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## A Feminist Re-examination of Fat Oppression in Fay Weldon's *The Fat Woman's Joke*

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### Abstract

*In contrast to the general and reductive assumption that pathologises fatness, this paper contends that fat female bodies serve as a critical nexus of intersectional oppression, where patriarchal, capitalist, and cultural power structures converge. In the light of Fay Weldon's, The Fat Woman's Joke, in this study I will excavate the complex dynamics of fat representation, exposing the insidious mechanism of objectification, marginalization, discrimination, and commodification that perpetuate fat female oppression. Building on the theoretical foundations of Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf, I aim to illuminate how the protagonist, Esther, embodies the tension between the cultural construction of femininity and bodily autonomy. Hence, by unpacking fat bias as a tool of social control and economic exploitation this study argues that fatness constitutes a paradigmatic site of feminist struggle, necessitating a nuanced reconsideration of identity, power and resistance in contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** Fatness, Objectification, Victimization, Discrimination, Commodification, Cultural construction.

### Introduction

She's a genius  
She's extraordinary  
She is an ordinary girl  
She's a fat woman

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-Sharon Bas Hannah, "Whoever I am, I'm a fat woman"<sup>1</sup>

Western philosophical approaches have always distinguished between the body and the mind. Generally, the body is theorized as a biological aspect that is separated from rational faculties and deemed an instrument to be directed and a possible source of disruption to be controlled. It can be safely argued that this dualist axis of mind and body is gendered, with women being associated with the body as Elizabeth Spelman in her essay "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views" 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."<sup>2</sup> Spelman essentially argues that the Eurocentric paradigm has traditionally oppressed women in the form of reducing their worth to perform bodily roles i.e., reproducer and caregiver. However, it is believable that in the current era, women's bodies remain a primary site of social control in the form of rigid beauty standards and societal condemnation of non-conformity.

In this article, the author examined the profound articulation of fatness as a compelling feminist issue within the narrative of *The Fat Woman's Joke* by Fay Weldon. Drawing on Susan Bordo's insights on the cultural construction of femininity, how Esther's oppression, fundamentally linked to her physicality, forces her to navigate societal attitudes and power dynamics that sustain harmful ideologies surrounding fatness. The interactions with four central characters i.e., Gerry, Phyllis, Alan, and the Doctor highlight the nature of her fat oppression through four distinct manifestations: objectification, marginalization, commodification, and pathologization. Furthermore, in the light of Naomi Wolf's analysis in *The Beauty Myth*, it will be demonstrated how Esther's fat oppression functions as a tool of control and an avenue for economic exploitation within a capitalist and patriarchal framework. In this way, through these comprehensive examinations, the article will illuminate the varied forms of fat oppression that Esther experiences, thereby enhancing our understanding of the politics of fatness in the current era.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Bas Hannah, "Whoever I am, I'm a fat woman" quoted in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, edited by L. Schoenfielder and B. Wieser (Aunt Lute Press, 1983), xxiv, 123. The verse highlights how society overlooks women's intellectual or personal potential because of their physical appearance.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Spelman. "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views", *Feminist Studies* 8, No.9 (Spring 1982): 123. [www.jstor.org/stable/3177582](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177582).

*The Fat Woman's Joke*, published in 1967, must be acknowledged within the temporal context of post-war Britain—a society navigating with sprouting gender dynamics and the burgeoning momentum of second-wave feminism. Despite growing recognition of women's rights, the cultural landscape of that society was firmly patriarchal which endorses the image of the slim, compliant housewife and solidifies oppressive gender roles through media, advertising, and social expectations. Within these parameters, the worth of women is measured in terms of their appearance and their ability to maintain domestic harmony, while any deviations from these norms — particularly through body size — were met with harsh societal disdain. Set against this backdrop *The Fat Woman's Joke* follows the story of Esther, a middle-aged fat woman who, after separation from her husband, retreats into a self-contained existence. Through Esther's introspective narrative and her exchanges with her friend Phyllis, the text uncovers the psychological and emotional toll of fat oppression and deconstructs the commodification of women's bodies and the rigid beauty standards that serve as instruments of social exclusion. With sharp wit, the text examines the intersections of body, power, and identity, unveiling how domesticity and marriage can serve as a mechanism of control. In this way, Weldon disrupts the prevailing silence of her society around fatness as a feminist concern by linking personal struggles with broader structures of domination and foreshadows contemporary feminist critiques of body politics.<sup>3</sup>

