

Challenging Beauty as a Myth in the Novel '*Dumplin*' by Julie Murphy

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Abstract

The title of this study is Breaking the Beauty Myth in Dumplin' Novel by Julie Murphy. This study used Dumplin' novel as the object of the study which focused on how the beauty myth was portrayed and how the characters resisted the beauty myth inside the novel using Naomi Wolf's theory The Beauty Myth in Culture and Hunger chapters. The writer used qualitative descriptive method to collect, analysis, and interpret the data from dialogues and monologues. The results showed that beauty my attacked women especially their physical appearance that beautiful women should have thin body and if they were not, they should go on strict diet. However, the characters did not accept the beauty myth which said beautiful was thin. They rejected the concept of beauty myth by eating foods that they liked and accepting who they were regardless that their body type belonged to the beauty standard or did not.

Keywords: *feminism, beauty standard, beauty myth, women empowerment*

A. Introduction

The word beauty often lingers on women. The word beauty itself is described as something that pleases the eyes. As mentioned by Holman (2011) beauty means physical attractiveness in women. Since the definition of beauty means physical attractiveness, a lot of people relate it to women physical appearance. However, Hall (2021) states that the concept of beauty always changes from time to times and from place to places. As in India, women can be considered as beautiful if they have yellow skin, that is why Indian's traditional beauty recipes put a lot of turmeric as their beauty recipe.

In China, as mentioned by Saltzberg and Chrisler (2006) that women bind their feet to be as small as they can since they are five years old in order to be beautiful and the name of the tradition is lotus-feet. In Europe, most women wear corset so they will have a slimmer figure. Their body will shape like an hour glass. It hurts women a lot because they cannot breathe as they supposed to be.

In Indonesia, according to Valentina (2020) Indonesian women can never escape from body shaming whether it is from their skin tone, their body curve, or even flaw on their skin. As proved by ZAP Beauty Index (2020) the result from survey in July-September 2019 that the highest percentage of women who get body shaming are the curvy ones which is 47%, the uneven skin is 36.4 %, the chubby cheeks is 28.1 %, the tan skin is 23.3%, and the skinny is 19.6%. The data shows no matter what kind of physical appearances that women have, they will always get criticized.

Meanwhile in America, what considered as beautiful are women who have physical figure like Kim Kardashian, slim but in the right places like chest and butt. Because of this, a lot of American women do plastic surgery and do strict diet to reach this beauty standard.

From the explanation of the definition of beauty in some countries above, it can be seen that in order to be beautiful women need to scarify a little or a big part of their body or soul. It is so ironic that the pressure to be called beautiful only happens on women. Even, in the first beauty pageant, women need to fit the standards that are created for them under men's judgement. According to Laham (2020) The first international beauty pageant was held in 1888. It is called Concours de Beauté. This contest shows only men who can tell women are beautiful or not. It happens due to all of the judges in this contest are men. They also set the standard of beautiful women is the women who have slim figure.

Furthermore, this beauty contest makes women to be more insecure about their body. This contest also creates a stereotype in women's head that fat is their number one enemy. To get rid of fat, a lot of women do strict diet. The examples of strict diets are eating only tiny bite of food, drinking only water, and eating only raw foods. Those strict diets only make women suffered. In addition, according to Lenhard, et, al., (2008), not only they do strict diets but they also do liposuction. A research from 1998 to 2002 including 2275 questionnaires shows that women choose to do the liposuction as an instant way to remove fat under the skin by using surgery technique. Lenhard, et, al., (2008) adds, bad risks of liposuction are dangerous, those are infection, numbness, and dead. It shows that women' struggle to be called beautiful is hard.

However, women these days are more aware that beauty standard is nonsensical. As informed by Kuhn (2019) in South Korea, women reject the Korean beauty standard that women should be petite, young, and pale. It is a protest to the Korean's beauty standard that it is not women's fault if they are big, old, and tan.

Furthermore, from celebrity in United States, there is a woman who fights against the concept of beauty. Petersen (2016) tells in her book about McCarthy, an actress from United States who fights for an equality for fat women and thin women to have the same spot to shine in entertainment world. She makes social expectation that woman body should be thin is failed because she can rock the screen with her own natural charm. She even writes her own name as one of the most popular women in Hollywood. Even though

her body is fat but she proves to everybody that she can be a successful actress in Hollywood. To support writer analysis, she used some related studies from students who conducted the study of feminism especially about beauty standard that oppressed women from time to time and from one place to another. Here were three students who have the similar studies:

The first study was conducted by Fortuna (2016) a thesis entitled *The Society's Oppression in Constructing the Beauty Standard: A Feminist Reading of Scott Westerfield's Novel Uglies* from Universitas Airlangga. She used *Uglies* novel from Scott Westerfield as the object of her study. She chose Naomi Wolf's the Beauty Myth as the theory to analysis the issue. The objectives of her study were to disclose the beauty standard pictured in novel and how women's reaction to face the oppression. She used qualitative-descriptive through dialogue and quotation. The results were found that the government the one who oppressed women to obey beauty standard they created.

