

Social Stigma of Obesity in Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Date of Article</p> <p>Received : 2024/2/13</p> <p>Received in revised form: 2024/2/20</p> <p>Accepted: 2024/3/12</p> <p>Available online: 2024/6/12</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <p>appearance, judgement, obesity, overweight, society, stigma</p>	<p>Beauty standards are often influenced by social values and cultural norms. What is considered to be beautiful has evolved over time and varies across cultures. These standards play a significant role in individuals' perceptions and behaviors about beauty. In addition, society places strong pressure on women to follow unrealistic beauty ideals. In today's society, being slim is the ideal that women should follow. On the other hand, obese women are subjected to frequent judgments based on their weight and appearance. The constant exposure to social judgments and negative comments about their bodies can lead them to have body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and a feeling of inadequacy. Furthermore, these judgments and societal ideals can influence individuals' choices and decisions.</p> <p><i>Fat Pig</i> is about Helen, a plus-sized woman, who falls in love with Tom, who is generally considered an attractive man. It deals with the judgments and criticism they face as an unconventional couple.</p>

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Introduction

Obesity is heavily stigmatized in society, leading to bias, prejudice, and discrimination in various settings, including the workplace, education, healthcare, and personal relationships. This unfair treatment leaves thousands of people with obesity without adequate support or protection (Lupton, 2013a).

Weight stigma refers to negative attitudes towards overweight or obese individuals, often manifesting as stereotypes like laziness or lack of willpower, social exclusion, and prejudice. Examples of weight stigma include verbal teasing, derogatory remarks, teasing (name-calling), physical assault (kicking, shoving,

hitting, and etc.) and victimization in relationships (Lupton, 2013a). Stigma is defined as a "set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something" (Merriam Webster, n.d).

In a society that supposedly to be modern and compassionate, individuals who discriminate against overweight individuals or use derogatory language towards them do not appear to recognize that those individuals are real people who are deeply affected and humiliated by their words or actions. They may also be unaware of the struggles these individuals face with self-hatred or mental health issues. Alternatively, they may simply

not care about these factors and believe that overweight individuals deserve to be punished (Lupton, 2013b).

Identity has a role in how individuals handle stigma. Some individuals can carry a stigma without being significantly affected by it, as they are shielded and supported by their own beliefs about their identity. For some people, their identity beliefs act as a reference point and set of expectations that are separate from other possible frameworks of identity, such as social identity. On the other hand, some individuals primarily define themselves based on their social identity and see themselves as unquestionably belonging to a specific social category. These individuals are aware of the societal expectations and standards associated with their category of belonging (Goffman, 1963).

Thus, media and other cultural factors have stigmatized obese people, particularly women. Stigma is not exclusive to small groups of people, but rather it is created and sustained by individuals in positions of power who discriminate against those who have less power. Stigma is completely reliant on social, economic, and political power. Power is necessary to stigmatize. Sometimes, the role of power in stigma is often overlooked because power differences are often seen as normal and not problematic. There is a tendency for people to concentrate on the traits linked to illness, medical condition, deafness, and obesity (Link & Phelan, 2002).

Obese bodies have been seen as inferior, unattractive, and repulsive in society. These perceptions have been influenced by the belief that a disciplined body is closer to God, which originated from Judeo-Christian ideals. The

ability to control bodily impulses, such as hunger, has been seen as a sign of moral superiority and innocence. Even in today's more secular society, these moral assumptions still shape our understanding of self-discipline and how it relates to body shape and size. Additionally, media coverage has portrayed them as not only lacking self-control but also as inevitably sick and unhealthy, regardless of their actual health status. This perception has led to the belief that obese people deserve their stigma and are a burden on healthcare systems. Ironically, obese individuals often avoid seeking medical help due to fears of being judged by doctors, which can prevent them from receiving necessary preventive treatment for potential health conditions (Lupton, 2013a).

Neil LaBute: An American Playwright

Neil LaBute (1963-) is a highly produced contemporary American playwright, director, and producer. He is a prominent figure in contemporary theatre and film, who is known for his provocative and divisive works. His plays and movies often generate controversy and elicit strong reactions from both audiences and critics. While some critics have accused him of seeking to shock and label his work as superficial, LaBute himself has repeatedly emphasized that his primary goal is not to disturb, but rather to educate his audience. He strives to create a theatre that goes beyond mere entertainment and offers deeper insights (Weiss, 2010).

