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Intergenerational Shame and the Affective Politics of the Black Fat Body in Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's *Big Girl*

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العار العابر للأجيال وسياسات التأثير العاطفية للجسد الأسود الممتلئ في رواية "فتاة كبيرة" للكاتبة ميكا جميلة سوليفان

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الملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف العار العابر للأجيال وسياسات التأثير العاطفية المرتبطة بالجسد الأسود الممتلئ في رواية "فتاة كبيرة" للكاتبة ميكا جميلة سوليفان. وتتمحور الدراسة حول سؤالين رئيسين: كيف تمثل الرواية العار العابر للأجيال بوصفه اقتصادًا عاطفيًا داخل الأسرة السوداء؟ وكيف تتمرد مالايا على النصوص العاطفية الموروثة من أجل تحقيق امتلاك ذاتي جسدي وعاطفي؟ تهدف الدراسة إلى تحليل آليات انتقال العار عبر ممارسات الرعاية والانضباط ومراقبة الجسد التي تمارسها الأم والجدة. كما توضح الكيفية التي تقاوم بها مالايا هذا العار الموروث من خلال تنمية وعيها الذاتي، ورفضها العاطفي، وإعادة تشكيل علاقتها بجسدها. وتعتمد الدراسة منهجًا نوعيًا في البحث الأدبي قائمًا على القراءة الدقيقة للنص. وترتكز في إطارها النظري على أعمال سارة أحمد، ولا سيما نظرية الأداء العاطفي والاقتصادات العاطفية، إلى جانب نظريات النسوية السوداء ودراسات الجسد الممتلئ. وتبين الدراسة أن العار لا يُقدَّم بوصفه تجربة شخصية أو داخلية فحسب، بل بوصفه ظاهرة اجتماعية تُقيِّد جسد مالايا الأسود والممتلئ من خلال التحذيرات المتكررة، وأساليب التقويم والانضباط، ومخاوف الأسرة وقلقها المستمر. كما تُصوَّر الرعاية الأمومية والرعاية العابرة للأجيال في الرواية بصورة ملتبسة؛ فعلى الرغم من أن الأم والجدة تسعيان إلى حماية مالايا من عالم يتسم بالعنصرية ورهاب السمنة، فإن هذه الحماية نفسها كثيرًا ما تُنتج الضغوط ذاتها التي تحاولان تجنبها. وعليه، لا تُعالج السمنة في الرواية باعتبارها مشكلة طبية أو شخصية فحسب، بل بوصفها تجربة ثقافية وعاطفية تتشابك فيها مشاعر الحب والخوف والجوع والرغبة والقلق المرتبط بالقبول والاحترام الاجتماعي. وفي الختام، تجادل الدراسة بأن سوليفان تُحوِّل العار الموروث من أداة للسيطرة على الجسد إلى فضاء محوري للمقاومة العاطفية وتحقيق السيادة الذاتية على الجسد.**الكلمات المفتاحية** : الطفولة السوداء الممتلئة؛ العار العابر للأجيال؛ سارة أحمد؛ الاقتصادات العاطفية؛ الأداء العاطفي؛ النسوية السوداء؛ دراسات الجسد الممتلئ؛ "فتاة كبيرة"

Abstract

This study tries to examine the intergenerational shame and the affective politics of the plus-size Black body in Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's *Big Girl*. It deal with two central questions: How does the novel represent intergenerational shame as an affective economy within the Black family? and how does Malaya rebel against inherited emotional scripts so as to have a physical and emotional self-possession? It aims to analyze the transmission of shame in the ways of care, discipline and body surveillance used by the mother and grandmother. It describes how Malaya resists the inherited shame through her self-awareness, emotional refusal, and changing her relationship with her body. The study uses a qualitative approach with the type of literary

research based on close reading. It is based on the work of Sara Ahmed, the theory of affective performance and affective economies, Black feminism and theories of the fat body. In this study, shame is not a personal or internal experience, but a social phenomenon that binds Malaya's black, fat body through reoccurring warnings, disciplining and familial anxieties. Maternal and generational care is rendered ambiguous in the novel; although the mother and grandmother try to keep Malaya safe from a racist, fatphobic world, this safety can often instill the same kind of pressure. So obesity is not considered a medical or personal issue but rather a cultural and emotional experience involving emotions of love, fear, hunger, desire, and anxiety for social respect. In the end, the study contends that Sullivan transforms inherited shame from a means of body control to a crucial zone for emotional opposition and body self-possession.**Keywords:** Black Plump Childhood; Intergenerational Shame; Sarah Ahmed; Emotional Economies; Emotional Performance; Black Feminism; Plump Body Studies; *Big Girl*.

