



Teen Body Image In Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'*: A Feminist And Pedagogical Reading

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Abstract

This article examines Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* as a feminist young adult text that challenges dominant beauty norms through themes of body image, femininity, fat identity, and community. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, feminist pedagogy, and fat studies, the chapter argues that femininity in the novel is not inherent but socially learned and repeatedly performed through visible practices such as fashion, dieting, posture, and public display. The analysis further explores how family relationships, friendships, romantic desire, and collective participation in the beauty pageant reshape traditional narratives of shame and exclusion. By presenting fatness as both identity and community, *Dumplin'* offers a critical perspective on body positivity that emphasises social support over individual confidence. The article concludes that the novel serves as an effective feminist classroom text, encouraging young readers to question normative beauty standards and envision more inclusive forms of embodiment.

Key words: gender performativity, femininity, pedagogy, fat, beauty.

Introduction

Young adult literature plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' understanding of their bodies, identities, and social value. In many narratives, femininity and beauty are presented as natural qualities associated with thinness, discipline, and visual appeal. Such representations often marginalise bodies that fall outside socially accepted norms, particularly fat bodies. Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* intervenes in this tradition by centring a fat protagonist who refuses to view her body as a limitation to self-worth, desire, or visibility.

This article reads *Dumplin'* through feminist and pedagogical lenses, using Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to argue that femininity in the novel is constructed through repeated social practices rather than biological essence. It further draws on feminist pedagogy and fat studies to examine how beauty norms are transmitted, challenged, and reworked through family relationships, friendships, fashion, romantic desire, and community. By rewriting the beauty pageant and reclaiming fat identity, *Dumplin'* offers young readers a critical framework for understanding body politics and resistance.

Fatness, Shame, and Internalised Body Norms

In *Dumplin'*, fatness is closely tied to shame, not because of the body itself, but because of the social meanings attached to it. The novel shows how shame is learned over time through repeated messages from family, peers, institutions, and popular culture that mark certain bodies as unacceptable. Willowdean's awareness of her body is shaped by how others look at her, speak about her, or fall silent around her size. These everyday interactions teach her to monitor herself constantly, leading to what feminist scholars describe as internalised body norms—standards that individuals absorb and apply to themselves even in the absence of direct judgement. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues, women are trained to see their bodies from the outside, learning to measure themselves against an ideal that is always out of reach. In this sense, shame in *Dumplin'* is not a personal failing but a social emotion produced by repeated exposure to body hierarchies.

Importantly, the novel presents internalised shame as subtle and persistent rather than dramatic or obvious. Willowdean often anticipates ridicule or rejection before it occurs, showing how deeply body norms shape self-perception. This anticipatory shame limits movement, desire, and confidence, teaching fat characters to take up less space both physically and emotionally. At the same time, *Dumplin'* refuses to present shame as total or unchangeable. By placing Willowdean in situations where she is seen, supported, and affirmed—particularly through friendship and collective action—the novel reveals that internalised body norms can be unlearned. From a pedagogical perspective, this makes *Dumplin'* especially valuable, as it helps young readers recognise shame as something taught by society rather than something that originates within the body. The text thus invites readers to question where their ideas about “acceptable” bodies come from and to imagine ways of resisting the quiet, everyday practices through which body shame is reproduced.

Femininity as Performance and the Mother–Daughter Dynamic in *Dumplin'*

Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity helps us understand that femininity is not something a woman is born with, but something she learns to perform through repeated actions. According to Butler, gender is created through everyday practices such as how one dresses, moves, eats, and presents the body in public (Butler 33). In *Dumplin'*, Julie Murphy shows that femininity is recognised through visible acts like wearing makeup, choosing certain clothes, dieting, maintaining posture, and behaving in socially acceptable ways. Willowdean's struggle with femininity does not come from rejecting being a girl, but from the fact that her body does not fit the narrow standards through which femininity is usually judged.

The beauty pageant in the novel clearly shows how femininity is performed and controlled in public spaces. The girls who participate in the Miss Clover City pageant are trained to look graceful, confident, and attractive through rehearsed movements, smiles, and carefully styled appearances. Willowdean notices that these girls seem to follow an unspoken set of rules about how a “proper” girl should look and behave: “The whole point is to walk up there and not fall on your face and to try to make it look like your fake eyelashes aren't stabbing your eyeballs” (Murphy 173). Judith Butler explains that gender norms survive because they are repeatedly performed and rewarded in public spaces. Those who perform femininity correctly are praised, while those who do not are ignored or criticised. When Willowdean enters the pageant without changing her body, she challenges this system. By performing femininity in her own way, she shows that it is not natural or fixed but something that can be performed differently.