LaBute's initial venture into the professional theater scene was with *Filthy Talk* for Troubled Times: Scenes of Intolerance, which premiered off-Broadway in 1992. LaBute took on multiple roles in the production, serving as

the writer, actor, and director. The play addresses similar topics that he still writes about today, such as betrayal, gender politics, the loneliness of individuals even within tight-knit communities, the soul-crushing monotony of work, and more. Furthermore, *Filthy Talk* addresses the contentious subjects that later brought LaBute recognition (Griffith, 2012).

Despite covering various topics and employing different styles, the core of his work is an unrelenting examination of human pathology that makes many people uneasy (Bigsby, Stage and Cinema 10). LaBute has penned a collection of plays referred to as the Beauty Plays or the Beauty Trilogy, which are satirical works that tackle society's preoccupation with physical appearance and body image. Each play reinforces the idea that individuals go to great lengths in pursuit of beauty (Etcoff, 1999). These plays are *The Shape of Things* (2001), *Fat Pig* (2004) and *Reasons to be Pretty* (2008) (Hetrick, 2010).

Most of his works are characterized by the use of overlapping dialogue. This is not so much because his characters are impatient and cannot wait for others to finish speaking, but rather because they believe that their own thoughts and words are of utmost importance. They speak from a sense of self that requires space, attention, and centrality (Bigsby, 2007). Social Stigma of Obesity in Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*

Fat Pig takes place in a large city near the ocean and begins in a busy restaurant where characters are initially referred to as Man and Woman. The woman is described as plus size who is quietly eating a bunch of food in a crowded restaurant. A man enters, carrying a lunch tray. With his first words, 'pretty big'

(LaBute, 2004, p.1), he comments on the size of the restaurant, mentioning that there is plenty of space for people. The woman thinks he has commented on her appearance and thinks he is referring to her rather than the restaurant. The man clarifies that he is not talking about her and apologizes for any offense caused, then he continues to look for a place to sit, and the woman offers to make room for him at her table. The man hesitates, unsure of whether to accept, and the woman reassures him that he would not be intruding. The woman thought of him saying 'pretty big' about her because people say things about her body image all the time, but she got used to it after a certain time. The man tries to comfort her and tells her, "It's your body, you do what you want. That's what I think..." (LaBute, 2004, p.7).

Helen used to have people comment and judge her appearance. People have been fat-shaming her body weight because she is an overweight woman, ignoring her personality and other character traits. Fat shaming refers to the act of criticizing and harassing individuals who are overweight, targeting their weight or eating habits in order to induce feelings of shame. The intention behind this behavior is to potentially encourage individuals to consume less food, engage in more physical activity, and ultimately shed weight. Many studies provide evidence that fat shaming in any form leads to increased stress, higher calorie consumption, and weight gain among individuals who are overweight (Gunnars, 2022).

Individuals who are overweight or obese tend to avoid social situations more, feel more rejected by others, and sometimes experience

lower quality relationships. Overall, overweight and obese individuals tend to have more challenges with social functioning compared to those of average weight. It is crucial to comprehend these connections as obesity becomes more prevalent, of particular interest is how body image plays a role in mediating or moderating the relationship between obesity and negative social outcomes (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Moreover, experimental studies have demonstrated that when individuals are given information that emphasizes personal responsibility for obesity, it leads to an increase in negative stereotypes towards obese individuals. On the other hand, the provided information highlights the multifaceted causes of obesity, such as biological and genetic factors, it improves attitudes and reduces stereotypes (Puhl & Heuer, 2010).

The prevailing belief in society is that individuals are solely responsible for both the cause and the solution to obesity. This message of personal responsibility is widespread and contributes to the stigmatization of obesity, as it justifies society's acceptance of stigma. However, this message does not align with scientific evidence. There are many factors that contribute to obesity that are beyond an individual's control. Genetic and biological factors play a significant role in regulating body weight, and there are social and economic influences that have altered the environment to promote and reinforce obesity (Puhl & Heuer, 2010).

