, and it does so through both the shows it broadcasts as well as advertisements. When Plum was still a young girl, she was obsessed with the sitcom *Ellie*. The actress who played the title character, as is the norm, was beautiful, with a perfect body, and the feature that she was famous for was her extremely beautiful, long, thick, honey-coloured hair. This actress, Marlowe Buchanan, also appeared in several shampoo commercials. Since Plum really wanted to look like her, she had pleaded with her mother to buy the shampoo that she promoted. This is an example of the way celebrities and advertisements can manipulate the thinking process and influence the choice taken by young, vulnerable minds. Later in life, when Plum was in her junior year of high school, she was influenced into joining the Baptist Weight Loss after she came across its advertisement on television. The advertisement featured Eulaya Baptist, the founder of Baptist Weight Loss. The commercial started with an old photograph of a fat

Eulaya Baptist, wearing faded jeans and trying to shield her face from the camera. In a voiceover, she confessed to being sad because she was so fat that it made her unable to play with her own daughter. Then, present-day, slim Eulaya Baptist appeared, bursting through the photograph, standing in a “ta-da” pose. She then claimed that by following the Baptist plan and by eating only what the plan provided, one would be able to lose weight without starving themselves.

In the advertisement, Eulaya was accompanied by various women from different age groups, each woman with her own backstory. What is common among these women is that their existence had been miserable when they were fat, and losing weight through the Baptist Plan made them not only happy, but also successful, and their lives more fulfilling. This advertisement has such an effect on Plum that she gets determined on joining Baptist Weight Loss and she starts visualising her future in college when she would be slim, would be known by her real name Alicia, and Plum would no longer exist.

In *Lighter Than My Shadow*, Katie is shown reading a magazine named *Girlz*, from where she reads “Stretch marks are caused by rapid weight gain” as she stands examining her thighs and stomach in front of the mirror (Green 90). In the next panel, she is shown reading an article titled “Tips to get your perfect body”, at the same time remembering an incident when she was having lunch with her friends, and her friends commented on how lucky Katie was to be able to eat as much as she liked, without gaining any weight. Now Katie feels that her friends were saying that out of jealousy because they wanted her to get fat and that she had been stupid to have kept on eating so much. Influenced by what she has read in the magazine, she decides to be “in control” (Green 91). Wolf in her work has explained why women are so influenced by

magazines, and the reason they follow the advice and suggestions related to womanhood that is provided in them so religiously: “The voice of the magazine gives women an invisible female authority figure to admire and obey, parallel to the mentor-protégé relationship that many men are encouraged to forge in their educations and on the job, but which women are rarely offered anywhere else but in their glossy magazines” (74).

In the three texts, as in real life, mass media and popular culture have played a great role in disseminating and indoctrinating the idea of the perfect female body among its consumers. The process of indoctrination about the ideal female body that began during childhood and was aided through their personal experiences combined with the representations in mass media and popular culture has created in all the three protagonists a sense of dissatisfaction and hatred towards their own bodies. This in turn drives them to strive for better bodies in which they hope of becoming better, hence acceptable and desirable versions of themselves.

Chapter Three

Food, Hunger and the Female Body/Mind

Dieting is the most common practice among women through which they regulate their food intake and eating habits in order to decrease, maintain or increase body weight, or in other words, to achieve the desired size of their body. Almost every woman goes through some sort of food restriction at least once in her lifetime. Especially for women who seek to reduce themselves in order to fit into the mould of ideal femininity, dieting occupies an important place in their lifestyle. As dieting is directly related to food and eating, women, as a result, share a complex love-hate relationship with both. The process of eating is a basic act performed by all creatures in order to nourish their bodies and sustain their life. But this basic survival process becomes a complicated, sometimes political act in the case of women, especially those whose bodies deviate from what is regarded as the norm.

Contradictory to the belief of dieting being a modern phenomenon, Louise Foxcroft in her work *Calories & Corsets: A History of Dieting over 2,000 Years* (2011), states that its history can be traced back to “barely recorded pre-history but it really took off some two thousand years ago when the Greeks, who knew for a fact that carrying too much fat is bad for you, developed a fundamentally sound way of addressing it...” (17). The word diet is derived from the Greek word “*diaita*”, and as Foxcroft states, the word “described a whole way of life rather than referring to a narrow, weight-loss regimen. It provided an all-round mental and physical way to health, basic to one's very existence and success” (20).

The modern practice of diet, as we know it today, where it mostly aims at weight loss became popular in the nineteenth century when the trend for dietary advice became widespread. A number of self-proclaimed diet experts published numerous diet books which had a huge following worldwide even though many of these weight loss theories were extreme in nature. One such popular diet was “Banting”, named after William Banting. After his own successful weight loss, Banting published a revolutionary pamphlet titled *Letter on Corpulence, Addressed to the Public* in 1863 which laid down his own diet plan of low-carbohydrate, low-calorie diet that had resulted in his weight loss.

When the practice of dieting first became common in the modern Western world in the early nineteenth century, it was mostly practiced by men as being fat was associated with femininity. The shift in the economy from agricultural to industrial was causing more men to gain weight as they were engaged in more sedentary work. This necessitated the distinction between the genders to be made more visible as men were becoming feminine by gaining weight, and women masculine by entering the public sphere. So when women first engaged in dieting, it was a form of bodily rebellion with the help of which women were able to assert that they had the same amount of self-control as men. Dieting hence was a political action among the first women dieters. Women who chose to fast were believed to possess supernatural powers because it was deemed impossible for a woman to possess such a degree of self-control. Eventually, at the end of the nineteenth century, fasting became a craze among women and everyone started dieting either to lose weight or because everyone they knew was participating in it. Thus, regulating their eating habits and counting the number of calories that they consumed became a norm among women. In the present

era, men who engage in calorie tracking are those who wish to build muscle, whereas, almost all women who count calories are the ones seeking to reduce their weight. In recent years, the practice of dieting is no longer limited to teenage girls or adult women. According to Susan Bordo, an increasing number of girls from much younger age group are engaging in this practice, “girls as young as seven or eight... They jog daily, count their calories obsessively, and risk serious vitamin deficiencies and delayed reproductive maturation” (61).

The protagonists of all three texts share a complex relationship with food and eating, they engage in some form of dieting and calorie restriction, which in turn has both overt and covert effects on their mental as well as physical well-being. In *Lady Oracle* (1976) by Margaret Atwood, because of the relationship that Joan had shared with food during her overweight teenage days when she “never opened her mouth except to put except to put something in it”, after losing the weight she tries to stay away from food as much as possible (Atwood 76). When Joan starts a new life after running away from home, she tries to avoid visiting places where she would be tempted by food. When she absent-mindedly finishes an entire packet of biscuits, she considers that as a “bad sign” (Atwood 11) that she needs to watch out for. Even as an adult Joan never really learns how to cook, and she is dismayed that after their marriage Arthur expected her to cook, “out of raw ingredients such as flour and lard” (Atwood 227). She remembers that she had never cooked in her life, her mother had cooked and she had eaten and those had been their strictly defined roles in terms of food and eating. She can only prepare snacks and meals by employing simple methods such as boiling and whenever she tries to prepare an actual meal out of raw ingredients, the result is mostly disastrous:

[C]ooking wasn't as simple as I'd thought. I was always running out of staples such as butter or salt and making flying trips to the corner store...my inedible food: the Swiss fondue which would turn to lymph and balls of chewing gum from too high a heat, the poached eggs which disintegrated like mucous membranes and the roast chickens which bled when cut; the bread that refused to rise, lying like quicksand in the bowl; the flaccid pancakes with centres of uncooked ooze; the rubbery pies. (Atwood 227-228)

She describes the oatmeal porridge prepared by her as “lumping as burning” (Atwood 7), and about beef she states, “I never did learn to cook it properly, it always came out like vinyl” (Atwood 27). She remembers the way she has ruined food while trying to cook over the years: “Years of breakfasts, inept, forsaken, never to be recovered...Years of murdered breakfast...” (Atwood 7). She considers it to be an achievement if she is able to prepare a proper meal: “I cooked lunch without mishap, nothing exploded or boiled over...” (Atwood 28). Her lack of cooking skills may be because of her past relationship with food which had led her to be overweight. After losing weight, perhaps she wants food to become the least of her priorities: “I wanted to prove that I didn't really care about it. Occasionally I neglected to produce any food at all because I had forgotten completely about it” (Atwood 228). If she stays away from food and if she lacks the skill to prepare delicious meals, she would not be tempted by it and hence be able to maintain her weight.

Joan had been able to lose weight after the death of Aunt Lou when it is revealed that she had left two thousand dollars for Joan on the condition that she would inherit the amount upon losing a hundred pounds. Joan had taken extreme

measures to lose weight, employing the numerous methods of weight loss that her mother had at different points coaxed her to try, all at once. She took diet pills and laxatives and replaced breakfast with black coffee, appetite-suppressant candy, and a small amount of cracker. This excessive restriction of calories also caused her to relapse during which state she would indulge in binge eating, consuming everything available within reach, and then throw up later: “I recall with horror consuming nine orders of fried chicken in a row – until my shrunken and abused stomach would protest and I would throw up”. This phenomenon is explained by Naomi Wolf in her work *The Beauty Myth* (2002), where she talks about the destructive consequences of sustained caloric deprivation, quoting Roberta Pollack Seid, “Ironically, dieting...itself may provoke obsessive behaviour and binge-eating. It may indeed cause both eating disorders and obesity itself” (qtd. in Wolf 196).

