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OVERCOMING FAT SHAMING THROUGH SELF-ESTEEM IN VASHTI HARRISON'S *BIG*

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Abstract

Picture books can have a formative impact on children under thirteen's mental and emotional growth. However, while acknowledging its potential importance, few studies have dived into children's picture books that focus on fat shaming or body discrimination and self-esteem in children. This research, therefore, examined the children's picture book written and illustrated by Vashti Harrison titled *Big.* This current study aims to reveal 1) How *Big* by Vashti Harrison represents fat shaming and self-esteem, 2) How the main character in *Big* overcomes fat shaming, and 3) How the critical position of the author related to the topic of fat shaming and self-esteem in this picture book is. This study employs qualitative types of study with Stuart Hall's theory of representation as the framework, supported by Roland Barthes' semiotic approach and Foucault's discursive approach. The findings uncovered the act of fat shaming in this study serves as social pressure toward the girl's body image and negatively influences the girl's view of her own body. Nevertheless, Harrison's narrative also shows her insight on the topic of fat shaming, which rejects the idea of biases for plus-sized people in society.

Keywords: *Fat shaming, picture book, representation*

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Introduction

A picture book is a literary work whose pictures or illustrations displayed is as important as or even more important than the text (Kennedy, 2019). A picture book typically consists of 32 pages with each page having at least one picture or illustration. These types of literary work are often aimed at young readers. Therefore, this book typically featured colorful and uniquely shaped illustrations to attract young reader's attention. This article discussed a picture book entitled *Big* (2023) written by an American writer and illustrator from Virginia, Vashti Harrison. Harrison's story is a self-love journey of a girl that is percieved as being too big by society. This picture was published in 2023 and has won several awards such as Caldecott Medal 2024, a Coretta Scott King Award Author & Illustration Honor Book, and a New York Times bestseller (Harrison, n.d.).

This story focuses on the girl's journey to love herself and stand against fat shaming and all discrimination and criticism toward her appearance. The act of making fun of and humiliating someone who is considered fat or overweight refers to fat shaming (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Fat shaming can take various forms such as verbal fat shaming, dislike glances, sarcastic expressions, and even comparing to certain animals (Ginting & Wiradharma, 2023). This discrimination can happen to all segments of society including children. This social issue not only can be found in real life but also in literary work, as one of the literary work characters that reflects the reality of life. Picture books as children's literature provide such good media to present philosophical issues in a way that engages young readers (Wartenberg, 2009). A picture book as a literary work also carries important values such as morals, culture, behavior, psychology, and cognition that can shape children's mental development (Ismail, 2023). Therefore, this study will analyze a picture book titled *Big* (2023) on how the representation of fat shaming and self-esteem to overcome this fat shaming action. In this current study, Hall's Theory of Representation was employed due to its relevance to the subject. In the constructionist approach, Hall (1997) developed two models: a semiotic model influenced by Roland Barthes and a discursive model influenced by Foucault. The semiotic model will be used to analyze the constructed meaning of the visual images in the children's story under study, while the narratives will be scrutinized using the discursive model.

In doing this study, several previous studies are used to support this research. The first previous research by Kusumayanti et al. (2024) has given a clear example of utilizing Hall's theory of representation. She analyzed how the author of *Balloons for Papa* represented child determination and

depression through the use of color and how the author's personal experience became the main source of the way the author represented the topic in the picture book. Meanwhile, Audina et al. (2024) studied the representation of body image and self-acceptance in a novel called *45 Pounds (More or Less).* Her study found that media portraying unrealistic beauty and body standards affects how the main character sees herself and makes her feel dissatisfied and unsure of herself.

Sarwar and Zahra (2023) used a multimodal approach to analyze a children's cartoon program titled *Motu Patlu* and later found that fat shaming in children's cartoon programs is used as a joke or a humorous subject. They found these things can cause the normalization of fat shaming action and lead to the fat stigma, this brings us to the following article by Ginting and Wiradharma (2023). In their study on the Indonesian fat women community using discourse analysis, they studied a Facebook community to see how society's judgment toward overweight women shows up in daily life. In this study, they found overweight women who were fat-shamed both verbal and non-verbal by various people such as family, coworkers, and neighbors.

A study of five picture books by Adelia and Irawan (2020) in identifying factors for low self-esteem shows that in the fourth picture book, one of the causes was body image or perception of a person about their own body. Furthermore, Siskawati (2020) in her study of Philip Whitney's novel, explores how the character in the novel gains self-esteem. It was found from her research that there are three main pursuits for building self-esteem. This article helps this current study to understand more about how self-esteem is represented in a literary work. Although all the previous studies have been complex, none have applied representation theory as the main framework or employed a semiotic approach to analyze how fat shaming and self-esteem are represented in *Big*. Additionally, the connection between Harrison's background as the writer and the story she created also deserves a deeper investigation.

