International Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume 8, Issue 3, 2026
Homepage : http://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls

A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Reading of Female Body Image in *Letting Ana Go* and *Picture Perfect*

Oluwanifemi D. Bamidele-Nelly
The Federal University of Technology Akure, Nigeria
ndbamidele-nelly@futa.edu.ng

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i3.2613
APA Citation: Bamidele-Nelly, O.D. (2026). A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Reading of Female Body Image in *Letting Ana Go* and *Picture Perfect*. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies. 8*(3).267-279. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i3.2613

Received:
03/04/2026

Accepted:
29/04/2026

Keywords:
Contemporary American Fiction, Female Body Image, Feminism, Psychoanalysis

Abstract

This study examines the representation of female body image as a contested site of sociocultural regulation and psychic negotiation in contemporary American fiction. While existing scholarship has largely approached female body image through either sociocultural or psychological frameworks, a gap remains in integrative analyses. Addressing this, the paper undertakes a feminist-psychoanalytic reading of two contemporary American novels: Anonymous' Letting Ana Go and Alessandra Thomas' Picture Perfect to explore how female body image is constructed, internalised, and resisted. To achieve this aim, the study performs a qualitative close reading and comparative textual analysis of the novels drawing on feminist theories of embodiment, surveillance, and neoliberal self-regulation alongside psychoanalytic concepts of repression, identification, and misrecognition. The analysis reveals that the novels' protagonists internalise dominant body ideals that equate thinness with women's beauty, self-control and worth. However, their trajectories diverge: Ana's story in Letting Ana Go culminate in anorexia and death as a destructive assertion of agency, while Cat in Picture Perfect, recovers through therapy, creative expression, and resistance to external validation. The study concludes that while sociocultural factors may influence women's embodied experiences, access to support and ideological resistance can significantly determine outcomes.

1. Introduction

"To lose confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in oneself." *(Beauvoir, 2011)*

Contemporary feminist scholarship increasingly examines the politics of bodily representation, paying particular attention to how gendered subjects are shaped, regulated, and constrained by sociocultural narratives (Brown & Gershon, 2017; Froidevaux-Metterie, 2020; Su, 2024). While earlier feminist movements emphasised reclaiming the female body from patriarchal objectification (Walker, 2003; Wollstonecraft, 2004; hooks, 2014), more recent scholarship expands focus to the commodification of wellness, the therapeutic rhetoric of "self-love," and the intensification of visual culture in digital spaces (Bordo, 2004; Holmes, 2015; Orgad & Gill, 2022). Within these evolving discourses, body image emerges not as a private concern but as a culturally orchestrated and politically regulated phenomenon that profoundly shapes women's affective and relational lives.

Body image is commonly defined as an individual's perception and evaluation of their physical appearance, shaped by sociocultural, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions (Slade, 1994; Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Cash, 2004; Rodgers et al., 2023; Merino et al., 2024). While positive body image is associated with acceptance and realistic perception of one's body, negative body image often manifests through shame, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and compensatory behaviours (Tylka, 2012; Quittkat, 2019). Research

consistently indicates that women are disproportionately affected, largely because the female body has historically functioned as a primary locus of social control (Tiggeman, 2015; Ricciardelli et al., 2018; Swami et al., 2022). Consequently, body dissatisfaction among women is best understood not as mere individual crisis but as a systemic cultural condition tied to unattainable aesthetic ideals.

In literary criticism, analyses of female body image have generally followed two dominant trajectories. The first privileges sociocultural and ideological critique where scholars examine how literature reproduces or contests sociocultural structures of female body discipline, surveillance, and neoliberal self-regulation (Younger, 2009; Siddique, 2021; Kouta, 2023). Such scholarship demonstrates that fictional bodies are shaped by external structures of patriarchy, media, and consumer capitalism. The second interpretive dimension approaches female body image primarily through psychological or trauma-oriented paradigms. Here, literary representations of female negative body image are examined as manifestations of emotional distress, identity crisis, or post-traumatic response (June, 2010; Holmes, 2020).

While both trajectories have yielded significant insight, sociocultural readings risk downplaying the unconscious dimensions that render women's body disciplinary practices psychically compelling, while psychoanalytical interpretations may insufficiently situate female body image within systemic gendered contention. Consequently, there remains a need for literary scholarship that integrates feminist critique with psychoanalytic reading to better interrogate this complex phenomenon.