1. Introduction

The full-figured Black female body is in an ambiguous position in the modern American feminist literary landscape since it is not a biological body, but a social and emotional body where race, gender, body size and cultural power converge. In many cultural settings, the Black fat body is deciphered with the help of prejudicial notions that link it with surplus, inadequacy, lack of control, and moral weakness. As such, the shame of this body is not only a personal emotion but the outcome of social practices that have a greater tendency to expose some bodies to surveillance, correction, and marginalization. The study is based on the theory on emotion as a social force, as developed by Sara Ahmed (2014), which posits that emotions circulate between bodies and signs, setting boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. (10–13).The study investigates Big Girl of Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, which can be understood as a novel that works as a surface that is inscribed with the accumulation of shame, fear, desire, hunger and familial anxiety for the Black fat body. The novel is about Malaya Clondon, a black girl raised in Harlem in a family and community that equate fatness with social risk and rejection. Malaya's hunger and desire are not just looked at as a natural human need, but also taken as a symptom of excess and a lack of discipline time after time. Her food, art, love and space comes to be read, readable in her body that needs to be controlled. In this way, Malaya is taught early in her life that her body is not her body, but something which is open to comment, warning, correction and evaluation. This study is founded on the idea of intergenerational shame. *Big Girl* also shows that shame is not only passed on to Malaya by the outside world, but also from the inside, from her mother, her grandmother. It's not just cruel that they take control of her body, it's also based on fear and a need to protect her in a society with a racist and fat phobic agenda. However, this protection turns into ambivalencies, as it is a process which replicates the social pressure it aims to overcome. Weight Watchers meetings, repeated diet advice, and food restriction are all ways of bringing the thinness message to Malaya, as a way to happiness, love, safety and acceptance. This is the "promise of happiness" – the experiences and things that are envisioned as paths to a better future (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 26–29).This study is informed by two questions: How does *Big Girl* depict inherited shame as an affective economy among black family? How can Malaya defy inherited emotional scripts to achieve some kind of bodily and emotional self-possession? The study is to look into how shame is inculcated in one's family care and how it is conveyed through disciplines of the body and through the constant surveillance and observation of the day-to-day; and second, to investigate Malaya's transformation from being an object of correction into a subject who is able to be aware, refuse and define herself.This study makes a case for viewing the Black fat body not as an "excessive body" that needs to be corrected in Big Girl. Instead this "excess" is socially and emotionally constructed within the family, culture and discourse. Shame in the novel is not just a sense of weakness or fault; it is a family system of emotions that are passed down, propagated through love, fear and protection. However, Malaya will not be bound in this legacy. The novel of Sullivan begins to offer a way to resist shame—without fleeing the body, but by "claiming" it back as part of identity, voice, and life. So Malaya's body is a field of struggle for discipline and freedom, for inherited shame and emotional rejection, for social integration and self-determination.

1.2 Previous Studies

The current study falls under the areas of fat studies, Black feminist criticism, and affect theory. The significance of these fields is that the study does not look at the "fatness in *Big Girl*" as a private or medical problem alone. Instead, it reads her body as a social and emotional site that is defined by race, gender, family, and cultural expectations. In the early 2000s, fat studies came to light as an important response to the pathologization of fat bodies, which the thesis explains. Fat studies is not about curing fatness but about exploring fatness as a social identity which is frequently stigmatized and oppressed. It also reveals that the literary novel is a space in which these meanings can be studied in terms of their production, repetition and even sometimes their contestation, in a fashion that is narrativized. One of the basic lines of research in fat studies focuses on the concept of the docile