Despite its importance, the topic of fat shaming, self-esteem, and self-love in children's literature has been overlooked. This paper aims to address that gap and highlight the discussion that has long been unexplored. This exploration is highly significant, as it highlights a crucial issue caused by fat shaming especially when it happens to children, and makes these children doubt themselves and lose their confidence. This research employs three main research questions 1) How does *Big* by Vashti Harrison represent fat shaming, 2) How does the main character in *Big* overcome fat shaming and gain self-esteem, and 3) How is the critical position of the author related to the topic of fat shaming and self-esteem in this picture book.

Research Methods

Design

This study applies a textual qualitative research to analyze the data. By using this qualitative research, this study can dive into a deeper understanding of social issues presented in the material object (Denscombe, 2010). The data of this study was taken from facts and information available in *Big* (2023) written by an American writer and illustrator from Virginia, Vashti Harrison. In collecting the data this research conducts a comprehensive reading as the most effective method to gather the primary data. The primary data is taken from Harrison's picture book and specifically selected based on the relevance to fat shaming and self-esteem.

Data and Data Source

The current research is a textual study that does not involve any participant, but the characters in the selected literary work. The primary data on self-esteem and fat shaming are in the form of verbal dialogues stated by the characters, visual presentation including images or illustrations, and narration on the plotline of the picture book.

Instrument

The primary instrument in this textual study is a discursive and semiotics analysis sheet developed by the researchers to classify issues related to fat shaming experienced by the main character in the story, as well as all of the character's experiences in building her self-esteem. The researchers classify the written texts and images into fat-shaming category, low self-esteem category, and the strategy to build the main character's self-esteem. From the classification, the collected data are scrutinized.

Data Collection

Data collection is the process of gathering data or samples (Denscombe, 2010). In this study, the data refers to information and knowledge related to fat shaming and sef-esteem. Data collection is a very important step in the analysis process. Without data collection, research cannot be conducted. There are several methods for collecting data. For this research to collect the data, comprehensive reading is used as the most effective method to gather primary data from Vashti Harrison's picture book titled *Big* published by Little, Brown Books for Young Readers on May 2, 2023. The primary data is specifically selected to be relevant to the research topics on fat shaming and self-esteem. The data used can be in the form of narratives, images,

illustrations, and dialogues stated by the character in the picture book. Furthermore, to understand Harrison's critical position, as the author of the book, the researchers examine various interviews with Vashti Harrison about fat shaming or self-esteem, and other topics related to this picture book, as well as online documents about Vashti Harrison.

Data analysis

The fundamental analytical framework of his study is rooted in Stuart Hall's theory of representation and supported by the semiotic approach by Roland Barthes. The data analysis follows a semiotic approach by Barthes to reveal the first and the second research questions. This process involves examining each sign as a signifier (images, text, or narration) to find out its meaning on how fat shaming and self-esteem are represented and how the main character overcomes it in the story. The final stage of this analysis will be conducted using Stuart Hall's constructionist approach. Through this process, Harrisons's critical position as the writer of this picture book regarding topics on fat shaming and self-esteem will be revealed.

Results and Discussion

Results

Fat shaming and low Self-esteem represented in Big by Vashti Harrison

The goal of this research is to uncover any fat-shaming treatment that the girl gets from society and how she gets away with this discrimination. Another point also added on how this fat shaming affects the girl's mentality, psychological states, and any other negative impact. In this picture book, fat shaming is represented as social pressure toward the girl's body image. Body image itself refers to how a person thinks, perceives, and behaves toward their own body shape.

Fat Shaming

At the beginning of this story, the girl is initially described as a kid who has grown up into a big girl. However, as the story goes, the word "big", which was once a compliment for the girl, becomes a mockery and takes on a negative meaning. McClendon (2018) states that social pressure is the influence exerted by society on a person's actions, thoughts, or behaviour. In this case, the comments from others about her body become a social pressure that changes her mindset about having a body like hers. The first instance of fat shaming in this picture book can be seen in the figure below.

Figure 1: The girl gets stuck in the swing and is humiliated (Harrison, 2023: 10)

The story of this picture book mostly takes place in the girl's school, which is narrated as an elementary school where the girl is in the 2nd grade. As seen in Figure 1, the girl is shown playing on the swing but then unfortunately gets stuck. This narration of this part shows that instead of helping the girl while she seeks help, the other character, who is her peer friend, is shown mocking her and does not take her condition seriously. Among three out of six characters in this part, they mocked the girl by calling her "moo", "whale" and "moose".

