



Literary Studies

Fighting Body Ideal Construction in America as Expressed in Julie Murphy's *Dumplin*

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A B S T R A C T

Not only marginalize and discriminate big-size women, social construction of ideal body has contribute to eating disorder and anorexia on women in America. Thus it triggers rejections of protest through all platforms and one of them is Julie Murphy's *Dumplin*'. The purpose of this research is to reveal Julie Murphy's worldview of fighting discrimination because of social construction in novel *Dumplin*'. *Dumplin*' is chosen as the material object of this study. The formal object of this study is how the main character fight the social construction through its relation with other characters. Julie Murphy's *Dumplin*' is believed to express the social group world vision thus Lucien Goldmann genetic structuralism theory is used. Dialectical method is used to achieve the purpose of this study. The primary data are taken from *Dumplin*' novel. The secondary data are taken from journals and books related to this study. The focus of the research are 1) analyzing the literary structure of the novel through the relations of its characters, 2) finding the genesis of the novel by analyzing the social structure, 3) the author's (social group) worldview in the novel. Therefore, the structure of the novel are analyzed through the characters relations and the genesis found as the social structure investigated and analyzed. The result of analysis shows that the author World View represents social groups fighting againsts body ideal construction such as NAAFA, The Fat Acceptance Movement and Body Positivity Movement that try to fight and modify the body ideal construction as dominant social construction that exists in society through her novel *Dumplin*'

I. INTRODUCTION

Social construction exists in all aspects of our life including ideal body size. One of beauty standard constructed in our society is enforced through the beauty pageant. The contestants need to meet the requirements and fulfill the unwritten requirement such as having ideal body to join the further selection process while beauty is not limited to body size. For instance as Agarwal (2017) mentions in Mauritania community in Africa, women with obesity level categorized by BMI are seen as the beauties. This constructed beauty standard, specifically body size, create isolated and discriminated feeling to women categorized nonideal. As explained by Cordell dan Ronai (1999) in *Identity management among*

overweight women, Sheila, a professor aged 35, says she feels hurt as society focuses only on her as obese and miss out the positive things she has. Further, this construction has contributed to one of crucial issue in America. Not only marginalize and discriminate big-size women, social construction of ideal body has contribute to eating disorder and anorexia on women in America.

This issue triggers rejections of protest as all women has rights to be categorized beautiful apart from their body size. Several researches such as conducted by Jeffery Sobal (1999) are taking The Size Acceptance Movement in America as their research object. The rejection to this ideal body construction appears such as in the form of

article, novel, social media comments, or film. Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* is one of novel that bring this issue to surface. As Goldmann (1967) says "[the literary creation] is made not from without but from within society, that it is a part –varying in importance, of course, according to circumstances– of the intellectual life of that society and through it, of social life as a whole (p.493)." Therefore, through literary work, intellectual life of the society can be seen. Zurmailis (2009) also supports Goldmann because literary work reflects norm and intellectual life of the society as there is relation between human [as the creator of literary work] and values in the society itself (p.47). Goldmann (1980) further explains that relation between human and its environment manifested to three basic characteristics of human behaviour

It seems to me that these three basic characteristics of human behaviour, that is: (1) man's tendency to adapt himself to his milieu and, thus, the significant and rational character of his behaviour in relation to it, (2) man's tendency to coherence and to global structuring process, (3) the dynamic character of his behaviour and the modifying tendency of the structure of which he is a part, as well as the developmental tendency of the latter, are found at the base of all positive research into the literary creation (p. 11).

Julie Murphy tries to modify and change this social construction structure through *Dumplin'*. As explained in Goldmann's (1967) Concept, *Dumplin'* as human fact is a response of an author as collective subject, constituting an attempt to modify the social construction "human facts are the responses of an individual or collective subject, constituting an attempt to modify a given situation in a sense favourable to the aspirations of that subject (p.494)" As it has been through non-stop structuration, *Dumplin'* as the product of culture shows the author world view which is the idea, inspiration, or expression of a number of people that is the opposite of another group of people. The author has the world view as she is part of that society which expresses social value live in her society.