Beauty usually lingers to how good women's face is or how great women's body is. In another definition, the word beauty is a pleasure in spirit or mind from the quality of a human or a thing. Beauty does not always talk about great physical appearance especially about women. Just like a famous word says that beauty is in the eyes of beholder. Everyone has their own perception of beauty. Some say slim is beautiful or some say fat is beautiful. It is just a matter of perspective. The word myth means consciousness that is not true that usually spreads from mouth to mouth so people believe it is real. So, beauty myth means something that is not true about women face or body because the definition of beauty itself does not really talk about physical appearance. However, these days women are pressed to be beautiful according to beauty myth. It means women are forced to be something that is not real. According to Wolf (2002) beauty myth is a tool that trapped women to feel dissatisfied with their body, the feeling unable to satisfy men's needs, even hate themselves. It is because beauty myth often classified women to have physical figures that they do not have since they are born. As examples, lighter skin color is always categorized as beautiful meanwhile darker skin color is always categorized as not beautiful. So, beauty myth spreads the idea by telling women there is a beauty standard that says lighter skin women are beautiful. Since this idea is spread from time to time and mouth to mouth, women slowly believe that darker skin color is less beautiful than the lighter ones. A lot of women are forced to believe they are beautiful if they have some physical appearance according to the beauty myth. Since women are miserably to reach the beauty myth, a lot of women fight against it. So, breaking the beauty myth means a movement to reject everything that makes women feel insecure about their body and soul. As mentioned by Wolf (2002) this world is full of male domination that hurt women in so many aspects as in politic, economy, social, or culture. Women cannot get what they want without men permission. That is the reason why women want to break free from it. Women want to be treated the same as society threats men. For example, get the same good education, job, and politic. As Desmawati (2018) mentions in her journal that feminism is a women's movement in order to be equal

as men and reject everything that makes women feel inferior to men. It means the concern of feminism is to get women in the same position as men not in front, behind, above, or below.

In culture aspect, Wolf (2002) says women are oppressed to be beautiful in men eyes. They compete to each other in order to prove who can survive this unrealistic competition. A slim body is very desirable for most women in the world today. The women beauty ideals continue to glorify the thin ideal that represents the female form as a slender, feminine physique with small waist and little body fat (Robinson, 2017). Women are indoctrinated since young to accept their value if only they are good looking according to beauty myth. However, the society never tells men the same. They are still human being if their face is not good looking but when it comes to women, the society is really harsh. As mentions by Wolf (2002) women are created to be closer to beauty myth, so they only have two options: smart but ugly or beautiful but unintelligent. They cannot have both. The saddest part is most women choose to be pretty instead of smart because they realize society is more kind to good looking women. It relates to what Murnen (2016) says in her journal that this situation creates cultural influence of women to chase after beauty beyond everything.

Novel is one of the literary works in prose form from the imagination inside the author's mind which usually tells about life problem. As defined by Burgess (2020) novel is created in order to have more complexity and more length in plot than prose which relates to human experience bases on true event or pure imagination. Since novel is more complex than prose, it helps people to have larger and broader analysis about the issue inside the novel.

The perspective that the author gives to deliver the story to is called point of view. As mentioned by Nur (2017), point of view tells in which side the story is being told so reader can find out in whose eyes and whose voice the story is narrated. There are three types of point of view. Those are the first person who is narrated by the main character itself. The example is the usage of "I". Then, the second person which reader as the main characters that the author talking to. The usage of this point of view is "you". Last, the third person which the author is someone who is outside of the story, but they are telling the main character to the reader. The third point of view is pronoun "she", "he", or "they". Point of view is important to be included in story because reader needs to know in whose perspective the story is.

In this study, the writer focuses on analysing how the beauty myth is described in *Dumplin'* novel by Julie Murphy using Naomi Wolf's theory of *The Beauty Myth* in Culture and Hunger chapters. In Culture, women are described as object who can not

choose what they want to be. They also oppressed to have body that satisfy the men and the society. As Wolf (2002) mentions that women only a thing that being looked by men and they can only watch that they are being looked by men. They can not do anything to break free. It is getting worse in Hunger chapter because as stated by Wolf (2002) women above 18 years old is not satisfied with their body. Then, their first goal is to lose weight that the society likes. This is more important than they have success on their job or they can have a good carrier. In addition, to have body that makes society happy which is thinness, a lot women do extreme diet. Most of them have bulimia and anorexia.