body by Michel Foucault and how bodies that are different from the dominant ideals are disciplined by society. In this context, Madhi's Fatphobia and Self-Restraint: A Study of Obesity in Selected Novels (2024) focuses on the theme of obesity in the novels Big Ray by Michael Kimball, Butter by Erin Jade Lange, and Hunger by Roxane Gay. Foucault's approach is used by Madhi to demonstrate the function of beauty as a technique of bodily discipline. The study contends that the character of a fat person is de-legitimated, and that all their humanity is denied. Malaya's body is also corrected and observed in Big Girl. But Madhi's work is not about Black fat girlhood, nor the emotional passing down of shame within the family. In this way, the study does not start by addressing bodily regulation—as such—but rather the more specific question of inherited shame and affective regulation.Likewise, Atayurt's Excess and Embodiment in Contemporary Women's Writing (2021) examines the representation of the fat female body in fictional and non-fictional women's writing. Atayurt reviews the books by Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, Claude Tardat and Judith Moore. The study suggests that the cultural lean body preference generates anxiety about food, body size, health, happiness and success. It also provides evidence that the fat body frequently gets labeled as a "cultural impossibility" and a space of repression, particularly if excess is equated with trauma. The relevance of this study to *Big Girl* is the Malayan society is also small, in which body size is related to fear, shame, and social acceptance. The study by Atayurt, however, continues to be more general for the treatment of fat female embodiment. It does not consider the racialised definition of fatness or the intergenerational transmission of shame within the family.Gagliardi's 'I'm Fat. It's Not a Cuss Word': A Critical Content Analysis of YAL Featuring Fat Female Protagonists' (2019) study is a valuable addition to the research and study of fat representation. Gagliardi reviews the novels and graphic novels of the present-day, including Gabi, a Girl in Pieces, Dumplin', and This One Summer. The study focuses on the ways women's fatness is represented and the ways language influences the reader's perception of fatness. This is particularly pertinent to the study as repetition, naming and attachment are also key aspects of Sara Ahmed's concept of "stickiness." Malaya's body is made meaningful in *Big Girl* through the repetition of comments, warnings and judgments of the family. But Gagliardi's work is not about Black fat embodiment, or the affective politics of the family. Hence, the study will make use of Ahmed's theory to explore the body of Malaya as the site for shame to adhere to, in both language and intimate family relations. Fictional Representations of the Fat Female Body: A Critical Discourse Analysis (2018) by Michelle Green also helps to contextualize the current study. Green introduces the field of fat studies as an interdisciplinary one, encompassing sociology, psychology, cultural history, media studies and literary criticism. The study counters the widely held belief of normal weight people that fat individuals are ill, lazy, unattractive, and morally deficient. This is helpful in supporting the study since *Big Girl* does not include Malaya's body as Malaya's failure of self-control. Instead, the novel demonstrates ways in which the body is interpreted in the light of the cultural concepts of beauty, discipline, respectability, and femininity. However, Green's work does not specifically focus on black fat girlhood. It also doesn't provide a focus on the emotional role of mothers and grandmothers as agents of shame. This is why the present study will limit itself to the family as an affective locus for the co-occurrence of love and discipline.Augustynowicz's "Ambivalent Bodies: The Monstrous Fat Female Body in Carmen Maria Machado's 'Eight Bites'" (2022) examines the fat female body with regard to bariatric surgery and monstrosity. The study reveals that narratives about weight-loss surgery frequently depict the fat body as a body that needs to be taken off, fixed, or avoided. This argument is important because it shows how fatness can be employed as a problem that has to be eradicated before the subject can be acceptable. The pressure to be smaller is there also in Big Girl, and it is acted upon primarily through family guidance, body shaping and the anticipation of future bliss. One focuses on surgery or monstrosity. Rather, it examines the more mundane manifestations of emotional stress that occur in the daily lives of families. In 'Lazy, Gluttonous, and Weak': Biopower and the Disciplined Fat Boy in Young Adult Literature (2019), Ryan discusses the anti-fat sentiments that inform the portrayal of fat boys in YA literature. Ryan's main object of his study is male characters but it is also helpful because it elucidates the moral connection to fatness. Fatness is seen as a sign of weakness, indulgence, stupidity or lack of control in characters. This makes it easier to understand why in Malaya's hunger in Big Girl, it is necessary to find no less than two meanings. Socially interpreted as sign of excess and failure. The present paper, however, takes a different approach as it examines a character of color, female body, and size whose body is all of these at once.Therefore, the study fills this gap by focusing only on Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's Big Girl. It examines intergenerational shame as an affective economy inside the Black family. More specifically, it studies how Malaya's body becomes a surface where family love, maternal fear, hunger, desire, respectability, and social judgment meet. By doing so, the study contributes to fat studies and Black feminist literary criticism through a focused reading of how inherited shame is produced, repeated, and resisted in the novel.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Sara Ahmed's affect theory, Black feminist thought, and fat studies in order to examine intergenerational shame and the affective politics of the Black fat body in Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's *Big Girl*. These theoretical fields are necessary because Malaya's fatness is not represented as a simple bodily condition or a private problem of self-image. Rather, her Black fat body becomes a social and emotional surface where race, gender, body size, family discipline, shame, hunger, and desire meet. Therefore, this study does not ask only how Malaya feels about her body. It asks how her body is made to carry certain feelings, especially shame, fear, disgust, and the promise of future happiness through thinness. In this sense, the Black fat body is not merely seen; it is read, judged, corrected, and emotionally organized by the family and the wider culture.This study is based on Sara Ahmed's theory of emotional performativity as its core conceptualization. Unlike the traditional approach that considers emotions as private psychological states which emanate from the inside to the outside, Ahmed takes another perspective. Rather, she says, emotions are practices of the social and cultural formation of the surfaces of bodies and worlds. The Cultural Politics of Emotion is not just a question of what emotions are: it is a question of what emotions do (Ahmed, 2014, p. 7). This change is significant because it conveys emotion as a dynamic, rather than static emotion. Emotions are not just a reflection of the self, but they are also an expression of social relations, boundaries and which bodies are welcomed, feared, rejected and disciplined. The emotions are also used to make a difference between inside and out, self and other, individual and community, as Ahmed (2014, p. 10) argues. So, emotion is one of the modalities in which social power can influence the body.Reading *Big Girl* is all about this understanding. Malaya's shame is not just a personal one, because it arises from her sense of insecurity. It's created as a result of repeated experiences with family expectations, comments about the food, suggestions for weight loss, correction of bodies, and a belief that her body needs to be smaller, to be acceptable. This way, shame is enacted. It has an impact on Malaya. It helps her to understand how others view her. It also helps her to learn that her body is a problem before she can define it for herself. The repeated emotional performances can be understood through Ahmed's concept of emotional performativity, which helps to account for the production of the very reality that it appears to represent. These meanings are repeated onto Malaya's body when her body is treated as excessive, undisciplined or needs to be corrected.The affective economies is another idea Ahmed has that goes some way towards clarifying the circulation of emotions and how they become powerful. Emotions are not just for people and objects for Ahmed. Instead, they traverse between bodies, signs and social meanings. Affective economies involve the value of emotions that occurs with repetition and circulation. According to Ahmed (2014), emotions link people with communities and bodies with social space by the strength of the attachments (2014:119). This means that feelings are almost as social as money, they flow, collect energy and become attached to certain bodies. In *Big Girl*, Malaya's body is put into an affective economy that equates fatness with excess, lack of control, unhappiness and social failure. The worry of her family is not all personal about her body either. It is molded by broader cultural signifiers and associations with Black female fatness.Stickiness is a concept that is related to affective economies, and belongs to Ahmed. Stickiness is the quality of the contact between certain emotions, words, meanings and certain bodies, which occurs repeatedly. These attachments are not always natural, but are created through the process of history and social practice. Ahmed states that emotions "stick" to bodies and signs "stick" to bodies, both in terms of histories of contact and histories of repetition" (Ahmed, 2014: 95). She also tells that emotions build up collective meanings through sticking figures together and give the effect of coherence to them (Ahmed, 2014, p.108). This is a good way to comprehend the meaning of the term "fat" as it connects to Malaya. Fatness in the novel is not simply a description of how big one's body is. It has emotional connotations of shame, failure, ugliness, hunger, moral weakness. These meanings are enhanced by Malaya being both Black and fat. Her body is viewed through a history of black women's bodies being seen as fat, eating too much, or being out of control.The concept of 'shame' is particularly relevant to this study. In Ahmed's (2014) understanding, shame is an overwhelming and painful feeling that is experienced in and through the body. Shame is contagious. The "shamed" subject is made visible to others and is being looked at and evaluated by them. According to Ahmed, the relationship between the subject and itself is painful, but it is the relationship that the self has to itself when it is seen by others (2014, p. 103). This double movement is the way Big Girl makes Malaya's shame. She suffers from a sense of shame within her, but it is manifested externally through family policing, social condemnations, and cultural norms. She is shown to look at her body as she imagines others look. Consequently, there's a personal and social aspect of shame.In this study, the idea of intergenerational shame is meant to refer to the transmission of shame in the context of family relations. *Big Girl* has more than one source of shame. It is also passed from person to person in the family's close confines,