Dumplin' is published in 2015 for the first time. As explained in *Goodreads* (2015), this novel has been translated into other languages such as German, French, Bulgarian, Swedish, Spanish, Dutch,

Portuguese, Italian, etc. This literary work won numbers of awards. The attempt of trying to deny and destroy the construction of ideal body makes *Dumplin'* gain popularity in young adult category and get the chance to be adapted to Netflix film in 2018. This adaptation gains 85% rates from critics [tomatometer] and 75% from 1003 audiences. *Dumplin'* is a story of Willowdean, the daughter of the former queen of beauty contest, who has a big-size body. She doesn't like the way her mom stick to the diet and tries to commit to never do the same. She wants to challenge the construction that beauty is ideal body by participating in the beauty contest in which her mom wins and is one of the judges. This is the form of her denial and her attempt to destroy the construction that the beauty has to have ideal body.

Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* is believed to express the social group world view and attempt to reveal that body ideal is social construction and thus discrimination caused by merely social construction should be fought. To comprehend the world view, the genesis of the social construction should be found. For that reason, Lucien Goldmann genetic structuralism theory is used as this study aims to reveal Julie Murphy's worldview. This paper aims to analyze (1) how author's (social group's) world vision depicted through the novel, (2) how the relation among characters (the literary work structure) shows the attempt to fight the social construction, (3) how the social construction of ideal body as the beauty standard in America becomes the genesis of the *Dumplin.'*

II. METHODS

Dialectical method is used to achieve the purpose of this study. The primary data are taken from *Dumplin'* novel. The secondary data are taken from journals and books related to this study. Dialectical method allows its researcher to start the research from any point and enlightenment can be gained through perpetual movement from the parts to the whole and vice versa as this method basically sees that individual fact or idea can be understood only when it takes up its place in the whole, in the same way as the whole can be understood only by our increase knowledge of the partial and incomplete facts which constitute it. Goldmann (1964) further explains that

there are never any absolutely valid starting-points, no problems which are finally and definitely solved, and that consequently thought never moves forward in a straight line, since each individual fact or idea assumes its significance only when it takes up its place in the whole, in the same way as the whole can be understood only by our increase knowledge of the partial and incomplete facts which constitute it. The advance of knowledge is thus to be considered as a perpetual movement to and fro, from the whole to the parts and from the parts back to the whole again, a movement in the course of which the whole and the parts throw light upon one another (p. 5)

This research will serve the structure model of the literary work followed by structure model of the social structure, and the analysis will be showing relations among the characters with movement to and from the both structures to see the world view and the genesis of the novel.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Novel *Dumplin'* Structure

Clover City, Texas, is the setting place of the *Dumplin'*. The setting time are 1930, 1994, 1997, and 2015. The issue introduced when Willowdean is interested in Bo as they both spend much time together working in the junk food store Harpy's. As the big size woman, Willowdean has no confidence to love Bo, the perfect ideal guy. At the same time, her friends often make fun of her as she is the daughter of the former queen of the beauty contest. Having such a big size body is the opposite to her mother's status which is seen as the extraordinary beauty with obviously ideal body. Willowdean decides to build her confidence and get herself suit with Bo. She tries to fight the social construction that beauty is having the ideal body by enrolling to the beauty contest. She joins the Miss Teen Blue Bonnet Beauty Contest with her friends who are often bullied by this kind of social construction. As explained by Goldman (1967) as the response of being collective subject, literary work contains expression or aspiration of a certain group who oppose the dominant construction by the other group to create equilibrium (p.494). Therefore, the structure of this literary work is built by a group who defend and who oppose this social construction of body ideal. Willowdean and Millie are the example of imaginary characters who oppose and try to

destroy the body ideal construction. On the other side, Willowdean's mother, Callie, Patrick are the examples of imaginary characters who defend and retain the body ideal construction as dominant perspective.

By looking at the relation between Willowdean and her mother, it can be seen that her mother position is defending the ideal body construction as her mother force her to stay on diet as she is on diet before the beauty contest starts opening the annual contest. Her mother also forbids Willowdean eating greasy food because of her fanatic ideal body that needs to be retained to be ideal all the time.

The last few days of school mark the start of pageant prep season, which means my mom is on a diet. And when my mom is on a diet, so is everyone else. Which means dinner is grilled chicken salad. It could be worse. It has been worse (Murphy, 2015, p.12-13).

"You're not eatin' that greasy food you're selling, are you?" "you know I don't even like burgers and hot dogs that much (Murphy, 2015, p.13)."

Callie and Patrick are the representation of social group that keep the body ideal construction alive. The time Callie knows that Willowdean is the daughter of the former beauty contest queen, she sarcastically asks her right away that Willowdean won't join the contest because of her big size body. Patrick even says Willowdean and her friends who don't have ideal body are the jokes as this is the beauty contest not the livestock contest.

