

# The Word of the Body: Depictions of Positive Body Image In Philippine Young Adult Literature

Gabriela Lee

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## *Abstract*

The relationship between body image and identity is one of the hallmarks of young adult literature. Despite the advances made by various feminist movements, “[G]irls’ lives are still adversely affected by social pressure to adhere to an ideal standard of beauty,” says Beth Younger. This obsession with weight and appearance is a heady mixture of information overload, media portrayal, and an overall propensity for obesity in the past decades due to a number of complicating factors: food production, environmental factors, epigenetic research, and changes in lifestyles. Young adult or YA stories are also part of this continuous portrayal of female bodies as either acceptable or marginal, or even reversing our notions of either concept. In the Philippines, these stories feature female protagonists who consider their appearances, though not necessarily their weight and body shape and size, important enough that the text considers and acknowledges their appearances as part of their struggle to be accepted within certain social spheres. This essay is concerned with the positive portrayal of the fat female body in young adult literature and how it becomes a subversive body, since it performs its pleasures for the self, and not for others.

**Keywords:** *young adult literature, body image, fatness*

## The Word of the Body: Depictions of Positive Body Image in Philippine Young Adult Literature

The relationship between body image and identity is one of the hallmarks of young adult literature. Despite the advances made by various feminist movements, “[G]irls’ lives are still adversely affected by social pressure to adhere to an ideal standard of beauty” (Younger, 1). Though “[t]remendous pressure is placed on women to attain the ideal body” (Forbes & Frederick, 2008), this is particularly true of teenage girls. According to the NYC Girls Project, over 80% of 10-year-old girls are afraid of getting fat, and by 12 years old, their self-esteem goes down and only recovers in their 20s (2015). The pressure to fit in also plays a role in the relationship between teens and their bodies: According to the *Teen Health and the Media* resource page run by the University of Washington, “at age thirteen, 53% of American girls are ‘unhappy with their bodies.’ This grows to 78% by the time girls reach seventeen” (2009).

This obsession with weight and appearance is a heady mixture of information overload, media portrayal, and an overall propensity for obesity in the past decades due to a number of complicating factors: food production, environmental factors, epigenetic research, and changes in lifestyles.

There is no denying that adolescents are leaning towards the tendency of obesity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In fact, according to the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development’s 8th National Nutritional Survey, “the prevalence of overweight among Filipino children zero to five years old has significantly risen from 1% in 1989 to 5% in 2013” (PCHRD, 2016), while the 2011 Health Survey, run by Global School, “indicated that about 13% of adolescents in the Philippines are overweight and obese” (PCHRD, 2016). Furthermore, in the *State of the Art of Obesity Research in the Philippines: 1981-2011*, researchers have noted that “a Filipino adult surveyed in 2008 was 10 times as likely to be overweight than someone seen in 1987; while the Filipino adult in 2008 was three and a half times more likely to be obese

compared to 1987” (Florentino, 2012).

However, the line between obesity and health has become more blurry. Health writer Erica Goode notes that “children [are growing] up in a society where thinness is prized, eating disorders are common and obesity is epidemic, the self-consciousness of adolescence can also pose a challenge for parents, many of whom are already having trouble figuring out what, in the turbulent world of teenage behavior, is normal and what is a cause for worry” (New York Times, 2003). As early as the 1980s, it has been observed that “[M]any adolescent girls who are of normal weight are concerned about being too fat and are engaged in potentially harmful weight-reducing behaviours, such as crash dieting and purging. In a recent survey... there was a striking disparity between self-perception of obesity and actual weight for height in girls but not in boys” (Feldman, et. al., 190).

Recent studies by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (2009) and Javellana (2014) point out that body image satisfaction among Filipinas are usually influenced by media consumption – particularly the Internet, television, and print magazines. And in order to achieve these picture-perfect bodies, “more and more teens trying to imitate the pop stars and celebrities. They yearn for the skinny, emaciated look and diet and a large proportion [become] anorexic” (Javellana, 96). The confluence of pressures – medical, social, and psychological – for teenage girls to look and act a certain way has never been more potent, nor more damaging, than right now.

