

Invisible Beauty: A Thematic Study on DanielleSteel's *Big Girl* and RoxaneGay's *Hunger:A Memoir of (My)Body*.

Greeshma S Prasad

Govt Guest LecturerDepartment of English
Mannam Memorial NSS College, Kottiyam (P.O)Kollam.

Abstract: Human body, the vehicle of soul, must be treated with love and respect . The role of body is essential to continue a human life but people discriminate it based on its size and colour. The person with slim body gets wide acceptance and respect while others are ignored and neglected from the society. So people are impressed by trim body and they do their maximum for owning a beautiful figure. The life of segregation from the family and society is horrible and pathetic which leads to mental trauma . The problem of overweight destructs the confidence of an individual. Body shaming is the central issue that is presented in the two novels *Big Girl* and *Hunger : A Memoir of (My) Body*. *Big Girl*, a popular novel by an American author DanielleSteel discusses the life of a big girl named Victoria who is flabby by birth. She feels humiliated throughout her life as her body is not fit for the society. In the second novel *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* by Roxane Gay, an American writer , discusses her own life who becomes fat by over nourishing herself and considers overweight as an advantage . This paper is to project the difference in the attitude of characters in viewing their bodies as well as a reply towards the society against body shaming.

Key words: body shaming, fatness, *Big Girl*, Danielle Steel, *Hunger : A Memoir of (My) Body* , Roxane Gay , mental trauma, overweight, eating disorder, slim .

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The term 'body shaming' is used for criticising people based on their physical appearance. Tamra , the writer says:

Body shaming is lethal to a person 's self-esteem. If a person's self -esteem is damaged, everything from depression, anxiety, and eating disorders can follow. It is time for it to end, and for people to realize that trying to fit into that tiny window of our culture's standards is not only impossible; it's ridiculous(6).

The role of human body is great for the better survival in the earth. The world always support diversity but in the case of body size, the society or the majority have a fixed opinion that being slim is the perfect size .In the work *Body Image and Body Shaming*, the writer Meghan Green says " The way a person looks is mostly determined by his or her genetics. It can be very difficult to change things that are genetically determined" (25). In the *Big Girl*, Victoria's obesity is genetic. She suffers severe humiliation even from her parents though the reason of her heavy body is genetic. Victoria laments " I 've been on diet since I was born...Apparently I inherited my grandmother's genes. She was a "big" woman, as they say. I 've been fighting that battle all my life "(377,378).In the case of *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, it is Gay's decision to remain fat in order to protect her from the male gaze. Though the reason for their fatness is different, they have experienced segregation from the society. Their struggle is not a serious issue for those who are slim .

DanielleSteel's *Big Girl* discusses the life journey of Victoria Dawson from her birth to the age of thirty. She is the first child born to the parents who never show any affection to Victoria because of her dumpy size and lack of beauty. She is really beautiful but her beauty is invisible to the eyes of society .For the society , beauty means physical beauty with size zero. As her beauty is against the societal norms, she is ridiculed and humiliated by everyone. No one supports her to fight for her identity . In many situations she hides herself from the outsiders since everyone teases her on plus size body. She " had opted for jeans and a loose shirt to hide her shape" (44).

Whereas in *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* , Roxane Gay picturizes her complicated relationship with weight. Her fatness is not genetic and she is not overweight before the age of twelve .She is a victim of brutal rape which happened at her twelfth age . For long days and years she cannot escape from that shocking incident which changes her life completely. Horrifying memory of gang rape wounds her deeply and it always presents in her heart. It haunts her continuously and she finds comfort at eating. She begins over eating to attain big size . As she is too young, she has no other solution to overcome the pain so she finds happiness in eating.

She becomes bigger and bigger which makes her secured from the sexual violence. She thinks that if a woman is plump, men show a repulsive attitude and never show lustful feeling. So through her plus-size, she achieves her own safety and enjoys her life without any fear of being fat.