particularly via the mother and grandmother. Not so much as being oppressive of maternal and generational figures. Instead, the novel demonstrates how their care is motivated by fear. They are concerned about a racist and fatphobic world, but protecting Malaya from a racist and fatphobic world is the same pressure. This is the reason for the ambivalent family love. It's the care of the child, but it's also the child's body that's disciplined. The mother and grandmother start to internalize an inherited emotional script: warnings about food, concerns about appearance and a belief that a smaller body will lead to a safer future.The novel brings out the emotional significance of thinness through the concept of the promise of happiness, which Ahmed has. In The Promise of Happiness, Ahmed suggests that happiness can be said to be linked to objects, choices and ways of life. She characterizes “happy objects” as objects that flow as social objects and are thought to bring people towards happiness (Ahmed 2010, p. 29). The objects are transformed into “happiness means” or “happiness pointers” because they lead people to a future that is promised to them (Ahmed, 2010, p. 26). Thinness in the context of Big Girl is one of these objects promised. Malaya is educated that a smaller body will equates with love, beauty, social belonging, safety. But the novel challenges this promise as it requires Malaya to give up her current body to be entitled to a future happiness. Thinness is not just a physical goal. It is an emotional script which structures Malaya's relation to herself.This happiness script also relates to race and gender. The thin, white, able body becomes a cultural norm and bodies that deviate from the norm are seen as failures. In particular, Ahmed says, some signs become more affective as they circulate the more affectively they circulate, the more they seem to contain affect (Ahmed 2010, p. 38). The repeated images of fat black women as unhappy and unhealthy, undesirable or too much is emotional authority. Eventually these start to look like the truth. Malaya's body is formed by this circulation in Big Girl. Her corpulence is viewed as a fault that needs to be fixed so that she can be a happy, female, accepted member of society. The prospect of happiness is thus a method to control.The second major component of this theory is black feminist thought. The fatness of the experience of Malaya must not be our sole measure. The meeting of the dimensions of race, gender, and size has shaped her body. The idea of intersectionality, which describes how systems of oppression are not separate, but interwoven and create specific types of marginalisation, is helpful here (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Fatphobia is not about anti-Black racism and gendered expectations of femininity in Malaya. These forces forge her Black fat girlhood. She is judged not only for her fatness, but for the sign of failed femininity, danger and excess that is inscribed in her fatness, that is read in her fatness, and that is racialisedPatricia Hill Collins' idea of controlling images also helps to explain the cultural significance of the black woman's body. Collins contends that controlling images are not easy stereotypes. They are ideologies that help to legitimize racism, sexism, poverty and other inequalities as natural and normal (Collins 2000, p. 69). These images restrict the view of black women and their feelings. Images that create emotional legibility for black women: Mammy, Jezebel, Matriarch and Strong Black Woman. The Black fat female body is now more heavily coded with the addition of fatness. It might be thought of as too much, too selfless, too aggressive, too undisciplined, too unworthy of attention. This background can account for the fear of the body of Malaya that is a concern in the family in Big Girl. Her body is not just big, it is socially perceived as being too visible, too vulnerable.The Mammy image is particularly significant in the representation of black fat female body. The Mammy stereotype frequently portrays the black woman as sizeable, unsexual, nurturing, and serviceable. Her fatness is emotional coded: she has to look after others, to take the pain, to be cheerful. This image is a denial of black women's femininity and desire. It also puts them apart from that fine white feminine figure. Controlling images refers to Black womanhood as opposed to white, middle-class ideas of femininity (Collins, 2000, p. 65). While there are no Mammy figures found in Malaya, the history of these figures influences the social reading of Black fat female bodies. She is thrust into a framework of her body being burdened with the fear that it may be understood within the old paradigms of excess and social failure.The Strong Black Woman stereotype also plays a role as it requires emotional control. There is an expectation for black women to experience and bear pain, hide and maintain their vulnerability, and to take care of others. Emotional restraint, independence, and self-sacrifice are social expectations supported by the Strong Black Woman schema, which can negatively impact the physical and emotional health of Black women (Godbolt et al., 2022; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). In terms of Big Girl, this can help to understand why it is not easy for Malaya to express itself in such a way. She doesn't have to deal with body shame alone. In addition, she lives in a culture that often requires black girls and women to suppress their feelings of pain, hunger, desire, anger, or need. Thus her body and emotions are in synchronisation.The third aspect of the framework is fat studies. Fat studies is an approach to understanding fatness that aims to cast doubt on a medicalization view. It explores the cultural, political and emotional essays of fat bodies. Here the theory of stigma developed by Goffman (1963) can prove very useful, since he defines an attribute as “deeply discrediting” if it diminishes the whole person to a “tainted and discounted” one (p. 3). In literature and culture,