Young adult (YA) stories are also part of this continuous portrayal of female bodies as either acceptable or marginal, or even reversing our notions of either concept. In the Philippines, these stories feature female protagonists who consider their appearances, though not necessarily their weight and body shape and size, important enough that the text considers and acknowledges their appearances as part of their struggle to be accepted within certain social spheres. In this essay, I will be highlighting the status quo in the portrayal of young women and their relationships with their bodies, and how they are perceived by the characters around them, in selected YA fiction from the Philippines. I will also be examining a young adult novel, *Choco Chip Hips* by Agay

Llanera, whose protagonist struggle with the marginalization of her body, and how she asserts her identity as a fat woman, thereby resisting these acts of marginalization. In examining these texts, I argue that the positive portrayal of the fat female body in young adult literature becomes a subversive body, as it performs its pleasures for the self, and not for others.

These kinds of portrayals are particularly important because in young adult fiction, the struggle against marginalization is a particularly potent trope, especially in stories where protagonists attempt to fit into particular societal and systemic models in order to be acceptable. It is also common that

[c]haracters who do not “fit” a hyper-thin European ideal are marginalized. In a revealing intersection of sexuality and body image, heavy characters are sexually promiscuous, passive, and act as if they are powerless, while in marked contrast thin characters act responsibly and appear to be powerful (Younger, 4).

Medical professionals have already noticed that “culture play[s] a role in obesity attitudes” (Wright and Whitehead, 121). This can be expanded to the cultural value placed on youthfulness and vitality; it should be noted that “thinness as a culturally valued commodity is related to the value placed on youth” (Ritenbaugh, 357). Rachel Beineke notes, “Many overweight children are faced with the torment of being ridiculed and outcast every day by peers and family. This rejection is especially hard during adolescent years because appearance becomes so important” (1998). Bordo also notes that, in popular culture, “the discipline and normalization of the female body... has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control” (2363, 2001). In many YA texts, the fat body is an outsider’s body – it is a body that is not meant to occupy the role of the protagonist, unless and of course he or she loses weight and becomes part of the acceptable social group that one is supposed to aspire towards.

This can be seen as a response to the wider observation that “the body has been... rhetorically manipulated throughout history in response to cultural and social anxieties” (Wilson and Laennec, 5), so much so that Berger reminds us that, even in the classical painting of the nude form, the female body is traditionally seen as a passive object presented beneath the

male gaze (1972). However, it is also in young adult literature that allows for the negotiation of body image in such a way that it presents the female body as a site for identity negotiation and subversion, particularly since “[a]n integral component in the construction of female sexuality, YA novels are cultural productions that contain depictions of young women in all shapes and sizes, with all sorts of problems, issues, and attitudes” (Younger, 21).

In the brief history of young adult literature in the United States, locating the preoccupation of writers with the teenage body dovetails with the rise of the problem novel – a sub-genre of YA fiction that emphasizes personal and social problems that teenagers face, such as violence and drug abuse, bullying, sex and sexuality, and other social issues. As Beth Younger points out, “[u]nlike other genres, YA literature provides multitudinous representations of young girls as sexual beings and reflects the social anxiety about controlling these bodies” (2).

From *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly, to *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, to *Forever* by Judy Blume, the focus on social status and appearances are always present as the protagonists examine themselves and their place in the world around them. In particular, “*Forever* contains graphic, female-centered depictions of teenage sexuality” (Younger, 3) which was unheard of when it was first published in 1975. Whereas Daly’s novel was centered on the first flush of romance, culminating in a school dance, and Hinton’s *Socs and Greasers* were concerned with their appearances and their physicality as they fought for control over the city streets, Blume’s novel moved past the soft romance of many female-centered YA novels and confronted body issues in a direct and practical way. As Michael Cart notes,

The taboos that had hobbled the literature in terms of subject and style had flourished in the complicity of silence that authors had maintained in the forties and fifties. But in the late sixties and early seventies, a new and bolder generation of authors began to break the silence with the power and candor of their voices (32).