Upon closer examination, four out of six characters are also illustrated with a laughing expression. This fat stigma often frames fat individuals and fat shaming as something humorous or merely a joke. However, these actions can deeply hurt the victims, which shows in this part how the girl is illustrated with sad expressions. This indicates that the girl did not appreciate the other actions that humiliated her and did not take her seriously just because of her size.

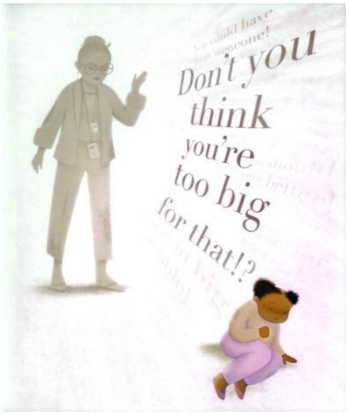

Figure 2: The girl is told she is "too big" by an adult (Harrison, 2023: 12)

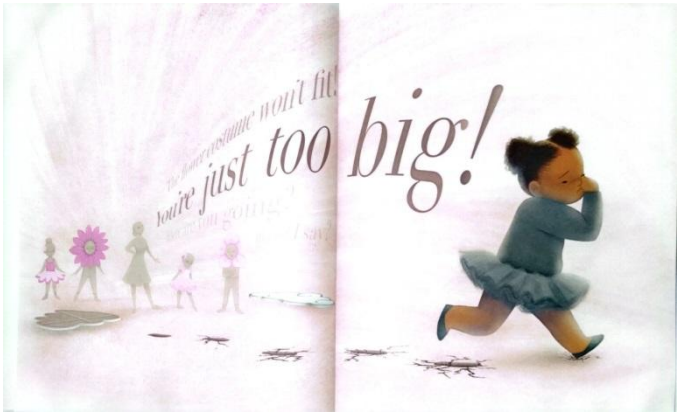

Figure 3: The girl is told that she does not fit (Harrison, 2023: 23–24)

Besides her peer friends, there are also adults who are making criticism and comments about the girl's body image. When the girl gets stuck on a swing, a teacher then comes and helps her. However, after helping the girl this teacher throws comments on the girl, which can be seen in Figure 3. Not only directly describe the girl as "too big", but the teacher also said, "You should know better". This comment demonstrates the common stigma among society toward fat people where they are seen as lazy and not paying attention to their physical condition. In this figure the teacher also mentioned in the narration that the girl does not belong to the little kids, implyings that the girl does not fit the standard to be a little girl just like her other friend.

The next Figure 3 also featured a teacher that criticized and fat-shamed the girl. In Figure 3 the setting changes into theater class, where the teacher tells the girl that she cannot wear the flower costume like her other friend because it does not fit her. Instead, she is given a cloudy husky gray mountain costume. The important part here is that the word "won't fit" by the teacher can be understood literally and figuratively. This phrase not only shows that the costume does not fit the girl but also suggests that the girl's size is beyond the standard. Therefore, because of this, the girl lost her opportunity to wear the flower costume while her other friend was still in the flower costume. This situation reflects how fat individuals are often excluded from society and lose opportunities because society itself fails to provide a proper accommodation for fat person people.

In both Figure 2 and 3, adult female characters who are teachers are portrayed doing fat shaming to the main character. This is interesting because as a fellow female, woman, or a girl instead of encouraging the girl, these teachers give criticism to the girl's body. One of the manifestations of beauty standards is the idealization of a certain body size, where a woman's body is seen as incomplete until it reaches these standards.

In this picture book, the teacher tries to fit the girl into the existing body standard by commenting that the girl's body is "too big", implying that her physical appearance is not yet fitting. These portrayals reveal that it is often adults who project negative judgments and sigma toward a girl's appearance. The criticism, comments, and fat shaming that comes from the girl's surroundings in this story play as social pressure. This social pressure can negatively affect how the girl views her body image. Therefore, the next discussion will analyze the effect of this fat shaming on the girl.

Low Self-esteem

Low self-esteem means a negative perception, where a person feels unworthy, and with characterized by diminished self-worth and lack of confidence. After being fat-shamed and influenced by others' ideas toward her body, the girl is narrated as "it makes her feel small". The word small here can be interpreted as a feeling of inferiority due to being seen as not fiting society's standard. When the girl stops acknowledging her worth and only focuses on other opinions, she will gradually lose faith and confidence in herself. This feeling leads the girl to develop low self-esteem.