The importance of body shape and weight in attracting romantic partners is acknowledged for both males and females. Studies show that during adolescence, boys tend to prioritize

physical appearance and seek partners based on societal beliefs of attractiveness and slimness more than girls do (Cash & Smolak, 2011).

LaBute presents the first meeting in a way where people are not judged because of their appearance. The man does not stigmatize the woman for her body size; he asks her for a second meeting and if they can see each other again. At first, the woman wonders if it would be good to meet him again. The man asks if they meet for lunch or dinner, and they agree to meet in the evening. The woman tells the man to call her and gives him her name, Helen. He tells her like Helen of Troy, and she makes a joke about that she says, "thousand ships that would carry her" (LaBute, 2004, p.14). And the man introduces himself as Tom. Helen tells Tom that there may be reasons why she will not hear from him again. She emphasizes that she does not usually pursue guys and wants the person to know that. She admits that the person may already have a girlfriend or not be attracted to her, but she hopes they will still call her, and she suggests that even just talking on the phone would be fine for her. Helen asks Tom not to be afraid of her taking a chance and not to worry about what others think. Her talk and expectations reveal that she is coping with body shaming and knows the limits imposed on her by sociocultural factors.

The mental well-being of obese individuals is increasingly affected by dissatisfaction with their body image and concerns about weight and shape. Various factors, such as the media, peers, family, coaches, and teachers, have a significant influence on body image satisfaction and the development of eating disorders. Particularly for women, societal

emphasis on slimness can have a negative impact on psychosocial functioning. However, the differences in mental health between normal-weight and obese adults are generally small. Obese women who have extreme concerns about their weight or shape are most likely to experience psychosocial disorders. These women tend to evaluate themselves based on their size and shape, leading to dissatisfaction with their body image and subsequent mental health issues. It is important to note that these issues are related to body image dissatisfaction rather than actual weight status. Gender and cultural differences can also affect self-esteem levels, with obese women generally having lower self-concepts compared to obese men. Therefore, cultural and social values may have a greater impact on mental health than obesity itself (Talen & Misty, 2009).

The role of family relationships in a person's development and perception of body image is significant. Parents have a crucial influence on their children's body image. When parents encourage weight loss activities and strict diets, it is likely to cause dissatisfaction with their children's bodies (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). A study on body image found that there is a strong connection between mothers and daughters when it comes to eating, dieting, and body image. The messages, both verbal and non-verbal, that what daughters receive from their mothers has an impact on their own body image. Mothers tend to communicate to their children that they should have certain body images, often through teasing, pressuring them to change certain behaviors, and restricting their food choices. These actions by parents have an influence on body image and eating

habits of their children (Jaffe & Worobey, 2006). Helen mentions that she does not care about what people say and think about her, but she still remembers the nickname her mother used to call her, which seems to have had an evident influence on her. The impact of family on a child's self-acceptance and self-value is crucial, especially for mothers, because they often provide insights and judgments on appearance, shaping their children's lifelong understanding of how they perceive themselves. Although Helen has grown up, her mother's nickname still affects her deeply, and it still bothers her.

The "Specific peer influences that have been demonstrated include comments from peers about weight and shape" (Cash & Smolak, 2011, p.16). Carter, Tom's coworker and friend, believes that Tom has a girlfriend, but Tom denies it. He wants to know who the woman is, but Tom refuses to tell him. Then, in the restaurant, when Tom and Helen are together for the second time, they meet Carter. Tom introduces Helen to Carter. Earlier, Tom told him that he would meet a group of people for work. Carter asks where the rest of the group is, and there is an uncomfortable moment. Then Helen goes to the restroom. Carter immediately comments on her appearance by saying, "Not that she couldn't eat for five" (LaBute, 2004, p.35). Tom explains that Helen is a colleague and what he is saying about her is mean. Carter says that he knows it is not nice, but he is being 'honest'. Moreover, he tells Tom that his mother is 'fat' and adds that he knows why Tom feels 'embarrassed'. Carter recounts a humiliating experience at a grocery store where he yelled at his mother for taking too long in the candy

aisle. He says, "I used to walk ahead of her in the mall or, you know, not tell her about stuff at school so there wouldn't be, whatever. My own mom" (LaBute, 2004, p.48). He expresses his frustration with her weight and suggests that she should eat less, and he blames his mother for her weight gain. As he thinks that her weight is the cause of his father's late work and golfing on weekends, he wonders, "How's he gonna love something that looks like that" (LaBute, 2004, p.48). He has asked his mother to look at herself in the mirror; he is disgusted because of her weight, and he has even called her 'cow'.