It is pertinent to mention here that Weldon's foundational critique of fat oppression in *The Fat Woman's Joke* paved the way for modern writers and theorists to engage critically with body politics. By foregrounding the fat female body as a site of contestation, Weldon expanded the scope of feminist inquest, influencing later scholars such as Susan Bordo, Naomi Wolf, and Kathleen Lebesco, who have interrogated the politics of patriarchal and capitalist systems which exert control through bodily norms. Moreover, Weldon's depiction of how fatness is stigmatized, pathologized, and commodified retains profound relevance even in today's world, where fatphobia continues to permeate media, healthcare, and societal ideals of beauty. Contemporary feminism, now centered around intersectional approaches, attempts to dismantle not only gender-based oppression but also the systemic marginalization rooted in body size, race, class, and sexuality. In this context, *The Fat Woman's Joke* emerges as a pioneering text

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<sup>3</sup> Fay Weldon. *The Fat Woman's Joke* (Academy Chicago Publishers, 2005).

that challenges readers to confront enduring forms of bodily regulation and exclusion. Its importance lies not only in its historical critique but also in its continued call for an inclusive feminism that celebrated diverse embodiments and resists the commodification of women's identities. Hence, reexamining Weldon's novel through a modern lens allows for a deeper understanding of how fat oppression can serve as a mechanism of control and reaffirms the urgency of addressing this issue in the ongoing struggle for gender and body justice.

### Literature review

A significant body of feminist literature underlines how patriarchal norms standardize and control women's bodies throughout the history. Feminists believe that, in the contemporary times, cultural expectations shift from what women can do to how women are expected to look. For instance, Sandra Bartky notes in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, "normative femininity is coming more and more to be centered on a woman's body — not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more precisely, its presumed heterosexuality and appearance"<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, Katie Conboy and her co-authors in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* point out that just as men seek to control and tame the natural world, they also seek to dominate and manipulate the feminine form, equating it with nature to be subdued and regulated. They emphasize that culture has traditionally valued certain 'natural' feminine attributes such as narrow waists, small feet, and long hair, while simultaneously requiring highly unnatural methods to achieve them, such as corsets, foot-binding, and hair products for straightening or detangling<sup>5</sup>. In this way, it is argued that in contemporary times, while the qualities of domesticity, femininity, and docility are still favored in women, the female ideal has moved away from these seemingly abstract qualities and has been placed directly back onto the female body.

Particularly, in the arena of fat studies, researchers argue that dominant patriarchal systems expect women to remain unobtrusive, to take up minimal space, and to be as invisible as possible. In contrast, fat female

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<sup>4</sup> Sandra Bartky. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Routledge, 1990), 80.

<sup>5</sup> Katie Conboy et al. *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 2.

bodies defy these expectations by occupying space and being highly visible. Consequently, in many socio-cultural narratives, fat female bodies are stigmatized, condemned and labelled as “compulsive eaters” or “hyper-emotional”, and a “physical and moral failure”<sup>6</sup> as has been noted by Samantha Murray in her book *The ‘Fat’ Female Body*. This general perception that Murray noticed can be vividly observed in several literary writings. For instance, fat women in fiction are often portrayed in anti-hero roles as friends, subordinates, or comic relief. In her essay “The Trash Heap Has Spoken: The Power and Danger of Women Who Take up Space,” Carmen Maria Machado writes of fat women in fiction: “They’re never romantic leads, or heroes. They never get to just be. It’s like writers can’t imagine fat women having sex or agency or complex lives”.<sup>7</sup> The same fact is publicized by Beth Younger in *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature*. The author reveals that fat female characters are simultaneously represented in literature as sexually promiscuous and as submissive, passive, and ineffective<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, in the article, “Disparate but disabled: Fat embodiment and disability Studies”, Herndon observes fat crime victims are frequently viewed with pity and helplessness due to their size. Similarly, they may be dismissed as unlikely victims of intimate partner violence or sexual assault because they do not fit the typical stereotype of a desirable victim — usually depicted as thin and attractive. Hence, these portrayals perpetuate long-held, negative views regarding fat females.