However, the female body is still problematically portrayed in these novels, which contributed to the culture of thinness as an attractive

trait. In particular, “obesity and thinness are closely tied to core societal values for the West” (Ritenbaugh, 357) which may also account for the singular portrayal of the slim female protagonist in most YA fiction. As Younger points out, “an unacknowledged assumption about weight functions similarly [in YA fiction]: If a character is presented and no reference is made to her weight, the reader assumes a “normal”—read “thin”—weight. Most often weight is mentioned only if the character is considered abnormal, i.e., fat or chubby” (5).

In Philippine popular culture, the fat body is treated in a manner that is also more regressive than transgressive. Fatness is usually used for comedic effect – the punch and the punchline – and the subject of the joke is usually expected to laugh along and accept the insult to the body. We are fond of saying, “Uy, tumataba ka na naman,” (“Hey you’re getting fat”) whenever we greet relatives and friends, without realizing that one’s size and weight may be a sensitive topic. Ancheta notes that there is “the ironic ease with which Filipinos treat bodies” (27, 2009), that makes fatness a paradox: fat bodies imply that there is both financial capability to purchase food but also a lack of control in consuming food. Thin bodies are not associated with fitness and health, but rather poverty – but also an ability to control one’s hunger (Ancheta, 2009). This is even more problematic when the data suggests that being “[o]verweight and obes[e] was more prevalent among women with more education, higher socio-economic status, sedentary occupations, and increased dietary energy intake” (Florentino, 2012). The ability to control is also seen in anti-fat prejudices and rhetoric, i.e., that fat people have complete control over their bodies. “All of these beliefs are centered on the notion that each person is responsible for what they get in life. These beliefs celebrate the assumption that fate is self-determined” (Crandall and Schiffhauer, 459) and therefore, those who cannot control their weight, cannot control their lives.

Culturally speaking, the fat Filipino body is a contradiction in terms: to be fat is to have wealth, and to be fat is to be selfish, gluttonous. Therefore, being fat is treated with both jealousy and derision. Add to that the complications and baggage of being born female, and it is no surprise that comediennes such as Nanette Medved, Eugene Domingo, and Nova Villa use their bodies as comedic tools, precisely because

they occupy such a liminal space in the landscape of Philippine popular culture: the fat woman, laughing. In this case, the culture of stand-up comedy becomes a place for them to reclaim power and control over their bodies – bodies that are usually seen as shameful and marginalized.

The Filipino's relationship with fatness is not just the physical image of the body, but is also marker of class and social standing. Because of this, not only is the Filipino teenage girl expected to tread the fine line between thinness and fatness, but that there is also the “allure of thinness to an overweight adolescent who believes – because everyone/thing tells her so – that with thinness comes acceptance, popularity, love” (Wear & Nixon, 60).

Much like in the United States, the singular portrayal of the female protagonist becomes problematic, particularly because there is little interrogation of the character and how it represents the situation of adolescent Filipinas, and there is even fewer subversions in terms of appearance alone. However, there are contemporary efforts in contemporary young adult fiction to question why the only acceptable Filipina body, at least judging by how it is portrayed in mass media, is the pale and slender one.

In the landmark anthology *Bagets: An Anthology of Filipino Young Adult Fiction*, three stories focus specifically on the physical appearances of their female protagonists: “My Brown, Bony Knees” by Heidi Emily Eusebio-Abad, “There Was This Really Fat Girl...” by Carla M. Pacis, and “Cinderella and the Night of the Prom” by Rachele Tesoro. As the editors described these stories in the introduction, they are “stories that tackle the issue of body image, which female adolescents are extremely sensitive to” (90, 2006). All three stories present girls who are unhappy with their physical appearances: two of the three stories focus on weight gain, while the first story by Eusebio-Abad focuses on the dark complexion of the protagonist, who wishes for a lighter skin tone. All three stories do not provide easy answers for the girls, and they can be read as a triptych of the Filipino teenage girl's body-negative high school experiences.