When Joan was a teenager, she ate to defy her mother, but at the same time, she also ate because of panic because once she had heard her mother refer to her as an accident and she wished to be substantial so that her mother would not be able to get rid of her. It is also revealed that Joan derived morose pleasure from her weight only in relation to her mother. Other times, she felt miserable, but could not stop herself from eating. The more miserable she felt, the more she ate as if to replace the void within her with food. Similarly, as an adult, Joan indulges in binge eating when she is overcome by uncontrollable emotions such as excessive guilt after the death of her mother. Joan also indulges in excessive eating as her wedding date with Arthur approaches because of the fear that Arthur might discover her past as an overweight teenager that she had hidden from him all along, and that her wedding would get cancelled because of her being “exposed at the last minute as a fraud, liar and

imposter” (Atwood 216): “Under the strain I started to eat extra helpings of English muffins covered with butter, loaves of bread and honey, banana splits, doughnuts, and secondhand cookies from Kresge’s” (Atwood 216). When Joan learns of her mother’s death, she feels guilty for having walked out on her and run away from the house even though she knew that her mother had been unhappy. Overridden with guilt and regret, Joan indulges in binge eating: “...I went to the refrigerator...and gorged myself on the contents, eating with frantic haste and no enjoyment half a chicken, a quarter of a pound of butter, a banana cream pie, store-bought, two loaves of bread and a jar of strawberry jam from the cupboard... I threw up twice during the night...” (Atwood 193).

In other words, Joan resorts to seeking comfort in food whenever she is overcome by an uncontrollable negative emotion. Hence her compulsive eating can be seen in a pathological light and the way she consumes an excessive amount of food after she learns about her mother’s death and purges later on points toward the classical symptoms of an eating disorder.

As the title of the novel *Dietland* (2015) by Sarai Walker itself indicates, the issue of food, eating and the act of dieting occupies a central place in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Plum is shown to be attending meetings of the “Waist Watchers” (a company offering weight loss services) and it is revealed that she has been dieting, or at least trying to diet for over a decade now. Throughout the novel, whenever any food item is mentioned, it is accompanied by a bracket that mentions the number of calories it contains. For example, “low-fat hummus and sprouts on oatmeal bread (300)” (Walker 10) or “a cup of black coffee (free food) and an oatmeal cookie (195)” (Walker 12). This points toward the fact that constant calorie

counting comes as naturally as breathing to people who participate in prolonged periods of dieting. They involuntarily end up calculating the amount of calories a food item contains as soon as they see it.

The novel not only deals with the relationship that the protagonist shares with food and dieting, but it also provides a critique of the entire weight loss and diet industry. It is revealed that Plum had been a part of the Waist Watchers, a program that provided diet tips and recipes, for several years, and because of its failure she had decided to undergo weight loss surgery, “I’d been devoted to the programme for years and I was bigger than ever” (Walker 8). While reading Verena Baptist’s book, *Adventures in Dietland*, where the entire weight loss industry is exposed, Plum recalls her own days during the junior year of her high school when she had been a part of the Baptist Weight Loss. The television advertisement through which Plum gets introduced to the Baptist Weight Loss comes with the promise that by choosing their program, their clients would be able to lose weight without having to starve themselves. They could have “a Baptist Shake, flavoured with real Georgia peaches” for breakfast and lunch, and for dinner, “the possibilities are endless” (Walker 42). Baptist Weight Loss would provide its clients with shakes and frozen dinners so that they no longer need to grocery shop or cook. Since they would be provided with readymade meals which they were exclusively supposed to eat while on their plan, they would no longer be thinking about food. The advertisement then progresses to show women from various age groups and different walks in life who had been fat earlier and were able to effortlessly lose weight through the Baptist Plan. The women in the advertisement are shown to be miserable when they were fat and achieve true happiness only after losing weight. The advertisement makes use of the common

rhetoric of weight loss companies – women will be able to realize their full potential once they overcome their appetites and reduce the size of their bodies; that food should be the least of their concerns and they should not think about the food at all.

On Plum's first day at the Baptist clinic, she along with the other new members are shown a documentary about the life of its founder Eulaya Baptist. According to the documentary, Eulaya, who had been a former Miss Georgia and also participated in the Miss America pageant, had gained weight during pregnancy which she was unable to lose even post-partum. When she was not able to lose weight even by the time of her child's fifth birthday, she decided to undergo stomach stapling surgery. Her husband, Allan Baptist who was against this, had decided that the only way Eulaya would be able to lose weight would be by completely removing her from the world of food. So, he hired his cousin to cook for his wife as well as to restrict the amount of food that she consumed: "His cousin prepared all of Eulaya's meals so she didn't have to shop for food or go into the kitchen. Allan Baptist even took the drastic step of padlocking the refrigerator shut. He kept Eulaya away from restaurants and she stopped socializing with friends..." (Walker 46). It was after nine months of this restricted living, "with Eulaya eating nothing but hard boiled eggs and lean roast beef and cottage cheese with canned peaches" that she was able to become her slim former self again (Walker 46). It was after her journey of weight loss that Eulaya had the idea of helping others struggling to lose weight. This is how she opened the first Baptist weight loss clinic "that would provide its patrons with low-calorie shakes, frozen dinners, and a special exercise program" (Walker 46). Those who enrolled in the clinic or "Baptists" would, as a result, not think about food, "except when it was time to drink or heat up their next meal" (Walker 46). So through the documentary, the

idea that was first introduced in the advertisement that weight loss is highly effective if one no longer thinks about food is reinforced.

The success of Eulaya Baptist's weight loss and the method used to obtain it becomes the selling point of the Baptist Weight Loss, but this exact thing is exposed as a sham in *Adventures in Dietland*, a book written by Eulaya's daughter, Verena Baptist. Verena Baptist reveals, "Within a year, Mama began to regain the weight she'd lost. Since she had invested our family's savings in Baptist Weight Loss, Daddy foresaw disaster and agreed that Mama needed her stomach stapled" (Walker 46). This reveals how permanent weight loss through dieting is rarely achieved, and what was being sold to all the customers of Baptist Weight Loss in the name of diet food was a lie. Verena further reveals in her book that the diet not only failed, but some who had been a part of the programme "claimed to have suffered kidney problems as a result of the diet" (Walker 49).

Also, the Baptist meals did not taste good. Verena Baptist in her book reveals that Eulaya's personal assistant had blackmailed her with a recorded phone conversation where she had confessed that the Baptist meals "tasted like shit" and Eulaya herself would not have eaten them even if someone paid her for that (Walker 50). Along with the meals being very less in quantity, Plum felt that the Baptist meals had no connection with real food. She reflects: "...they seemed to lack a connection to actual foodstuffs; I thought it was possible the "food" was constructed of other elements, like paper and Styrofoam, but I didn't care, as long as eating it lead to thinness" (Walker 50).

This reflects how people who fall under the trap of such diet companies are ready to sacrifice the quality and taste of their meals or are even prepared to stay with their stomachs half full with the hope that the meals they are having would eventually lead to miraculous weight loss. In order to achieve a slender body, they are willing to sacrifice everything and this attitude can be reflected in a car sticker used by Plum's friend, Nicolette's mother that reads, "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" (Walker 52). What they fail to see is that, in the name of diet food, they are tricked into buying a poorer quality of food with lesser nutrient value for double the price compared to what they would have spent had they chosen to eat normal food.

Another tactic used by weight loss companies, in this case, Baptist Weight Loss is equating the ability of a person being able to stick to a diet to their moral restraint. This same idea has also been fed to Plum during her first week as a Baptist. She had "been instructed to avoid people who were eating, those unruly mobs with their knives and forks" (Walker 50). Because of her ability to stick to her diet, she felt a kind of superiority over people who eat, she felt she was "experiencing transcendence from the grotesque world of mastication and gazing". Her choice of words describing people eating points toward the fact that she too is viewing people who can restrain their appetites as greater, superior beings and giving them greater moral credit. She was engrossed in this belief to such an extent that the sight of people eating made her feel nauseous because for her the act of eating was something "grotesque" and animalistic.

When Plum is able to stick completely to the diet and lose weight during her initial weeks as a Baptist, she is encouraged by remarks such as "You must have been good this week!" (Walker 53). Later when she indulges in binge eating and is filled

with guilt, she “confesses” during her next visit to the clinic. Here the entire process of dieting is paralleled to the practice of religion. The very name “Baptist” is successful in enforcing this parallel. Just as religious practices praise morality and condemn any sin, diet companies praise the capability of their clients to successfully stick to their diet. Whenever one indulges in any form of sin, one confesses in the church, in the same way, one confesses in the clinic whenever one falters from the prescribed diet.

Another parallel that can be drawn from this is female hunger in general paralleling female sexuality, and the requirement for both to be controlled and restrained. Susan Bordo in her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) talks about how whenever women are shown as having a voracious appetite in films and novels, “their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite” (110). This gender ideology was inaugurated in the Victorian era when the depiction of women indulging in hearty meals was considered taboo. Helena Michie in *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (1987), a work that looks at the portrayal of women’s bodies in a variety of literary and non-literary genres from the Victorian era, talks about the absence of any mention of the heroine eating in Victorian fiction depicting dinner parties and social gatherings. She also notes the absence of any depiction of the heroine either eating or starving in the Victorian social novel that provided a realistic treatment of the most gruesome subjects. She notes: “Hunger in even the poorest Victorian heroines happens offstage; never do they intrude on the decorum of the novel...” (13). Since delicate appetites came to be regarded as a sign of femininity and virginity, weakness and pallor eventually became signs of beauty in the refined

lady. As Michie observes, because of the deprivation of food in the public and social space, eating was forced to become a private activity, resulting in young women “forced to nibble scraps in their bedroom” so that they could feign a lack of appetite at dinner tables (20). As Michie notes, this is how the act of female eating came to be equated with the sexual act: “The ‘secret nibbling in the bedroom’ makes even more explicit the unconscious equation of food and sex. Eating is typed as a bedroom activity, something too personal to survive the public scrutiny of the dinner table” (20).