In addition to the sociocultural context, fatness or obesity is also studied at length as an anomalous and precarious condition. This politics of fatness is evident in the *Let’s Move* initiative, which considers fatness as an epidemic and one of the greatest threats to America’s health and economy. This standpoint, I believe, overlooks the complexities of natural human diversity in body types, reducing fatness to a medical or moral issue rather than recognizing it as part of the broader spectrum of human variation. Associating obesity with the term epidemic in our understanding evokes images of contagion, corruption, and peril, framing fat people as a genuine menace to both our individual and national health. We are in agreement with A.E Farnell who in *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*

<sup>6</sup> Samantha Murray. *The ‘Fat’ Female Body* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Carmen Maria Machado. “The Trash Heap Has Spoken: The Power and Danger of Women Who Take up Space”, (*Guernica Magazine*), 13 Feb 2017, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Beth Younger. *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Scarecrow Press, 2009).

points out that the medicalization of fatness and the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic lead to “apocalyptic thinking” and a “witch hunt targeting fatness” that “strip[s] away humanity” to create a politicized condition that overlooks the intricacies of human alterations in body type.<sup>9</sup> Though Farnell considers all fat bodies marginalized, suppressed, and oppressed, in our analysis of *The Fat Woman's Joke*, we particularly focus on Esther who in that case would be doubly marginalized, oppressed, and suppressed—first because she is a female, and secondly, because she is fat. Thus, Esther serves as a compelling case study for examining the intricate politics of fat female oppression, revealing the deeper societal forces at play.

### **Theoretical framework**

Though for a long time, the female body has been ignored by different subjects and disciplines such as sociology and anthropology and relegated to the realm of biological representation, nevertheless, in the contemporary era, it has been a frequently debated issue. This fact is also asserted by Kathy Davis who used the term ‘body craze’ for growing interest in bodies, particularly in feminism and cultural studies. Davis regards feminism, as a pivotal movement “responsible for putting the body into the intellectual map of academia”<sup>10</sup>. Building on Davis’s assertion, this article explores how fat feminist scholarship has critically examined and challenged dominant discourses surrounding female bodies, ultimately reconfiguring the ways we think about embodiment, identity, and social justice. This section mainly focuses on developments in fat studies and fat feminist interventions into the dominant discourses on female bodies by authors such as Susie Orbach and Naomi Wolf.

This study employs close textual analysis of *The Fat Woman's Joke* in the light of Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. A nexus between Bordo's and Wolf's theories is built to expose how fatness is not only a site of private tussle but also a political struggle for women. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo argues that the body is not a purely biological entity but is, in fact, profoundly shaped by cultural practices and societal norms. She builds on Michel Foucault's assertion that

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<sup>9</sup> A.E Farnell. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Davis. *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: Sage Publication), 1.

“our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture,” highlighting how “the body is in the grip of cultural practices, in fact, there is no natural body, and it is just the cultural practices”.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that the physical form is not immune to the influences of the external world. Moreover, Bordo contends that the complex and deeply institutionalized system of values and practices within society compels women to believe “that they are nothing (and are frequently treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and tagless”.<sup>12</sup> In this way, she conceptualizes the female body as “a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced”.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Bordo’s analysis highlights how the female body is far from an individual or natural entity; instead, it is constructed by societal norms that impose unrealistic standards on women.

While Susan Bordo’s cultural construction of femininity highlights how the ideal female body is a cultural and societal construct, Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, explores the political and economic forces driving this construction. Wolf argues that beauty myth is not simply about physical appearance but functions as a tool for patriarchal control and capitalist gain. According to Wolf, primarily, the beauty myth serves to maintain patriarchal dominance by creating an impossible standard of beauty that keeps women preoccupied with their appearance.<sup>14</sup> This constant focus on achieving physical perfection reinforces traditional gender roles, ensuring that women remain subordinate. By dictating that women must be “bulgeless”, the beauty myth limits their autonomy, trapping them in a cycle of self-surveillance and insecurity. In this way, the beauty myth becomes a form of social control, keeping women from fully engaging in other aspects of life and reinforcing the power structures that benefit men.