In Eusebio-Abad's story, Claire describes herself in comparison with her beautiful high school friends, many of whom were part of the cheerleading squad. She says that her "physical build would have been great for the top of the human pyramid... except that my brown, bony knees would really stand out" (93). She attempts various beauty remedies to lighten her skin, but to no avail. Self-conscious of her appearance, she decides to stand at the sidelines during a particular cheerleading performance and support her friend Melissa instead. However, in the middle of the routine, Melissa sprains her ankle, and Claire becomes her replacement during the final human pyramid. Claire realizes, at the end of the routine, that "nobody was looking at my knees. Or if anybody was looking, it didn't matter at all" (97). She triumphs over her self-consciousness over her looks, and claims her body as her own, "brown, bony knees and all" (97).

Unlike Claire, the protagonist in Pacis' story was unable to recover from her body issues. To lose weight before the prom, Ana receives Bangkok pills from her friend Kat. The pills are a popular weight loss supplement in the early 2000s. At first, Ana notices that "[t]he pills were working wonders. She was never hungry... [s]he felt light and really energetic... [but t]here were days when she had a buzz in her head the whole day. And days too when she had no idea what the teacher was talking about or even remember her teacher's name" (105). Her body reacts badly to the pills, and because she lost weight too fast, she collapses in school and has to be taken home. She has no energy to attend her own prom – the very reason why Ana wanted to lose weight in the first place. In the end, the same body that she wanted to control was the one that let her down: not because of her weight, but because of her desire to control her weight and be accepted by her peers.

While the first two stories present a very clear moral – to fail at changing your body is human, to accept your body, divine – Tesoro's story seems to be the most complex, in that the protagonist neither attempts to change her body, but neither does she triumphantly accept it. The protagonist, Darlene, describes herself as "fat. In kinder terms, I am varyingly 'a little overweight,' 'chubby,' or 'Rubenesque.' Can you believe that? *Rubenesque*. As if that highly cultured, arty word changes a thing" (109). She



compares herself to Cinderella, wanting to be transformed through hair and makeup and prom couture, but realizes that she is still the same she's always been and that her fairytale ambitions were not realistic. She comes to this realization when she compares herself to two other classmates – her best friend Sheila, who loses her virginity during the course of the evening; and prom queen Michelle, who makes fun of Darlene all throughout the evening – and realizes that they were all laboring under unrealistic expectations about the magic of prom night. Darlene concludes the evening by saying, “I guess you expected a love story. But in a way, I guess this is. I'm trying to learn how to love myself” (113).

As short stories, they invite the reader to examine the bodies of these female protagonists, and how they play into the stereotypical characterization of the teenage girl: unsure of her appearance, self-conscious, and malleable to the whims of the world around her. Their form forces the reader to come to conclusions quickly as well; a short story is regularly consumed in one sitting. As such, these girls are not portrayed as complexly as can be, unlike in longer fiction works.

However, in YA novels in the Philippines, there is still a lack of diversity in terms of portraying female protagonists. More often than not, they are rendered either as unusual physically, or in terms of personality. In *Una and Miguel* by Lilledeshan Bose (2002), the give-and-take first person narration results in having both characters describe each other: Miguel is described as having “sparkly hazel eyes, thick eyelashes, and hair that flopped over his forehead” (9) while Una is described as “*morena*, long hair in pigtails, almond eyes and upturned nose... [she] looked like a funky artist-type” (10). While Miguel's description focuses on generic facial aspects, Una's description is more detailed – her skin color, the effect of her clothing style that warrants a label. Her body is never described, until Miguel begins dating another girl. Here, Miguel compares them by making a list, where he says “CUTENESS: Una: Like the girl from the Osbournes, but better. Tonette: Like Miley Cyrus, not in ‘Hannah Montana the Movie’ but in ‘The Last Song’” (80). Kelly Osbourne, the cultural reference here, is not only known for her alt-rock fashion style, but also the fact that she is plus-sized. This is in comparison to the waif-like figure of Miley Cyrus just as she was shedding her teen-pop image.

Once again, as Berger notes that “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (47). Here, in this novel, even the female characters do not have control over their physical description. It is given to the male characters to compare and contrast them. Miguel describes her for his own benefit, and the benefit of the reader. His description of her (artist-type, Kelly Osbourne-level of cuteness) is skewed towards the marginal, not the conventional, notion of beauty. And unlike the trio of short stories presented earlier, Una is not even given an opportunity to describe herself.