Unlike the term body shaming, the word 'slim' pleases the mind of both young and older generation. It gives them confidence, respect and honour as the society now defines the health of a being based on their size. If the person is very slim, then society argues that they are physically fit and healthy. But for a person with plus-size considers the body of diseases. In the novel *Big Girl*, Victoria's sister gets admiration from every corner of the society and parents show immense love upon her only because she is beautiful and slender. Victoria laments "her father still regularly teased her about being their 'tester cake'...that Grace was beautiful and she wasn't, and they had gotten it right the second time around" (31). Gay never feels ashamed of her appearance and she never bothers others on their comments. She lives her life for herself and not to get rewards from the society.

Fatness is not considered as a positive word as it always creates mental agony. In ancient times fatness symbolizes positivity. The writer Amy Erdman Farrell reveals "until the late 19th century...fatness was often linked to a generalized sense of prosperity, distinction, and high status." (27). But a few years later new belief arises in the mind connected with beauty in which 'slim body' gets attention and 'fatness' becomes the word for vulgarity. Even though people are highly educated, they get depressed on hearing the word that they are fat. The word fat is an adjective and not an insult but still most of the people use it to ridicule and to hurt the mind of overweight people. Gay, in her memoir, declares that she admires her body and feels proud in saying that she is overweight. She asserts that being slim means to attract the eyes of men but for her she doesn't need any recognition from men. She says "This is what most girls are taught – that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society" (13).

This beauty concept of present society is really weird because it never gives a space to the plus-size girls. Like various discrimination in the society, discrimination based on size is acute and it is difficult to escape from this mental trauma. Victoria is deeply affected the body checking disorder as she always compares her body with others and feels irritated with her body. She wishes to be attractive by acquiring size zero. She is conscious of her body and feels upset when she finds slimmer girls. Even though she possesses better educational qualifications and a good career, she cannot escape from the stereotyped concept of women body. In the case of Gay, she is confident and treats her body with respect. For her, beauty is not lies in the outer body. She is happy with her physique and never likes to wound it so she safe guards it from the sensual eyes. She has no interest in comparing her body with others since it is her decision to remain overweight. After that tragedy of sexual abuse she considers heavy body as the best device to protect her body and eats a lot to become a plus-sized figure. Her words:

I was swallowing my secrets and making my body expand and explode. I found ways to hide in plain sight, to keep feeding a hunger that could never be satisfied – the hunger to stop hurting. I made myself bigger. I made myself safer (61)

According to the societal norms, beauty should lies in the body and not in the soul. Both men and women are the victims of body shaming which resulted in psychological problem. Only a few people come forward and assert their determination to overcome the agony due to body shaming. It mostly affects women rather than men. Women always wishes to be in beauty forever. Victoria suffers high mental struggle through out her life. Even though she is a good and confident teacher in the school, she cannot escapes from the inferiority complex of fatness which regularly haunts her. When she cannot controls the mental tension regarding overweight, she consults a doctor and seeks advice. Gay, in her memoir, says that throughout her life, her body is an object for laugh and bad comments, but she walks confidently and never listens to it. As a writer and spokesperson, her knowledge is wide and has the maturity to understand that body shape has no meaning in her life. She easily overcomes her mental struggles and has self capacity to go beyond limitations.

Parental role is unspeakable in children's life. For the better future of a child, good parenting is necessary. Victoria is unlucky to get a worse parents who from her birth onwards teases her and never gives a mental support. Victoria loses hope because of her parents dual treatment in expressing love towards the two daughters. Whenever her parents meet Victoria, their only advice is to reduce her weight. "Her father's comments about her looks always made her sad. And her mother pretended not to hear, never reassured her, and never came to her defence. Victoria knew instinctively that her mother was disappointed by her looks too" (40).

Roxane Gay, the writer and the soul of the memoir, writes that she has a good family. She shares every thing with her family and leads a happy family life till the age of twelve. After that she begins to hide certain matters from her parents especially the rape incident. As they are grown as Catholics, she fears the response of her parents. So she keeps it as a secret. Gay's parents are far better than the parents of Victoria since they never torture her for her overweight.

