

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Today, many people believe that women now have the same opportunities as men. Women can work, study, and enjoy many rights that were once not available to them. These changes make it look like equality has been achieved. However, one big question remains, “Why do many women still not feel truly free?” According to the National Organization for Women (NOW, 2025), Studies from Stanford University and the University of Massachusetts found that 70% of college women reported feeling less confident about their appearance after reading women’s magazines. This shows that even today, beauty standards which are parts of beauty myths still have a strong effect on how women feel about themselves. Naomi Wolf, in her famous book *The Beauty Myth* states that, we are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth (Wolf, 2002: 10). And here beauty refers to currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in west, is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact (Wolf, 2002: 13). The pressures of beauty standards, gender expectations, work-life balance, sexism, and societal judgment can limit their sense of freedom. In other words, formal or legal freedom does not always equal personal or lived freedom. The limits are still there, but they have moved into other areas.

Beauty has become a way to control women, it shapes how they act, how they see themselves, and how others treat them. So actually, the topic of beauty is not really about being “pretty” or “ugly,” but about how the feeling of being “ugly” can change women’s behaviour and shift their focus to other things (Wolf, 2002: 9-12). Wolf divides the beauty myth into six aspects: work, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence. Each aspect has its own way of operating or influencing and limiting women in different areas of life.

Dumplin’ (2015) is a young adult fiction novel who wrote by an American author, Julie Murphy, who was born in 1985. The novel was published in 2015 and has received several awards, including being listed as a New York Times Bestseller and one of TIME Magazine’s 100 Best YA Books of All Time. In 2018, the novel was adapted into a Netflix film.

The story follows Willowdean Dickson, a plus-sized teenage girl living in the small Texas town of Clover City. Her mother, a former beauty queen, is involved in organizing the town’s oldest beauty pageant. Because Willowdean does not fit conventional beauty standards, she often feels judged and excluded. Her journey reflects how the beauty myth operates and influences women’s lives through her personal experiences.

This study explores Willowdean’s personality traits, examining how the beauty myth appears and influences her life and how she challenges and moves beyond it. By analysing Willowdean’s story through Naomi Wolf’s theory, this research aims to show that beauty standards are still powerful today. They continue to shape women’s lives in

quiet but serious ways, and remind us that women should be valued for much more than just their appearance.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the issues that the writer carries from the novels the research problems are:

1. What are Willowdean's personality traits as portrayed in *Dumplin'* (2015)?
2. How do the beauty myth's aspects and effects appear in Willowdean's life?
3. How does Willowdean go "*Beyond the Beauty Myth*"?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to answer the problems listed in the research problems. The aims of this paper are as follows:

1. To discover Willowdean's personality traits as portrayed in *Dumplin'* (2015)
2. To explore the beauty myth's aspects and effects appear in Willowdean's life
3. To analyze how Willowdean goes "*Beyond the Beauty Myth*"

1.4 Previous Studies

In analyzing the novel, the writer reviewed several studies that are relevant to the study conducted by the writer. The writer reviewed five previous studies that were relevant to the study. Previously, this novel has been analyzed in a Jstore article titled "My Big, Fat YA Lit: Plus-Sized Female Main Characters" by Rogers (2018). Which discussed how plus-sized female protagonists are represented in young adult (YA) literature. Rogers begins by sharing her own lifelong struggle with body image, explaining that she has felt overweight or obese since childhood. She reflects on how her physical size has often overshadowed her personality and achievements, shaping

both her self-perception and her relationships. Her motivation in writing the piece is to highlight YA books featuring plus-sized protagonists in the hope that young readers can avoid the decades of self-criticism she has endured. Rogers presents three key examples of works that succeed in depicting plus-sized female characters as complex individuals and one of them is Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'*.

The second related study the writer reviewed is "*Konstruksi Ukuran Tubuh Ideal di Amerika dalam Novel Dumplin' Karya Julie Murphy: Kajian Strukturalisme Genetik Lucien Goldman*" by Resty Maudina Septiani (2021). Which discusses about Julie Murphy's perspective on challenging discrimination rooted in social constructs, as portrayed in her novel *Dumplin'*. These groups challenge society's narrow beauty standards and try to change how people think about body image.

The third related study is "*Portraying Maternal Love Diversity of Selected Characters in Dumplin' Novel by Julie Murphy*" by Nia Alfani and Ruisah (2022). This article discussed the different types of maternal love depicted in *Dumplin'* by Julie Murphy. Focusing on the relationships between Willowdean, her mother, and her aunt. The conditional love she receives from her biological mother fosters obsessive tendencies, while the unconditional love from her aunt results in episodes of conditional depression. The findings reveal that two distinct types of maternal love from her mother and unconditional love from her mother significantly influence Willowdean's psychological state.

The fourth related study is "*Challenging the Beauty Myth in Dumplin' Novel by Julie Murphy*" by Siti Mariyam (2021). This thesis examines how the novel portrays

the beauty myth and how its characters resist the beauty myth. The author uses Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, particularly the Culture and Hunger chapters that reveals beauty myth targets women, especially regarding their physical appearance, promoting the idea that true beauty requires being thin and that women who do not fit this ideal should follow strict diets. However, the characters in *Dumplin'* reject this notion. They challenge the beauty myth by enjoying the foods they love and embracing their identities, regardless of whether their body type fits conventional beauty standards.

The fifth related study is "*Defying Hyperreal Beauty in Julie Murphy's Dumplin'*" by Noor Neamah Hutheah (2023). This paper analyzes how beauty standards are portrayed in Julie Murphy's novel *Dumplin'*, using Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. It discusses how media, advertising, and digital editing have shaped and altered society's understanding of beauty. Hyperreality describes a state where the line between real life and its representations becomes unclear, leading to overly idealized versions of reality.

Among the five previous studies reviewed, many have examined Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* and/or applied Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* as a theoretical framework. However, this thesis offers a different approach. It focuses solely on the journey and responses of the main character, Willowdean, and applies Wolf's theory within three specific aspects, while also including the final chapter, '*Beyond the Myth*' to explore how Willowdean actively challenges beauty standards.

1.5 Scope of The Study

In this study, the writer examines intrinsic elements, theory and method. The intrinsic analysis examines the characters and characterization, the conflicts of the story, and the settings of the story's time and place, these elements serve as textual evidence to demonstrate how the beauty myth influences and limits the main character's opportunities, as well as how she resists these limitations that are revealed through her dialogues and interactions. The second is the theory, the writer is using Naomi Wolf's theory of *The Beauty Myth* also including beyond the myth that reveals how the main characters challenge the beauty myth in Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'*.

1.6 Organization of The Writing

The thesis comprises four chapters, some further divided into several subchapters. The four chapters are listed below.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains the study's background, research problems, objectives, method, review of previous studies, and thesis outline.

CHAPTER II THEORY AND METHOD

This chapter contains the theories used to analyze the novel. The writer applies intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to analyzing the story's elements. The intrinsic elements are limited to characters, characterization, conflict, and setting. The extrinsic

analysis explores how Naomi Wolf's Theory of The Beauty Myth in three aspects (Work, Culture, Sex) works and affects Willowdean's along with the chapter of "Beyond the Myth" to reveal how Willowdean challenges the myth

CHAPTER III

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter contains analysis of the novel that draws on the theoretical framework. The study focuses on addressing the issues raised in the research problems.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This chapter is the summary of the research paper.