Similarly, *Shine* by Candy Gourlay (2013) also focuses on the physical characteristics of the main character, Rosa. In this Crystal Kite-nominated novel, Rosa tells her own story, though she is mute and disabled because of a mysterious ailment that robbed her of her voice and left imprints around the base of her throat. “They are ugly thickenings the texture of rope. See the puckers, the shrivelled folds, the welts. Like burn scars...” (8), she says of the marks around her neck. Because of an urban legend that circulated in her perpetually rainy town, Mirasol, these marks are also considered by the local townfolk as marks of a monster. As such, she lives a Rapunzel-like existence, homeschooled by her doctor father and her quasi-religious *yaya*.

The fact of her being trapped by her appearance and her disability consistently highlights the marks on her body as both what defines her and what limits her. Rosa sees her disability as something that renders her an outsider in the town of Mirasol. As the story progresses, she learns that not only does her disability marginalize her, but also, her attempts at escaping her marginalization are continuously met with defeat. Finally, she frees herself by leaving Mirasol and moving abroad with her father, thereby removing her body from the environment that condemns it.

This intersects with the notion of the fat body, in that “obesity is [also] a bodily condition that society has defined as abnormal and undesirable. Obesity also shares other salient characteristics with disability when defined in terms of abnormality. For example, the stare—both the disabled and the obese are looked at by ‘normals’ with an unwelcome and judgmental gaze” (Quick, 2008). In fact, throughout the course of the story,

Rosa continuously attempts to placate this gaze by wearing a scarf around her neck – despite the humid, tropical weather – in order to hide her scars.

Though of course, conflating disability with obesity is problematic in and of itself, there seem to be intersections between these two conditions when it comes to sites of identity negotiations in YA literature. The female body becomes a place for “real, material domination... in a culture that systematically deploys medicalized, masculinist languages to categorize, abstract, and universalize women’s biology” (Wear and Nixon, 3) and both the disabled female body and the fat female body is seen as abnormal, marginal and problematic. There is a sense of brokenness in both the disabled body and the fat body, and constant attempts by the medical community to “fix” them; i.e., make them universally acceptable. This becomes problematic, particularly when seen through a wider context:

Weight-based stigmatization and victimization in childhood can have negative consequences for children’s subsequent psychological and social adjustment. Among obese youth, greater peer victimization has been negatively associated with decreased emotional well-being and psychosocial functioning (Gray, Kahhan, and Janicke, 722).

As can be seen, there is a significant lack of positive portrayals of fat female bodies in young adult fiction that is regularly consumed by readers, since “the omnipresent media portrays desirable women as thin” (Pipher, 184). This is why *Choco Chip Hips* by Agay Llanera diverge from the trend because it portrays the marginalized adolescent female body as something that should be focused on, instead of ignored or changed.

In *Choco Chip Hips*, the protagonist, Jessie, has accepted her appearance: she will never be thin and slender like the girls in their high school’s streetdance club. She is an emotional eater, much like her father, who owns the popular cake shop The Baking Spoon. She dreams of bursting out of her shell and moving her body like her deceased mother, who was a TV entertainment dancer in Filipino variety shows in the 1980s. But she’s content to keep to herself, playing second fiddle to her best friend Kim, and their dreams of becoming famous bakers someday.

However, when her father collapses from a stroke and has to be rushed to the hospital, Jessie's life turns upside-down. It doesn't help that her father does not seem to be willing to change his lifestyle in order to be healthier.

Dad met my gaze with a surprised look on his face. "What? I'm starting on the maintenance meds."

In a millisecond, the panic gave way to disbelief. "Don't you remember what the doctor said? The medication is optional but you need to change your eating habits."

Dad's voice was gentle. "I'm just being realistic, Jess. You know I'm bad at diets."

