



Life as a Fat Female Body: A Feminist Narrative Inquiry with Iranian Women

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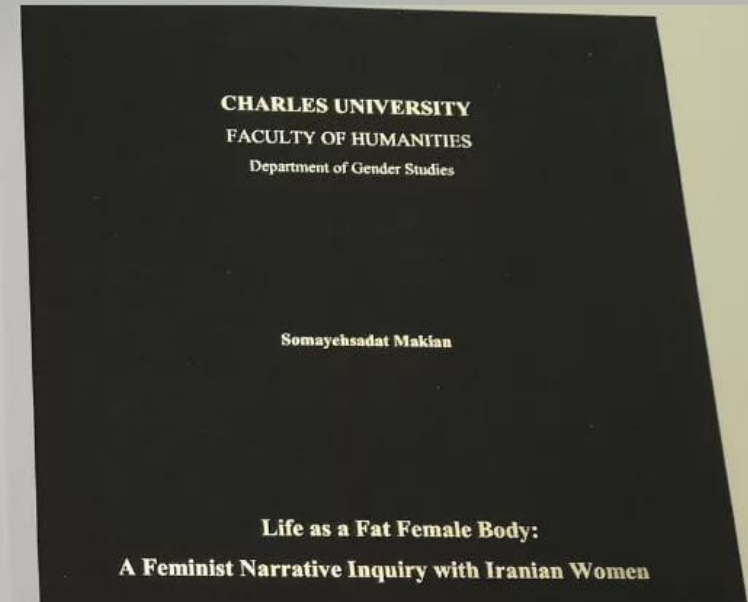
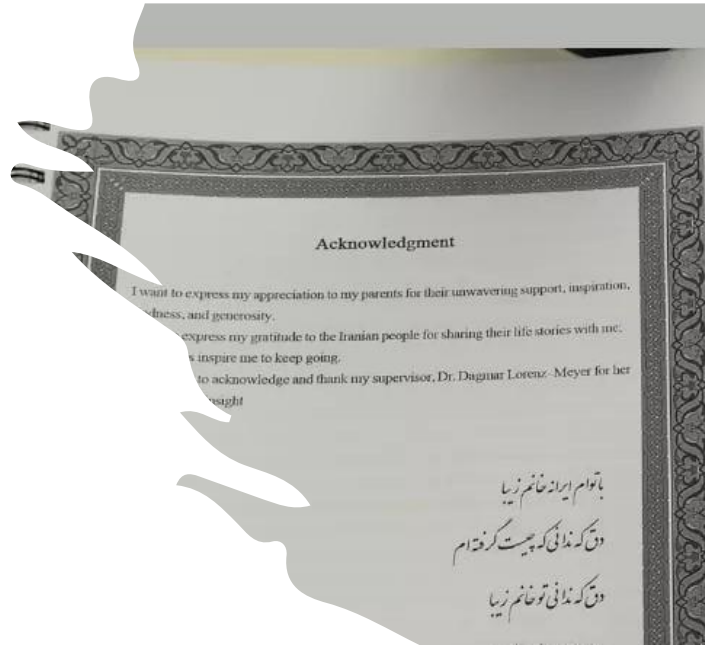
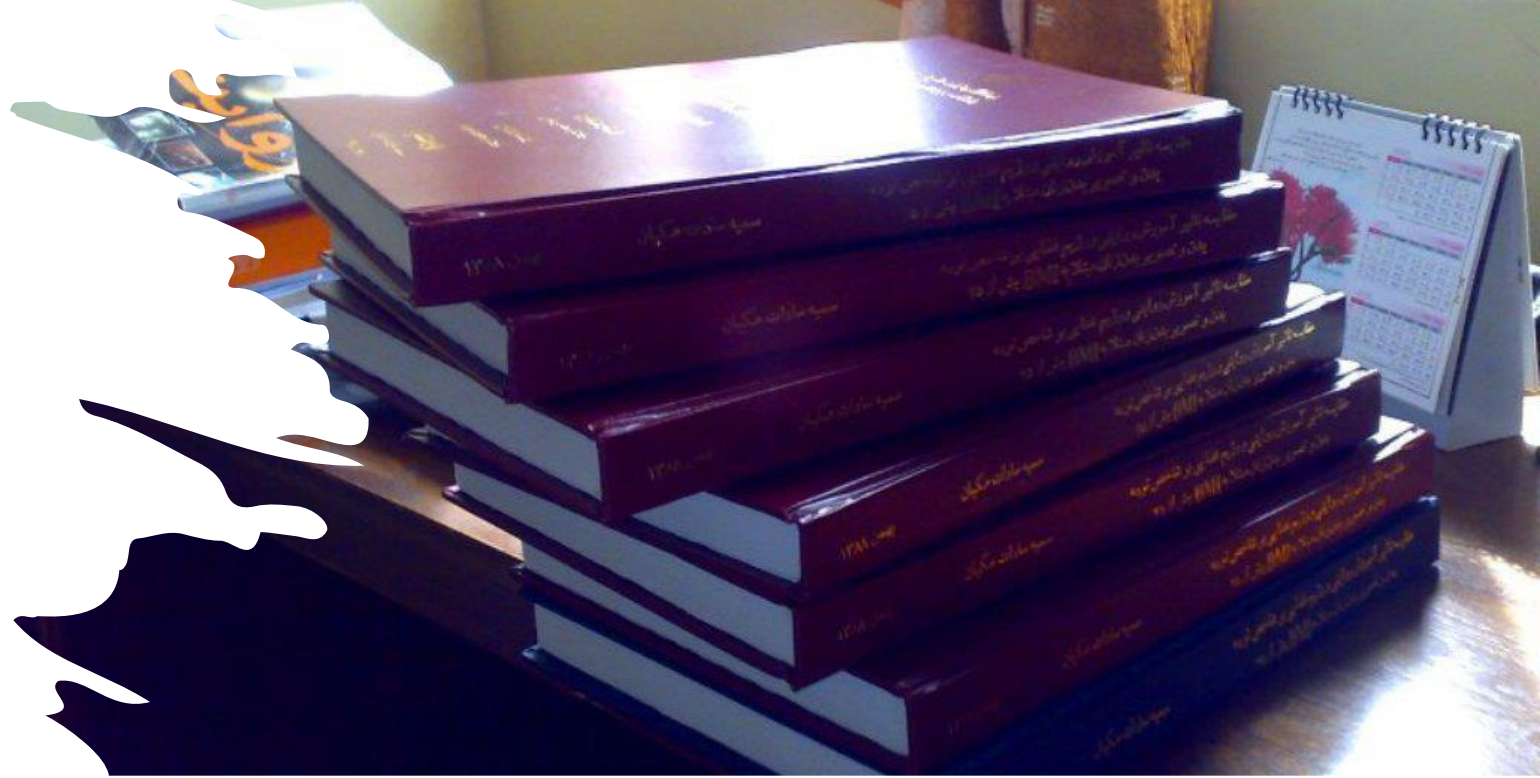
Diploma Thesis