Carter is a man who always judges people and speaks without considering the consequences of his words. He freely expresses whatever comes to his mind, often making harsh comments. His tendency to judge people is clear. He told the company that Tom has a girlfriend, Helen, and he described her as 'huge' and 'pig'. This stigmatization and objectivation of Helen's appearance increase Tom's insecurities. Also, when Tom asks him about his opinion of Helen, he responds by saying she will be a 'weight' on him, using a pun to comment on her weight. Even when Tom points out that Carter's judgment is based only on her physical appearance, he says, "You're ... doing that strictly on a 'physical' basis" (LaBute, 2004, p.70), but Carter dismisses it by saying, "you're a good-looking guy. You're successful, bit of a player in the industry ... I don't understand you taking God's good gifts" (LaBute, 2004, p.70). Tom tries to defend his relationship with Helen by expressing, "I like her. A lot. She makes me happy, and I really wanna make her happy, too..." (LaBute, 2004, p.71). But Carter

continues to criticize Tom for dating a plus-size woman, implying that she is not suitable for him. Carter's judgments on Helen's appearance reflect the stereotype and stigma that exist in society. This kind of judgment reinforces the harmful belief that a person's worth is determined by their partner's appearance and indicates stereotypes about men's preferences for women's appearance.

Throughout the play, Carter's judgments on appearances extend beyond Helen; he also expresses his shallow judgments toward his co-worker Jeannie. He tells Tom that she has some weight in her arms and describes her as 'flabby' and 'sloppy'. He tells Tom that "She came into my office with her suit jacket off and had on one of those, you know, flimsy sort of blouses with the no sleeves look. I seriously think her arms have gotten chunkier or whatever. The past few months" (LaBute, 2004, p.21). Also, he says that in winter, women do not go out and start to gain weight; that's why Jeannie has gained weight. When Tom tells him that his judgments are based only on physical appearance, Carter justifies himself by saying that it is an 'observation' and he 'observes things', but Tom advises him to talk to his therapist if he is still seeing one. Later, his interest in her only arises when he discovers that she has started going to the gym, which highlights his preference for a partner who follows the social standards of beauty. The ideals of body image, as they have studied different cultures to determine the prevalence of various sociocultural ideals. Previous comparisons across cultures indicated that the desire to conform to the ideal body shape was less common in developing or non-Western societies. However, there is now a growing

agreement that this ideal has become a global phenomenon, largely due to the widespread influence of Western media (Cash & Smolak, 2011).

Society imposes cultural stereotypes on women, forcing them to conform to a narrow ideal that either emphasizes their physical appearance at the expense of intelligence or their intelligence at the expense of their physical appearance. Women are often expected to choose between developing their minds or their bodies, rather than being allowed to embrace both aspects (Wolf, 2002). Another character who stands for society's expectations and bias is Jeannie. She is Tom's co-worker and ex-girlfriend; she expresses dissatisfaction with Tom's relationship with Helen because of her weight. Jeannie keeps asking him whether he has a certain girlfriend, but he avoids answering the question. Then Jeannie tells him that she knows from Carter that the woman is 'fat'. She comments on Helen's body and tells Tom that she is not suitable for him; she says, "It's not like she's... She's really fat, Tom! A fat sow and you know it. I can tell you're aware by the way you're acting, which is really the puzzling part" (LaBute, 2004, p.67). She asks him why Helen for him is better than the others, and Tom replies, "I enjoy her because she's not you, anything like you ... she's not obsessed with looks and money and clothes" (LaBute, 2004, p.67). She praises herself and who other guys like because of her looks; she tells Tom, "I'm not saying that I'm some, you know, glamour queen, but guys do like me. They do." (LaBute, 2004, p.23). Jeannie embodies the belief that a person's worth is determined by their physical appearance, and her criticism of

Tom's and Helen's relationship reinforces the notion that love and acceptance can only exist between individuals who meet society's standards of beauty. Jeannie emphasizes the central role that beauty ideals play in determining a person's value by consistently focusing on Helen's appearance and disregarding any other qualities she possesses. Jeannie's critiques of Tom and Helen's relationship also expose her own flaws and imperfections; her obsession with appearance reveals her inability to acknowledge her own flaws, highlighting the judgmental standards imposed by society.