The disbelief snowballed into anger. Loads of it. I shot up from my seat and pointed my finger at him. "Are you telling me that you'd rather feed your big-ass appetite than lower the risk of another stroke? Because you have a choice, Dad. I freaking don't. When you die, you leave me behind. And FYI, I've had enough of parents dying on me!" (13)

Jessie's exploration of weight loss is not motivated by vanity or even by her own health; rather, she does it to help her father help himself. Along the way, she discovers that the body she has is more than enough to simply just move around – she discovers that she also has her mother's talent to dance. This motivates her to use her body as a form of expression, and as a way to triumph over her insecurities. Not only does she conquer her lack of training, but she also goes up against her poor self-esteem:

If dancing was a skill, so was not feeling self-conscious. I was getting good at tuning out my insecurities while I danced, and losing myself in learning the steps.

The sweat started dripping. The feel-good brain chemicals kicked in, convincing me that I was doing the right thing—dancing like I really meant it. The effect was equivalent to having eaten a candy bar but ten times better, because dancing was healthier (38).

In the third act of the novel, Jessie finally finds the courage to try

out for the streetdance team, despite the lack of support from her friends and peers. She trains with the handsome and down-to-earth Dave, who is already a member of the Hoofers, and who teaches her how to use her body to create meaningful choreography. There's a romantic spark between them, but it's never fully developed – Jess is allowed her chance to shine on her own, without having to rely on an emotional crutch to propel her to the top.

Jessie also arrives at realizations herself that none of the other characters in the previous texts were allowed to realize – that their bodies do not dictate their decisions in life. She matches her actions to her body, assuming that her classmates would be repelled by her weight:

But I realized now that it wasn't entirely true. All these years, I thought Dave was the one who changed. But what really happened was I got bigger. And by virtue of gaining all that weight, I thought people would naturally be repelled by me. Maybe I was the one who shut them out (63).

This path towards self-actualization and empowerment is naturally bolstered by the positive influence she receives at home. Her father, a single parent, cares for Jessie as he occupies the role of both father and mother. His determination to create a caring environment in which Jessie is allowed to be herself provides “ways in which the family, as a basic social unit, plays a role in the phenomenon of obesity and offer insight about the viability of targeting the family as a unit of practice when designing weight reduction strategies” (Wright and Whitehead, 128). By making sure that both father and daughter support each other towards the goal of becoming healthier, though not necessarily thinner, the text emphasizes body positivity without necessarily discounting the importance of a healthy body.

And it is through this emphasis that Jessie claims her streetdance audition performance as her own. It is through this performance, oddly enough, that Jessie finally drops her own performance as a fat girl and instead embraces her own sense of personhood. Whereas before, she had a list of things she was afraid of doing, or rules that she imposed upon herself (e.g. never wearing white or colored clothes because it didn't look good on a fat person; fear of being judged by her peers for her decisions, etc.), during her performance, she allows herself the

freedom of movement – both as a dancer, and as a person.

I was invincible. I was Mom fighting her performance demons and emerging victorious. I was Dad at the gym, pumping weights with arms that threatened to give way beneath the iron. I was myself, dancing my insecurities away, trying to make the audience feel something. Sweat gushed down my chest, my back, my face. Sweat was a fact of life. Deal with it. So were my jiggles, my hips, the extra weight I had yet to lose. All the things that I was ashamed of, I now bared (71).

By using everything that made her who she is, Jessie becomes a subversive character – finding power in her body that society has deemed unacceptable. This undercuts the primary narrative of physical acceptability, in which “our prejudices against the unattractive, particularly the obese...” highlights “negative attitudes towards the obese than towards bullies, the handicapped or children of different races” (Pipher, 184). By subverting the idea that thinness equals power and popularity, *Choco Chip Hips* actually emphasizes the process of claiming one’s body as part of one’s journey towards becoming a complete person.

By writing about fictional characters who journey towards self-acceptance and provide a positive valuation of the fat body, stories like these make a variety of body types mainstream instead of marginal. The struggle to accept one’s body is not to exchange it for another one, but to learn how to claim the body as an imperfect performer. To perform the fat body as a positive identity despite all of the socio-cultural norms that says otherwise is to subvert these assumptions and instead put forth an alternative point of view – that all bodies are acceptable, and that all bodies are worthy of pleasure, of desire, and of acceptance.

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