Moreover, American fiction, particularly those centred on female protagonists navigating body dissatisfaction, presents as a suitable genre for such integrative analysis. From Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017) and more recently Denise Williams' *The Fastest Way to Fall* (2021), these novels depict young women whose relationships with their bodies are shaped by cultural stereotypes, peer culture, family dynamics, and validation by romantic partners. Yet these narratives do more than document sociocultural pressure. They also reveal the psychic processes through which external norms become absorbed as intense regulatory practices, self-punitive rituals, and distorted self-perception.

Adopting qualitative close-reading and in-depth comparative textual analysis, this study undertakes a feminist–psychoanalytic reading of two contemporary American novels: Anonymous' *Letting Ana Go* (2013) and Alessandra Thomas' *Picture Perfect* (2014), to investigate how female body dissatisfaction operates simultaneously as a culturally influenced condition and a psychological crisis.

The choice of the two novels is informed by their detailed engagement of female body image, self-surveillance, eating disorders, trauma, and the psychological burden of contemporary beauty culture among young American women. Both novels foreground the intersection of sociocultural pressure and psychic conflict, thereby making them suitable for an integrated feminist–psychoanalytic analysis. Furthermore, their contrasting narrative trajectories also enable a comparative exploration of internalisation, resistance, and female agency in contemporary American fiction.

2. Female Body Image in Contemporary American Literature: An Overview

Body image is a central concern in feminist literary studies, especially as contemporary fiction continues to portray the female body as a battleground of identity, discipline, and desire. Emerging from a long tradition of gendered critique, feminist scholarship has moved beyond analysing the objectification of women to interrogating how beauty ideals are internalised, negotiated, and resisted within lived and narrated experience. The female body, in this evolving discourse, is not merely represented; it is constructed as a site where power, visibility, affect, and subjectivity intersect.

Recent American feminist and literary scholarship underscores the nexus between female body image and broader ideological formations such as neoliberal self-regulation, postfeminist

media culture, and the commodification of femininity. Piran (2019) argues that girls' experiences of embodiment are shaped through relational negotiations with dominant appearance stereotypes, often resulting in disconnection, fragmentation, and diminished agency. Similarly, Orgad & Gill (2022) demonstrate how contemporary discourses of empowerment repackage structural inequalities as individual deficits, demanding relentless introspection, body dissatisfaction, and emotional labour from women. Connors and Trites (2025) extend this argument by analysing how American Young Adult (YA) fiction continues to disseminate neoliberal ideologies of individualism, body dysmorphia and self-discipline, even as certain texts attempt to resist them.

Alongside these structural critiques, scholarship in contemporary American literature has examined how fictional narratives stage body enhancements, dieting, fatness, and eating disorders as culturally produced phenomena. Younger (2009) traces how female body image in YA literature is intertwined with sexuality, morality, and romantic legitimacy, revealing that narratives of empowerment often reinscribe patriarchal valuation of thinness. Siddique (2021) further complicates this idea by analysing representations of fat female protagonists in contemporary YA novels, arguing that even "fat-positive" texts may reproduce weight bias through persistent surveillance and stereotypical framing. Kouta (2023), drawing on Feminist-Foucauldian analysis, demonstrates how Western beauty standards produce the "docile female body" through self-surveillance and internalisation in Korean American YA fiction.

Empirical research in literary and cultural studies also suggests that fictional depictions of the body shape readers' self-perception. Vendemia and Robinson (2022) argue that narrative depictions of protagonists' body size and esteem influence readers' body image through processes of upward and downward comparison. Their work highlights the complexity of representational politics and cautions against simplistic assumptions regarding positive portrayals.

Beyond YA contexts, American fiction more broadly has depicted the female body as a canvas upon which race, class, sexuality, and trauma are inscribed, revealing how thinness, whiteness, and youth function as hegemonic ideals shaping women's access to love, legitimacy, and social mobility. June (2010), in her analysis of fragmented female bodies in postmodern multiethnic fiction, illustrates how wounded and scarred bodies simultaneously symbolise intersecting oppressions and collective resistance. Likewise, Newman (2018), though writing in the context of contemporary art, exposes the paradox of critique and complicity in body politics, arguing that women may attempt to subvert beauty stereotypes while simultaneously internalising and performing them.

Collectively, these studies establish two dominant trends in existing scholarship. The first foregrounds female body image as a sociocultural and ideological crisis, while the second privileges psychological, affective, or trauma-oriented readings that interpret female embodied shame as symptomatic of identity fragmentation and anxiety. Although both trajectories have generated valuable insight, they frequently operate in parallel rather than in sustained dialogue. It is within this critical landscape that this paper situates itself, by undertaking an integrated feminist-psychoanalytic reading of *LAG* and *PP*, thus positioning the texts as complex narratives where the politics of female body image are simultaneously sociocultural and psychological.