Callie laughs "you're not entering [pageant], though, are you?" (Murphy, 2015, p.31).

Patrick rocks back and forth on his heels. 'I hear you got some of your friends to join the pageant with you. You better make sure they know it's a beauty contest and not a livestock show (Murphy, 2015, p.202).'

On the other side, Willowdean and Millie try to destroy this social construction by enrolling to the beauty contest to challenge and prove that only someone with ideal body size can join and win.

Social Structure

As explained by Pausé (2017) long before American Medical Association officially states

obesity is a disease, fatness has been seen as abnormal, unnatural, and disgusting. Fatness often being attached to two of seven sins; gluttony and sloth. Further, fatness is seen as the collapse of discipline and self control which are parts of main values of the Western Religion Doctrines. The protestant ethic believe that human reap what they sow. Fat people are described gain their fatness as the consequence of their wrong choice. It is also strengthened by the neoliberal perspective that big size people constructed as the failure by the lack of discipline and self control. The modern health perspective also strengthen this idea by not only states the fatness is the result of the individual wrong choice but also strengthen that this individual wrong choice become the burden of the society (p.510-511).

Bailey (2010) also states that Puritanism is the roots of US antifat discourse as it is believed fat is attached to bodily desires which is the opposite of purity and godliness (p.451). Susan E. Hill (2011) also states in the Abraham tradition, Christian believe that “*gluttonous behaviour begins to take on the character of sinfulness and shame (p.120).*” Laura Fraser (2009) also find the same that in American culture, “*indulging the body and its appetites was immoral, and that denying the flesh was a sure way to become closer to god. Puritans such as minister Cotton Mather frequently fasted to prove their worthiness and cleanse themselves of their sins (p.13).*” Abigail C. Saguy (2013) further

“By the twentieth century, a slender body provided an important way for Americans to demonstrate not only their wealth and status but also their moral virtue...in the United States, where there is a deep-seated cultural belief in self-reliance, body size [is] especially likely to be regarded as under personal control and reflecting moral fiber (p.41)”

This is the genesis of the antifat discourse and the ideal body size construction.

This genesis of body ideal construction inserted through beauty pageant. Although there are many types of beauty pageant in America, The Miss America is the dominant beauty contest with 10 million views each year. The winners of Miss America is getting thinner and most of them have crucial eating disorder (p.231). Thompson & Hammond (2003) conducted a survey of 131

participants who are all beauty pageant contestant from 43 states in America and the result shows most of them have eating disorder (p. 231). While Wiseman, et. al. (1992) states that the winner of the beauty pageant Miss America is getting thinner while the national average weight of women in America are rising. This cause the body size dissatisfaction among American Women (p.199). Further, beauty pageant force the thin body ideal construction through the bikini show. Everhart (2011) states that “*the first Miss America pageant was held during this time in which women were paraded around in their bathing suits and the winner’s physical measurements were considered ideal and something for normal women to obtain (p.15).*” Therefore, King-O’Riain (2008) states that “*Beauty pageants are not only places where queens are chosen but where they are made. In this sense, beauty pageants can be seen as cultural forms of collective self-identity as well as embodied production points of cultural identity (p.75).*”

This thin body ideal construction stirs uproar and rejection in America. The size acceptance movement appears and has been opposing this construction since 1960s. Alentola (2017) states that in 1967, there are 500 American assembled in Central Park, New York demonstrated to think big that anyone shouldn’t feel guilty by their body size difference (p.10). In 1969, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) was established in America. This organisation fights for fat people’s rights to be seen equally (About NAAFA, 2017).

Willowdean’s Attempt to Fight Body Ideal Construction

Willowdean is the imaginary representation that againsts the ideal body construction that exists in society and shows how proud she is of her own body. She keeps voicing that all the body size whether it is skinny, thin, big, fat, oversize are just the same. When she introduces herself to Bo for the first time, she attaches fat to describe herself *The first time we met, when he was still a new hire, I held my hand out and introduced myself. “Willowdean,” I said. “Cashier, Dolly Parton enthusiast, and resident fat girl (Murphy, 2015, p.8).*”