In addition to its patriarchal function, Wolf contends that the beauty myth is also driven by capitalist motives. The beauty and diet industries, in particular, exploit women’s insecurities by promoting products and services

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Bordo. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (University of California Press), 140.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Naomi Wolf. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Collins, reprint 2002).

that promise to help them achieve the idealized image of beauty. Through advertising and marketing campaigns, these industries commodify women's bodies, transforming them into objects of commercial value. This commodification generates enormous profits, as women are encouraged to invest time, money, and effort into altering their appearance in pursuit of an unattainable ideal. Wolf argues that this capitalist exploitation benefits not only the industries that sell beauty products and services but also the broader capitalist system, which thrives on perpetuating insecurities to drive consumerism. By tying women's self-worth to their physical appearance, the beauty myth ensures a steady market for products designed to "fix" their bodies, thereby creating a cycle of consumption that serves capitalist interests. Ultimately, the beauty myth operates as a dual mechanism, sustaining both patriarchal dominance and capitalist profit at the expense of women's autonomy and well-being. In this way, together, Bordo's and Wolf's theories illuminate how fatness serves as a focal point for understanding the interplay of cultural, political, and economic forces that shape women's identities and perpetuate systemic oppression.

### **Analysis**

The analytic expression explores the multifaceted ways in which Esther experiences fat oppression through her interactions with key characters in *The Fat Woman's Joke*, revealing the societal mechanisms that devalue her existence. Firstly, it is to demonstrate how Gerry's objectifying gaze lessens Esther to a mere spectacle, highlighting the societal tendency to dehumanize fat bodies based on appearance. Moreover, it illustrates the discrimination and stigma Esther faces through Alan's ableist expectations about her capabilities, showcasing the intersectionality of fat oppression with other societal discriminations. Furthermore, the study analyzes Esther's interactions with Phyllis, revealing how she internalizes societal fat phobia, and illustrating the pervasive cultural norms that lead her to adopt self-critical perspectives. Finally, the research will highlight the medical pathologization of her body, as evidenced by the doctor's approach, which generalizes fatness solely as a medical issue. Through these interactions, it is established that Esther's struggles are not merely isolated, personal or medical but rather reflect a broader cultural narrative that perpetuates discrimination and stigma against fat female bodies, underlining the urgent need for a more inclusive understanding of body diversity.



Generally, the most obvious way through which fat bodies are oppressed is offensive jokes and insistent objectification which mirrors a broader societal tendency to dehumanize and scrutinize them. This subject is effectively illustrated in *The Fat Woman's Joke*, where Esther becomes a target of the male gaze. Due to her fatness, Esther is depicted in the text as a commodified object, vulnerable to comparison and mockery. The persistent body shaming and sexualization that Esther experiences are vividly expressed during a dinner scene at her friend Phyllis's house. As they enjoy pre-dinner drinks, Phyllis's husband, Gerry, objectifies Esther's by noticing her physic.<sup>15</sup> Despite being aware of this inspection, Esther remains passive, exemplifying her willing presentation of her body as a spectacle for external judgment. Her silence underscores Bordo's assertion that fat women are conditioned to perceive their bodies as bulky, greedy adversaries, a constant threat to their control, humanity, womanhood, and self.<sup>16</sup> In this way, Bordo suggests that fat bodies are socialized to tolerate derogatory remarks and objectifying gazes, a phenomenon that Esther exemplifies.

Moreover, Esther's fat corporeality leads to her marginalization and discrimination in the workplace, contributing to her oppression by relegating her to the confines of the domestic sphere. This limited role for Esther stems from the deeply entrenched belief that fat women do not possess the physical and mental abilities required to work outside the home. Alan's attitude toward Esther starkly embodies this predisposition. His prejudice for Esther's body aligns with Murray's observations that 'fat' women are treated with suspicion and with quite unabashed hatred and disgust. Murray describes the accumulation of a lifetime of fat-phobic macro aggressions as follows:

[D]aily humiliations that shape the lived experience of the "fat" woman might range from being "politely" refused a job because "you don't quite fit with our image", spurned by a would-be lover because of the perceived repulsiveness of one's "fat" flesh, berated by a doctor who looks at the "fat" woman before him with barely concealed contempt, or being calmly told by a customer service representative that "larger passengers" are required to purchase two airline seats. These everyday interactions operate to "shame" the

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<sup>15</sup> Fay Weldon. *The Fat Woman's Joke*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 15.