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Introduction

- “My father said: ‘I love you as long as you are not fat.’” (Fatemeh, interview 2008) cited in my master thesis in Psychology entitled: Efficacy of narrative therapy and diet therapy on body image and body mass index of Iranian women with overweight and obesity, Tehran, Iran, 2008.
- Writing novels
- Master thesis in Gender studies(2023),
- re-analysis of data generated with women identified as fat in group therapy sessions conducted in Tehran in 2008 for my master thesis in psychology.



Research questions

Three broad research questions guide this inquiry:

First, I wish to examine how women experience fatness in the context of their relationships with their parents, partners, relatives, and friends? Where do they locate legacies and responsibilities for fatness? And how do those who have had children experience their pregnancy and relation with their own children?

Second, what emotions are generated in particular encounters and relations? What figures or metaphors do they use for expressing emotions such as hate, fear, and panic but also love, and pleasure?

Third, how do normative expectations of dieting, weight management, and the medicalization of obesity and surgery affect Iranian women's attitudes toward their bodies? When and how do these normative ideals of body shape and size appear and how do they get subverted or refused? In other words, where and how do Iranian women show fat resistance? How might they conceive of fat aesthetically?

FEMINIST LITERATURE ON FATNESS AND OBESITY: THE STATE OF THE ART

Feminist psychologist Susie Orbach (1970) fat studies scholar in 1970s maintained that specific industries such as those of fashion, cosmetics, and media offer dreams and products which are particularly tailored to slim bodies and intentionally or inadvertently demonize fatness. In her book *Fat is a Feminist Issue* Orbach (1978) explains:

Fat is a social disease, and Fat is a feminist issue. Fat is not about lack of self-control or lack of willpower. Fat is about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion, and rage. It is a response to the inequality of the sexes. Fat shows the experiences of women today in ways that are seldom examined and even more, seldom treated. While becoming fat does not alter the roots of sexual oppression, getting fat can thus be understood as a definite and purposeful action; it is a directed, conscious, or unconscious, challenge to sex-role stereotyping and culturally defined experience of womanhood (Orbach, 1978, 6).