In the present society, most people suffer from fat phobia. Everyone one loves food but at the same time they are addicted to the body shape. Throughout Victoria's life, from her childhood to the adult age, she is

haunted by fat phobia. She always recollects the behaviour of her parents which haunts her even after she becomes a teacher. She says "I am a big person. All three of them are thin Not only do I put on weight easily, I over eat when I'm upset. I've always had a problem with...with my weight" (208). Victoria is unable to love her body as she herself denies the qualities of her body and spends infinite time to focus on the false values of body size. She fights for slim body but gets only overweight body.

But Gay has no such tensions regarding her over weight. She lives in the fat phobic world with great confidence and without caring society's opinions on body shape. She is free from this fear. She doesn't give a negative meaning to the term fat. She loves herself and has no biased opinion on beauty. Gay is confident in saying "Living in my body has expanded my empathy for other people and the truths of their bodies. Certainly, it has shown me the importance of inclusivity and acceptance for diverse body" (297) . Gay accepts her body as it is and speaks against the low body image .

Eating disorder is considered to be the major reason for obesity. It is a reason but cannot be the single reason for the overweight . In the *Big Girl* and the *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* , both Victoria and Gay are the lovers of food. Victoria has healthy appetite and eats big portions at every meal. Danielle Steel says "She liked cakes and candy and ice cream and bread, particularly when it was fresh out of the oven. She ate a big lunch at school. She could never resist a dish of french fries, or a hot dog bun, or a hot fudge sundae"(34) . When she is grown up , she cannot enjoys food because plus-size forces her to control the intake of food. It is a great battle for her. Over eating is not considered as good habit but the writer Gay finds comforts in eating and consumes excess food in order to forget her rape incident. She intakes large quantities of food. She declares proudly that she eats a lot of food and enjoy eating in the hope that she will be safe as if she is big in size.

Through self-esteem and self- appreciation one can overcome the existing social norms regarding body. If one needs attention and love from outside, the first step that requires is self love which is the accurate medicine for solving all beauty related issues. In *Big Girl*, Victoria realizes her mistakes of degrading her beauty from her friend Collin white. His words gives great confidence and courage to face the world. "As long as you're healthy, what difference do a few pounds make? Crazy diets...No one wants a woman who looks sick or like she's been liberated from a refugee camp"(378). In these words his true love with her soul is visible. Only an open hearted man can love a woman for her soul . At the end of the novel Victoria understands that she is beautiful. Danielle Steel's line "she was a beautiful woman. She always had been. She just didn't know it, and now she did. And as she looked up at him, she knew just how much she was loved" (447).

In her memoir , Roxane Gay says that she treats her oversized body as a shield to protect her from sexual attack. She gives priority to the safety of her body rather than to be an attractive figure . She is happy in her present look and advised others to be as what they are and not imitate others. She respects her body and eats to shield herself from the evil eyes and her ambition is to be less attractive. She doesn't need any appreciation from the outside world as she herself is there to appreciate her and not need the acceptance from the society. She says " This body is resilient. It can endure all kinds of things. My body offers me the power of presence. My body is powerful" (296). Only the uncivilized society and narrow minded people ashamed of her body and finds time to criticize it . Gay loves her body and considers it as a symbol of her identity.

Margo Maine, a clinical psychologist and writer, talks that human body is facing war since people lose self-esteem and develop strong false values related to the beauty of body. In her work *Body Wars : Making Peace with Women's bodies* , she says "develop a value system that puts appearance in its place and honours our bodies as wonderful gifts regardless of the external packaging"(24) .People should understand the wonderful function of body and tries to appreciate it since it is necessary for the survival. Though both characters are oversized, their personality is different. Victoria fears fat and thinks that fatty body is an obstruction for love, respect and appreciation. While Gay adores it and encourages it and has a perception that oversized body can stand as a shield to avoid sexual violence and physical attack. Beauty should be valued based on their purity of mind and not on their external appearances. Body is necessary to survive but never gives too much priority to the flesh as it decays one day. Through the two works, both the writers attempt to say the point that self-love is necessary in the life. Oversized body too have beauty. People should develop a mind to accept the beauty of plus-sized being because size is not a matter of living. Goodness at heart is better than a body with sparkling beauty.

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