This attitude has been carried on to the present day – various advertisements especially the ones marketing products aiding to control weight such as diet pills, as has been shown by Bordo in her work, reinforce the belief that an ideal woman is not supposed to eat much. Bordo has also discussed the continued use of female hunger as a metaphor for their sexual desire and appetite in advertisements and films in the present day. Hence female hunger needs to be controlled and restrained in the same way that female sexuality does. Bordo also notes how society found a need to control women’s hunger, especially during periods when they were becoming stronger in social and political life:

Anxiety over women’s uncontrollable hungers appears to peak, as well, during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially. The second half of the nineteenth century, concurrent with the first feminist wave...saw a virtual flood of artistic and literary images of the dark, dangerous, and evil female: “sharpteethed, devouring” Sphinxes, Salomes, and Delilahs, “biting, tearing, murderous women”. (161)

Naomi Wolf has also made a similar observation: “Modern culture represses female oral appetites as Victorian culture, through doctors, repressed female sexual appetite” (97). This further explains the strategy behind the use of moral terms by diet companies when talking about dieting to their clients and while advertising their products. A woman is “good” if she is able to restrain her hunger, which in turn reflects her sexual restraint. This in turn propagates the idea that women are not supposed to eat much, and that they have a very small appetite, and many women put up with this appearance even if the reality points towards something else. Plum too has internalized this concept because she believes that women do not eat on dates. When Verena sets her up on blind dates as a part of the “New Baptist Plan” (through which she seeks to undo the harm caused by her mother Eulaya’s Baptist Plan), Plum is at loss about how to act during her dates. After getting ready for her first date she reflects: “Sitting down at dinner table would be difficult, never mind eating, but girls didn’t eat on dates. At least I didn’t think they did...I tried to remember what characters in movies did. Deception was part of it. Pretending to be prettier, slimmer, and less hungry” (Walker 160).

Though Plum religiously sticks to her diet for the first few weeks under the influence of the rhetoric employed by Baptist Weight Loss, what causes her to falter is her inability to tolerate hunger. She may have been mentally determined to follow all the diet rules, but her own body defeats her willpower. She may wish to transcend the necessity of having to eat but she is not able to transcend her hunger. She starts experiencing unbearable hunger beginning from her second week as a Baptist. When she first shares with Gladys, her weight loss coach, about her persistent hunger, she explains it as sugar withdrawal and the poison leaving her system. Plum waits for her

hunger to go away, but it only gets worse with time, so much so that she starts dreaming about food: “At night I dreamt about éclairs. Hunger pangs woke me travelling through my body like the reverberations of a bell. I held my hands over my ears and rolled back and forth in bed, hoping the sensations would go away” (Walker 51).

Plum tries desperate ways to overcome her hunger, methods that were suggested by Gladys which include chewing on lettuce leaves dipped in mustard, drinking a large quantity of water, doing jumping jacks, and writing in her food journal. None of these methods work, leaving Plum hungrier than ever and topping that with other side effects that she has to deal with such as dizziness and trembling limbs. She also has suicidal thoughts, because a few times she “thought about jumping off the roof of the restaurant” (Walker 53), and it is also revealed that she was facing extreme hair fall: “I grew increasingly worried as the drain filled with clumps of my hair” (Walker 53). These were the ways in which her body was warning her regarding the extreme calorie deprivation that she was causing her body to undergo by following the Baptist Weight Loss program whose meals only make up around 12000 calories a day. It is ironic that she had been attracted to Baptist Weight Loss out of several other diet companies in the market because of the advertisement that stated “A Baptist is never hungry” (Walker 43). Moreover, it was reassured during the first day at the Baptist clinic that their clients would not have to think about food unless it was time to heat and consume the readymade meals provided by them. But the reality is the direct opposite – Plum is constantly hungry and she is thinking about food all the time.

Her hunger is something that she is not able to tolerate and master even later in life. This explains her inability to diet, which she had been constantly trying to do for almost a decade. She would start each day by consuming the correct breakfast and snacks as prescribed by *Waist Watchers*. But as the day would progress, her hunger would increase to such an extent that she would lose concentration and her hands would start shaking. This made her break away from her diet and consume something that was not recommended in order to satiate her hunger. In this way, Plum began her day every day by trying to diet but would fail to do so. For Plum, the feeling that she gets while being hungry is the worst feeling that one could experience: "Hunger is what death must feel like" (Walker 7). Since Plum has constantly been trying to diet, she is described as being hungry several times in the novel.

Plum's inability to tolerate hunger made her incapable of dieting for prolonged periods of time, and as a result, hindered the process of her weight loss. At the same time, it is a boon for her in disguise as it also prevents her from developing eating disorders, as she confesses, "I was too squeamish for bulimia and lacked the masochism needed for anorexia" (Walker 65). The period when some girls develop eating disorders is during their teenage years, while they are still at school. Though Plum had started dieting by the time she reached high school, she is unable to starve herself like other girls: "I took smaller portions and sometimes skipped lunch at school, but I didn't like being hungry. There were girls at school who starved themselves, but I didn't know how they did it. When I was hungry I couldn't concentrate, and I needed to concentrate so I could get good grades" (Walker 43).

Though Plum does not get diagnosed with any eating disorders in the novel, she does show some tendencies and symptoms of disordered eating. This first

manifests itself a month after Plum joins the Baptist Weight Loss. Since Plum worked part-time at a restaurant in order to make money for the expenses of the Baptist Weight Loss, she was not able to resist real food for a long period of time. Surviving solely on the meagre Baptist meals, she used to be hungry all the time, and being surrounded by delicious food all the time made it even harder for her. Once she is in charge of stirring a pot of macaroni and cheese and the smell overpowers her senses: “The intoxicating smell filled my nose and my mouth, even penetrating my brain and wrapping its orange tentacles around every conscious thought” (Walker 54). Not being able to resist, she later scoops up some leftover food from the plates that came back to the kitchen for being washed and places them on her tongue. Eventually, when she comes back to her conscious state of mind and realises what has been doing, she rushes to the bathroom and spits out the glob of food into the toilet. After this incident, she continues with this process of putting leftover food from plates, taking in the taste, and then spitting it off. Gradually she starts eating leftover french fries from the dirty plates. This reaches a climax when the restaurant is preparing food for a retirement party and she ends up stealing food: “Six weeks of systemic starvation had weakened me. For every macaroon that made it into the patters, another went into my apron pocket” (Walker 55). As soon as she gets the chance, she starts binging on the macaroons, which is described very graphically:

One macaroon slipped into my mouth, and then two, and then as many as would fit. I consumed them so hurriedly that at first I didn't enjoy the shock of creamy coconut against my tongue. I stuffed three macaroons into my mouth before stopping to catch my breath, and then I made room for two more. My face flushed and I began to cry. I knew

what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't eat the macaroons fast enough. A ball of coconut formed in my throat. I paused to swallow, then continued working through my stash, wiping my nose with my sleeve as I chewed. (Walker 56)

This lapse on the part of Plum makes her feel like a criminal, she felt as if she has committed a grave crime. But she cannot stop herself from doing it. It is in fact her body fighting against her and reacting to the intense calorie restriction that it had to undergo. Emotionally she was suffering from guilt, but physically she felt good: "I expected to be sick, but once the pain was gone, I felt better than I had in ages. My headache disappeared. I had grown so accustomed to having a headache that not having one felt strange...I slept through the night for the first time since becoming a Baptist" (Walker 56).

What she had done may have been very bad for her diet, but it proved to have a positive impact on her body which she had starved for several weeks. The manner in which she indulged in binge eating may be disordered, in the sense that it was not the usual way in which people eat food, but it would not have happened had she not starved her body for so long in the name of diet.

But a single binge eating episode is not sufficient in order to satisfy her hunger. The hunger returns when she wakes up the next morning. She describes her hunger as a "beast" that "gnawed" at her (Walker 56), implying that it acts as an entity separate from her, and it is something that she is unable to control. She again binges on her Baptist meals, consuming several meals all at once. But this fails to give her satisfaction because she had had a taste of "real" food and the hunger for real food

could never be satiated by the Baptist meals which felt and tasted entirely artificial. So she goes to the mall with her friend Nicolette where they binge on several items of fast food and Plum also buys half a dozen donuts to take home, which she later binges on at 2 am.

Plum was at the risk of developing a potential eating disorder, the early symptoms were visible, but, Eulaya Baptist is killed in a car accident and the Baptist Weight Loss is shut down by her daughter Verena. Even though Plum is distraught upon hearing the news because her dream of becoming smaller in size is shattered, this proves as a blessing in disguise for her in the long run. Had she continued tormenting her body with extreme calorie restriction, her body would have reacted at times by making her binge in order to compensate for all the calories that are required by the body to function. In this way, Plum would have been caught in an endless process of starvation and binge eating.

There are other characters in the novel who, unlike Plum are not able to escape from the clutches of eating disorders. One such character is Julia Cole, the manager of the “Beauty Closet” at Austen Media, who is secretly working on an exposé of the Austen Empire. Since she works for the Austen media, she needs to look a certain way in order to fit in and be accepted. Since her mother was black, she describes herself merely as “passing”: “Passing for thin. Passing for white too” (Walker 246). So in the constant attempt to pass as a thin woman, she develops bulimia – her prolonged dieting causes her to binge, and in order to get rid of the excess calories, she throws up right after indulging in the binge. Similarly, several teenage girls, readers of the *Daisy Chain* magazine, confess in their correspondence about throw up after each meal, so that they do not put on weight.

Though Plum does not develop a full-blown eating disorder that can be clinically diagnosed, her eating habits do reflect her mental state. When she is depressed and filled with anger and angst, she starves herself and this results in binge eating later. For example, when she is under the New Baptist Plan through which Venera Baptist seeks to undo the harm caused by her mother's weight loss plan, and also to persuade Plum not to undergo the surgery for weight loss, Plum is in a constant battle with herself. As Verena goes on providing new tasks as a part of the plan, Plum grows increasingly conflicted, because she feels that the tasks Venera laid down for her only make her more aware of the hardships faced by women of her size in a society that is highly fat phobic. When she is at her lowest point, full of anger at the world that has failed her, she steals the appetite suppressant called Dabistaf from Verena's table and takes several of them at once, as a result, she is able to mitigate her hunger for days. When the effect of the pills wears off after several days, she eats voraciously. It is only when her inner conflict is over, that she decides against the surgery and learns to accept her body that she is finally at peace. It is at this stage that she is able to listen to her own body, follow its rhythms, and eat just the right amount that she would require to nourish her body. She loves cooking but mostly stays away from it due to fear that she would consume excess calories, but when she learns to listen to her body, she indulges in cooking as well as feeding those around her. Hence her eating gets normalised once she is happy with herself and is in a peaceful mental state.

