

Life as a Fat Female Body Bridging Feminist Narrative Inquiry and Creative Writing

Somayeh McKian

Faculty of Humanities, Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences,
Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran
Faculty of Humanities, Department of Gender Studies, Charles University, Prague, The Czech Republic
Contact@somayehmckian.com

Abstract

The medicalization of women's body mass index has led to the usage of terms such as "overweight", "obese," or even "morbidly obese," which convey negative clinical and moral judgment of death, disease, and especially failure. Gender studies and fat studies have shown that heavy women often internalize these valuations. Against this backdrop, this qualitative study examines the affects, emotions, and experiences of becoming, living, and identifying as "fat bodies" through narrative inquiry and creative writing with Iranian women. The participants were two women, 19 and 57 years old, graduated from different Iranian universities, one currently living in Iran and the other one in the Czech Republic.

The central idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are examined to understand how people construct their experiences as they live. By integrating feminist narrative inquiry with creative expression, the study promotes creative writing as a medium to challenge societal norms and foster personal empowerment. By turning a vital part of the interview into a short creative writing piece, participants got engaged in poetic expressions, revealing themes of resistance and aesthetics of fatness. Results show that fat is perceived as dangerous and considered a physical inadequacy due to societal beauty standards and can lead to social stigma. However, the findings also suggest that fat can be experienced as lively, pleasurable, and empowering when the sweating body is felt to be alive and energetic. This approach highlights the potentiality of creative writing in fostering the catharsis and amplifying these critical encounters.

Keywords: fat studies; feminist narrative inquiry; creative writing; fat resistance; aesthetic of fat

Introduction

The huge panic about fatness is replayed in mainstream culture. "What is an underlying "expectation" in the minds of women is a highly verbalized societal pressure on many Iranian women to get slender by whatever means necessary." (Suleymani, 2019, 214). As Suleymani argues, "based on the subculture of beauty surgery, women should always be accessible to fulfill the desires of men. They have to conform to the unstated dictates of physical beauty maintained by Iranian society at large" (Suleymani, 2019, 216). While fat has not been examined as a social issue in the Iranian context, Australian fat studies scholar Samantha Murry has argued that "as a consequence of this fat body panic, there is a need to renegotiate dominant understandings of the fat female body and investigate the problems and dilemmas

that shape the experience of fat corporeal being-in-the-world.” (Murray, 2008, 2), and to amplify or outline alternatives. This assumption lies at the very heart of this research. In accordance with Murry and the research participants, researchers have used the term fat as a non-derogatory term in an effort to reclaim it from the abusive and derogatory contexts in which it has been used. Addressing overweight bodies through gender and fat studies perspectives is especially pertinent but also demanding in the contemporary Iranian context where gender studies do not exist as an academic program or social lens. Meanwhile, fatness is increasing and is increasingly perceived as problematic. Recent findings from a Persian cohort study (2020) show that a large portion of the Iranian adult population is classified as overweight and obese (41% and 30%, respectively), with a higher prevalence of obesity in women than that in men (45% vs 19%) (Najafi et al., 2020). Most of the studies medicalize overweight and obesity. It appears that to date there is little feminist research on the fat female body in Iran. Suleymani (2019) suggests that in the current political climate of Iran's theocratic state, the Iranian feminist movement tends to focus on discriminatory laws and policies such as unjust family protection laws (Tohidi, 2010). Since it is not easy to express oneself in non-stigmatized ways when labelled as a “morbidly obese” body, this research aims to analyse the effects and experiences of diverse fat Iranian women. While narrative analysis illuminates the power of the social context, this research attempts to collaboratively with the research participants to tell other stories by converting parts of the interview into creative writing. The creative writing shows how women can represent themselves in more empowering ways compared to dominant narratives about body weight and fat hatred. It allows the forms of unmaking and unbecoming that offer more creative ways of being in the world.