3. Theoretical Framework: Feminism and Psychoanalysis

This paper adopts feminist and psychoanalytic theory to interrogate female body image as both a sociocultural and psychic experience. The integration of these frameworks enables an analysis that situates female body image within systems of gendered power while also accounting for the unconscious processes through which such power is internalised, negotiated, or resisted in literary representation.

3.1.Feminism

Feminism provides the primary lens for examining the sociocultural regulation of female bodies. Central to feminist thought is the argument that the female body is socially produced rather than biologically determined. Beauvoir (2011) reiterates a strong feminist claim that the body is not a thing but a situation, and in line with this assumption, one is not merely born but rather becomes a woman. She foregrounds the idea that femininity is constituted through cultural norms, embodied practices, and systems of power.

Likewise, Bartky (1990) points out that women's bodies are constantly subjected to male surveillance, often leading to bodily dissatisfaction. She argues that contemporary constructions of femininity increasingly define women primarily through their bodies. Rather than emphasising women's social roles, responsibilities, or reproductive capacities, normative femininity now revolves around the sexualised female body, especially its presumed heterosexual orientation and its physical appearance as objects of scrutiny and evaluation. She claims that this emphasis fosters internalised self-surveillance, in which women resort to monitoring and disciplining their own bodies through everyday grooming and appearance management. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of the Panopticon, Bartky suggests that such constant self-monitoring reflects an internalisation of patriarchal power, whereby women maintain a state of perpetual visibility that ensures their own compliance (81).

In Susan Bordo's influential work, *Unbearable Weight…* (2004), she reveals a trend in which women constantly regulate their bodies through controlled eating and other weight-loss regimens in order to be validated by men. She describes anorexia as a modern-day female illness and eating disorder, the crystallisation of culture, and a reflection of Western imperatives of self-control, perfectionism, and moral discipline imposed on women. Bordo (2009) extended this to describe a form of normative behaviour that affects not only young girls from dysfunctional families suffering from embodied shame, but women from various cultures around the world. Bordo's framework illuminates how thinness in the selected novels operates not merely as an aesthetic goal but as a moral ideal tied to the protagonists' worth, success, and femininity.

More recent feminist scholars extend these critiques into neoliberal and postfeminist contexts. Niva Piran's *Theory of Embodiment* (2019) emphasises that women's relationships with their bodies are shaped through relational, institutional, and cultural processes that can foster either disconnection or resilience. Orgad & Gill in *Confidence Culture* (2022) demonstrate how discourses of empowerment and self-esteem reposition structural inequalities as individual responsibilities, demanding continuous body surveillance and emotional labour among women.

Together, these perspectives are relevant in analysing how female beauty and body ideals are socioculturally constructed in the novels, how disciplinary practices are imposed on the protagonists' bodies, and how moments of resistance and redefinition are interpreted within the narratives.

3.2.Psychoanalysis

In this paper, psychoanalysis complements feminism by foregrounding the unconscious dimensions of female body image and subjectivity.

In his revolutionary work on psychology, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Sigmund Freud provides an account of repression and symptom formation, suggesting that unresolved psychological conflict often manifests somatically. Freud's assumption offers a critical lens for understanding how the protagonists' experiences of negative body image are symbolic expressions of psychological distress.

Jacques Lacan's concept of *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) further clarifies the complex relationship between body image and identity formation. In his seminal essay, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed at Psychoanalytic Experience* (1949), Lacan argues that an infant's identification with its mirror image inaugurates the formation of the ego

through a fundamental misrecognition of the self. The reflected image appears unified, coherent, and bounded, whereas the subject's lived bodily experience remains fragmented and uncoordinated. This disparity produces what Lacan terms an "identification…with an image that is outside itself," thereby establishing the ego as an alienated construct (Lacan 2006, pp. 75–76).

Misrecognition, therefore, is not simply an error of perception but a condition of subjectivity whereby the subject takes the external image as a true representation of self, despite its illusory presentation. As Lacan further explains, this process "situates the agency of the ego…in a fictional direction" (Lacan 2006, p. 76), underscoring the fact that identity is constituted through an external image that the subject can never fully embody. The result is a permanent tension between the imaginary ideal of wholeness and the real experience of bodily insufficiency.