Food occupies a central space in Katie Green's graphic novel *Lighter Than My Shadow* (2013). Since childhood, Katie is shown to be a fussy eater and she struggles to finish her plate during mealtimes, and it requires a lot of coaxing from her parents

to make her eat. Also, she requires a lot of time to finish her meals. This becomes a cause of great distress for her, especially during lunchtime at school. All her friends finish before her and then leave her alone to complete her lunch during which time the boys come to her and bully her. This causes her to mostly throw away her lunch after her friends are done. As she struggles to complete her meals at home, she comes up with a solution of hiding food inside her pockets when her parents are not looking, and then later dumping it behind her closet. This gets discovered soon after, putting an end to this particular habit of Katie. Katie develops a quirky habit where she requires everything around her to be arranged symmetrically, arranged in the proper order, and counted. She follows the same rule with food – each category of food requires to be kept separate on the plate, each food item needs to be cut into equal sizes, each mouthful needs to be of the same size, and the number of times that she chews on each side of her mouth needs to be counted. By following this complex ritual Katie is somehow able to complete her meals, even though she is still a slow eater and her parents are relieved on seeing her completing her meals.

For a certain period, it appears that Katie's conflict with food and the process of eating has been resolved. When Katie reaches secondary school, she starts getting bullied by boys who call her a man, because she is taller than most girls, and unlike them, she is not interested in make-up and grooming herself. When Katie shares her experience of being bullied with her parents, they do not consider it to be a serious matter that would require immediate intervention. Rather they consider it as something universal that everybody experiences, and also a vital part of a person's growth process. Her father comments, "Everyone gets bullied. You need to just laugh it off" and her mother adds, "Just don't let it get to you, love" (Green 50). So the next

time she gets bullied, she is aware that she cannot seek comfort from her parents, that they would suggest her to become tougher. She does not know how to deal with her emotions, so she seeks comfort in food. When she comes home after getting bullied at school, she binges from the snack cupboard, and later also has second helpings in dinner. Her parents are unable to see that Katie is indulging in compulsive eating, rather they are happy that she has a healthy appetite and they no longer have to coax her into finishing her meals. Susie Orbach in her book *Fat is A Feminist Issue II* (2006) defines compulsive eating as follows:

Compulsive eating means eating without regard to physical cues signalling hunger or satisfaction. It means, in fact, being so terribly out of touch with your body that these mechanisms are suppressed. Food is experienced as something almost magical, imbued with the power to make you feel better, to squash feelings, to provide comfort, to induce feelings of strength and so on. (ch. 3)

What Katie indulges in is, in fact, compulsive eating because she is seeking to get rid of all the negative emotions of shame and inadequacy that she felt after getting bullied because she has no other outlet for these emotions, and also since she has no other place to seek comfort, she is seeking comfort in food.

Back at school, Katie's friends comment on her appetite, and her ability to stay skinny regardless of her consuming so much food. They wish their metabolism too to be like Katie's so that they would be able to eat as much as they wished without getting fat, and a girl even enquires, "Do you throw it up in secret?" (Green 55). This refers to the attitude that young girls, who have just been initiated into the world of

beauty practices feel about eating disorders. For them, eating whatever they want, and then later throwing up does not seem like a pathological condition that requires professional help, but rather an effective method to stay thin. They get the illusion that they are not starving themselves because of the binge that they indulge in, at the same time the body does not consume all the calories because the food is purged later on. Even though Katie is still not much into beauty practices and does not consider much about how she looks at this stage, this does affect her subconsciously, which will come to the surface later on.

Eventually, Katie starts becoming increasingly aware of her body. She does not join in with her other friends when they compare their bodies with each other, and complain about aspects of their bodies that they dislike or feel to be fat or out of proportion. But all this will have an impact on how she later views her own body because though she does not actively participate in these discussions, the ideas the girls uphold slowly get ingrained into Katie's subconscious mind. Katie starts feeling left out during the conversations of her peer group, she starts feeling that there must be something wrong with her. So in her desire to fit in, she shaves her leg, convinces her parents to buy her more fashionable bags and shoes for school, shortens the length of her skirt, and changes her hairstyle. This too fails to provide her with a sense of adequacy and eventually she starts feeling that she would never be good enough. This is also seen in her attitude towards her body which she begins comparing with other girls. For her, everybody seems to possess perfect bodies and for her, only her body seems somehow out of proportion. She gets convinced that she is fat and needs to be in control.

She begins by giving up all junk food for Lent, but even after the period of Lent is over, she is unable to consume anything that she considers to be unhealthy. Consuming even a small piece of chocolate causes her to be overridden with extreme guilt and she compensates by walking thousands of steps in order to burn the calories. She determines to follow a rigorous diet eliminating anything she considers to be fattening from her meals. So in the attempt to achieve the perfect body and achieve an overall sense of being adequate enough, she obsessively follows an extremely rigid diet. But even after eating a completely healthy dinner prepared and served by herself, the next day she is overcome with fear that she had consumed too many calories and decides to skip her lunch in order to compensate for that.

Even after strictly regulating the number of calories that she consumes, she is not able to feel good enough or adequate enough. She still feels that she is not doing enough and is unable to keep negative thoughts away from her head which makes her feel that her eating habits would eventually cause her to become fat. The extent to which this thought torments her is reflected by the fact that her nightmares consist of images of her becoming fat after consuming sugary food items. Eventually, she reaches a point where she consumes only a negligible amount of food causing her to become extremely thin along with facing other side effects of calorie deprivation such as hair fall. When she is taken to the doctor by her parents who begin to worry about her deteriorating health and her inability to eat a sufficient amount of food, it is also revealed that she had not menstruated for the past two years. But this visit to the doctor does not help as she feels that the doctor simply wants her to become fat and gets horrified when she advises her to consume food that is high in calories and offers to recommend high-calorie supplements that would help her build strength or

prescribe medicines to stimulate her appetite. Katie declines all the alternatives given by the doctor and when she leaves the clinic, she is in tears.

Katie's physical as well as mental health begin to deteriorate in the aftermath of her visit to the clinic. At dinner time, she is unable to eat and lashes out at her parents who she feels do not understand her suffering. She just has an apple for breakfast which she consumes while walking to school. She gets dizzy in the middle of her classes and then passes out. It is then that she gets diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and the doctor explains that every system in Katie's body has been impacted by starvation. Katie already had a complicated relationship with food since childhood when she was an extremely fussy eater, as an adolescent she sought the help of food when having to deal with negative emotions for which she found no outlet, and by the time she is in her late teens she posits food as her enemy, something that hinders her from achieving the best version of her physical self.

Tracing the cause of eating disorders, Naomi Wolf notes how in the early 1990s eating disorders were seen to develop as a result of "anomalous personal behaviour":

...the cause was not assumed to be society's responsibility...but rather personal crises, perfectionism, poor parenting, and other forms of individual psychological maladjustment. In reality, however, these diseases were widely suffered by many ordinary young women from unremarkable backgrounds, women and girls who were simply trying to maintain an unnatural "ideal" body shape and weight...eating disorders were widespread among otherwise perfectly well balanced

young women, and that the simple, basic social pressure to be thin was a major factor in the development of these diseases. (5)

In the case of Katie, it cannot be denied that she already shares a love-hate relationship with food and eating and she has a personality trait that requires her to strive for perfection in every aspect of her life, but what eventually drives her to develop anorexia nervosa is the simple desire to fit in and to be accepted. In order to fit in, she works on her appearance and her body. She feels that all her friends possess perfect bodies except herself and she too strives to mould her body into the ideal, and this ideal is inherently thin and toned.

Katie's path toward recovery is long and difficult during which she is withdrawn from school and is under regular monitoring by her parents. When the doctor's approach fails and she is still not able to make herself eat food, her parents turn to therapy and consult a dietician to chart out a meal plan for her. She is shrouded by feelings of disgust for herself every time she eats a meal, and later when she observes herself in the mirror, she feels that she looks "fat" and "huge" (Green 173). Katie is gradually able to make her eat food and achieve the target weight provided by the dietician, but the process is not smooth. She experiences breakdowns where she snaps at her parents or throws away the plate of food. During her lowest point, she feels disgusted at herself, out of control, and the voice inside her head keeps telling her that she is fat and gross. Nevertheless, she regains her physical strength and is able to go back to school.

But Katie's battle with food and eating is not yet over. She finds it very difficult to estimate the amount of food she should eat because she no longer has a

diet plan to stick to. She is unable to listen to her own body and then decide how much she needs and finds it very distressing when she is asked to serve herself at mealtimes. Exploring alternative treatments, Katie also starts regularly visiting a healer named Jack who helps her in feeling good about herself. But she feels good only during her visits and then she is back to her regular self. After one such visit, when she is unable to fall asleep at night tormented by numerous thoughts, she ends up visiting the kitchen and binging out of the snack cabinet. This binge is accompanied by a feeling of guilt and she desperately tries throwing up but is unable to do so. The next morning she tries to cope with this by obsessively exercising. This cycle of binging continues even after she moves away from her home to college. It happens in the middle of the night if Katie has been through a stressful situation during the day. When she gets physically intimate with her boyfriend for the first time, she is overcome with an intense negative feeling in the middle of the act and is not able to continue. She is unable to fall asleep because of her uncontrollable thoughts and then ends up binge eating. She also binges when she is stressed because of her college work and studies, and also when she realizes that Jake had been touching her inappropriately during their therapy sessions. Every binge is followed by her trying to compensate for the excessive calories consumed by compulsively exercising and skipping breakfast or lunch the following day. This in turn worsens the situation because it results in her binging some more because her body craves the nutrition that she has denied it. So from occasional binges during stressful situations, Katie begins to binge almost regularly and she is trapped in this never-ending cycle of binge eating and self-inflicted starvation.