“fat” woman, to force her to “see” her own object(ed) body.<sup>17</sup>

Murray's identification of fat shaming is exemplified in *The Fat Woman's Joke*, particularly during a dinner party when Phyllis introduces Alan's secretary, Susan, to Esther. In response to Esther's inquiry about Susan's look, Alan describes her, saying, “She is slim like a willow. But she has curves here and there”.<sup>18</sup> When Esther further enquires about Susan's qualities, Alan responds, “She is thin. She is temporary...not a typist by nature, but something far more mysterious and significant”.<sup>19</sup> This response highlights Alan's proclivity to attribute a woman's worth to her physical appearance rather than her professional capabilities. By equating professional competency with a specific body type, Alan not only vitiates Esther but also strengthens Bordo's assertion that, in modern Western society, thinness symbolizes a range of positive attributes, including moral control, modernity, sophistication, civilization, and a “sole frame of reference inferring self-worth”.<sup>20</sup> In this context, thinness signifies a denial of animalistic behavior — the embodiment of a modern, industrialized state of control. As Bordo argues “the size and shape of the body have come to operate as a market of personal, internal order (or disorder) — as a symbol for the emotional, moral or spiritual state of the individual”.<sup>21</sup> In this constructed equation, the thin body represents development, self-control, and competence, while Esther's fat body embodies a lack of control, resulting in her marginalization from professional spaces and confinement to domesticity.

It is pertinent to mention here that the fat bias that Weldon represents is not merely fictional as Andrew Brown in her thesis, *The Elephant in The Room: Fat Phobia and Oppression in the Time of Obesity*, refers authentic surveys which suggest that 93% of human resource professionals admitted they would hire a “normal weight” candidate over an equally qualified fat applicant, 15% whispered they would not promote a fat employee, and one in ten claimed it was adequate to fire an employee for being fat.<sup>22</sup> Brown

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<sup>17</sup> Samantha Murray, *The Fat Female Body* (Springer, 2008), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Waldon, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Brown, *The Elephant in The Room: Fat Phobia and Oppression in the Time of Obesity* (Memorial University, 2013), 9.

also quotes other theorists and their reflections concerning fat phobia such as John Cawley who in *Body Weight and Women's Labour-Market Outcomes* points out that fat women earn up to one-fourth less than their thinner co-workers and fat employees are frequently denied health insurance benefits.<sup>23</sup> Correspondingly, E. D. Rothblum in "The Relationship between Obesity, Employment Discrimination, and Employment - Related Victimization" noted that fat women are pressured to resign or are fired for being fat. According to Brown, perhaps most insidious of all, anti-fat attitudes are often most deeply internalized (and most intensely expressed) by fat people themselves. Brown also quotes Gallagher's scholarly contribution titled "Negative Judgements about Male Associates of Obese Females" in which the latter carried the psychological study of weight bias that fat people expressed significantly harsher judgments upon viewing an image of a thin man with a fat woman than average weight people did. In this way, Brown's thesis provides a few of the concrete examples of fat oppression familiar in our society.<sup>24</sup>

Coming back to Weldon's text, while Gerry objectifies Esther and Alan discriminates against her in the workplace, Esther's friend Phyllis adds a multidimensional and intersectional layer to her experience of fat oppression. For instance, Phyllis's internalization of societal ideals surrounding the female body is manifested in both her appearance and behaviour. Described as "thirty-one and finely boned, beautifully dressed in a red tiny-flowered trouser suit with hat to match-neat, sexy and rich; invincibly lively and invincibly stupid", Phyllis embodies the cultural standard that equates thinness with attractiveness.<sup>25</sup> Her veneration for this ideal becomes apparent when she belittles Esther, stating, "You don't seem to have to follow the rules. You are enormous, but it doesn't seem to matter. To be frank, you are an appalling sight at this very moment".<sup>26</sup> Such comments reveal not only Phyllis's internalized fat phobia but also her proclivity to impose her beliefs on others, thereby fortifying a culture of fat-shaming stigma and marginalization. This mindset of Phyllis goes parallel to Cecilia Hartley's observations in her article, "Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship," where she argues that, according to prevailing Western cultural norms, beautiful equals thin and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 19.