fatness can serve as such a stigma. Fat characters can be portrayed as lazy, gluttonous, weak, immoral, or out of control (assumptions) (Farrell, 2011; Herndon, 2003; LeBesco, 2004). So fatness in *Big Girl* cannot be interpreted as a mere physical reality, it is a social one.Representation is also important in fat studies, as fat bodies tend to be objectified. According to Nussbaum, objectification is the treatment of a person as a thing or as a thing composed of parts rather than as a whole person or agent (1995). A medical gaze, a social gaze and a family gaze are used to objectify fat characters in literature. For Malaya, her body is subject to interpretation and correction on top of being interpreted and corrected. Some people "read" her body before she has a chance to talk for herself. It is also for this reason that a close textual analysis is required. The novel should not be read just for the events that take place in Malaya, but for the way that the text is written—a form of the language through which Malaya becomes an object of shame, care, fear, and resistance.Marilyn Wann's work is an important component of the political goal of fat studies. Wann claims that by defining thinness as “naturally beautiful” and fatness as “obviously ugly,” one is engaging in fat studies, not in propaganda (2009, p. ix). This is crucial because, unlike in other cultures where the body of Malaya is considered a problem, *Big Girl* does not require the reader to accept this notion. Rather, the novel asks the reader to consider another world, a social world, that makes her body problematic. Fatness, in turn, is a political gesture, which is why the depiction of fat female bodies is, according to Murray, a political act: Fatness is frequently seen as a variant of the “normal” female body (Murray, 2020, p. 66). It is a feminist and political issue, rather than a personal story to tell, to portray Malaya's body.In Sabrina Strings's historical research, she reveals that modern fatphobia has a racial history. In Fearing the Black Body, Strings contends that the struggle against fatness in the West started not as an impartial medical issue, but as an anti-fat bias. Instead, it was influenced by slavery, colonialism, Protestantism, and racial science (Strings, 2019). She argues that, for elite Europeans and white Americans, racial discourse was a tool for making distinctions between themselves and racialized others (Strings, 2019, p. 15). The connection of fatness with blackness, savagery, lack of control, and moral inferiority and of slenderness with whiteness, civilization, and self-mastery were made. The historical context is important to read *Big Girl* because Malaya's fatness is racialized. Her body is not only deemed fat, it is deemed to be a Black fat female body in a culture that has historically associated Blackness and body fat.A racist perspective on fatness is the reason why the worry of being fat in Malaya is so strong. What the grandmother and mother are trying to do with the body is no mere matter of taste. They are a product of a broader history in which the black female body has been observed, evaluated and discounted. Drawing on Strings, Kate Manne explains that the idea of fatness was not first maligned then linked to Blackness, but rather the pair was "weaponized to gain a negative association with fat and Black bodies" (Manne, 2024). This is part of the reason the size was not all the family feared. It's also the story of the world that is racist and fatphobic reading Malaya's body. The family attempts to preserve her, but 'preserve' turns to 'discipline.This reading is also informed by the notion of body surveillance. Objectification theory refers to the internalization of others' gaze on women and their constant monitoring of their appearance, as a form of body surveillance. The surveillance of black fat women is heightened due to the interplay of race, gender and size stigma. Stanton et al. (2022) show that Black women’s experiences of gendered racial sexual objectification are linked to depressive symptoms, body surveillance, and body image discrepancy. This is important for *Big Girl* as Malaya's body is not only watched by society. It is monitored within the family. Slowly she learns to view herself as a body to be inspected. Emotional fields are created by food, clothes, beauty, and size, and she has to learn how to deal with others' perceptions of her.It is also helpful to read the discussion on fat shaming as performative by Tanisha Spratt. Based on the Butler and Ahmed, Spratt asserts that shame is relational and is the product of repeated language and actions (Spratt, 2023). Because it is the person who is shamed who sees herself from another perspective, she needs to be watched. Because the person who is shamed must be watched, shame requires a witness. This is an argument that is applicable to Malaya's experience. Her shame is not in isolation. It is created by a series of repeated scenes of being watched, corrected and measured. Fatness can become a marker of lack of self-control under neoliberal notions of health and responsibility. The fat subject is expected to say sorry, to apologize, to strive to improve themselves, to be humiliated. Malaya is driven into this script in Big Girl. She will expect to be changed, to take change, and to consider thinness as the right way to be different.This is also underpinned by Judith Butler's theory of performativity. However, Butler suggests that performativity takes place through repetition and citation, and that a performative act is successful when it reiterates an already established norm (Butler, 1993, p. 13). Ahmed takes this insight and extends it to emotion, demonstrating that emotional acts are dependent on repetition. If the body is often characterized as "disgusting", "dangerous", "excessive" or "shameful", it does not merely "name" that body. It assists to create the body as such in a social space. That's why family speech is important in Big Girl. Weight comments, food and future happiness comments are not idyllic suggestions. They restate

general norms and make them personal. The family is one of the sites in which cultural fatphobia is enacted, in repetition.These theoretical theories make it possible for the present paper to describe *Big Girl* as a novel about the emotional inheritance of body shame. Ahmed's theory helps to describe the circulation, attachment and bodily meaning of emotions. Black feminist theory provides an understanding of why Malaya's body needs to be read through race, gender and historical stereotypes of black womanhood. Fat studies is an explanation for why fatness is not an "uncontroversial physical reality," but rather a political and cultural sign. These interrelated lenses reveal intergenerational shame as less a family issue and more an affective economy that is rooted in racism, patriarchy, fatphobia and respectability politics.This structure can also be used to read the resistance of Malaya. She is not just a victim of shame throughout the novel. Instead, it's about her slow and steady journey towards an awareness of herself and self-possession as a body. It is not as if she runs away without leaving any trace of shame behind. Rather it is her questioning of the emotional scripts that have been embedded in her body. She starts to understand that it is not her body that is the issue, it is the social world that teaches her to see her body as a problem. In this context, *Big Girl* is a means to make the Black fat body a place of inherited shame become a place of affective refusal or self-definition, a place of political meaning.