This idea of femininity as a learned performance is also reflected in the relationship between Willowdean and her mother, Rosie. Rosie, a former beauty queen, strongly believes in traditional ideals of femininity and passes these beliefs on to her daughter. Through her emphasis on appearance, dieting, and public behaviour, Rosie teaches Willowdean—often unintentionally—that being feminine means looking a certain way. Judith Butler points out that gender rules are often taught within close relationships, especially within families (Butler xix–xx). Rosie's behaviour shows how femininity is learned at home long before it is judged in public spaces.

At the same time, the tension between mother and daughter shows that these ideas can be questioned and changed. Willowdean refuses to follow her mother's expectations and insists on defining femininity for

herself. Rosie's worry about Willowdean's safety and acceptance reflects a society that punishes girls who do not fit beauty norms. Gradually, Rosie begins to understand her daughter's choices, suggesting that femininity is not something inherited, but something that can be negotiated. From a teaching perspective, *Dumplin'* encourages young readers to see femininity as a social performance rather than a natural truth. It shows that resisting body norms does not mean rejecting femininity, but reshaping it in more inclusive and empowering ways.

Friendship, Companionship, and the Social Construction of Beauty

Along with family and public institutions, *Dumplin'* shows that friendship plays a powerful role in shaping ideas of beauty and femininity. Beauty in the novel is not presented as a natural or universal truth; instead, it is socially constructed through peer relationships, approval, and exclusion. Willowdean's friendships, especially with Ellen, Millie, and Hannah, become spaces where dominant beauty norms are questioned and reworked. Unlike the judgmental gaze of society or the pressure from pageant culture, these friendships allow Willowdean to exist without constantly having to explain or defend her body. In this sense, companionship functions as a supportive space where alternative performances of femininity are possible.

Nina Amato rightly notes that contemporary YA narratives increasingly frame body acceptance and fat identity as relational and collective processes rather than individual transformations (Amato11-14). In *Dumplin'* the formation of the "Dumplings" pageant group highlights how friendship can resist the social pressure to conform to narrow beauty ideals. When Millie, Hannah, and others decide to enter the pageant alongside Willowdean, they do not do so to win or to transform themselves into ideal beauty figures. Instead, their participation is based on mutual support and shared vulnerability. This collective action challenges the idea that beauty is an individual achievement based on physical appearance. Rather, the novel suggests that confidence and self-worth are strengthened through belonging and solidarity. From a Butlerian perspective, these friendships enable a collective re-performance of femininity, showing that gender norms can be destabilised not only individually but also through shared resistance.

At the same time, the novel does not ignore the tensions that exist within friendships shaped by social beauty standards. Ellen's conventional attractiveness makes Willowdean feel inferior: "El is everything I am not. Tall, blond, and with this impossible goofy yet sexy paradox going on that only seems to exist in romantic comedies." (Murphy 1-2). Her relationship with Ellen reveals that the social construction of privilege operates within friendships. Ellen's thin body allows her to move easily within socially approved standards of beauty, even though she verbally supports Willowdean. This imbalance creates emotional distance between them and shows that friendship alone cannot fully escape social hierarchies. Beauty norms continue to shape interactions, even among friends, reinforcing the idea that these norms are deeply embedded in social life.

Pedagogically, *Dumplin'* shows young readers that ideas about beauty do not develop in isolation; they are learned through everyday interactions with friends, family, and peers. The novel presents friendship as an important learning space where body norms can either be reinforced or challenged. When characters offer empathy, support, and solidarity, they help one another resist harmful beauty standards. Thus, *Dumplin'* teaches young readers to see beauty not as an individual failure or achievement, but as a socially constructed idea that can be questioned and transformed through collective care, mutual understanding and feminist resistance.

In this way, *Dumplin'* extends its feminist message by showing that changing beauty norms is not only an individual journey, but also a social and relational process.

Rewriting the Beauty Pageant: A Feminist Classroom Tool

In *Dumplin'*, the beauty pageant is rewritten from a symbol of female control into a space for learning, resistance, and feminist questioning. Traditionally, beauty pageants teach girls to value themselves through physical appearance, discipline, and public approval. However, Murphy reworks the pageant by allowing

characters like Willowdean and her friends to enter without trying to “correct” their bodies. This shift transforms the pageant into a teaching tool that exposes how beauty standards are created and maintained. In a classroom context, the pageant can be read as a practical example of how gender norms are performed, judged, and reinforced through repetition, making abstract feminist theories easier for students to understand.