fatness signifies “careless, lazy and self-indulgent” behavior.<sup>27</sup> Phyllis's comments on Esther serve to propagate this damaging ideology, highlighting how even friendships can become sites of oppression when individuals internalize societal pressures and exert them onto others.

Interestingly, Phyllis's stress on achieving a perfect body is diligently tied to her professional and social aspirations. She also considers that attractiveness is crucial for career success, which resonates with Alan's views on the effect of beauty standards in the workplace. Bordo's concept of the “politics of appearance” and Wolf's “professional beauty qualification or (PBQ)” further expounds this societal perception. Bordo argues that women are acutely aware of how their appearance affects their success, noting that decisions regarding diet and cosmetic surgery are often driven by the need for personal and economic security.<sup>28</sup> In Bordo's perspective, women are compelled to conform to specific appearance standards and they are not merely “cultural dopes”<sup>29</sup> blindly adhering to societal 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.<sup>30</sup>

In this light, Phyllis's preoccupation with conserving an ideal body demonstrates how societal expectations concerning beauty can influence professional opportunities and social prominence.

Just like Bordo, Wolf also theorizes this aspect of fat oppression and its gendered nature and terms its professional beauty qualification or PBQ.

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<sup>27</sup> Cecilia Hartley, “Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship,” in Rose Weitz (ed.), *Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: OUP, 2010), 245-254.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 30.

Citing the example of television journalism, Wolf exposes the oppressive and gendered aspect of the PBQ. She maintains that in journalism male news anchors are usually an older man, “avuncular” and “distinguished”, accompanied by a much younger female, “nubile”, and “heavily made-up” with “professional prettiness level”.<sup>31</sup> She goes on to reflect on the hypocrisy of the PBQ by maintaining: “If a single beauty standard were applied equally to men as to women in TV journalism, most of the men would be unemployed”.<sup>32</sup> Hence, Phyllis's focus on appearance accentuates the systemic inequities perpetuated by rigid beauty standards, which considerably control women's prospects and success in the workplace.

Finally, Esther's meeting with the doctor introduces another significant yet ubiquitous aspect to her oppression, emphasizing societal perceptions that view fat bodies only as diseased and in need of ‘fixation’. Esther layovers at the doctor due to her nausea; however, the doctor assumes that her reason for seeking help is solely driven by a desire to change her body following societal expectations. He states, “You came because I am a cosmetic doctor and you are fat and you don't want to be fat; otherwise, you would have chosen another doctor. You don't have to be fat”.<sup>33</sup> This interaction aligns with Naomi Wolf's review of fat oppression. According to Wolf, our culture idealizes a female body type that becomes gradually unattainable over time, fueled by the economic benefits derived from exploiting women's insecurities and convincing them that accomplishing this ideal is vital for a successful and gratifying life. She argues that a substantial economy has developed around the notion of the “ideal” female body, encompassing the cosmetic industry, valued at approximately USD 170 billion; the diet and weight-loss sector, worth around USD 192 billion; and the rapidly expanding market for cosmetic surgery, estimated at USD 44.5 billion. Wolf also underlines how cosmetic surgeons manipulate language to categorize natural female body features in problematical ways to promote their industry's viability:

...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

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 109.

"condition" that was imported into the United States by Vogue only in 1973; they refer to this texture as "disfiguring," "unsightly," and "polluted with toxins." Before 1973, it was normal female flesh.<sup>34</sup>

This critique demonstrates how the cosmetic industry capitalizes on societal ideals by redefining normal body characteristics as issues needing resolution. The doctor's presumption that Esther's visit is motivated by a desire to imitate these beauty standards epitomizes this exploitation. By pathologizing fatness and presenting it as an ailment requiring medical intervention, the doctor mirrors the broader trend of commodifying body image in the name of treatment. However, his wonder when Esther expresses her lack of concern about being fat discloses societal predispositions against women who resist orthodox body norms. For instance, when Esther states, "I have always been fat. It hasn't troubled me," the doctor's surprise "A fat girl growing up? Untroubled?"<sup>35</sup> accentuates the prevailing belief that a fat girl who does not writhe from body-related distress is an anomaly. This further reinforces the pervasive scrutiny and judgment women face based on their physical appearance.