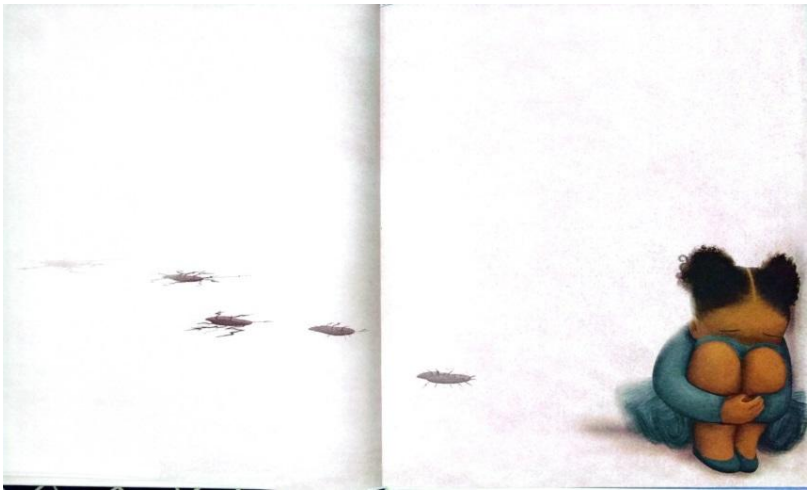

Figure 4: The girl develops low self-esteem

This part is shown in the picture book by the illustration of the girl's body is curled up in the corner so that her face is covered by her legs after her teacher calls her "too big". The foot prints indicate her steps as she moves away from society – showing desperation. Someone with low self-esteem tends to have a negative perception of their body image and vice versa. When a person struggles to see their true worth and feels inferior, it is a sign of having low self-esteem.

Self-Acceptance to improve Self-Esteem

Fat shaming and its effects become the main issue for the main character in this picture book. The girl struggles with her low self-esteem after getting fat-shamed by society and is eventually able to overcome this phase at the end of her journey. In the field of psychology, self-esteem is part of the core concept of personality development. Because of having low self-esteem, the girl is depicted breaking down in tears, reflecting her feelings of grief about the criticism she gets about her body. After expressing her emotions, the girl then illustrates the realization of her true self that others did not see in her from the outside. This becomes a turning point when she starts to accept herself, helping the girl regain her self-esteem and feel confident about her body image again.

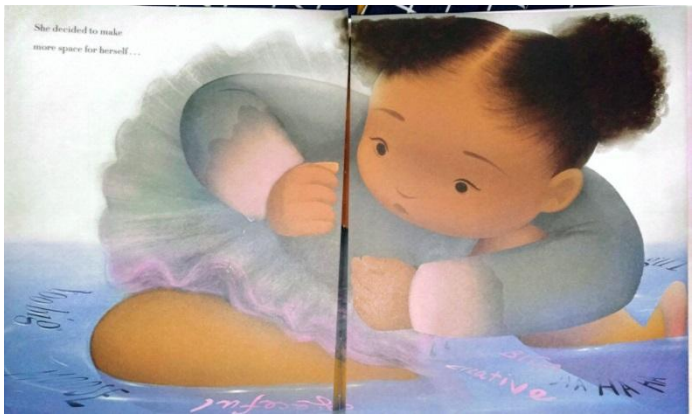

Figure 5: The girl makes a space for herself (Harrison, 2023: 45–46)

An interesting use of color in this part of the book worth further exploration. Two prominent colors are used in this part, which are pastel pink and husky gray. The use of color can effectively deliver the message to the readers. This pastel pink, which is dominant in the beginning, signifies the girl's love and confidence. Pink is associated with meanings such as love, affection, and comfort. The contrast with the husky gray color that gradually dominates after the girl gets fat shaming, reflects the girl's fading of confidence. Gray itself is often associated with negative representations such as lack of confidence, low energy, and depression.

Discussion

From the perspective of Hall's theory of representation, verbal representations can be analyzed through the written language that constructs a character's identity. At the beginning of the story, the author of *Big* describes her as a chubby little girl who is always praised. Over time, Big eventually becomes overweight and is recurrently mocked by her friends and

the adults around her. Borrowing Foucault's terminology, Hall (1997) highlights that, in discursive practices, what society believes to be true or normal is influenced by the concepts, institutions, and procedures through which knowledge is established. In this case, what society knows is that fat means negative. The fat-shaming that happened to Big may draw from the established discourse about beauty standard, mentioning that being fat is ugly.