This theoretical formulation has significant implications for understanding female body image, as feminist scholars have continued to draw on Lacan to argue that women's relationships with their bodies are mediated through culturally constructed images that function as unattainable ideals. Grosz (1994) opines that, within psychoanalytic theory, the body is not understood as merely biological; rather, it is shaped by psychic investments, inscribed by social forces, and mediated through cultural representations. Thus, the mirror in Lacanian theory extends beyond the literal reflective surface to encompass various forms of normative standards that influence self-perception.

Within this framework, misrecognition manifests as a persistent identification with idealised images of femininity that are themselves products of patriarchal and consumerist culture. The subject's sense of self becomes anchored in an external image that promises coherence but simultaneously exposes inadequacy. This dynamic is particularly evident in contexts of body dissatisfaction, where the individual experiences a disjunction between the perceived body and the ideal body. Bordo (2009) posits that pressure toward thinness becomes internalised by women, shaping their self-perception and driving them to pursue slender ideals, often at high psychological and physical costs.

Moreover, Jacques Lacan's theorisation of the gaze deepens this dynamic of misrecognition. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1998), the gaze is understood not simply as an act of looking but as the subject's awareness of being seen within a symbolic order shaped by the desire and authority of another. As this gaze is internalised, it produces a mode of self-surveillance in which the individual continually assesses their body from an imagined external perspective. This resonates with Bartky's (1990) feminist reworking of Foucauldian and psychoanalytic thought in *Femininity and Domination*, where she argues that women come to regulate and "discipline their own bodies" through the internalisation of an observing presence.

In literary representations, such as those examined in this study, misrecognition is evident in the protagonists' repeated engagement with mirrors, scales, and evaluative gazes. These moments illustrate what Lacan describes as the assumption of an identity that is fundamentally alienating, shaped by external images and imposed structures rather than originating from an authentic sense of self. Their bodies, therefore, become a site of ongoing negotiation, caught between lived embodiment and imagined perfection. This gap produces anxiety, compulsive self-regulation, and, in extreme cases, pathological behaviours such as disordered eating.

Importantly, Lacanian misrecognition also helps to explain why oppressive beauty standards retain such affective power. As Silverman (1996) argues, the subject's identification with an idealised image is driven by a longing for recognition within the symbolic order, even when that system marginalises or constrains them. In this sense, the pursuit of the ideal body is not merely imposed from without but is psychically internalised as a condition of intelligibility and social belonging.

Taken together, feminism and psychoanalysis enable a multidimensional reading of female body image in contemporary American fiction. While feminism reveals the sociocultural

conditions that regulate female bodies, psychoanalysis explains the psychic processes that render these conditions emotionally compelling and difficult to resist. This synthesis is particularly relevant for analysing literary texts, where the interplay between external representation and internal experience is central to the construction of characters and narratives.

4. Self-Surveillance and Body Dissatisfaction in *Letting Ana Go*

Letting Ana Go presents an intimate and disturbing account of how sociocultural pressures around body image become internalised and ultimately lethal. The story, narrated in epistolary form, depicts the gradual erosion of the protagonist's (Ana) self-worth as she attempts to conform to an idealised standard of thinness, mostly informed by her role as a high school cheerleader, comparison with friends, observation of the way her father treats her mother derogatorily, and expectations of her boyfriend in the novel's American setting.

Ana's transformation begins with keeping a food diary, which her coach suggests for health and performance reasons as a high school cheerleader. However, this spirals into an obsessive and destructive regimen of caloric restriction, excessive exercise, and self-surveillance. An important textual moment that illustrates the standards that Ana absorbs is her list of the Thin Commandments:

1. Thin = attractive. If you are not thin, you are not attractive.
2. Thou shalt do everything within your power to make yourself look thinner. This includes clothing, exercise, and taking laxatives when needed.
3. Thou shalt not eat without feeling guilty.
4. Thou shalt punish yourself for eating fattening foods.
5. Thou shalt always count and restrict your calories.
6. Thou shalt remember that what the scale says is the most important thing.
7. Being thin is more important than being healthy.
8. There is no such thing as "too thin."
9. Restricting calories and staying thin are measures of true willpower and success.
10. Thou shalt not weigh more than 110 pounds (Anonymous, p. 161).

For Ana, these commandments function as a secular catechism, reflecting Bartky's (1990) idea of an internalised disciplinary gaze through which women mete out discipline on their bodies and appearance. The repetition of "thou shalt" mimics the religious biblical doctrine of the Ten Commandments. It underscores the culture of thinness in Ana's world as not just aspirational but moralistic. She enforces these commandments as standards by which she disciplines her body through feelings of guilt and shame when she defaults.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Ana's adoption of these commandments is a form of introjection, in which external expectations are absorbed as internal conflict, manifesting as a distorted perception of self, harsh self-judgments, and disciplinary measures based on unmet internalised standards. Ana's body is therefore presented as a site of intense psychic conflict, reflecting Freud's (1905) position that unresolved psychic conflict often manifests as symptoms in the body.