It is important to note that both Bordo and Wolf contend that the societal construction of the thin body as spiritually enlightened, in contrast to the fat body being viewed as "abnormal," abject, and indicative of moral, physical, social, and cultural failure, nurtures self-loathing and nous of undesirability. In *The Fat Woman's Joke*, numerous instances demonstrate how Alan contributes to Esther's degradation, particularly through his trivializing responses to her concerns about her weight. He frequently undermines her confidence with comments suggesting she may be "just a little too fat" for acceptance in society.<sup>36</sup> These remarks affect Esther's self-perception, underpinning her belief in her undesirability. In a moment of susceptibility, she even enunciates this internalized narrative: "You don't find me attractive anymore. You're ashamed to be seen out with me because I'm fat and horrible, and you think people will be sorry for you because you're married to me".<sup>37</sup> This admittance poignantly encapsulates the reflective effects of Alan's conditioning on her sense of self-worth. Moreover, Esther's

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 53.

confession resonates with Bordo's assertion that such internalized ideologies lead to "uneasiness with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self-loathing".<sup>38</sup> This internalized narrative not only reinforces Esther's feelings of shame and undesirability but also illustrates how capitalist and patriarchal power exerts a strong force capable of shaking even a resilient and steadfast woman like Esther. In a parallel manner, Paolo Volonte's recent study, *The Fat Fashion: The Thin Ideal and The Segregation of Plus-Size Bodies*, also highlights this facet of fat oppression by narrating Catherine Derry's anecdote. Derry, in her essay "I'll Never Find a Dress': Shopping for the Prom" quotes a personal experience of sizeism. Being big-breasted and larger than a size 7, she could not find a beautiful dress for prom in young girls' stores and hence she states, "I started to hate my body for not fitting into the cute little dress".<sup>39</sup> Volonte, while analyzing Derry's condition, emphasizes that the most interesting aspect of Derry's story is that the awareness of being fat produced by the shopping experience is instantly accompanied by a natural stigmatization or self-stigmatization of the body. In Volonte words, "clothing that does not fit is an indicator of a devalued condition and triggers hatred not of the dress that does not fit the body, but of course for the body that does not fit into the dress".<sup>40</sup> Hence, this internalized narrative not only strengthens societal expectations but also deepens Esther's self-loathing, creating a pervasive sense of shame and undesirability that she attributes to her physical appearance on account of societal conditioning. Although Esther is medically fit, the constant fat oppression, driven by its own patriarchal and capitalist agendas, compels her to perceive herself as unfit and undeserving.

### Conclusion

In a nutshell, Esther's fatness transcends the reductionist prospect of personal health issues and foregrounds how it intersects with other major kinds of issues and oppressions. As Gerry objectifies her through the male gaze, while Alan reduces her to a mere tool for control, Phyllis dismisses her as obstructive and lacking social grace, and the doctor labels her as diseased, attempting to evoke sympathy. Each of these perspectives reflects the diverse ways in which Esther is devalued and oppressed based on her body type. In this way, Esther's experiences encapsulate the broader struggles

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Paolo Volonte's, *The Fat Fashion: The Thin Ideal and the Segregation of Plus-Size Bodies* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 47.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 46.

faced by women who diverge from the narrow beauty criteria prolonged by patriarchal and capital norms. Thus, in contrast to the general perception of fat as merely a medical issue, this research underscores that it is fundamentally a feminist concern, necessitating a critical understanding of the underlying patriarchal and capitalist agendas that promote fat bias even in today's world. We have explored how patriarchal structures impose traditional gender roles that distract women from their broader identities while capitalism perpetuates the beauty and diet industries, creating a pervasive cycle that deepens societal fat bias and restricts women's empowerment.