Generating a Feminist Aesthetics of Fat

While most of the literature on obesity fields was largely concerned with the denigration, pathologizing, and hatred toward fatness, this idea considers the possibility of a feminist aesthetics of fat. It points to the processes that make it hard to feel indifferent to fatness or regard it as aesthetically pleasing. Feminist aesthetics examines the concepts the hierarchies of which are imbued with gendered significance even though they are not frequently explicitly referred to. As such, feminist art goes beyond traditional and normative ideas. Plesse (2020) argues a more feminist approach to making and appreciating art leads to deeper and more interesting connections with art. The female body mostly is seen as aesthetically pleasing, which should be beautiful and flawless. As such, by only looking at artworks that are pleasing to the eye, one misses out on the chance to enjoy political and philosophical art, which is deeper and more difficult (Plesse, 2020). In Western society, a fat female body stands as a symbol of a neglected and uncultivated body and is excluded from the subject of aesthetics. Murray argued that: This aesthetic is not something spontaneously produced by us but is a learned discursive production that allows us to understand and embody the dictates of beauty. The fat woman appears as an uncared for, unmanaged, and excessive body which is often seen as the sign of gluttonous obsessions and unchecked desires. Accordingly, she has a body out of control, whereas an art of existence is all about a reigning in, of giving shape and form to one's life, one's desires, one's body. (Murray, 2004, 241). According to Murray, societal norms discipline fat women to try different routes to transform their ugly and ridiculed bodies into slim, more aesthetically pleasing, attractive, and sublime ones and acceptable by norms. When a fat woman's body does not aesthetically conform to the dominant ideals, it is assumed

that she cannot get enough pleasure from her own actions and body. According to Irvin (2017) fat bodies can be pleasurable if aesthetic exploration finds a new way to appreciate new kinds of physical and mental beauty. This exploration is defined as follows: Aesthetic exploration is the active pursuit of enjoyment in things that do not initially appear to be pleasing. It can, for example, foster a greater appreciation for the beauty of many body forms, as well as the beauty of standing up for oneself and others.(Irvin, 2017). If we consider the body as an artistic work, there is a general idea that when a work lacks beauty, the mind is forced to look for other values, such as conceptual beauty and moral implication. The purpose of feminist art is not beauty, but rather the intellectual insights that the audience acquires from participating with it (Plesse, 2022, 18). Such fat feminist aesthetics can be used to generate new ways of thinking. Creative writing as a corporeal process of writing can help women to see themselves as creators who can creatively rewrite stories about fatness, emotion, affect, pleasure, guilt, and shame. To illustrate how fat bodies can be disclosed as aesthetic through an account of matter as interaction, Colls (2007) gives an example of a collection of poems by Susan Stinson. It is a description of her describing her own body to an imagined audience. “When women ask me now how I come to love my body, I tell them that I looked at it very closely and wrote down what I saw. I sit naked on a chair with my legs slightly apart. I hold my bones very straight. My belly pours, hangs, moves, grows hair, and shines in marks that fall like fingers curving up around its sides. I am loose, I hang. There are not enough names for the places where my fat gathers on me; there is belly, thigh, hip, chin, but no simple way to say soft-mound between-breast-and-arm, or low-full-folds-that-are sides. My fat does not detach. It has motion like liquid. It moves in waves, it ripples. It is not a virtue, not a sin; it’s a bodily element with its own purpose and beauty” (Stinson, 1993 cited in Colls, 2007, 359–360). In contrast to worshipping firmness, Stinson invites her audience to see what fatness represents, it is not laziness or lack of control, it is about exploring capacities of the soft flab, making sense of bodily matters, shifting from size and form to connectivity to fatness. It represents new sensations. Stinson describes fat as uncovered and the opposite of sexual and beauty norms. It is a new way of speaking and feeling about fatness, unlimited and creative. Murray (2005) also describes how women can come out as fat woman giving an example of “the rhetoric of pride” by Wann (1988). Wann explains the reclaiming of the fat word the same as in the Gay Pride movement. Reclaiming the word fat is the miracle cure you’ve been looking for; the magic trick that makes all your worries about your weight disappear. Do you want to feel good about yourself? Silence your tormentors? Look better in miniskirts? Use the F-word. Say it loud, say it proud: Fat! Fat! Shake your belly three times and there you are, at home in your body, free from the guilt and the shame, the stress and starvation, and the self-hatred (Wann, 1998 cited in Murray, 2005, 268). Wann’s manifest for fat word exposes the fat female body to all to see. This is an invitation for women to imagine a sense of freedom, thinking about the body and not be afraid of the body, not be afraid of others’ fat hatred and fat shaming behaviors. In conclusion, in two pieces of creative writing in this research, “sweating” and “stop eating” themes could create new sensations and emotions for women, Nazanin wrote about sweating as a beautiful part of fatness, more alive and energetic, like the fatness never can stope her. In Nina’s writing, being stopped had a strong meaning, which means stop is another start; start being herself. Here, the fat body has its own bodily characteristics and is governed by its own force and momentums; sweating creates motion for the body, waves, and ripples; and it has a specific beauty and sensation. In creative writings they both directly show emotions toward their bodies, their words show what is their living fat.