Slim women fit the social standards of beauty while obese women are criticized for losing their femininity. This means that, while they are overweight, they are unable to fulfill feminine desires such as getting married, having children, and being attractive to men unless they lose a certain amount of weight. In essence, this perspective presents obesity as completely incompatible with femininity. Since marriage is often seen as a pinnacle of femininity, being obese at that moment would be seen as detracting from femininity. Additionally, the portrayal of a woman who has slimmed down as attracting attention from men for the right reasons reinforces the idea that femininity is closely tied to being slim and that a woman's worth is defined by the male gaze. A slim woman receives attention from men, while an obese woman does not, or at least not for the desired reasons. This discourse that presents obese women as unfeminine and not attractive positions them as deviant and different. Being both a woman and unfeminine sets the obese woman apart from other women and makes her appear unusual (Whitehead &

Kurz 2008). Jeannie succeeds in being desirable and values according to sociocultural norms, while Helen is described as 'Fat Pig'.

Animal references are commonly employed to stigmatize individuals who are overweight, particularly women. These derogatory terms, such as "pig" or "cow," are prevalent and easily conjured up to insult individuals with excess body weight (LeBesco, 2004). The state of being overweight is perceived as a symbol of inferiority and primitiveness, serving as a clear indication of an individual's low standing on the evolutionary hierarchy (Farrell, 2011). The term 'Fat Pig' highlights the offensive language and shallow judgments that women face due to their appearance and weight; it shows how they are judged solely based on their physical appearance, disregarding their personal attributes. Also, it highlights the stigmatization and dehumanization women have to face because of their body shape and weight. The playwright portrays the cruel treatment received by those who do not fit into society's constructed beauty ideals.

Helen is an overweight woman, and most of the time people judge her only because of her weight, and she endures criticism and judgement based on her physical appearance even before getting to know her personality. Helen is labeled as 'fat', 'pig', 'sow', and 'huge' by Carter and Jeannie, which greatly impacts her sense of self-worth. Additionally, she represents individuals who do not conform to social norms and are stigmatized solely based on their appearance, ignoring any other qualities.

It seems that "Appearance conversations can also train individuals to be highly evaluative of appearance" (Cash & Smolak, 2011, p.113).

The last meeting between Tom and Helen takes place at a beach picnic organized by Tom's company. As they are in a public setting, their relationship becomes subject to judgments and negative comments. Tom is nervous and hesitates to introduce Helen to his coworkers, and they sit away from others; barely anyone can see them, trying to avoid attention. Helen is upset because Tom only introduces her to people in the parking lot while she has been unpacking their stuff from the car, which she does not consider a proper introduction. Also, Helen wants to join the activities and have fun, but Tom seems stressed by his coworkers. Tom is torn between his affection for Helen and the judgmental opinions of those who are around him. His hesitation to introduce her reflects his concerns about social judgment and the potential to damage his image. Also, the words that Carter and Jeannies told him have affected him. This leads him to consider ending his relationship with Helen. On the other hand, Helen, initially confident in her own body, is accustomed to society's judgment. But as their relationship progresses and reaches a dead end, she begins to question her self-worth due to Tom's insecurities. This ultimately leads her to decide to change her appearance for him. She tells Tom, "I've never said this to anyone, not any other person in the world. Ever. My parents or a... no one. I would change for you. I would. I don't mean Slim-Fast or that one diet that the guy on TV did" (LaBute, 2004, p.81). She expresses her willingness to undergo surgery or any other means necessary to stay with him. Her decision highlights the influence Tom has on her, as she hopes to gain his acceptance and admiration by losing weight.