Besides analysing how beauty myth is described in *Dumplin'* novel using *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf, the writer also finds how Wolf encourages women to break the beauty myth as a myth according to *The Beauty Myth* theory. In Culture, Wolf (2002) encourages women to stop being obedient satisfying men and society eyes about their body. In addition, in Hunger, Wolf (2002) states that fat or obesity is not everyone business but women themselves. Women even can live longer if they have 10 to 15 % body fat above the insurance standard.

B. Method

The data were taken from one of literary works that was novel. Novel was book full of words rather than numbers. Therefore, writer uses qualitative data as the approach of the study. According to Hancock, Ockleford, and Windridge (2009) qualitative data was a research that focused on how to interpret phenomena in our society so that we can have to deeper the understanding to answer the question about social issue in our surrounding. In this study, writer used the data source from dialogues and monologues in *Dumplin'* Novel by Julie Murphy. In addition, other sources as books, journal articles, and other internet sources which support writer to collect the data so that writer can serve a great analysis about the issue found in *Dumplin'* novel. In collecting the data, writer used several steps. The first thing that the writer does is reading the novel repeatedly more than five times to understand about the issue more, than marked the dialogues or monologues from the novel. Then, the writer identified the issue which cover the whole novel. After that, the writer matched the issue to the expert theory which was from Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* that suits the issue about feminism. The last part, the writer analysed the quotations in essay form. After finding the data, the writer analysed the data, then used qualitative-descriptive method to present the issue found in *Dumplin'* novel according to Naomi Wolf's theory *The Beauty Myth*.

C. Findings and Discussion

Portrayal of Beauty Myth

When the word beauty is mentioned, women are the first thing that come to most people mind. According to Wolf (2002) it is because the stereotype glues on women for too long that women should be beautiful. In addition, Julian (2016) states the myth of beauty as a quality of beauty really exists objectively and universally. It is so ironic for

the fact both men and women have face and body but the pressure to pay attention on the body and face is put on women's shoulder only. Women must look beautiful. As for today, women must look good in appearance in order to be called beautiful. It is not only on TV, magazines, or advertisement but in fictional world too as in novel. As example, there are a few categories for women to be considered as beautiful. The writer finds the portrayal of beauty inside the novel according to Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth in Culture and Hunger.

Portrayal of Beauty Myth in Culture

In *Dumplin'* novel, the writer finds how beauty myth is portrayed. Beautiful women are women who have physical figure according to the society likes. According to Wolf (2002) to please society, women should be thin to be called beautiful. This is the reason why in *Dumplin'* novel, women have to please society eyes by having thin body. This is first the portrayal of beauty myth in Culture as the writer spots in the novel:

"El is everything I'm not. Tall, blond, and with this impossible goofy sexy paradox, going on that seems to exist in romantic comedies." (Murphy, 2015, p. 9)

The quotation above shows that the beauty culture in *Dumplin'* novel is someone who has "tall, blond, and sexy" criteria. "Tall" is physical appearance that is common to describe beautiful women on cover magazine, on advertisement, and on TV. According to Chu and Geary (2005) it creates assumption that taller women are more superior than the smaller ones. As in this novel, El is considered beautiful even though it is told implicitly because fat women inside the novel are underestimated when they want to enter the beauty pageant. Moreover, El hair is blond. "Blond" is American stereotype to describe beautiful women. It is very clear that the representation of beautiful women in this novel is someone who has the criteria just like El, "tall, blond, and sexy". It can be seen that beauty myth only cares about physical appearance. The beauty myth erases the fact that women in this world have different physical appearance.

Breaking the Beauty as a myth in Culture and Hunger

The word beauty, tragically, cannot be separated from women (Wolf, 2002). The beauty standard is different from one country to another. It is also different from time to time. However, the only same thing about beauty is women have to look good in physical appearance that generalize by society. According to Yan and Bissel (2015) those white, tall, and slim are categorized as beautiful. The society forgets not every woman have the same figure. Some are small, some are tall. Some are white, black, red, and yellow. In addition, some are fat, and some are thin. Small women feel insecure about their height meanwhile tall women feel insecure about their other body parts which do not belong to the standard. There is always be something wrong with women's body which is not beautiful even though they are already beautiful. Beauty is only an illusion because every

woman has their own beauty. Just like the characters in *Dumplin'* novel show their rejection toward the beauty myth in *The Beauty Myth's Culture and Hunger*