Research Sample

The research explores two cases that are based on in-depth individual interviews (one online with Nina and one in person with Nasrin). In brief, the epistemological assumption underlying these research methods is that narration allows Iranian women to talk about their experiences of the fat body—in their own words—and create grounded knowledge about the female body and the phenomenon of fat. In the interviews, an open interviewing procedure fosters mutuality between the researcher and the respondent (Evers & Boer, 2012).

Method of data collection	Year	Place	Age	Employment status	Marital status	Educational status	Number of children	Gastric & sleeve surgery
Narrative interview	2022	Tehran	19	BA student	Single	BA student in Counselling Psychology	0	yes
Narrative interview	2022	Prague	57	Retired teacher / Chef at a restaurant	Widow	BA in Law	3 (1 daughter, 2 sons)	no

Table 1: Overview of research participants

Narrative interview

The research employed narrative inquiry, adhering to feminist narrative research methods prevalent in gender studies, sociology, and psychology. Unlike positivism, which imposes predetermined realities, feminist approaches empower women to define their own experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1983). This qualitative method focuses on capturing lived experiences within social contexts, emphasizing subjective interpretation and storytelling (Chung, 2020). In Iran, where such narrative approaches are rare, the study explored female body through creative writing inspired by Yasmin Gunaratnam's works (2003; 2013). Interviews provided qualitative insights into the experiences of Iranian women, using narratives to delve into personal histories, emotions, and societal roles. By fostering mutual understanding in interviews, the research connected individual stories with broader social themes like family and education, enhancing understanding of the fat body through narratives.

Narrative analysis

Feminist narrative analysis explores how stories are constructed and their impact on audiences (Riessman, 2008). It embraces a diverse perspective, allowing women to articulate and analyze their experiences (Romero & Stewart, 1999). Narrative analysis sheds light on the often invisible fat female body in society, reframing past events and experiences in the context of evolving narratives (Bruner, 1990). This approach requires contextual interpretation, recognizing that meanings are dynamic and situational. The initial stage involves transcribing interviews, conducted in Farsi and selectively translated into English, focusing on narrative themes. Through feminist narrative analysis, themes were categorized and examined to highlight unique aspects of participants' stories.

Creative writing

Spontaneous body-based writing by the respondents on their own direct experience of their bodies, especially by the interviewees was applied as creative writing research method. After completing the interviews and transcribing them, we read them quite meticulously and noticed some specific points implying the agency of fat and its aesthetic significance in both Nina's and Nazanin's interviews. We identified two significant keywords in their interviews, "stop" in Nina's and "sweating" in Nazanin's narrative which both seemed like a poem. That is the words were strong enough to make us relate to them. Both participants had used these words repeatedly. Also, they had put intense emotions in these words which implied the significance of women's body language, gestures, and facial expression for them. This attitude intrigued us to manage further discussions with them a week after the interview. Their intense interest and emotion in their writing were pointed out to them when both of them accepted the invitation for an online conversation. At first, they were surprised and then confirmed that the words that they repeated in their interviews embodied/ entailed different aspects of their fatness. We talked about writing based on these keywords and composed a creative writing piece. Creative writing allowed them to (re)write themselves through narrative re-composition. This writing helped to heighten their sensation of being fat and breaking down or undoing the ideologies that might work as sources of oppression. Stopping and sweating unfolded these other meanings in the process of writing. Through the process of writing, they could know more about the main part of their interviews and reimagine the episodes they talked about and what they knew and became authors of different stories. As such, creative writing as a corporeal process of writing could help them see themselves as creators who can be creative in writing life stories about fatness and emotions.