Susie Orbach describes the act of compulsive eating as a chain and goes on to describe its working mechanism:

“A difficult emotion occurs. This leads to some reaction of denial or repression that you come to feel bad about. In an attempt to stave off both the original difficult feeling and the associated feelings it throws up, you eat compulsively. This then leads to feelings of low self-esteem, anger, despair and so on about the compulsive eating. The original feeling that started the chain is displaced and seemingly uncontactable. You feel pain and alienation.”

(ch. 4)

Katie’s cycle of binge eating or compulsive eating can be explained with reference to this mechanism laid down by Orbach. Katie binges on food wherever she faces a stressful situation. The major trigger of her compulsive eating is the memory of her being sexually abused by her healer, with whom she had built a relationship based on trust and believed would help her find a solution to her disordered eating. This memory haunts her not once but frequently. She does not know how to deal with those negative emotions that confront her. She indulges in binge eating which leaves her with a feeling of guilt and disgust towards herself, and her energy is diverted towards getting rid of the excess calories that she has consumed. So the original negative emotion that had occurred as a result of her memory of being sexually abused is replaced by another negative emotion of disgust and guilt caused by her compulsive eating. Katie had sought comfort in food even as a child as has been discussed earlier, but what she undergoes as a young adult is of a far greater magnitude which severely impacts her overall health.

When this cycle starts becoming increasingly frequent and Katie seems to see no way to come out of this, she reaches her lowest point and attempts suicide by swallowing dozens of pills at once. After a long and difficult period of recovery, she is slowly able to gather her will to live life again. After seeking the professional help of a psychotherapist, she is able to realise that her compulsive eating is only a coping mechanism and that she should not be so harsh on herself when she does it. The therapist explains that since she had always used food as a coping mechanism, it will require time for her to learn new ways to cope and that she should not be so harsh on herself the next time she binges. Katie follows this advice and constantly reminds herself that her bingeing is only a coping mechanism and she needs to learn to be kinder to herself. In an attempt to stop herself from bingeing, she avoids storing food in the house, but that only makes her more desperate by constantly reminding her of food and making her binge even more frequently.

It is only when Katie realises that willpower, guilt trips, and harsh punishments were not the things that would not help her heal that she is able to be kinder to herself and find an alternative route toward recovery. She realises that she is not in tune with her own body, and is not able to distinguish when she is hungry and when she is emotionally overwhelmed. So instead of inflicting harsh punishments on her body in the form of starvation and exercise, she decides to eat regular meals every day no matter what. Even though she eats compulsively whenever she gets nightmares or flashbacks, those episodes become less frequent because she has been eating regular meals. She also cooks her own meals and cooking too proves to be therapeutic for her and she enjoys it.

At one point though she grows extremely triggered when the flashbacks return to her and she grows extremely violent and breaks things around her, it is also the first time that she does not binge when she gets the flashbacks. When she reflects on her life she realises that she had based her self-esteem on “crazy standards, rules and regimes” (Green 476) and this was one of the reasons that made her develop her eating disorders. Next time she is on the verge of compulsively eating, she is, for the first time, able to listen to herself and then successfully able to stop herself. The greatest victory for Katie is when she is finally able to eat when she is hungry and stop when full because it was something that she never thought she would be able to do.

Katie’s compulsive eating was a result of her trying to cope with her overwhelming negative emotions for which she could not find any other outlet or source of comfort, and the major trigger for this is the memory of her being sexually abused by her healer, a person whom she had trusted to help her find a way out of her problems. But the extent to which her compulsive eating affects her and drags her into a never-ending loop of binge eating followed by starvation and rigorous exercise is because of her desire to possess and maintain a body that would be accepted and desired. The chain of events that follow after compulsive eating, namely being overcome by feelings of disgust and excessive guilt and then employing desperate methods in order to burn the calories consumed is caused because Katie does not want her body to deviate from the norm or look different from what has been idealized by culture and society. The reason that she punishes her and unwittingly causes more damage to her body making it unable to break out of the cycle of compulsive eating and self-inflicted starvation is because of the fatphobia that she has internalized

subconsciously during the vital years of her growth and development. It is the same in the case of Joan in *Lady Oracle* and Plum in *Dietland*. It is either because of their desire to get rid of their fat bodies or because of their fear of getting fat that they develop a complicated relationship with food and the process of eating.

The protagonists of the three texts possess bodies that are diverse from each other – Joan was an overweight teenager and has lost weight as an adult, Plum is a plus-sized woman in her mid-thirties, and Katie's weight fluctuates from being underweight to the recommended weight as she battles with eating disorders – what binds them together is the complicated relationship that they share with food and the process of eating. All the three characters posit food as their enemy at certain points in their lives because they believe that they would be able to achieve the desired bodies that they have visualised in their minds once they master their hunger and transcend the necessity to eat. Both Joan and Katie are compulsive eaters and the eating habits, including dieting and calorie restriction, of all three characters, have both overt and covert effects on their mental as well as physical health.

Chapter Four

Erasing the Fat Past/Body

The previous two chapters deal with how women develop a sense of dissatisfaction with their own bodies and the consequence that arise as a result of that sense of dissatisfaction. One consequence was them positing food as their enemy since they believed that it was their unrestrained consumption of food that was giving them the body that they so hated in the first place. This in turn had both overt and covert consequences on their body as well as mind. This chapter will deal with other major consequences/obsessions that arise as a result of this sense of dissatisfaction with one's body – the desire to erase/hide/transform/transcend the body that one currently possesses. This desire can be seen in the protagonists of the three texts in one way or another – those who experience a sense of inadequacy in the body they possess like Plum in *Dietland* (2015) and Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* (2013) seek to transform their bodies in certain ways so that they may correspond to the image of the ideal bodies that they have on their minds. On the other hand, Joan in *Lady Oracle* (1976) tries to erase all aspects of her past life as an overweight teenager.

In Sarai Walker's *Dietland*, Alicia Kettle alias Plum is a plus-sized woman in her early thirties who has spent more than a decade of her life trying to transform her body. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, a number of factors cause her to develop a deep sense of dissatisfaction with her body, causing her to conclude that the quality of her life would drastically improve once she is able to achieve a slender body, free from fat and bulges. In order to get rid of her fat body, she begins with dieting from her junior year at high school by joining the "Baptist Weight Loss". After the

company gets shut down, she joins the “Waist Watchers”. At the beginning of the novel, Plum has been a dedicated Weight Watcher for almost a decade. But dieting has actually failed to give her the body that she desired and her size is bigger than ever, much bigger than when she had first started dieting. She had been able to lose some weight at times when she dedicated herself fully to her plans, but they had only been temporary because her body reacted to the sustained calorie deprivation, causing her to indulge in binge eating. This points toward the failure of dieting in general, which has been noted by Margo DeMello in her work *Body Studies: An Introduction* (2013): “But the reality is that dieting rarely works...most people who diet,...will simply gain back the weight that they have lost. But from the perspective of the diet industry, diets are not supposed to work. If they did...then there would be no need for a diet industry anymore, and billions of dollars in profit would disappear alongside our corpulence” (195)

Noami Wolf too in *The Beauty Myth* (2002) states the fact that the diet industry does not really want women to get thin permanently because it would then run out of business. She quotes Joan Jacobs Brumberg who calls the diet industry an “entrepreneur’s delight” because “the market is self-generating and intrinsically expansive. Predicated on failure...the interest in diet strategies, techniques and products seems unlimited” (Brumberg, qtd. in Wolf 102).

It is because of this very reason that Verena Baptist calls the weight-loss industry “the most profitable failed industry in history” (Walker 99). Given the failure of dieting, the ultimate solution left for Plum in order to lose weight was undergoing a gastric bypass surgery that would finally be able to give her the body that she had longed for for such a long time. Though she is aware of the possible risks that it

would carry, her sense of dissatisfaction with her body is so great that she is willing to risk everything if the result would provide her with a slender body:

I was excited about it, but also terrified at the thought of having my internal organs cut up and rearranged and of the possible complications that might follow. The surgery would make my stomach the size of a walnut; afterward I'd only be able to eat spoonfuls of food each day for the rest of my life. That was the horrible part, but the miraculous part was that I would lose between ten and twenty pounds a month. In one year it would be possible to lose more than two hundred pounds, but I wouldn't go that far. I wanted to weigh 125 pounds, and then I would be happy. (Walker 7-8)

Her experience of having lived in a fat body for thirty years of her life in a highly fat phobic society has made her believe that her only way of being accepted by the society and living a happy, fulfilling life and enjoying all the aspects of life, in general, would be by reducing herself to fit into the societal standards of the desirable female body. She starts equating the life that she has led in her fat body as equivalent to some illusion and starts believing that her "real" life would begin once she becomes thin. She views her fatness to be a temporary state, a belief held by most fat women who have been trying to reduce: "They didn't view their fatness as a permanent state, no matter how long they'd been fat. They were just passing through Fat Town on their way to Slim City. I knew how they thought. I had been one of them" (Walker 220). This is similar to the belief held by Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, where she believes that her real life had begun from the time she lost weight.

This belief, that her existence in her fat body was only temporary and not real, is held by Plum since the very beginning. When she first comes across the advertisement for Baptist Weight Loss on the television, she believes that this plan is something that would finally make her capable of living that life she had always desired, and this would be her real life: “Thanks to the Baptist Plan I would be thin when I arrived at college. No one would know that fat Plum had existed. I wouldn’t even call myself Plum. I would be Alicia, since that was my real name” (43).

On her first week as a Baptist, when she is full of motivation and optimism, she is able to stick perfectly to her diet and not falter a bit. She feels a sense of superiority from people who engage in eating. She feels as if she will finally be able to escape from that body that had been a cause of so much suffering and unhappiness: “I was a jailed girl about to be released from a long sentence” (50).