By looking at the setting of the world Julie Murphy creates, Willowdean is the 21st generation. Looking

back at the size acceptance movement, it has started to oppose this construction in 1960s. As Alentola (2017) explains, the manifesto in Central Park in New York in 1967 gets 500 people demonstrated fighting the body ideal construction (p.10). In 1969, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) was established in America. This organisation fights for fat people's rights to be seen equally (About NAAFA, 2017). Nowadays, the acceptance movement is spread throughout literary work like Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* or online platform such as social media and blog. Affula & Ricciardelli (2015) further explains that

Over the past decade, in Canada and the United States, blogs have become a popular and important space for fat women and their allies to create and further develop discursive strategies to contest the gendered anti-fat discourses perpetuated by the media, governments and the field of medicine and institutions of public health... Today, social media provides new tools for women FA activists to use to renegotiate how fat and gender have been reframed within the rationale of neoliberal citizenship, and innovate on the popular FA notion of fat as a kind of body diversity, through discussions on body image, beauty, and health. (p.453-455).

Therefore, Willowdean is the symbol represents the group of society who has big size body to challenge and fight the ideal body construction exist in society and shows confidence as all body sizes are just the same.

Willowdean also tries to destroy society's perspective that big size women have their big size body because of gluttony or greasy food. Willowdean described eating grapes still has big body while on the other side El still has small body even though she has cheese or candied pecans for snacks which are attached to hi-cal "Says Ellen as she plucks a cube of cheese from her lunch spread and pops it into her mouth...with her mouth full of candied pecans...I pop a few grapes in my mouth... (Murphy, 2015, p.16)." Fatness is mostly attached to high cholesterol and greasy food as if only fat people over-consume these food. The reality is small body people also consume high cholesterol food. Julie Murphy even describe Willowdean does not like burger and hotdog with the fact she has big size body "You're not eatin' that greasy food you're selling, are you?" "you know I don't

even like burgers and hot dogs that much (Murphy, 2015, p.13)."

Looking back at history, numbers of articles, educational program, and research connect eating junk food and high cholesterol food to people having big size body. Further, fat people are seen as epidemic as having big size body lead them having chronic diseases such as obesity. Miller et. al. (2013) states that

Obesity rates in US and around the world have increased at such alarming rate that it is termed an obesity epidemic... the two primary factors which have the greatest impact are diet and exercise... especially the consumption of fast food and eating in restaurants may play in the prevalence of overweight and obesity among Americans (p.179).

Miller, et al. (2013) surveys 500 Grown-Up American who consume fast food and find that "the participants who report they eat fast food meals or fast food snacks 7 or more times per week, half of them had a BMI of 30 or more which is considered obese...(p.182)."

The fact is, obesity is actually caused by the bad cholesterol. Not only people categorized obese by BMI who have bad cholesterol but also people who actually categorized ideal by BMI. Even worse they have double risk of dying. As explained by LeWine (2012)

We tend to think of type 2 diabetes as a disease that afflicts people who are overweight. But it can also appear in people with perfectly healthy weights – and be more deadly in the them. A study published today in the Journal of the American Medical Association indicates the normal-weight people diagnosed with type 2 diabetes have double the risk of dying from heart disease and other causes than overweight people diabetes.

Medics strengthen this body ideal construction. Politics uses medical approach to control body size and construct ideal body through BMI. As written in U.S. Department of Health & Human Service (n.d)

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a person's weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters. BMI does not measure body fat directly, but BMI is

moderately correlated with more direct measures of body fat. BMI can be a screening tool, but it does not diagnose the body fatness or health of an individual.

The way Willowdean states how winning this beauty pageant is the only achievement her mom has shows how she believes nothing be achieved by ideal body but being the queen and then former queen of the beauty contest. Her mom even forces herself to use tight dress which supposed to be too tight as she gains weight. Not only to satisfy her fans expectation, but also to show her sexyness. Further, Murphy (2015) describes the irony of Willowdean mother as working in a retirement home and sarcastically contrast the glamorous life as former beauty queen vs feed and wipe elderly asses.

The pageant is my mother's single greatest accomplishment. She still fits into her dress-a fact she won't let anyone forget, which is why as head of the pageant committee and the official hostess, she takes it upon herself to squeeze into the dress as a yearly encore for all oh her adoring fans (p.14).

Once a year, like Cinderella, my mom's life is glamorous. It's the life she expected to live. But for the rest of the year, she works as an orderly at the Buena Vista Ranch Retirement Home, where she does exotic things like dole out daily prescriptions, feed the elderly, and wipe their asses (p.14-15).