Feminist scholar Susan Bordo (1993) agrees that Western society and its institutions denigrate fat female bodies and fatness. Bordo (2012) identifies the factors that contribute to people's preoccupation with thinness and weight loss and focuses more on how cultural norms influence the experienced body than on the physical body. She investigates how women's dread of becoming fat is frequently linked to a distorted perception of their bodies, which can lead to anorexia or impulsive eating (Bordo, 2012).

Lauren Berlant (2007) is another feminist scholar who has shed light on the obesity endemic in the early 2000s. She shows that obesity is especially prevalent among poorer groups in the US and explains that African Americans and Latinos are carrying the heavy burden in their bodies of poor work and nutrition, the easy availability of fast food that gives energy boosts to those with low salaries and little time for preparing nutritious meals. Berlant (2007) argues that mass media and social and health services admonish girls and women to get their body weight under control, assigning responsibility to the individual while simultaneously profiting from selling diets and other “remedies”. As such, Berlant puts more emphasis on life situations rather than individual responsibility. Low salaries and little time for healthy eating, designed people's life to slow death (Berlant, 2007).

Australian Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray, a founding figure in this new field, argues that “The fat body is a site where multiple discourses converge, including those regarding normative feminine attractiveness and sexuality, health and pathology, morality, anxieties about excess, and individual responsibility in the project of self-governance.” (Murray, 2008, 213).

Fat Shaming and the Sidelineing of Female Bodies on Iran's National TV



Figure 1: "Fat and Thin", Iranian TV show puppet series (1990)



Figures 2 and 3: "Alesoon and Valesoon", Iranian TV show puppet series (1994)



- **The Medicalization of Obesity**
- **Body Policing, Fat Shaming, and Fat Phobia**
- **Diet Culture and Healthism**
- **Fat Pregnancy**
- **Generating a Feminist Aesthetics of Fat**

Conclusion

Gender studies and fat studies have shown that fatness is often viewed as a lifestyle choice for which fat people, especially fat women, are fat-shamed and blamed. Fatness is medicalized as it is viscerally hatred, also in non-western countries like Iran. This individualistic, dichotomous, and behavioral perspective leads to a limited body of knowledge about this important issue and often results in misconceptions, prejudices, and marginalization of fat women. A feminist approach to fat studies helps us better understand the social construction of fatness and the wider environmental and cultural contexts in which it takes place. The body is fundamentally shaped in the cultural context and the society in which someone lives; however, few studies have yet been carried out to examine the effect of Iranian culture and lifestyle on Iranian women's bodies, especially when shaping people's attitudes regarding fatness is concerned. Fat shaming interacts with anti-fat attitudes and fatphobia and becomes a mechanism of body policing and self-monitoring of fat bodies. The concept of fatphobia refers to the fear or hate toward fat people and can be conducive to fat hatred and goes together with a punishment of fat bodies deemed unhealthy, which constitutes the medicalization of fatness. As such, medicalization and fat shaming reinforce each other. Since obesity in its prevailing discourse generally is considered as a lack of health, pathologizing it and attributing responsibility to the individual are characteristics of medicalization that are closely connected with dietary culture and healthism. As part of the medicalization of obesity, there is an increasing focus on pregnancy. Here pregnancy is often a focal point for further regulating and blaming fat women for the health of their fetuses; therefore, mothers are accused of risking to pass on their own fatness genetically to their children and grandchildren who stand to inherit it, as such pregnant maternal responsibilities motivated the fat pregnant women to concentrate on protecting their offspring from their own fat bodies. While the sections have focused on the negative emotions associated with fatness, the consideration of a feminist aesthetic of fat opens some new perspectives on fat bodies and highlights the creative aspects of fatness which make up the elements of a portrayal of a new kind of beauty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I used narrative inquiry as a way to access and represent the multiple viewpoints of participants. In this perspective, storytelling is seen as a means to include women's experiences, break the silencing of women, and give women a chance to voice and analyze their own experiences (Romero and Stewart, 1999).