But dieting fails to provide Plum with the expected weight loss, and when the novel opens, Plum has decided on undergoing surgery in order to lose weight. She is shown to be leading a routine existence with very little social interaction and her daily movement is restricted between her apartment and her friend Carmen’s café, but she believes her social life would drastically change after she becomes thin: “In my real life I would have more friends, and dinner parties and overnight guests, but my life wasn’t real yet” (6). She feels that she had taken the wrong route to achieve weight loss earlier, and this time, since the surgery was guaranteed to help her lose weight, the “real” woman that she was supposed to be was within her reach: “I had caught her like a fish on a hook and was about to reel her in. She wasn’t going to get away this time” (15).

Since Plum's life, as long as she had been in her fat body, had not been very satisfactory or fulfilling, she wants to have her thin self, the real Alicia the best of everything. Even though the surgery is scheduled to take place after four months when the novel opens, Plum has already started buying clothes of smaller size that her future thinner self would be wearing. She carefully kept those clothes inside her closet, whereas the regular clothes that she wore "were stuffed into the dresser or flung on the floor" (14). It is revealed that Plum always wore black clothes mostly "ankle-length skirts and long-sleeved cotton tops" (15) which made her look as inconspicuous as possible. Whereas the smaller clothes that she ordered were of the latest fashion and in beautiful colours: "Inside the closet, there was nothing black, only color and light... blouses in lavender and tangerine, pencil skirts, dresses, a selection of belts" (15). This reflects her attitude towards her fat body – she views her body as something that should be made as less noticeable as possible, and it also points toward her desire to mould it into a shape that she would feel happier occupying and would not be shameful to show to the world.

One of the tasks of the "New Baptist Plan" requires Plum to undergo a series of makeovers so that she gets an idea about the kind of beauty practices that she would have to take part in order to maintain the attractiveness of her thinner self once she loses all her excess weight. This particular task requires Plum to live as Alicia (her thinner, "real" self). Verena explains that since Plum had already started buying clothes for her future self, she wants her to do the same for her present self as well. So Plum is made to discard her black clothes and undergo a makeover. In this task, Plum is accompanied by Marlowe Buchanan, a feminist writer who had been a former actress. Along with getting new outfits, Plum also gets a supply of high-end

cosmetics, gets a manicure and a haircut. She also visits a dermatologist who injects her forehead with chemicals and suggests treatments for her blemishes and fine lines. Marlowe explains that all these would be necessary once Plum gets thinner if she really were to live like the image of the ideal female that she has on her mind. She explains that the ideal female body is “factory fresh and new, as if the shrink-wrap has just been removed” (Walker 145). The final visit that Plum makes as a part of her makeover is to a plastic surgeon’s clinic because plastic surgery would be inevitable as her skin would sag after her extreme weight loss and she would have to re-align certain parts of her body. Through these various visits and appointments, Plum becomes aware that losing weight would not mean that she would find a solution to her miserable life. She would still need to engage in several practices, some extremely painful in order to resemble the image of the society’s ideal female body. She will even have to take resort to surgical interventions in order to reconstruct and modify her body.

Body modification, which includes a wide range of alterations to the body, is not a modern practice. People from different cultures and from different parts of the world have performed some form of body modification since several thousand years ago. The reasons for modifying one’s body are several and varied in different cultures ranging from religious to aesthetic. Focusing on body modification practiced for aesthetic reasons, two popular historical examples would be corseting which was common among Victorian women, and foot-binding in China, which began around the 10th century and was widely practiced till the late 20th century. Body modification for aesthetic purposes includes practices as routine and unremarkable as make-up or shaving, waxing, tanning, and haircut, to something more permanent as

tattooing and piercing to more radical practices such as bodybuilding and practices in the field of cosmetic surgery.

Modern cosmetic surgery, as we know it today, developed during the First World War. It was targeted toward soldiers whose bodies had been wounded and disfigured during the war and doctors developed new techniques in order to repair their bodies and faces. At present people resort to cosmetic surgery both for repairing birth defects and disfigurements caused by accidents and injuries as well as to make themselves appear more beautiful or aesthetically pleasing.

Plum believes that her life would be happy and fulfilling only after she transforms her body and in order to achieve that she has prepared herself to take various painful measures. Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) explains that because of “the complexly and densely institutionalized system of values and practices” prevalent in our society, women are made to believe “that they are nothing (and are frequently treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless” (32). This is the reason behind the ever-growing popularity of cosmetic surgeries. She further explains the scenario of how women are made to feel about themselves and this can be aptly applied in the case of Plum: “That situation is one in which a constellation of social, economic, and psychological factors have combined to produce a generation of women who feel deeply flawed, ashamed of their needs, and not entitled to exist unless they transform themselves into worthy new selves (read: without need, without want, without body)” (47). In order to achieve these transformations, women feel compelled to take measures that are painful, expensive, and at times risky.

The plastic surgeon, Dr Peter Ahmed, explains to Plum that she would have to go through a series of procedures after her bypass surgery because since she would be losing a lot of weight at a rapid speed, she would be left with a lot of sagging skin. Plum is made to stand nude before him as Dr Ahmed explains to her the various procedures and draws upon her body with a black marker in order to demonstrate where the cuts, incisions, and stitches would be made into her body. He explains that she would require a tummy tuck, breast lift and implants, arm lift, complete lower body lift, and possibly a facelift since as he explained, fat was natural collagen and without it, she would wrinkle more. He further tells her that she may choose to get a nose job since it was “a bit big” and that she might possibly require liposuction because she would still be left with small pockets of fat after her bypass surgery.

Noami Wolf has pointed out that since women form the majority of the costumers of the industry of cosmetic surgery in this era that we live in, what she terms the “Surgical Age” (220), these complex procedures have been trivialized as one of the vain beauty practices as women indulge in, and this is reflected by the names that these procedures are given, but these surgical interventions that women take resort to are at times major surgeries with possible health hazards: “Cosmetic surgery is not ‘cosmetic,’ and human flesh is not ‘plastic.’ Even the names trivialize what it is. It’s not like ironing wrinkles in fabric, or tuning up a car, or altering outmoded clothes, the current metaphors. Trivialization and infantilization pervade the surgeons’ language when they speak to women: ‘a nip,’ a ‘tummy tuck’” (257). This is also seen in the language that Dr Ahmed uses while explaining the various procedures that he describes, his overall attitude, and the casual tone he uses to explain to Plum that she would not ever be able to breastfeed after the procedures are

done on her breast. Because of the manner in which he draws over her body with a black marker, and takes about cutting and stitching up the flesh at different parts of her body, Plum equates him to a tailor: "I pictured him with a pair of scissors, cutting my flesh as if it were cloth" (Walker 147).

In the midst of the tasks of the "New Baptist Plan" when Plum starts having second thoughts about the bypass surgery but is still intent on transforming her body, she finds an alternative potential weight loss method. Verena had shown Plum a bottle of particular French diet pills that her colleague Rubi had obtained from Paris and called it "Dabsitaf" though it was not the pill's real name. According to what Verena tells Plum, those pills were actually appetite suppressants, and unlike other diet drugs, they actually worked, because Rubi herself had spoken to people who had used them and were able to lose a large amount of weight. The pills provided a complete eradication of hunger, but some of the people who had used it had developed life-threatening complications. The pills were manufactured by an American company but they were first launched in France since the company was aware that they would not get the approval of the FDA. Because of the life-threatening side effects of the pills, Rubi and Verena were campaigning against Dabsitaf so that it does not get approved by the FDA.

Despite everything that Plum learns about Dabsitaf including its life-threatening complications, she steals a bottle of the pills when she finds it lying on Verena's desk during her absence. This reflects Plum's desperation where she was prepared to take the greatest risk if that meant that she would be able to escape her fat body and achieve the body of her dreams. Having come to know about Dabsitaf, she sees it as a potential alternative for her weight loss: "I reached for it and shook it,

listening to the pills rattle like dead bugs in the amber plastic. If I decided against surgery, I could use the \$20,000 to fly to Paris several times and stock up on the drug. Verena said there could be deadly side effects, but the same was true of the surgery. And besides, even crossing the street carried risks” (Walker 158).

After Plum’s fourth task of the New Baptist Plan where she goes on a series of dates with four men and all four of them treat her badly, she is at her lowest point. Her hatred for her body is strongest at this point. In this state of mind, she swallows several pills of Dabsitaf all at once.

During her third and fourth task of the New Baptist Plan, where she tries living the life of Alicia (her thin self) while still possessing the body of Plum, she gets to confront the reality of thin privilege which can be defined as the benefits (social, practical and financial) a person receives because of the size of their body that is relatively slimmer or smaller. Because Plum does not receive any such privilege, she gets to see the real world and the real side of people without their façade of kindness or goodness. During the third task, for which Plum has to undergo a makeover, she needs to get her outfit custom-made by Rubi, because fashionable and pretty looking clothes are rarely available for people of Plum’s size. The outfit that is made for Plum is a white poplin shirtdress with purple trim, inspired from a poplin shirtdress that she had bought for Alicia, paired with purple tights. When Plum looks at herself in the mirror after wearing this outfit, she sees a strange hybrid of Alicia and Plum, a look she is not so sure about: “Seeing Plum wearing Alicia’s dress was like looking in a funhouse mirror. Alicia, blown up twice the size she should have been” (Walker 148).

The first time Plum goes in public wearing this outfit, her experience is not very good. In the subway station, people were staring at her because they were used to seeing fat people dressing up as inconspicuously as possible, usually in the back or dull colours so as not to attract any attention. A young man even comments, “Can you imagine doing *that*? (Walker 149). When Plum confronts him, he punches her in the face causing her to fall on the platform and cause her to be stamped by passengers rushing out of the train that has just stopped.