Furthermore, in *Letting Ana Go*, the reader observes the toll of emotional and mental distress that accompanies Ana's obsession with the idea of "thinness." Merino et al. (2024) caution that excessive preoccupation with appearance can escalate into more serious psychological difficulties, such as low self-esteem, social withdrawal, unhealthy eating patterns, and compulsive exercise, among others, thereby damaging mental well-being and overall quality of life. This idea is exemplified in Ana's rapid descent into anorexia, a condition that Susan Bordo (2004) describes as a modern-day female illness and eating disorder defined by a state of chronic starvation. In Ana's case, anorexia is not merely an eating disorder but is closely linked to her desperate attempt to assert control over an unstable emotional self.

5. Distorted Sexuality in *Letting Ana Go*

Ana's story also reveals that over time, her perception of her desirability becomes tightly linked to male approval and patriarchal validation. Constantly having to witness her father's rejection of her mother for being overweight, Ana develops a strong opinion that a woman's beauty and worth are tied to having a thin body. This impression is further complicated by moments of watching her father's open affection for his slim, younger girlfriend named Annette. As a young woman coming of age, such maltreatment of her mother reinforces the idea that a woman's value is largely hinged on sexual appeal determined by hegemonic patriarchal standards. During one of such occasions, Ana observes how her father adores Annette:

> Dad nodded across the table to a woman with the brightest red hair I'd ever seen and mesmerizing green eyes. She wore a silky white top that swooped low under her emerald blazer…This woman was why Dad left Mom… I closed my eyes and took about ten long, deep breaths. All I could see was Annette's face, her bright red lipstick, her bright red hair, her bright green eyes. She was gorgeous.
> And thin.
> Mom never stood a chance (Anonymous, p.150).

This moment exemplifies how patriarchy operates through bodily comparison. Orgad & Gill (2022) note that postfeminist culture promotes a "love your body" rhetoric while simultaneously reinforcing the desirability of thinness and whiteness. Ana's internal conflict which stems from her mother's inability to fit into her father's standards on one hand and her father's adoration of Annette on the other, reveals her entrapment within these dual worlds. She confesses, "I get it that Mom is not a skinny, big-chested model. I understand that's what he wanted. I'd rather look like her than Mom…" (Anonymous, p. 158).

Furthermore, Ana's romantic relationship with Jack is fraught with anxiety about her body being inadequate. She constantly evaluates his gaze, interpreting every touch and compliment as a measure of her sexual value. She once recalls:

> …Jack rolled over on one elbow and stared at me. I felt his eyes on my face, then his hand sliding across my stomach, tucking beneath me, pulling me close to him. Both his hands gripped my waist, and I realised that his fingers almost touched on either side. Something about this made me smile… (Anonymous, p. 155).

Here, having a waist that is slim enough to fit into Jack's hands appears to be a great achievement for Ana, as she feels that her body has satisfied Jack's standards. Jack validates Ana's thoughts when he confesses to her, "You have such an amazing body. It's perfect." (Anonymous, p. 155).

Ana considers this remark a symbolic validation of her worth. Lacan's mirror stage is relevant here, as Ana's body becomes her ego ideal, constructed through Jack's affirming gaze and touch, yet haunted by the terror of losing that affirmation. Her relationship with her close female ally, Jill, intensifies her expression of unfulfilment through constant gazing in the mirror. Jill encourages her to constantly look at herself in the mirror and, thereafter, use a red marker to outline any sagging skin on her body so she can keep her size and shape under control through dieting and exercise. Ana adheres:

> Usually, I'm not so emotional, but I'd just run five and a half miles, and all I could see in the mirror yesterday were all the places on my body that stretched against the beautiful red dress. I dug through my desk until I found a red marker and stood in front of the mirror just like I'd seen Jill do. I circled every part of my stomach and hips and arms and chest that needed to go away…it seemed like sagging bags of fat swinging from my body. I started to cry harder… (Anonymous, p. 171).

6. Obsession, Anorexia, and Death in *Letting Ana Go*

Ana's eventual collapse is the culmination of her obsessive eating disorder (anorexia), which masquerades as discipline but is in fact a death sentence. Despite her deteriorating health

from anorexia, Ana insists: "I don't have a disease. I have willpower." (Anonymous, p. 227). Here, Bordo's (2004) depiction of the cultural valorisation of bodily control as a form of moral superiority is evident. Ana's distorted perception is not only symptomatic of an eating disorder but also of a culture that equates self-destruction with self-mastery. Her identification with anorexia becomes her only mode of agency, a way to transcend the helplessness she feels in her family and social life.