Also, Helen's decision to undergo transformation for him is a result of both Tom's insecurities and the social pressure they both face. Tom submits to social judgments and is forced to examine his biases by following social norms. This leads him to question his own values, and admitting his fear of society's judgments, he tells Helen, "I guess I do care what my peers feel about me. Or how they view my choices, and yes, maybe that makes me not very deep or petty or some other word, hell, I dunno! It's my Achilles flaw or something." (LaBute, 2004, pp.82-83). This scene highlights the underlying obsession with physical appearance and the resulting stigmatization of treating women solely based on their appearance. Their long conversation reveals Helen's attempts to save their relationship, but Tom hesitates, and he is constantly aware of others' judgments. This causes him to consider ending their relationship.

At the end, Helen tells him that they could work on their relationship, and Tom replies that he does not think he can, and both of them begin to cry while gazing at the sea. This conversation raises the question of whether love and acceptance can win over society's prejudice. Although Tom loves Helen, he decides to end their relationship, which is affected by social values and people's judgments. Even though Helen is ready to change for him, he follows society's traditions. Additionally, it shows how society's obsession with beauty ideals results in stigmatization faced by individuals who do not fit into the social mold and how it can often dictate one's choices and their effect on people's lives and decisions.

The public is highly interested in fat women, and women often feel guilty about it. This guilt stems from the understanding that society views women's bodies as belonging to the community rather than themselves. The cultural emphasis on female slimness is not solely about beauty but rather about enforcing female obedience (Wolf, 2002). Tom struggles internally with his attraction to Helen and the fear of being judged by society. Throughout the play, he has a conflict between embracing his relationship with an overweight woman or surrendering to social norms. At last, he surrenders to social values because of his fear of the judgments of his surroundings. Tom's surrender highlights the social barriers that prevent individuals from finding happiness and love outside of social expectations and presents how society can make individuals feel the need to conform, even at the expense of what they want. Furthermore, this conflict highlights the influence of social expectations and the challenges individuals face when they go against social norms.

People only judge and criticize Helen based on her appearance and body weight, ignoring her other qualities such as her wit and caring nature. She always hears fat shaming from others. Through Helen's self-deprecating behavior, LaBute shows how society's obsession with appearance and unrealistic beauty ideals can affect people in a negative way, leading them to use different approaches to cope with these judgments. Additionally, by deconstructing the idea of beauty, he depicts the harmful impact it can have on women's self-esteem and self-worth.

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وصمة العار الاجتماعية للسمنة في مسرحية "الخزيرة

البدينة" للكاتب نيل لابيوت

رفل ثائر عبد القادر

مروة غازي محمد

جامعة بغداد - كلية التربية للبنات

المستخلص:

معايير الجمال غالباً ما تتأثر بالقيم الاجتماعية والمعايير الثقافية. ما يعتبر جميلاً قد تطور على مر الزمان ويختلف من ثقافة لأخرى. تلعب هذه المعايير دوراً هاماً في تصورات الأفراد وسلوكياتهم حول الجمال. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تفرض المجتمع ضغوطاً قوية على النساء لاتباع قيم الجمال غير الواقعية. في مجتمعنا الحالي، النحافة هي المثل الذي يجب على النساء اتباعه. من ناحية أخرى، تتعرض النساء البدينات لأحكام متكررة بناءً على وزنهن ومظهرهن. يمكن أن يؤدي التعرض المستمر للأحكام الاجتماعية والتعليقات السلبية حول أجسادهم إلى انعدام الرضا عن الجسم وانخفاض التقدير الذاتي وشعور بالنقص. علاوة على ذلك، يمكن أن تؤثر هذه الأحكام والمثل الجمالية على اختيارات وقرارات الأشخاص.

"الخزيرة البدينة" يتحدث عن هيلين، امرأة بدينة، التي تقع في حب توم، الذي يُعتبر عمومًا رجلاً جذاباً. يتعامل العمل مع الأحكام والانتقادات التي يواجهونها كثنائي غير تقليدي. الكلمات المفتاحية: المظهر، الحكم، السمنة، الوزن الزائد، المجتمع، وصمة العار.