1.4 Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method in the analysis of literature, which is done by giving attention to the novel titled Big Girl by Mecca Jamilah Sullivan. The research aims to examine the images and contexts of Malaya's black, plus-size body that is presented as a shameful, scrutinised and corrected family object. The study also explores transgenerational transmission of the shame through the mother and grandmother, and how familial love can sometimes be a vehicle for the reproduction of the societal terror of the "plus-size body. The analysis draws on a theoretical construct which integrates Sara Ahmed's theory of affective performance and affective economies with black feminism and research on the plus-size body. This is because it is seen to be a social and cultural force that repeats, discourses, and monitors Malaya's body. So this research doesn't really consider obesity a medical problem, but rather a cultural and emotional identifier in which problems of race, gender, and body size intersect.This approach leads the study to examine the novel and its portrayal of inter-generational transmission of shame as well as the emotional scripts passed down from the family to the protagonist. It also explores how Malaya attempts to defy such scripts by becoming self-aware, by challenging the shame, and by re-imagining her body/self relationship. The study aims to discover the emotional and political aspect of the novel's whole-bodiedness of the Black body in doing so.

1.5 Discussion

Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's novel *Big Girl* tells the story of Malaya Clondon, a Black girl growing up in Harlem during the late 1980s and 1990s. The novel presents Malaya's experience as a journey of physical and emotional self-discovery, in which she realizes from childhood that her curvy body is not viewed as normal, but rather as a subject of commentary, scrutiny, and correction. Through Malaya's character, the novel reveals how the curvy Black body intersects with family, shame, desire, hunger, and the search for recognition. Big Girl thus becomes an important text for understanding how the body becomes a space onto which social emotions particularly shame, fear, and the desire for acceptance are projected.The novel *Big Girl* portrays Malaya's experience through three interconnected analytical movements: first, by depicting her full, black body as one to which feelings of shame, fear, and social judgment cling; second, by tracing the transmission of this shame within the family through the mother and grandmother as an ambiguous form of care and surveillance; and third, by revealing Malaya's gradual transformation from accepting shame to resisting it and rebuilding her relationship with her body. Through these themes, the body in the novel becomes a space of conflict between familial and social control on the one hand, and self-awareness and emotional rejection on the other.

1.6 The Black Fat Body as a Sticky Body

The *Big Girl* shows that Malaya Clondon's body is not treated as an individual or natural body, but rather as a social and emotional surface to which meanings of fear, shame, excess, and indiscipline adhere. From the very beginning of the novel, Malaya's body becomes an object of scrutiny and observation rather than one of understanding or acceptance. This aligns with Sara Ahmed's conception of emotions as social forces that do not remain within the individual but move between bodies and signs, producing boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. Ahmed argues that emotions do not exist solely within the self but construct the boundaries of the self and the collective through interaction with others (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10). From this perspective, shame does not appear in the novel as a simple internal feeling within Malaya, but rather as a social effect that accumulates around her body through her family, doctors, peers, and strangers. The first major scene of emotional performativity in the novel is a "Weight Watchers-style Meeting" held in the basement of a Harlem church, which becomes a ritualised site of shame production. Ms. Adelaide, the leader, is identified as the one

who invites the women to "think about your favorite food" and confess the one that "always gets us in trouble" (Sullivan, 2022, p. 8), in front of a large easel with the inscription "EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS PIE CHART". Women who call out "pasta," "oxtails," and "pistachio ice cream" make those foods "sticky", creating associations of shame with the food and guilt and a sense of lack of control with the women calling them out. Ms. Adelaide's Theatrical Confession, "I used to be a corn junkie!" in which she imitates a messy and fierce battle with an ear of corn, makes the room laugh. According to Ahmed, disgust in this case acts like an attachment that sticks to fat women's bodies. Their bodies are treated as overfull and hence deserve surveillance and disciplining. The pie chart illustrates that each named trigger is transcribed as data within a system of moral responsibility. Thus, this prompts women to view their bodies as a problem to be managed through self-monitoring.This scene takes on even greater significance when Malaya tries to play the role expected of her during the meeting. She considers saying that her "trigger" is "fat-free frozen yogurt" so she can appear "Centered, Committed, and in Control" the program's motto. However, her true desire cannot be reduced to a single food item; the novel notes that the only word Malaya can find to name her desire is "the only word she could find to describe her true trigger is MORE" (Sullivan, 2022, p.12). This word is highly significant; it reveals that the problem lies not in the type of food, but in society's understanding of the desire of a plus-size Black girl. MORE means more than physical hunger, it's a desire for fulfillment, love, art, freedom and space. However, the emotional system around her does not understand this desire as human, it's an excess, it's a thing that needs correction. Here, Malaya's body becomes a "sticky body" that is, a body to which connotations of excess and guilt cling before its owner can explain her desire in her own words. In this scene, Sullivan shows that shame is not just an emotion, but a social act. All women at the meeting must state out loud that their food is "dangerous," that they know they have done something wrong, and engage in the rhetoric of appetite management. Emotion here is not just a description of an already existing reality but also is a means of producing it, as seen in Ahmed's idea of "emotional performativity. Telling women to "put themselves in danger" of some foods is not just highlighting an existing relationship between food and the body, but creating a relationship of guilt and failure. Similarly, Malaya is not simply a food-loving girl but a body that must be "managed" and "surveiled.In the same way, Malaya is not a mere food-loving girl but a body that must be managed and watched. Her body, therefore, is a "problem," not only in terms of its plumpness, but also because society repeats language around her body that makes it appear problematic.The novel illustrates that the stigma of Malaya's body is not restricted to the public sphere, it is felt in the family sphere too. The family, and especially the mother and grandmother, is involved in the creation of this emotional economy by activities that seem to be caring but contain surveillance and fear. This is seen, for example, when Malaya gets her birthday bicycle as a gift. It is said that the bicycle is "a stationary bicycle. For exercise!" It is not so much an innocent present, but a means of disciplining the body (Sullivan, 2022, p. 42), Here the gift is a direct message of feeling: There's something wrong with your body. The bike for Ahmed is a 'happy object': an object made available as a means to future happiness. Thinness is sold to Malaya here as a requirement for love, acceptance, security and a better life.