In addition, Ana's interactions with her friend Jill and Jill's mother, Susan, further entrench this distorted perception. Susan, who constantly reinforces the message that thinness equates with success and desirability, becomes a surrogate mother figure whose praise Ana craves. When Susan compliments her appearance, Ana responds with a mix of pride and fear, indicating the addictive power of external validation. Her relationship with these two enforces her belief that the true way of getting body satisfaction is embedded in a woman's ability to control her diet and remain thin always. On her birthday, she decides to indulge herself by having a slice of her birthday cake, but this thought is short-lived as she imagines what Jill and Susan will think. The narrator captures Ana chastising herself:

> The worst part is that I know I let Jill down. She was so disciplined and didn't eat a single bite of cake, but still seemed to be having a great time with the rest of us. That's just it: I still think I need to eat food to be having fun with everyone else. I want to be different. The reason Jack likes me is not because I look like every other girl; it's because I look different from any other girl (Anonymous, p. 119).

The foregrounding of "discipline" and "different" in this excerpt emphasises that these terms are what Ana romanticises as agency because her society adjudges such women as beautiful, successful, and self-controlled, while women with bigger bodies are associated with laziness and a lack of discipline. Such dynamics reflect the gendered mechanisms of social control described in Bartky's work on "Panopticism of Femininity" (1988).

Even in the face of hospitalisation, Ana resists recovery. She becomes paranoid that nutrients are being secretly infused into her through IV fluids, giving way to the possibility of her gaining extra weight beyond what she considers ideal for her. At this point, the reader's attention is drawn to her heavy psychological investment in bodily deprivation despite the risk of death. Ana dies eventually, and her medical report stating "Immediate cause of death: cardiac arrest due to anorexia nervosa" (Anonymous, p. 227) signals not just the failure of intervention but the fatal consequence of a culture that conflates female virtue with thinness.

Scholars such as Holmes (2020) argue that anorexia should be understood not merely as an individual pathology but as a sociocultural syndrome, one that thrives in late-capitalist, image-saturated environments. To this end, Ana's story is a cautionary tale about the intersection of personal trauma, cultural idealisation, and systemic misogyny.

7. Negative Body Image and Self-Reclamation in *Picture Perfect*

In *Picture Perfect*, Alessandra Thomas provides a counter-narrative to the tragic spiral of Ana in *Letting Ana Go* by charting a protagonist's journey from body dissatisfaction toward recovery and self-empowerment. Cat's story begins in the aftermath of a traumatic accident, which results in her significant weight gain. The novel foregrounds how her physical transformation impacts her social status, sense of self, and mental health, thereby revealing the intersection between female body size and the politics of visibility.

On her return to campus after the life-changing accident, Cat is met not with concern but with polite avoidance. She recalls:

> The girls had already snagged a table and filled it with six pitchers of beer and snacks. As soon as they saw us, the squeals filled the room. They grabbed Joey and exclaimed over how cute her little dress was, how hardly they ever saw her out of scrubs last year. They hugged me too, with quick, closed-lipped smiles, and an extra hard hug on their tiptoes. But they didn't say a word about my outfit…Then, I got the head cocked to the

> side, and always the same question. "How are you feeling?" Nobody wanted to hear the real answer (Thomas, p. 20).

For Cat, this reaction speaks volumes. As Ahmed (2017) argues, the absence of affirmation is a form of affective violence, a withdrawal of social legibility. In Cat's case, because her embodiment no longer conforms to the aesthetic standard upheld by her peers, her bodily transformation renders her simultaneously hyper-visible and socially erased.

Furthermore, mirror scenes in her story depict her struggle to reconcile her new reality with external validation. She confesses, "I turned to the side and stared at myself in the mirror. Instead of a sharply defined torso and legs, I now had a body full of carefully controlled bumps… that was when the tears started again." (Thomas, p. 26). This mirror moment reflects what Lacanian psychoanalysis describes as the fragmentation of one's body image, destabilising the coherent ego. Cat's inability to reconcile her internal self-image with her altered physique generates a crisis of recognition, echoed in her need for external reassurance from her peers and boyfriend.