Rejection of Beauty Myth in Culture

From then until now, there are always be a lot of women who do not satisfied with their own body because the beauty myth controls their mind to feel insecure of their own body (Wolf, 2002). This is an important issue that women have to fight just what the characters do in *Dumplin'* novel as described by this quotation:

"I don't like to think of my hips as a nuisance, but more of an asset. I mean, if this were, like, 1642, my wide birthing hips would be worth many cows or something." (Murphy, 2015, p. 12)

The quotation above shows that the character does not let the beauty myth destroys her satisfaction of her body. In *Culture*, women are stereotyped to get close to the beauty myth that does not allow women to have fat. Like in the novel, Willowdean, the main character gets bad treatment because she has plus size body. However, she does not mind it at all. Indeed, she is proud of her hips as seen in line "I don't like to think of my hips as a nuisance" which indicates she does not care if her hips have fat. The fat does not stop her of feeling fabulous. She shows how she loves her body. As mentioned by Rosida and Saputri (2019) to fight against the unrealistic beauty standard that chains women from then until now, all women need are self-love and self-acceptance. In addition, the line "but more of an asset" indicates her hips as an important part of her body that she should keep safe. Just like the next line says "my wide birthing hips would be worth many cows or something" which means she thinks her hips are not just object but more valuable things. It is because from then and now cows are expensive animal. Not everybody can afford to buy a cow.

Rejection of Beauty Myth in Hunger

In *Hunger*, being super thin is a trend that makes women suffer. According to Wolf, (2002) they are not allowed to have normal body or fat body because society thinks it is not beautiful. This phenomenon makes women go on extreme diet by eating as little as possible, even if they can, they will not eat at all. In *Dumplin'* novel, writer finds the characters inside the novel break the rule that in order to be beautiful, they have to feel hungry. The quotations that writer finds can be seen in this quotation:

"I sit down and liberally spread my salad dressing across my plate, because on the eight-day God create ranch dressing." (Murphy, 2015, p. 16)

The quotation above shows the main character rejects the beauty myth that forces women to feel hungry all the time. Inside this novel, in order to not get bullied and to be called beautiful, women have to be thin which means they have to go on diet. When they go on diet, they also being paranoid of fat, sugar, and salt because those are things that the Capitalist make women believe having contribution to gain weight. That is why Willowdean's mom order her to eat salad only. In the end, she does not eat them. She

likes another food better. Just like the line "because on the eight-day, God creates ranch dressing" refers to Christian's belief eight day is a better day. In her opinion, ranch dressing is better than salad dressing because it contains buttermilk, mustard, and herbs which makes it tastier than salad dressing that mostly contains olive oil, mayonnaise, and parsley leaf. At least, she chooses seat her favorite dressing without feeling guilty. On the other hand, she also rejects the beauty myth that does not allow women enjoying their food as seen in this quotation:

"I grab a fistful of pretzels and a soda before running upstairs."
(Murphy, 2015, p. 17)

D. Conclusion

After analysing "*Dumplin'*" novel by Julie Murphy using Naomi Wolf's theory *The Beauty Myth* in Culture and Hunger, writer can answer the questions in the Statements of Problem in Chapter I. Those are "how is the beauty myth portrayed in *Dumplin'* novel?" and "how do the characters resist the beauty myth in *Dumplin'* novel?".

The first one, how the beauty myth is portrayed inside the novel. In Culture, the definition of beauty only focuses on women's physical appearance. Inside the novel, the definition of beauty is body just like El, tall, blond, sexy. Having braces on their teeth like Amanda is out of the list of beauty. In addition, number one physical appearance that women should have is thin body. If women do not have thin body, the society will make them hate their own body. They will get bullied, get nicknames they do not like, and get underestimated to enter the Miss Teen Blue Bonnet, the beauty pageant. As in Hunger, the portrayal of beauty myth is thinness. Willowdean is forced to do diet by her mom who is former Miss Teen Blue Bonnet so her body will be thin just like her mom's body

However, the characters inside the novel does not fall for the beauty myth that society plants in their head that beauty only belongs to thin women. As the answer of the second of Statements of Problem is how the characters inside the novel resist the beauty myth. They resist the beauty standard that makes women suffer. In Culture, Willowdean accepts her body just the way it is. She does not afraid to wear swimsuit on the pool and she also does not mind what people will comment about her body that is different with common women in her surrounding. She and her friends also dare to join beauty pageant that people think does not suit her and her friend's plus sized body and Amanda braced teeth. As in Hunger, they fight the beauty myth by eating what the beauty myth forbids them to eat foods as pretzels and junk foods. They prove that beauty is only an illusion.

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