Table of research participants

Name/ pseudonym	Method of data collection	Year	Place	Age	Employment status	Marital status	Educational status	Number of children	Gastric and sleeve Surgery
Somayeh	Autoethnography writing	2022	Prague	38	MA student	Single	BA and MA in Clinical and General Psychology	0	No
Sara	Narrative therapy session	2008	Tehran	43	Housewife	Married	BA in Chemistry	3 daughters	No
Maral	Narrative therapy session	2008	Tehran	39	Housewife	Married	BA in Philosophy / MA in Literature	2 daughters	No
Nina	Narrative interview	2022	Tehran	19	BA student	Single	BA student in Counselling Psychology	0	yes
Nazanin	Narrative interview	2022	Prague	55	Retired Teacher / Chef at a Restaurant	Widow	BA in Law	3 (1 daughter and 2 sons)	No

Narrative Interview

Narrative Therapy

Autoethnography

Autoethnography

- “I was a heavy baby girl at the time of birth, 3.730 kilos. All of my siblings (five sisters and one brother) had that same weight, so it was easy for our relatives and neighbors to say: “This is genetic!” I heard it a lot during my childhood when my mom talked about her obesity: “My genes made you, all of you, obese at the time of birth because your aunts [my father's sister] are slimmer than my sisters. So, it is like a mother's genetics that sticks to your genes and blood! You must be careful, otherwise, you will easily become fat!” (Somayeh 2022).
- “One scene that occurred frequently in the summer was when my mom returned from grocery shopping and the weather was so hot, that she sweat a lot and got out of breath. She entered the house, and immediately took off her clothes, her breast being noticeably big [because of several time breastfeeding]. She then took tissue paper and lifted her breasts up and removed the sweat from underneath her breasts, dried it, and put them back again. She repeated this process with her big stomach hanging out. She lifted this big pillow of fat up, wiped the sweat off, and put it back. I thought about how difficult it was for her to live with this fatness. But she always said, “I like my body, and I don't have any bad feelings about my body. This sweating means my body does something and it makes me feel alive and energetic.” It created an image for me that a sweating body is lovable”. (Somayeh 2022)
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- “I don't want to bother you, when I get old and fat, and cannot move easily I'll be a burden for you all. I don't want that” (Somayeh 2022).
- “My mom never talks a lot about her body, but most of the time squeezes their stomach is like a pillow of fat and says: look at this! seven times pregnancy, hospital, natural delivery (no cesarian), again breastfeeding up to two years old, again pregnancy, oh, don't ask me what this fatness is!” (Somayeh 2020)
- “My mother would often say: “Look at this! (She taps at her belly) Seven times pregnant, hospital, natural delivery (no Caesarean section), breastfeeding again for two years, another pregnancy. Oh, don't ask me what *this* is!” And then one of my sisters would say: “Maman, it's not seven, it is six!” (Two of my sisters are twins) and laugh, and mom says: “You sit here and correct me! It doesn't mean anything to me!” (Somayeh 2022).
- “My dad always smiled after some conversations about my mother's fatness and how her fatness could transfer to the children and usually said: “Don't worry, you are healthy, and this is important; these kids are also healthy.” I remember from my conversation with my dad when I was a child; that he once he told me: “humans are like trees; when you enter a jungle, no two trees are the same; some are tall, some are short, just like human beings. Some are thin, some are fat, some ugly some nice, so, people are different.” (Somayeh 2022).
- “My mother said, “If I want to lose weight, I should go to a nutritionist and listen to her carefully and eat exactly based on the diets she gives me. But I have a lot of thoughts in my mind, always. I cannot concentrate on just my body and dieting, I would have to hit my head with something and lose my memory and forget everything and start just taking care of my body and losing weight, but I cannot. I should worry about your dad and take care of him and the medicine he takes, about his food and special diets (my father had a heart surgery two times), I have worries about all of you, your sisters and brother, so, it is impossible!” (Somayeh 2022)