Analysis: Cutting the Flesh: Sleeve Surgery

Nina, a nineteen- year-old student of psychology focused on the negative emotions she received from her relatives, friends and grandmother. Her dad was the first person who had already told her the first time:

Don't make yourself feel terrible, don't make yourself tired, finally, you should have surgery, you are like the other relatives, look at your cousins who did bariatric surgery, you have this obesity gene too. My mom is a thin and short woman, but my dad always has 10– 12 kg overweight. Some of our relatives are overweight also. (Nina, 2022)

When Nina talked about how her father told her she had "the obesity genes", and had to have surgery, she got emotional and stopped speaking for a few seconds. Then she said, "I hate surgery, hate it." Even though she knows that "the obesity gene" is not a "mother's genetic" but could be the father's genetic too, she never blames the father. Rather she ultimately accepts to do sleeve surgery to get rid of the destiny of obesity that the father portrays. Nina directly expressed how she hated surgery with intense emotions:

When my dad told me I should have surgery, I thought it was somehow my destiny. The scene, 100 kg on the scale showed that I was a hopeless girl, and I told myself,... You should listen to them, they are right, this fatness is dangerous ... Finally, I decided or was forced to have surgery. I was so scared, even the moment before going to operation room, all the time I was thinking about the opening of my stomach, cutting one part of myself, inside of my body, and throwing it away. It was horrible. I was crying and said why?

why? Why should I do that? why is this the only way? but it seems it was the only way to be like other people. (Nina, 2022)

This narrative shows Nina's hatred toward surgery/father, but it is a mix of emotions: hatred (I hate surgery), fear (I was scared, it was horrible), hopelessness (I told to myself listen to them). Surgery is presented as the solution of the father, who disciplines the female's body through creating fear, shame, and self-hate for cutting one's body and reshaping it. Nina's relationship with her younger brother was also significant. Nina's father was overweight, and her brother had become like their father when he was 12 years old. But the family's judgement of her brother's course of action was different from her own: The other relative told him "Don't eat, stop eating, you become like your sister!" But my parents told him that it's ok, "Eat as much as you want, then you will go to the gym and do workouts and you become thin!" (Nina, 2022). While her father persuaded her to have surgery, he never forced his son to do so. Although Nina's father was overweight but her mother was not, the father proudly mentioned the "obesity gene" stuck to Nina's genes. It shows in Nina's account both mother and father tried to control her and locate the responsibility of fatness on her individual life; her mother several times taking her to doctors and therapist and her father with ignoring his fatness (and maybe his obesity gene) and forcing her to have surgery. Nina's account shows fat resistance as well. She made a plan for the future after receiving judgments from relatives and looking forward to changing it and does not accept the beauty standards that already she rejects, and she had plans for the future:

My future will be better if I focus on my body, and not just other people's talking. I don't need more advice like doing surgery or stopping eating. I don't need their mirrors. I should focus on my feelings. I hope in the future, these issues will be completely resolved because I am involved with fatness my whole life from the day I was born until now, but I want to say that eventually it is not a big issue, society just makes it a big problem for us. I believe in every century, in different decades, the beauty and health standards are going to change and it is not fixed, so, I think I am wasting my life and energy on such a thing that 100 years later maybe isn't even important. If one day I become a mother to a daughter, I would like that she experiences none of these behaviors, because of being overweight or obese. I don't want her to experience the vulnerability that I experienced. (Nina, 2022)

Sweating body: activity and being alive

Nazanin who was a retired teacher, living in Prague, showed the impact of pregnancy and motherhood in her interview. Nazanin's narrative refers to the force of social norms of selfless motherhood and marriage. As she said:

These days women's consciousness has increased and women pay attention to themselves during pregnancy, during the marriage. In previous decades it was not like that. So, all thoughts in my mind were related to my husband and my children. I was far away from myself. I think I became fat for this reason, because of the pregnancy. I was 60 kg first, but in my first pregnancy I became 100 kg. It was a disaster, no one told me about that, I thought I should eat a lot for my baby inside me, but even with this huge amount of food, my baby was two and half kg! I told myself I ate a lot, so I cared about my baby, but it just led to my overweight. After breastfeeding, it become worse. Then I was very nervous

after I gave birth, I was stressed and anxious, and it made my overweight worse. So, automatically, I started to ignore my body and only cared about householding, raising children. I became pregnant three times continuously and I never thought that I was getting overweight, and that I should be careful. (Nazanin, 2022)

In other parts of the interview, Nazanin refers to her “lost body”. In addition, she talks about the sacrificed body. In terms of normative gender relations in Iranian society, sacrificing has a positive connotation: when a mother is recognized as a sacrificial mother, she is understood to be a “good mother” who has appropriate priorities and can ignore herself in favor of the family. It suggests that the mother’s body is sacrificed, ignored, and lost. Nazanin’s account showed fat resistance differently by telling her family members directly that she does not like diets. This fat resistance was different from my mother who resisted fat shaming by always taking part in all the parties and social events also my mother used different sets of norms against each other; not going on a diet (disciplining the body) because of taking care of my father (traditional housewife role).

I never [advise other] advice to other fat women to do surgery or diets, I even searched for diets, but I couldn't concentrate on losing weight. After my husband died, I didn't want to get married again so I ignored my body continuously. My friend and my daughter told me one day you lost yourself again, you should care about yourself, you eat a lot, and you should go on a diet. I said to them I don't want to get married again so I can eat as much as I want! I don't need to take care of my size. (Nazanin, 2022)

Nazanin showed fat resistance, when she resisted managing or policing her body size and weight through the medical system or dieting. Specifically, she refused to be attractive to other men who might be going out with her as she rejected getting married again. While this shows again that family and friends believe not being fat is equal to being attractive/normal and she refuses/rejects that there is also the discernible worry of others that Nazanin had ‘lost herself’ and was ‘ignoring’ her body. In Nazanin’s account, there is ambivalent emotion toward the body, forgetting/ignoring body norms is ignoring the body also. Nazanin refused it and enjoyed her fat body without going diet. This underlines the dominant position of heteronormative conceptions of sexual desirability, in which a woman is expected to conform to specific concepts of feminine beauty in order to be desired by a male or be correctly feminine (Orbach, 1978).

I sweat during work so it makes me happy because I think this activity is needed , I need that, but at the contrary in Iran, if a woman do physical work at the age of 50 they feel pity for her, so this new attitude and world view helps me here, so now I like my body, I talk with my body here, when I am doing something I talk to my body and I learned to take care of my body and do different physical move to change my mood, and I am not on diet at all, and my body is lovely for me. (Nazanin, 2022)

The scene of attending to and taking care of the fat body shows an implicit quotidian act of resisting the disciplinary framework of medicine and nutrition science that suggested fatness is a health issue and should be changed or removed. Nazanin had found that fatness and sweating meant the body was alive and did not feel bad about fat. As Murray (2005) argues, a fat body lives her body in every gesture, and every speech act.

Conclusion

The research explored normative expectations of dieting, weight management, and the medicalization of obesity and surgery that affect Iranian women's attitudes toward their bodies in different ways and also how they show fat resistance and refuse the normative ideals of body shape. Fat resistance can be shown in the creative writing they generated and also showed how they conceived fat aesthetically. Despite the continuous fat phobia women experience lively fatness, the women do not internalize fat hatred even if they may consider dieting and surgery. They offer everyday refusal and resistance with sweating bodies; sweating can be seen as a sign of being alive and energetic. Another everyday resistance is refusing diet regimes and not paying attention to size and form, in addition, they refused being stopped by parents and relatives to eat in everyday life. Women in this study referred to policing the bodies through the medicalization of fat. They are forced to have surgery or go on a diet in order to be happier in future life. While fat shaming is prevalent, there are also counterexamples of women refusing shame. Some participants reported enjoying their fat bodies and finding or treating the fat body as loveable and pleasurable. One of the participants referred to the significance of experiencing sweat – not as a sign of debility but as a sign of being active, which made them feel good about their body in its aliveness and vitality. Maybe these women also considered their bodies useless or ignored them so that they needed to sweat to feel that they were alive.