1.7 From Inherited Shame to Affective Refusal

Big Girl doesn't end Malaya's journey to the brink of physical disgrace and emotional subservient behavior. At the same time as her body is defined as an excess, a body under surveillance, a body burdened with the expectations of family and society, the novel follows her gradual "movement towards refusal." This rejection does not come out of nowhere and isn't a total liberation and the ultimate goal. Instead, it forms gradually over a course of small moments of anger, confusion, awareness, and a reconsideration of Malaya's body, her mother, and the desires that she's been taught to be embarrassed about. Malaya's resistance, therefore, does not imply that she is not subjected to shame, but rather that she attains a knowledge that shame is not a natural circumstance in her body, but rather an emotional system inherited and perpetuated within the family and culture.This resistance begins with Malaya's inability to fully conform to the "script of happiness" imposed upon her. Family and society present thinness to her as the path to acceptance, love, and security. According to Sara Ahmed's concept of "happy objects," the self is directed toward certain objects because they are imagined as sources of happiness; "happiness is directed toward certain objects, which become 'happy objects': objects that are anticipated to cause happiness" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21). In *Big Girl,* thinness becomes the ultimate "happy object"; it is presented to Malaya as if it were the solution to all her problems. The study explains that the "before-and-after" photos Nyela shows her daughter including a photo of a woman who has "fallen back in love with her husband" and become "a person anybody wanted to see" (Sullivan, 2022, pp. 142–143), function as happiness scripts; that is, narratives that teach Malaya that only a thin body is one worthy of love, attention, and recognition.However, the novel reveals that Malaya does not receive this promise with simple joy. When she

begins to lose weight, the world does not suddenly become a more compassionate or honest place. Rather, the stares of others become all the more revealing of the system itself. Malaya does not feel joy when a man from the neighborhood says to her, “Damn, big girl… You lookin' good. Whatever you doing, keep that up” (p. 235), but rather, “an odd mix of anger and gratitude” (p. 235). This is a double effect and it is very important, because it shows that what Malaya used to think was true—that being thin means being happy—is not totally accepted anymore. She feels the strength of the social recognition that suddenly has been given to her and how this recognition depends on the transformation of her body. Thus, admiration doesn't free her but rather it reminds her that she still has to prove her worth to society through her size and her control of her body.It sheds light on Malaya's emotional rejection. She doesn't turn down thinness just because it is a shape; she turns down the concept of thinness being the only state in which she can be happy and accepted. This is consistent with Ahmed's claim that the emotional orientations can be passed down, but they are not predetermined. We may be oriented toward some things, not others, and we can also redirect our attention, in doing so remaking the inheritance as Ahmed writes: “We can be oriented toward some things and not others as an effect of what we inherit, but we can also redirect our attention and in doing so, we remake the inheritance” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 86). This idea is very applicable to Malaya; she receives from her mother and grandmother a terror of the full figured body, but she is not completely dominated by it. She starts to ask herself about life which is greater than the body as a problem, and greater than diet, weight, and social gaze.Similarly, the secret feeding in Malaya is not to be viewed as unbroken subjection to shame or as an indication of “gluttony”. The narrative doesn't just explain that her eating is unappealing for being too much, but for being too much of a certain kind: too much smaller, too much more, too much more than she is supposed to be. When she feels a bit embarrassed, she seeks refuge in food: from her dance teacher who pinches her, from her mother who asks her about “points”, and from the comments about how big she is. Thus food becomes a mechanism to experience completely fullness, or for the instant to become numb, in response to physical sensations of shame (a tight throat, flushed face, internal heaviness). True, it is not freeing her, but not wholly bad: it's a gesture toward reattaching her body to her in a world that demands her body be exposed and judged.Malaya's resistance grows when she first begins to see her mother, Nyela, as more than a disciplinarian, but as a woman who is wounded, who carries the weight of past shame. While the first time she appears in the novel, Nyela is the “hawkishly fastidious” woman who watches her daughter's food intake, she seems different the next time she is mentioned: the tired widow who places “cold food onto a paper plate, meats and pastas towering so high it seemed the plate might rip in two” (Sullivan, 2022, p. 227). This image makes the mother become not a monitor but a cause of pity and understanding. Malaya knows that the mother who asked her to master her body wasn't completely free from hunger, sorrow, worry or emotional fatigue either. In this place, rejection is not rejection of the mother, but a heightened awareness of the strand of shame binding the mother, daughter and grandmother.The moment Malaya claps for her mother reveals a significant emotional shift. The text notes that Malaya gives Nyela “an all-out soul clap, the way the choir at her father’s church did when the music fell away and the voices and bodies took flight” (Sullivan, 2022, p. 232). This moment is not merely familial empathy; it is a reconfiguration of the mother-daughter relationship. Whereas Malaya’s body had previously been the object of her mother’s gaze and scrutiny, the mother herself now becomes visible to her daughter in her vulnerability. This shift opens up another form of care, akin to what bell hooks calls the “love ethic” an ethic of love based on recognition and care rather than discipline and correction.For this reason, Malaya’s resistance is not a simple rejection of her mother or grandmother. The novel is more complex than that. It shows it was passed from the mother and grandmother to the daughter, that they felt the presence of shame would keep Malaya safe from a cruel world. However Malaya begins to realize that protection through the reduction of the body can never liberate the body. It's an additional layer of protection. Because the rejection in the novel is emotional, Malaya can love her mother, can feel her fear, but she is not still carrying this fear in the same way. She admits to the emotional inheritance, but starts to mold it. Malaya's relationship with movement and space is also undergoing a change. The novel then slowly begins to look at movement not just as a place of exercise, weight loss and the exercise bike, but as an opening to the world. Malaya eventually stumbles upon Harlem, “damp with water and sweat,” passing “places she knew like blood and places she had never noticed, colors she could not be sure had ever existed before” (Sullivan, 2022, p. 243). This movement is not one towards physical changes, as diet culture would suggest, but rather a curious, open and uncalculated one. It's a movement that starts to see the world anew, not the question of how much weight have I lost? but a broader question: How can I live in this body without diminishing it into a shameful thing?The novel embodies the essence of refusal in Malaya's final line, which reads, “anything that wanted to stop her from gulping the hugeness of life had to be stepped on, stepped over, or kissed carefully and left behind” (Sullivan, 2022, p. 243). This sentence is very important as it is not a liberating or a complete break. The three