Creative writing

- I also used the method of creative writing, that is spontaneous writing of the body based on their direct experience of their bodies, specifically related to the interviews we had. After completing the interviews and transcribing the interviews, I read them several times. I noticed some specific moments in Nina and Nazanin's interviews that showed the agency of fat and the aesthetic of fat. I identified two markers or keywords in those interviews.
- In Nina's interview, it was the term “Stop it”, and in Nazanin's interviews it was the word “sweating”. Both research participants had repeated these words multiple times. And they put intense emotions in these words that I noticed based on the women’s body language, gestures, and facial expression. I decided to discuss this with them a week after the interview. They both accepted my invitation for an online conversation, and I told them about those key words. 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 know 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.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is concerned with the study of stories as they are told, as they are made up of past experiences and are linked to the movement of power in the larger world. when fat female body is invisible in society, narrative analysis can make her more explicit. The meanings of past events alter over time as the story's origins are modified to lead to variable and in-progress endings (Bruner, 1990). As a result, because meanings are not self-evident and created in context, interpretation and analysis are required.

The feminist narrative analysis that I adopt for this study takes narrative themes as the unit of analysis. The materials were coded into the following categories for narrative analysis: Fat inheritances and female lineages, responsibility and lifestyle, fatness and family histories, mothers and grandmothers as disciplinary forces, dieting and surgery, and Fat resistance. Different themes were gathered from the accounts of participants and analysis focused on different features of the themes.

Researcher Positionality

- .Feminist researchers emphasize the impact of the researcher's location on their study focus, methods, and result interpretation.
- .The personal position and views of the researcher regarding the subject, participants, and research method are termed as positionality (Feeley, 2019).
- .The study delves into the author's positionality through an autoethnography of living with a mother who identified as fat, shedding light on fat female body perceptions.
- .Analyzing personal narrative enhanced understanding of the fat female body and interactions with research participants.
- .Reflection on personal experiences revealed insights on body perceptions across generations and cultures.
- .Transformative narration highlighted the dynamic nature of life stories and their impact on narrators.
- .Challenges in revisiting past data underscored the evolving perspective towards gender and fat studies.
- .Participants' responses reflected a mix of expectations based on the researcher's profession and personal experiences.
- .The researcher's identity and location influenced participant interactions and the depth of understanding shared narratives.
- .Comparisons between different participants' experiences and the researcher's perspective revealed complexities shaped by age, culture, and life experience

Findings

- FATNESS: RELATIONSHIPS, RESPONSIBILITY AND FEMALE HERITAGE
- DIETING, SURGERY, FAT RESISTANCE AND AESTHETIC OF FAT

FATNESS: RELATIONSHIPS, RESPONSIBILITY AND FEMALE HERITAGE

I address the question of what contributes to the process and experience of women becoming fat or being seen as fat, particularly in the context of family relations in childhood and adolescence and later in their own families in Iran.

- Explored women's experiences of fatness concerning their relationships with family, partners, and friends.
- Examined where women attribute responsibilities for fatness, including heredity, genetics, lifestyle, and habits.
- **Pregnancy and Body Weight:**
- Investigated how women who have given birth experience pregnancy and their relationship with their children.
- Emphasized the social and physiological impacts of pregnancy and breastfeeding on weight.
- **Emotions and Metaphors:**
- Explored emotions like hatred, fear, shame, love, and pleasure in the context of fatness.
- Analyzed metaphors used by women to express emotions, highlighting ambivalence towards fat mothers.
- **Parental Roles in Fatness:**
- Mothers found responsible for daughters' weight, often attributing it to family history and genetics.
- Fathers' judgments varied, some focusing on health while others emphasized societal perceptions of body image.
- **Discipline and Body Policing:**
- Family members, especially mothers and grandmothers, employed various methods to discipline bodies.
- Discussion on the impact of surgery as a solution to discipline female bodies, leading to feelings of fear and shame.
- **Fear and Shame Dynamics:**
- Participants' narratives revealed how shame and fear of fatness play a significant role in policing the female body.
- Judgment by relatives and friends on fatness being dangerous influenced women to feel a constant need for safety.

DIETING, SURGERY, FAT RESISTANCE AND AESTHETIC OF FAT

I address how the women respond to all the judgments that I argued in the previous chapter.