References

- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Chung, S. (2020). *The Embodied Experience of Becoming a Mother: A Feminist Narrative Inquiry Using Art-Making Process* [PhD thesis]. Florida State University. Accessed 23. 09. 2022.
- Colls, R. (2007). Materializing bodily matter: Intra-action and the embodiment of 'fat'. *Geoforum*, 38(2), 353–365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2006.09.004>
- Evers, J., & De Boer, F. (2012). *The qualitative interview: Art and skill*. Eleven International Publishing.
- Gunaratnam, Y. (2003). *Researching 'race' and ethnicity: Methods, knowledge and power*. Sage Publications.
- Gunaratnam, Y. (2013). The prince and the pee. In *Death and the migrant. Bodies, borders and care* (pp. 91–98). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Irvin, S. (2017). Resisting body oppression: An aesthetic approach. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 3(4). <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.4.3>
- Murray, S. (2004). Locating aesthetics: Sexing the fat woman. *Social Semiotics*, 14(3), 237–247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330408629678>
- Murray, S. (2005). Doing politics or selling out? Living the fat body. *Women's Studies*, 34(3-4), 265–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870590964165>
- Murray, S. (2008). *The 'fat' female body*. Springer.
- Najafi, F., Soltani, S., Matin, B.K., Karyani, A.K., Rezaei, S., Soofi, M., & Hosseini, S.A. (2020). Socioeconomic-related inequalities in overweight and obesity: findings from the Persian cohort study. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8322-8>
- Orbach, S. (1978). *Fat is a feminist issue*. Berkeley Press.

- Plesse, E. (2022). *Feminist art and the critique of traditional aesthetic norms: What does feminist aesthetics say about our standards of appreciation and how can it be used to produce new ways of thinking?* Uppsala University Department of Philosophy. Accessed 22. 10. 2022.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage Publications.
- Romero, M., & Stewart, A. J. (Eds.) (1999). *Women's untold stories: Breaking silence, talking back, voicing complexity*. Routledge.
- Stanley, L., & Wise, S. (1983). *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Suleymani, S. (2019). Futurities of beauty and the scalpel: Cosmetic surgeries and fatphobia in Iran. *Fat Studies*, 9(3 4), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2019.1641396>
- Tohidi, N. (2010). The Women's Movement and Feminism in Iran. in A. Basu (Ed.), *Women's Movements in the Global Era: The power of Local Feminisms* (pp. 375–414.) Westview Press.

APPENDICES

Nina's Creative Writing

Stop, stop, stop it!

Stop it

I am thinking surgery cannot teach me how to live and how to love myself

-Stop it

-Why can I not wear a bikini

-Stop it

-Do you think I cannot see myself?

Do you think I don't have a mirror in my room?

-Stop it

-I am just a little baby who was overweight from birth, who can say stop yourself?

She shouldn't stop. She needs her body; she cannot make herself invisible to please you.

No.No.

-Let's eat together, on one plate, share the meal.

-No, now you stop it, you stop it. Don't tap on my shoulder, I never stop, you stop it.

- Sleeve surgery is your destiny, look at your cousins, you should do more surgery, lipomatic, suction

-No, stop it -Don't wear bikini

-No, stop it

-Beautiful girls don't have these kinds of legs, don't wear leggings its funny

-No, stop it

-Your fat is dangerous! You are dangerous for us, for yourself.

-No, stop it.

-You look 40 already, you are older than your mom

-No, stop it.

Nazanin's Creative Writing

Sweat more!

-Can I talk to you? Are you listening? I am talking to you. Yeah, I know, now you can listen to me. You, my body, already sweating, I can feel you are alive, look at me! You can see me again never forgot you, I want to be with you for the rest of my life, you will stay with me, for long long time, I know, you become better every day, I am with you when you are tired, standing all day long and cooking and sweating, your chicks blush because of warmth, but you are alive, energetic, fresh. You already win the game, stay fat, I don't care, you are already my love.