actions – stepped on, stepped over, kissed carefully and left behind – demonstrate a rich engagement with the past. Some things have to be broken, some have to be walked by, and some things have to be embraced in a loving and gentle manner. This is how Malaya has dealt with inherited shame; she can't do away with it, but she can decide what she will do with it. She doesn't allow it to occupy all the space of her body.The novel, in its formal aspect, is also not your typical coming-of-age story. The novel reminds readers that there is no definite weight-loss at the end of the novel in the form of Big Girl, and that this in itself is a resistance to sentimental text that requires a "body" solution. Diet culture is a numbers woman: before, after, before, after. But Sullivan will not have the number come out the climax. Rather, the ending centers on her ability to move, see, breathe and live. This is important - it does not allow the reader to reduce Malaya to a measurable physical success. Through becoming thinner, Malaya does not become herself – she becomes more self-aware because she understands that there is a way she has been made, and a way it can be altered.Consequently, it may be suggested that the non-affective refusal of the *Big Girl* isn't refusal of shame, but rather the return of shame to its proper place. It is not shame that Malaya is, nor is it shame that Malaya's body is, but it is the repetition of an historical, familial and cultural legacy. However, the moment Malaya learns to read she becomes a text that reads back. It is this shift that affective refusal is about: refusing to make the happiness of being thin, refusing to judge love by correction, refusing to see the whole black body as flawed or over-ripe.So Malaya's story doesn't end with the final liberation from fatphobia or the shame, but a more realistic and profound one: living with these forces. The novel does not assert that the world has been completely transformed, nor that Malaya is free from the "eyes of others. But that allows her to change her focus to other things: art, movement, the city, desire, and expansiveness. Her body becomes a space of negotiation, resistance and redefinition, then, from one of inherited shame. It is what makes Big Girl a novel that does not produce a single portrait of the painful full-bodied black body, but a story that exposes what this body can be, what it can refuse and what it can possess.

1.8 Conclusions

This study concludes that the novel *Big Girl* does not present Malaya Clondon's black, plus-size body as an individual or medical problem, but rather as an emotional and social site where issues of race, gender, body size, family, and shame intersect. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theory of affective performance and affective economies, the study reveals that shame in the novel is not merely an internal feeling specific to the protagonist, but rather a social force that is transmitted and attached to the body through repetition, commentary, surveillance, and discourses of thinness and happiness. The first section demonstrates that Malaya's body functions as a "sticky body" a body onto which meanings of excess, loss of control, shame, and social failure are projected. Scenes of food, diet meetings, photographs, and the exercise bike all reveal how the full-figured body becomes a surface onto which the family and society project their fears. Thus, the problem lies not in Malaya's body itself, but in the cultural and emotional system that makes this body appear to be a problem in need of correction. The second theme, however, reveals that shame in the novel is transmitted within the family through the mother and grandmother. Nyela and Ma-Mère do not pass shame on to Malaya out of direct cruelty, but rather out of fear, protection, and a desire to prepare her for a racist world hostile to full-figured bodies. However, this protection becomes ambiguous, as it reproduces the very logic they fear. Thus, the research reveals that inherited shame is transmitted not only through violence, but also through love, care, advice, and fear for the future. The third theme also clearly states that Malaya is not being presented as merely a victim. The protagonist feels a sense of shame in multiple instances, but slowly comes to doubt the emotional histories she has received. She resists by subverting the idea of a happy future that relies on becoming thin, as well as by reinterpreting the way she relates with her mother, her body, and her desires. The novel does not provide complete liberation or a perfect ending, but rather it provides Malaya with a new sense of awareness: that it is not her body that shames her, it is those who have imposed shame on her body over time: a social, familial, and cultural system. Therefore, the study suggests that *Big Girl* is not a re-imagining of the plus-size Black girl from outside the family, but rather from inside the family. The house is a place of love, but it can also become a site of fear of the body as the novel shows. Yet another opportunity for care is opened by Sullivan, one that is not about decreased and corrected bodies, but recognized, accepted, and reimagined relationships with the body. This is its novelty: not only does the body of the black, plus-size woman represent the pain of the black body, but it is also the place where it becomes a site of consciousness, emotional refusal, and self-possession.

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