- **Medicalization of Health:**
 - Explored the medicalization of fatness through interventions like dieting, exercise, and surgery.
 - Analyzed the impact of surgery on Iranian women's body attitudes and their response to societal body norms.
- **Fat Resistance and Aesthetics:**
 - Investigated fat resistance and how individuals perceive fatness aesthetically.
 - Examined narratives where fathers' judgments compelled women to undergo surgery for body modification.
- **Pathologizing Fat Bodies:**
 - Discussed the pathologizing of fat bodies and the pressure to conform to societal standards through surgical interventions.
 - Highlighted the perception of the fat body as flawed and the implications of surgical alterations.
- **Responses to Disciplining Methods:**
 - Some women accepted disciplining methods like diet and surgery, while others resisted and rejected them.
 - Views varied on fatness and sweating, with some seeing vitality while others expressed fear and ambivalence towards aging and weight gain.
- **Blame and Resistance:**
 - Women expressed blame towards mothers for unruly bodies and resistance to external control, particularly in dieting.
 - The metaphor of the "fat queen" symbolized defiance against dieting norms and restrictions.
- **Future Plans and Family Judgments:**
 - Some women demonstrated fat resistance by planning for the future despite judgments from family.
 - Showed how individuals navigate societal pressures and familial expectations regarding body image and discipline.

Conclusion

Overall, the following seven points sum up key findings.

- **1. Fighting the fat body**
- Women expressed varied struggles with their body image and fatness, viewing fat as unfamiliar and sometimes disliking their bodies. Metaphors like 'pillow of fat' were used to describe fatness. Some attempted to change their bodies through dieting, driven by a desire to make their bodies more pleasing while also indicating self-hatred. Participants had conflicting feelings towards their fat bodies, with some expressing direct dislike while others adopted royal titles like 'fat queen'. These emotions revealed a mix of love, hate, fear, and pleasure regarding body control, influenced by societal norms and personal experiences. The interplay between body image, self-perception, and control emerged as complex themes in their narratives.
- **2. The absent or senseless body**
- Women may not feel connected to their bodies due to reasons such as busyness, exhaustion from caregiving, and societal pressures like weight shaming and gender alienation. Participants in their 30s and 40s noted previous disconnect from their bodies. One individual couldn't recall her pre-marriage body, while another described feeling like a numb, a piece of wood, without sensation, a senseless body.

- **3. Fat inheritance and genetics**

- Some women state how “fat genes” can pass through generations and make children fat. But fat inheritances are also related to becoming fat through pregnancies and selfless family care. Not having enough time for looking after one’s body and self implies that how families are normatively and practically organized does not allow women to care for themselves. Many mentioned how pregnancy and breastfeeding changed their bodies and made them fat. It suggests the lines between biology and the environment are not clear. Future genetics disposition is itself ambivalent as the references to childbirth suggest.

- **4. The lure and the refusals of dieting**

- As might be expected from the focus on cosmetic surgery and beauty standards in Iranian social media, dieting was a prominent cultural ideal and practices of dieting in Iran were buttressed by a pervasive medicalization of weight. women were critical of the disciplining power of dieting and refused diets sometimes with reference that they lacked the “concentration” for focusing exclusively on diets at the expense of living and taking care of others. This suggests on the one hand that the women are influenced by the imperatives of housekeeping and childcare to the detriment of thinking about themselves. But on the other hand, these norms can also be used as a refusal of submitting themselves to the dictates of dieting.

5. Cutting the flesh: sleeve surgery

I have pointed to the rise of specialists and social media superstars actively promoting weight loss surgery so that their clients can get the "ideal body." In this study, one in five women had undergone gastric sleeve surgery. While it is often assumed that women are interested to undergo surgery this participant related how she felt ‘forced’ to undergo surgery by her father and friends. As I analyzed under the pressure of her family (mostly the disciplining role of grandmother, mother, and father), as well as friends and therapists she “chose” the removal of fat and correcting the body but did not feel the benefits of surgery. Rather she felt that something of herself as cut away and she refused further surgery. While the consequences of surgery are mostly analyzed psychologically, in my study, I focused on the metaphors she used about the physical process of surgery she found a brutal experience and called “cutting a part of the body and throwing it away”, cutting is a violent and brutal act that forces the body to accept irreversible changes.

- **6. Stop, stop eating, stop yourself**

Women in my study referred to a constant refrain of imperatives to ‘stop eating’, stop eating – both explicitly or implicitly in the suggestion to share plates or eat healthy. In some narratives, eating is related to stopping self respect and responsibility and to danger. In one case, it was the grandmother controlling the food intake by tapping a woman on the shoulder and saying, “stop it, stop eating”. This was heard by the research participant as “stop it, stop the way you are living, your fatness is dangerous, you are dangerous.”

- **7. Sweating body: activity and being alive**

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. Two 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.

. 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.



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