From a feminist pedagogical perspective, the rewritten pageant encourages critical thinking rather than passive acceptance of norms. As bell hooks argues, feminist teaching should challenge systems of domination and invite students to question what they have been taught to see as normal so that “one could teach without reinforcing existing systems of domination.” (hooks 18). In *Dumplin'*, the girls' participation disrupts the usual goals of competition and perfection. They do not aim to win but to be seen on their own terms. This collective act helps students recognise that empowerment does not require rejecting femininity altogether; instead, it involves reshaping its meaning. The pageant thus becomes a learning space where students can analyse how bodies are judged, whose bodies are valued, and how resistance can take place within existing systems.

Pedagogically, *Dumplin'* is especially effective because it does not present the pageant as entirely evil or entirely empowering. Instead, it shows it as a contested space where power and resistance exist together. This balanced portrayal allows teachers to use the novel to open discussions on beauty, gender performance, peer pressure, and body politics without offering simplistic answers. By rewriting the beauty pageant in this way, *Dumplin'* functions as a feminist classroom tool that encourages body positivity, critical awareness, and empathy. It teaches young readers that beauty is not a fixed truth but a social idea that can be questioned, rewritten, and shared more inclusively.

Fashion as Agency in *Dumplin'*

In *Dumplin'*, fashion becomes an important way through which characters express agency and challenge narrow beauty standards. Clothing in the novel is not merely decorative; it allows Willowdean and her friends to claim visibility and control how their bodies are seen. By choosing outfits that reflect confidence rather than concealment, Willowdean resists the idea that certain bodies must hide or apologise for their appearance. This aligns with feminist thought that views fashion not only as a tool of conformity but also as a potential site of resistance. When Willowdean wears pageant dresses on her own terms, she transforms clothing into a statement of self-definition rather than submission. Pedagogically, this moment teaches readers that agency does not always require rejecting traditional symbols of femininity; instead, it can emerge through conscious choices about how one performs femininity. In this way, *Dumplin'* shows that fashion can empower young women by allowing them to rewrite the meanings attached to their bodies.

Romantic Desire and Fat Representation in Young Adult Fiction

Young adult fiction has often linked romance with thin, conventionally attractive bodies, leaving fat characters outside narratives of desire. *Dumplin'* challenges this pattern by presenting Willowdean as both desiring and desired. Her relationship with Bo affirms that romantic attraction is not determined by body size but by emotional connection. This portrayal resists the common tendency to desexualise fat characters or treat them as comic figures.

From a feminist perspective, such representation is important because it helps young readers question who is considered worthy of love. According to Wann, fat studies scholars note that cultural narratives often deny fat individuals romantic legitimacy, reinforcing shame and self-doubt. By normalising romantic desire in a fat protagonist, *Dumplin'* offers a more inclusive vision of adolescence and challenges narrow beauty norms within young adult literature.

Fatness as Identity and Community

In *Dumplin'*, fatness emerges not only as a personal experience but also as a shared identity that helps create community and solidarity. Willowdean's interactions with friends who also feel excluded by dominant beauty standards show that fatness can connect people through common experiences of judgement, shame, and resistance. Instead of viewing her body only as a problem, Willowdean begins to understand it as part of a collective identity that offers support and understanding. Lebesco states that fat identity becomes empowering when it is reclaimed socially rather than endured privately. In this sense, the novel presents fatness as a basis for community that challenges isolation and internalised stigma. Pedagogically, this encourages young readers to see identity as something shaped through relationships and shared experiences, rather than as an individual failure or limitation.

Conclusion

Taken together, *Dumplin'* presents the body not as a problem to be fixed, but as a site of learning, resistance, and connection. By showing femininity as a performance shaped through family, friendship, fashion, romance, and community, the novel exposes beauty norms as socially constructed rather than natural. Fatness emerges as both an identity and a shared experience that can build solidarity and challenge isolation. At the same time, the text offers a critical view of body positivity, acknowledging that self-acceptance is shaped by social conditions and collective support rather than individual confidence alone. Pedagogically, *Dumplin'* works as a feminist text that encourages young readers to question dominant beauty standards, recognise the power of community, and imagine more inclusive ways of understanding the body. In doing so, the novel contributes meaningfully to young adult literature by turning personal body struggles into opportunities for social critique and empowerment.

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