Later when Plum reflects on the situation, she realises that the thin Alicia would be complimented for wearing an identical dress, and the young man who had punched Plum would have flirted instead with Alicia, and Alicia would have been flattered. Plum hates Alicia for this, but then she realises that “Alicia didn’t know he was nasty. Only Plum could see that side of him” (Walker 159).

She has a similar experience during her fourth task where she goes on blind dates with four different men and gets treated badly by all four of them. Moreover, she realises that because of the thin privilege possessed by a woman with a smaller body size, the thin Alicia would have been ignorant about the negative side of these people’s personalities who had treated Plum badly. She explains this to Verena:

Because I’m fat, I know how horrible everyone is. If I looked like a normal woman, if I looked like you, then I’d never know how cruel and shallow people are. I see a different side of humanity. Those guys I went on the blind dates with treated me like I was subhuman. If I were thin and pretty, they would have shown me a different side, a fake one, but since I look like this, I know what they’re truly like. (Walker 197)

Plum regards this as a kind of a special power she possesses that most women lack. Because of this, she is able to see past the façade of people and she knows the truth about how people actually are. It is after this realisation that Plum, for the first time in years, is able to view her body as worthy and her desire for escaping her fat body is allayed.

Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* too is at a constant war with her own body. She constantly tries to keep it in control, to mould it into what she regards as perfection, and at times she wishes that she was without body, that she would fade into oblivion. The various factors and incidences that cause Katie to develop a sense of dissatisfaction with her body have been discussed in detail in Chapter 2. This in turn causes her to develop a sense of inadequacy, and because of this, she makes up her mind to fit in and mould her body into an image of perfection that she has on her mind. She begins by changing her hairstyle and buying more fashionable clothes, and when this fails to provide her with a sense of being good enough, she decides that the problem is in the shape of her body which she finds to be out of proportion when compared to her peers. What begins as an act of giving up junk food for Lent gradually develops into a full-blown eating disorder like anorexia. Katie begins by giving up what she considers as being unhealthy for her body, and she reaches a point where she is unable to eat anything at all without obsessing over the effect that it might have on her body which she starts viewing as grotesque and out of control. Unlike Joan and Plum, Katie's body cannot be classified as fat or plus-sized, but when Katie looks at her body in the mirror, she can only focus on those parts that she hates, especially her hips and thighs. Whenever she thinks that she consumed something that was wrong for her body, she imagines these parts to have substantially increased in

size. On page number 101, Katie is shown to be drawing outlines over her thighs and stomach and then chopping off those areas. Though this is only Katie's fantasy, this act of chopping her body parts that she imagines herself doing, points toward her desperation to erase the portions of her body that she regards to be excess and out of control.

Katie's fear of getting fat reaches such an extreme that she begins to equate thinness with morality. For Katie, being fat implies being immoral and bad, as is reflected in her conversation with her therapist. When her therapist explains that the diet plan given to her by the dietician is flexible, that it is only a guide, and that she need not punish herself for not adhering to it exactly, Katie replies that she feels that she needs to stick exactly to it, and if she doesn't she "feels fat". When the therapist tells her to explain what she means by feeling fat, she replies "out of control". She further confesses, "No matter how much weight I lost, I never felt thin enough", that she "never felt good enough" (Green 187). So the state that Katie finds herself in has its roots in her simply trying to feel worthy enough as a human being and since she has set very extreme standards for herself, she is able to feel "good enough" only by becoming perfect – in terms of both her academic performance as well as her body.

Katie's journey of recovery from anorexia is extremely challenging because she feels that all the effort that she has put in in order to transform her body has gone in vain and that she would forever be trapped in the body she despises. When the doctor suggests refeeding options such as a naso-gastric tube, Katie is terrified. She visualises herself inflating like a balloon because of the excessive calories that would be forced into her body through the tube. She is constantly haunted by an image of a fat version of herself whenever she consumes any meal. She feels distraught at the

idea of losing control over her own body. Susan Bordo discusses the anorexic's need to always be in control, a trait that they share with body-builders – both feel their lives to be fundamentally out of control, and in turn, derive a sense of accomplishment when they are able to totally control and have mastery over their own bodies. There are two sources from which they derive a sense of mastery over their bodies, as has been discussed by Bordo: “First, there is the reassurance that one can overcome all physical obstacles, push oneself to any extremes in pursuit of one's goals.... Second, and most dramatic..., is the thrill of being in total charge of the shape of one's body” (152).

When Katie is finally believed to have recovered, after she reaches her recommended weight, she is still not able to feel happy or good about her own body. As Katie confesses to her therapist, her life no longer feels “real” post her recovery, all her other achievements, including her exceptional schoolwork and exam results, feel “empty” for her. She confesses, “Nothing feels real except anorexia” because anorexia was the only thing that made her feel good about herself (Greene 217). Anorexia gave her the feeling that she was in control of her own body, and that if she only worked hard enough and showed enough determination and willpower, she would be able to mould her body to the shape that she desires. In order to recover, she had to give up that control.

When Katie moves from her hometown for college, she plans to start her life anew, “I became obsessed with perfecting the new me” (Greene 258). This time she resorts to yoga to put her life and body back in control and eventually starts following a strict regime pushing herself as far as she can. After Katie develops a habit of compulsive eating, she follows it with restricted eating and even more obsessive

exercising because she does not want to lose control over her body for the second time by letting her body become fat. This in turn causes her to fall into a cycle of compulsive eating, calorie restriction, and obsessive exercising, a cycle that drastically deteriorates her health. Katie is now left to fight yet another eating disorder and embark once more on the arduous journey of recovery.

In Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* the protagonist Joan is overweight as a teenager and unlike in the other two texts, it is not the protagonist herself who wishes to transform her body from the very beginning. In the case of Joan, even though she had been bullied as a child, and has had to face numerous issues on account of her size (as has been discussed in chapter 2), she does not show a direct wish to alter her body. In fact, she uses her fat body in order to rebel against her mother's rigid views about women's roles and appearance and in order to defy all that her mother stands for. So Joan's body becomes a site of contestation, Joan and her mother is in a constant war with each other with the "disputed territory" being Joan's body (Atwood 71). So in Joan's case, it is initially her mother who seeks to transform Joan's body. She takes it up as a challenge to make Joan reduce in size and mould her according to the ideal version of femininity that she has on her mind. In order to make her daughter lose weight, Joan's mother tries every possible method she can think of— leaving diet booklets on Joan's pillow, promising to bribe her with elegant dresses if she lost weight, sometimes ridiculing her size, and at other times begging her with pleas about her health, sending her to a psychiatrist to even secretly mixing laxatives in her food. What ultimately causes Joan to lose weight is the death of Aunt Lou, who leaves a sum of two thousand dollars that Joan would inherit on the condition that she loses a hundred-pound weight. This fills her mind with doubts regarding whether her aunt

with whom she had been the closest had not accepted her fully for the way she was. This in turn forces her to confront her body as well as observe it closely, as a result, filling her with a sense of disgust for her own body. This is what ultimately pushes her to transform her body from the state that it had been in.

After transforming her body to a certain extent by losing weight, she is constantly haunted by her past and also the fear that her body may recuperate to the state that it had been earlier. Also, she seeks to erase all evidence of this aspect of her past life in order to conceal it from her present circle of acquaintances, especially her husband Arthur. After having reduced the size of her body, and running away from her parent's house in order to start a new life, Joan seeks to build a new identity altogether: "Suddenly I was down to the required weight, and I was face to face with the rest of my life. I was now a different person, and it was like being born fully grown at the age of nineteen: I was the right shape, but I had the wrong past. I'd have to get rid of it entirely and construct a different one for myself, a more agreeable one" (Atwood 152).

After reducing her size, Joan starts viewing her past as if it had not been real, that her actual life started only after she was able to come down to the required weight. This view of the fat body as not being real is not only experienced by Joan but it is a common feeling experienced by those who live with a sense of dissatisfaction in the bodies that they currently possess. They believe their real personalities will come to the fore only when they achieve the desired body. As has been discussed, this view is also shared by Plum in *Dietland*.

Since Joan had been extremely close to Aunt Lou, she had one particular picture taken with her which she always carried with her wherever she went. When her husband Arthur sees the picture for the first time and enquires about the fat person beside Aunt Lou, instead of telling him the truth that it was Joan herself as a teenager, she lies, telling him that it was her other aunt named Deirdre, who was fat because “she just ate too much” (Atwood 95). To make sure that Arthur did not discover her lie, she had created an entire backstory for her imaginary Aunt Deirdre: “I’d devised an entire spurious past for this shadow on a piece of paper, this woman of no discernible age who stood squinting at the camera, holding a cone of pink spun sugar, her face puffed and empty as a mongoloid idiot’s: my own shucked-off body” (Atwood 95). Joan believes that Arthur would not “be able to handle it” (Atwood 96) if he learns about Joan’s past. It is this fear combined with her own sense of insecurity that makes Joan hide this aspect of her life from her husband.

Throughout the novel, Joan is overcome with a sense of deep anxiety when she meets people who knew her before she lost weight or when she has to visit some place that she had previously visited during her childhood and teenage. She panics believing that the façade she has been wearing would finally be exposed to her husband. When Joan and Arthur decide to get married, she first considers inviting her father but decides against it fearing that he would reveal to Arthur more about her past than she would want him to know about. On the day of the wedding, when Joan realises that the church where they were supposed to get married was located in the same neighbourhood that she grew up in, Joan’s anxiety about being discovered as “a fraud, liar, and an imposter” (Atwood 216) returns:

My terror was growing. Surely the minister would be someone I knew, someone whose daughter I'd gone to school with, someone who would recognize me despite my change of shape. He wouldn't be able to contain himself, he would exclaim at my transformation and tell humorous stories about my former size and weight, and Arthur would know – on our very wedding day! – how deeply I'd deceived him.