Willowdean sarcastically aims to tell how women classified ideal body and described living their best because of their ideal body have the dark side untold and unseen somewhere. As we know, lots of public figures in America experience this bad effect of ideal body size construction.

As Pearson (2008) states, celebrities who keep stating their thin body is genetic or simply just because of regular working out is a lie. Gunnar Peterson, one of celebrities trainer, says celebrities are using drugs to stay thin. Working out only sometimes is not enough to stay thin and having ideal body as exposed actively by media and constructed in society. Paris Hilton is the example. She is found only order mineral water during her lunch after the set. At the end, in the Larry King talkshow she admits that she uses Adderall to contain disorder she has which is call concentration

deficit. Unfortunately, everyone knows Aderall is the top and famous diet drug in Hollywood.

...Paris Hilton recently admitted to talk to host Larry King that she takes Adderall for attention-deficit disorder...At the moment, Adderall is the latestt diet-drug craze in Hollywood. The number of celebrities addicted to it continues to rise. Female celebrities recently arrested – from Paris to Nicole Richie, from Lindsay to Britney Spears – all reportedly have used prescription Adderall. It keeps you awake while killing the appetite... Even when taken as instructed, Adderall can cause psychotic episodes, depression and serious heart problems.

Wilbur (2016) also writes that Demi Lovato, Popular American Singer, participates in beauty pageant when she was just 7 years “According to her, she first became aware of her looks when she was just 2 or 3 years old and would look down at her stomach and wonder if it would ever be flat, something that possibly stemmed from her mother Dianna Lee Hart’s Struggle with bulimia.”

Just to fulfill society’s expectation, lots of public figure in America use dangerous thing such as using drug which has even more negative effect for them. This is contrary to how ideal body construction is always attached to health and good self control.

Aunt Lucy who also has big size body choose Monday over Friday because Friday doesn’t deserve all the attention. This is the unconscious thought of Aunt Lucy as the previous generation of big size people. The dissapointment that society differentiates things that actually deserve to be treated the same is shown through this analogy. The same aquired by Willowdean as the next generation of big size people who experience hard life because of this construction. She even sees herself as Monday and Ellen as Friday strengthen that she knows and get the unfair treatment as El always get the attention just because her body classified ideal. While actually both of them are just the same but has different body size.

She'd [aunt lucy] call us her bee-utiful girls and take us for hot chocolate on Mondays, because Fridays didn't deserve all the attention. It was funny. I used to think of myself as a Monday and Ellen as a Friday. But Mondays and Fridays

were just twenty-four-hour stretches of time with different names (Murphy, 2015, p.63).

Author's World View

As part of group that fights ideal body size construction exist in American society, Julie Murphy expresses idea or expression of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) by creating an imaginary possible world through long structuration of characters relation which has homolog structure to American social structure. As part of fat activist, Julie Murphy not only actively express her world view through literary work such as *Dumplin'* but also through essay such as the one released in 2019 "The Little Mermaid's Ursula Is My Revenge Body Icon" on the anthology book of "The (Other) F Word: A Celebration of the Fat and Fierce" and personal instagram post. In all her literary work, she always uses big size woman as her main character. In her "The Little Mermaid's Ursula Is My Revenge Body Icon" essay, she shows her disappointment of ideal body size construction that also insert it to child fairytale, Ariel. She highlights the hidden intention of describing the witch, antagonic character, as oversize and ugly. Her new instagram posts (@andimjulie) on 19th March 2021 not only expresses gratitude of her 9 novels, several anthology chapters, first film script, *Dumplin'* adapted to Netflix, and several novels on

process to be adapted to film, but also expresses how happy she is because her works defend all body size and shape and she hopes lots of novels using variety of body size released until no body sized called ideal (Julie Murphy, 2020).

IV. CONCLUSION

Julie Murphy tries to change the dominant ideal body construction through her *Dumplin'*. As explained in Goldmann's (1967) Concept, *Dumplin'* as human fact is a response of "...of an individual or collective subject, constituting an attempt to modify a given situation in a sense favourable to the aspirations of that subject (p.494)." Through analysis provided, it can be concluded that the genesys of ideal body size construction is through religion. This body ideal construction is not an issue that can be taken for granted as it has been through a long structuration and it is even enforced through something people believe: religion. Therefore, modification is demanded by people who has the same aspirations as a social group. Therefore, *Dumplin'* shows the author's world view which expresses the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) view which fights ideal body construction by creating possible imaginary world with relations among characters that has homolog strucutre with American social structure.

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