Nonetheless, unlike Ana, who internalises cultural pressures to the point of annihilation, Cat initially suffers embodied shame but resists total submission. Her relationship with her boyfriend, Nate, initially offers her the possibility of recovery, but the dynamics of her dependency on Nate and her peers are questioned by her therapist, Dr. Albright, who warns that:

> …I worry about you tying your self-worth into only that…hiding behind Nate and how he makes you feel won't help you deal with it all the way. That's why I want to push you, Catherine. I do think we succeeded in nipping body dysmorphia in the bud…I want you to live with who you are…yes, you have a boy to tell you you're beautiful…but now I want you to step outside that comfort zone. Push yourself. Find that feeling in yourself, instead of getting it from others (Thomas, pp. 155–157).

Cat's relationship with Dr. Albright symbolises a significant intervention in her journey. As Orgad & Gill (2022) argue, contemporary postfeminist culture often masks dependency with the rhetoric of empowerment. Dr. Albright's guidance steers Cat toward a more radical self-definition that does not rely on Nate's validation. Such therapeutic moments reiterate Piran's (2019) advocacy for embodiment narratives that privilege internal experiences of strength, rather than appearance-based validation.

Further complicating Cat's recovery is the discovery of Nate's past derogatory remark: "I like a girl I can get my hands around." (Thomas, p. 252). This remark is similar to an instance in *Letting Ana Go* when Ana's boyfriend wraps his arms around her waist. This recurring metaphor of possession, exemplified by the protagonists' romantic partners encircling their hands around their waist, symbolises patriarchal control of female bodies. It also suggests subjection of their bodies to the male gaze and the fetishisation of thinness, which persists even within supposedly supportive relationships.

However, through her relationship with Dr. Albright, Cat eventually comes to the realisation that her relationship with Nate triggers her bodily anxieties. She admits, "Nate had helped me realize that I wasn't most attractive when I looked like everyone else. I was most attractive when I looked like myself." (Thomas, p. 274). Cat eventually finds her courage to confront this and detach her worth and validation from Nate's approval. This turning point in Cat's journey is significant. It underscores Butler's (2004) idea of "performative resistance", where she argues that identity is not fixed but constituted through repeated acts of opposition to norms. In this story, Cat reclaims her agency by redefining what beauty and worth mean to her.

8. Empowerment through Art and Therapy in *Picture Perfect*

Cat reinvests in her creative life as an arts and design student, and this decision becomes another avenue for her to reclaim her body and value. Unlike her previous perception of her body as spectacle and a site for external evaluation, Cat becomes more absorbed in her designs,

thereby extending her renewed internal perception and serving as a metaphor for reconstruction. This way, she shifts from being an object of external gaze and validation to an agent of creation, fulfilling Bordo's (2004) call for women to resist cultural scripts through embodied practices.

Additionally, her alliance with Dr. Albright, a therapist, models a feminist-informed clinical framework that prioritises narrative over normative healing. Murnen and Seabrook (2012) emphasise the value of strength-based therapeutic approaches that decentre weight as the locus of well-being. Cat's story aligns with this approach, portraying recovery as a complex yet achievable process grounded in autonomy rather than assimilation. Towards the end of the narrative, Cat discloses:

> I realized that I don't want to have to count on anyone to take care of me except me, including my body image…Nate had helped me realize that I wasn't most attractive when I looked like everyone else — I was most attractive when I looked like myself. When I acted like myself instead of worrying about what everyone else thought of how I looked (Thomas, pp. 274–281).

Thus, *Picture Perfect* moves beyond the binaries of thin and fat or beautiful and ugly by portraying the body not as a fixed identity but as a contested space that is vulnerable to cultural ideologies yet capable of renewal. Unlike Ana in *Letting Ana Go*, Cat's story offers a model of embodied resistance, wherein trauma becomes a basis for self-assertion rather than self-erasure.

9. Internalised Surveillance and the Female Body as Battlefield in *Letting Ana Go* and *Picture Perfect*

A feminist-psychoanalytic comparison of *Letting Ana Go* and *Picture Perfect* reveals a complex background of ideological conformity, embodied resistance, and psychological fragmentation. While both novels portray young American female protagonists grappling with distorted perceptions of their bodies, they diverge markedly in their narrative resolutions, ideological tone, and representational strategies. These differences underscore the multidimensionality of embodied experiences in contemporary American literature.