(Atwood 217)

Joan is overcome with a similar feeling when Arthur takes her to meet his friend Don and his wife Marlene, and Joan realises that she went to the same Brownies as her, and Marlene had been one of the girls who bullied her. At the thought of getting exposed, Joan feels her body transforming back to the state it had been when she was a Brownie: “Wads of fat sprouted on my thighs and shoulders, my belly bulged out like a Hubbard squash, a brown wool beret popped through my scalp, bloomers coated my panic-stricken lions. Tears swelled behind my eyes. Like a virus meeting an exhausted throat, my dormant past burst into rank life” (249). On the thought of being recognised by Marlene, Joan feels shameful for her childhood and her former self. It is ironic because Joan had not done anything for which she required to feel shameful. It was in fact Marlene who had bullied her and Joan had merely been the victim. But for Joan, her fat phobia has been ingrained in such a way that she feels that being fat is something that one needs to feel ashamed about, more than being a bully. Even though Marlene fails to recognise her, Joan is never really freed from the fears of her past being discovered. Her anxieties resurface when she publishes her book using her real identity, even though she had been writing gothic romances using her aunt's name. She fears that since her book became a sensation and she was now a

public figure, there was bound to be someone who would be interested in her life, and try digging up her past, hence her former self would be exposed to the entire world to see.

Because Joan is constantly trying to hide her past of being a fat woman from her husband, she is frequently haunted by it, especially when her mind is not fully conscious. She gets numerous nightmares where she is still the fat child that she once used to be. In one of the dreams, she is on one side of a door where she has been hiding from some people who are talking about her on the other side, but those people are on the verge of opening the door and exposing her truth. Arthur is unable to comprehend why his wife, who he believed to have had a normal childhood like any average person, would get nightmares. But Joan could not view herself the way Arthur viewed her because he was unaware of a vital part of her existence: “When I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn’t see what Arthur saw. The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own. I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me...” (Atwood 233).

Since she is so constantly haunted by her past, when she starts receiving blank calls, and anonymous letters and finds dead animals being left at her doorstep, she believes that someone has discovered her secret and was now threatening her. Later she becomes convinced that the anonymous blackmailer is her husband Arthur, and unwilling to face her past and her multiple identities being discovered, she stages her own death and escapes to Terremoto, near Rome in order to start her life anew.

We can see that the protagonist of all three texts try to mould and transform their bodies in certain ways. They share a common belief that their life would become “real” or satisfactory only when they transform themselves into the idealized version of themselves that they have on their mind. Naomi Wolf states that it is because women view their bodies as inferior when compared to men, “second-rate matter that ages faster” (93) that they strive for perfection: “Second-rate, woman-born, the female body is always in need of completion, of man-made ways to perfect it” (94). Bordo notes the role played by popular culture in disseminating the belief that with the help of the correct diet and exercise, one would be able to achieve any kind of body that one wishes for: “Popular culture does not apply any brakes to these fantasies of rearrangement and self-transformation. Rather, we are constantly told that we can ‘choose’ our own bodies” (247). Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* believes that if she works hard enough and adequately disciplines her body, she would be able to mould her body to resemble the image of the ideal body that she has on her mind, that she would be able to erase the fat parts of her body. Plum in *Dietland* feels that surgery would ultimately help her to transcend her fat body since everything else had failed. Women undergo great pain in order to achieve perfection by trying to erase their fat bodies – from obsessive workouts and calorie counting to starving (in the name of dieting) to taking a resort to surgical interventions. Even in the rare case that they are able to erase their fat bodies, as in the case of Joan in *Lady Oracle*, they now feel the compulsion to erase their fat past because it seems like a kind of disgrace to their present selves.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This study examines the struggles faced by women who are considered fat, it also draws our attention to how such individuals have been largely ignored, made invisible, and rendered insignificant by writers of fiction. The research takes up three works of fiction by three different authors, their works cover a span of almost half a century: *Lady Oracle* by Margaret Atwood which was published in 1976, Katie Green's *Lighter Than My Shadow*, published in 2013, and Sarai Walker's *Dietland* which was published in 2015. *Lighter Than My Shadow*, being a graphic memoir is of a different genre than the other two texts that are novels, and also its protagonist cannot be categorized as "overweight" or "obese" unlike the protagonists of the other two texts. However, the protagonists of the three texts share similarities that are powerful enough to overshadow the differences – all three live in a highly fat phobic society which in turn leads them to internalize this fat phobia, all three develop a complex relationship with food and eating, and all wish to transform and mould their bodies to fit into the idea of ideal femininity. These similarities are what has been explored in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

While the study looks at the issues that fat women face, it also touches on a larger issue that women face across cultures: the constant pressure and requirement to look a certain way in order to succeed in life or simply to be regarded as a dignified human being, a pressure that men do not face to the same extent.

The social, cultural, and economic factors behind positing slenderness as a prerequisite of ideal femininity have been discussed in Chapter 1. Chapter 2, while tracing the roots of women's dissatisfaction with the way their bodies look, has taken into consideration the attitude of the culture that shows a preference for slender female bodies to the extent of denying fat women opportunities in terms of careers and unconditional acceptance in its social circles. This chapter, by providing textual evidence from the primary texts, has shown that a woman's dissatisfaction with her body does not arise simply because of her insecurity or sense of inadequacy, but it is the culture that through its various tools makes her believe that she is inadequate if she fails to appear a certain way or possess a slender body. The findings of Chapters 1 and 2 have answered the first research question – “How has the notion of slenderness as the norm served to position the fat female at the margins of femininity?”

Chapter 3 probes into the ways in which eating and nourishing the body, a basic act necessary for survival becomes a complicated process for women in general, not only for those whose bodies fail to fall under the norm of slenderness. Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* is overweight as a teenager and she uses her fat body in order to defy her mother. But it is revealed that her excessive eating is not simply a form of rebellion, she feels that food would cover up the void within her that has been created because her mother failed to accept her fully. Joan, in order to lose weight, undergoes extreme calorie restriction, and post-weight-loss she always has to watch the number of calories that she has been consuming so that her body does not recuperate to its previous state. She achieves this by never learning how to cook so that the meals prepared by her are merely edible and there is no scope for her to indulge in excess. Similarly, Plum in *Dietland* believes that she has been unable to lose weight even

after trying for more than a decade because of her inability to control her hunger. In this way, she posits food as her biggest enemy preventing her from losing weight. Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow*, unlike the other two protagonists, has a body weight that can be regarded to fall under the “normal” range of the BMI. But her problem with food and eating arises out of her fear of becoming fat. She believes her body shape to be out of proportion when compared to her peers and believes that she would lose control over her body and it would become fat if she does not restrict the number of calories that she consumes. Though it is only Katie who gets medically diagnosed with an eating disorder, both Plum and Joan exhibit symptoms of eating disorders such as binge eating and compulsive eating. Thus Chapter 3 seeks to answer the research question about the relationship between the norm of slenderness and the development of eating disorders.

Chapter 4 has discussed the various methods adopted by the protagonists in order to erase their fat bodies and transform them. It further shows that even after losing weight one may still be tormented with fears and anxieties as in the case of Joan in *Lady Oracle*, and post weight loss, certain precautionary measures that are both expensive and painful are still required to maintain the thin, ideal body as Plum in *Dietland* discovers through the “New Baptist Plan”.

Chapter 4, along with some arguments placed in Chapter 3 have provided answers to the third and fourth research questions. The protagonists try many risky and even desperate methods in order to transform their bodies such as excessive calorie restriction. Plum in *Dietland* considers bypass surgery which is a risky procedure with many potential hazardous side effects, but she has been made to believe that health risks carried by obesity are far more than those carried by surgery.

Through Plum's various tasks of the "New Baptist Plan", it is revealed that this is not necessarily true. Plum's physical strength and her mental health are at their worst when she is desperately trying to lose weight by restricting her calorie intake. Plum also realises that she had for so long denied and underestimated her fat body and as she learns to accept her current existence, Plum realises that she can have a fulfilling life even in her fat body once she learns to accept herself fully. Joan in *Lady Oracle* has been able to lose weight but she has become extremely paranoid in the process. She is constantly confronted by the fear of her past as an overweight teenager being discovered and her body transforming itself to its former fat form. Comparing the mental health of Joan before and after her weight loss, it can be seen that the overweight Joan was more mentally at ease than the thin one. Similarly, Katie in *Lighter Than My Shadow* possesses a slender body but she has to battle two life-threatening eating disorders. Consequently, these arguments of the research address the two research questions – "Is it appropriate to assume the fat female body to be necessarily diseased, disabled, and socially dysfunctional?" and, "Is the slender female body as a rule always healthy and free of any disease and disorder?"

The present research has several important findings. First, the protagonists' experience of being bullied for the way they look points toward the fact that women are being denied opportunities, discriminated against and oppressed because of their physical appearance, and this form of oppression is still prevalent because it is not being addressed or taken seriously. Second, this research, by taking up three different texts that cover a span of almost half a century shows that there have not been many changes in the way fat people are viewed. Some of the prejudices against fat people and the resulting fat phobia that was prevalent four decades ago are still prevalent in

the present day. Third, the discussion of Chapter 2 shows that the cause of women's dissatisfaction with their bodies is not solely because of personal idiosyncrasies such as perfectionist tendency and lack of self-esteem, but culture plays a greater role in giving rise to this dissatisfaction. Fourth, from the arguments put forward in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, one can infer that women's dissatisfaction with their bodies is being trivialized as one of the many insignificant feminine problems but this can at times lead to far-reaching, even life-threatening consequences such as eating disorders. Because of this dissatisfaction women also are willing to take resort to risky measures such as surgical interventions in order to transform their bodies. Finally, the research makes the observation that women's overall progress is being hindered and they are not able to achieve their full potential because they are made to devote a significant amount of time, energy, and money to perfecting the way their bodies appear.

The scope of this research is limited to the three primary texts to provide perspectives on fat female corporeality. Further research can be carried out in the fields of fat studies, body studies as well as the representation of women's bodies in general. Texts from various cultures and ages can be taken into consideration to see how fat female bodies or any category of bodies are viewed, treated, and represented. An interdisciplinary approach would greatly enrich these researches by providing cross-disciplinary perspectives on how these bodies are understood.

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