Both Ana and Cat inhabit socio-cultural milieus in which the female body is scrutinised and regulated. Their experiences are emblematic of what Foucault (1977) describes, wherein bodies are regulated through various institutions and internalised social norms. Bartky's (1988) idea of the panoptical female subject resonates in both characters as Ana and Cat engage in self-monitoring behaviours such as calorie counting, mirror surveillance, and comparing their bodies to others, which reveal the internalisation of both the male and cultural gaze. Psychologically, both protagonists exhibit symptoms of body dysmorphia, that is, a distorted self-image arising from the incongruity between their embodied realities and socially constructed ideals. In both narratives, mirror encounters become moments of anxiety and judgment, positioning both protagonists as Lacanian objects of misrecognition where the subject fails to integrate their body image into a coherent self.

Nonetheless, the major point of divergence in both novels lies in how each character responds to her crisis. Ana spirals into a death drive as a result of her refusal of physical nourishment, pleasure and life, to maintain a particular weight. Her disordered eating symbolises compliance with cultural norms that valorise thinness as a virtue by which female beauty and worth are adjudged. The fatalistic tone in *Letting Ana Go* illustrates the deadly consequences of unregulated internalised misogyny and the lack of an emancipatory support system. Conversely, Cat's trajectory in *Picture Perfect* is redemptive. Although she initially struggles with shame and alienation, she eventually reclaims her agency through therapeutic intervention, artistic expression, and ideological resistance. Her narrative aligns with Ahmed's (2017) description of feminist survival, exemplified by a wilful decision to exist within systems that seek to erase or diminish one's subjectivity.

Another key difference arises from the cultural apparatuses that shape the protagonists' development. Ana's story, though set in the 2010s, reflects earlier media landscapes where

thinness was disseminated through magazines, peer dynamics, and familial expectations. Conversely, Cat's story engages more directly with the contemporary digital ecosystem, where body ideals are constructed and policed through online platforms. Orgad & Gill (2022) caution against the commodification of body positivity in neoliberal culture, where empowerment is sold as a lifestyle brand rather than a structural transformation. *Picture Perfect* engages this stance by portraying a protagonist who does not simply embrace her body at the end but who also resists the norms that define her worth by body size. In contrast, Ana's demise represents the outcome of internalised neoliberal femininity, where choice becomes a trap and discipline a form of disempowerment.

From a feminist standpoint, these narratives affirm the enduring importance of reclaiming the female body from objectification and regulation. Yet, they also illustrate that the pathway to reclamation is contingent upon access to supportive environments and emotional resources. Ana's lack of a safe support system beyond her ambivalent mother and complicit peers illustrates what happens when patriarchal narratives are left unchallenged. Psychoanalytically, she also represents the subject whose trauma overwhelms the ego's integrative capacity. Her anorexia is not just a symptom but a result of obsession and control. Meanwhile, Cat embodies a subject who redefines trauma by giving new meaning to her altered body and resisting psychological disintegration. Her movement from conflicting mirror encounters to creative expressions through her art canvas is metaphoric, signalling her passage from anxiety to empowerment.

10. Conclusion: Toward a Feminist Politics of Embodied Resistance

This paper has examined how *Letting Ana Go* and *Picture Perfect* represent female body image not as a static theme, but as a dynamic field of cultural negotiation, psychological fragmentation, and feminist potential. Drawing on critical insights from feminist and psychoanalytical theorists, it has demonstrated how the protagonists navigate sociocultural standards that are saturated with patriarchal ideologies and media-influenced perceptions of self-worth, by which their bodies are configured. Ana's story in *Letting Ana Go* offers a harrowing critique of the systemic and psychic violence perpetrated by idealised standards of femininity. Her descent into anorexia and eventual death is not simply a personal tragedy, but a cultural indictment. It illustrates how internalised misogyny, familial dysfunction, and a lack of critical support can lead to a fatal disintegration of self. Ana's life and death exemplify the cost of bodily perfection when framed as a moral, aesthetic, and relational imperative.

On the other hand, Cat's trajectory in *Picture Perfect* exemplifies feminist survival. Through therapy, artistic expression, and relational boundaries, Cat refuses the reduction of her identity to her body size. She learns to articulate her pain and reconstitutes her self-worth independent of male and societal approval. Her journey exemplifies what hooks (2000) describes as self-recovery as a revolutionary action. In *Letting Ana Go*, the urgency of feminist empowerment and psychological wholeness is foregrounded as important in preventing self-destruction. Together, these novels not only critique the hegemonic ideals that shape female embodiment but also propose alternative modes of being.

To this end, literary criticism must continue to foreground body image as a legitimate and urgent feminist concern. As American fiction increasingly reflects the complexities of gendered embodiment in digital and neoliberal contexts, a combined feminist and psychoanalytic framework remains essential. It allows us to see the female body not only as a text to be read but as a battleground to be defended and as a space where meaning, identity, and survival intersect.

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