However, the writer of the selected children's picture book under study successfully turns the low self-esteem into self-acceptance by showing the girl's self-help. She is crying as she gives herself space to see herself clearly. The changes in color on the girl's clothing represented in the picture book illustration, from pink and gradually turning grey, represent the girl's feeling that is slowly overtaken by her sadness and loss of confidence because of other's thoughts on her body image. In Figure 3, the girl wearing a full dark grey skirt, as Barthes elucidates, denotes the deep wretchedness while walking away from the crowd. Her hand closing her eyes designates her weeping. Eventually, after she cried, expressed her feelings, and made space for herself she started to see her true worth. This was represented by the return of a color pink on her costume featuring pink- colored words such as "graceful," "creative," and "kind"(Figure 5). The phase of gaining self-esteem and confidence according to Abdel-Khalek (2016), is mainly influenced by children's social environment.

Recognizing her worth helps the girl raise her self-esteem and makes her able to stand against the criticism that comes for her body image. This picture book shows how the girl overcomes fat shaming with her self-esteem by representing the girl confronting others and returning their negative comment saying that comment hurt her feelings. An important aspect is also shown in this picture book by narrating the girl rejecting an offer to change her appearance, this signifies the girl's self-acceptance after boosting her self-esteem.

At the very end of the story, the girl is presented doing ballet in a pink tutu skirt and pink cloth followed by pink-colored words such as "gentle," "kind," and "smart", symbolizing her embracing herself and finally able to do what she wants. However there is a contradiction in the illustration where the girl is represented as a dark-skinned girl doing ballet. Ballet is an art performance with an ideal standard for the dancer to have a pale skin tone resembling a "peeled apple" (Heinecken, 2019). Ballet has excluded black people from performing this art due to the perception that their body are naturally athletic and masculine. This part does not only show how the girl can stand up for herself after gaining self-esteem and overcome

fat shaming, but also shows how after accapting and loving herself the girl can challenge society's standard and norm.

Vashti Harrison is an American writer, illustrator, and filmmaker born in 1988. She was born to an African American father and an Indian mother. She also has an academic background with a Bachelor's Degree in Arts and an MFA in Film and Video. Throughout her career as an illustrator, she has collaborated with other writers and even actresses to create amazing work and received a lot of awards. This book titled Big is her first book as both the author and illustrator.

As the creator of this picture book, Harrison's background in creating this work becomes an interesting aspect that produces her work. Hall's (1997) constructionist approach sees an author's background and their connection to the theme or issue they presented in their work. In an interview with CBS Morning (2023), Harrison stated that the narrative of *Big* was more or less inspired by her personal childhood experience. She explained that the themes of fat shaming and self-love within the story are closely linked to her struggles related to body image during her early years. Harrison also underlines that the specific part where the protagonist gets stuck on the swing was drawn from a real accident in her childhood.

In the interview, Harrison also states that she intentionally left the main character in *Big* (2023) unnamed to help the readers universally relate to the main character's experience. She emphasized how her identity as a Black Woman in America shaped her decision, particularly the tendency for society to view plus-sized Black children as more mature just because of their size. Her explanation suggests that the creation of this work was shaped not only by her culture but also by her personal and emotional experiences.

Harrison also discussed her choice of using a pastel pink and grey color palette in *Big* (2023), explaining that it served as a critique of the belief that bright colors are inappropriate for plus-sized individuals because they attract too much attention (Harrison, 2023). This belief had ever caused her to feel insecure about her own body. Through her use of color, Harrison challenges these norms and declares that children, regardless of their body size, deserve freedom and joy to wear what they like.

In the author's note of Big, Harrison emphasized that it is not the girl's body that required change, but rather the implicit biases that society holds toward plus-sized or fat individuals. This statement reflects her rejection of fat shaming and her critique of society. Knowing that these characters and story are based on Harrison's personal experience, indicates her critical stance on the topic she seeks to convey. In other words, Harrison's critical stance reflects her strong rejection of the issue addressed in the picture book,

which centers on fat shaming and fat bias. Through the narrative, she supports and raises awareness among readers about how comments and criticism can easily affect someone, and rather than seeing someone from their outside look, she encourages the readers to love themselves and their true selves.

Conclusion

By utilizing Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation and Roland Barthes' Semiotic Approach, this research uncovers that the girl, as the main character develops a negative view of her body image due to repeated fat shaming coming from both friends and adult characters such as teacher. Through the narrative, Harrison highlights the social stereotypes associated with plus-sized individuals. The repeated fat shaming in this story contributes to social pressure, leading to feelings of body dissatisfaction. However, despite all the advices and offers, she is developing her way to have herself-esteem. Ultimately these feelings change her idea and mental representation of having a larger body as something unique.

Another significant point found in this study is Harrison's employment of color symbolism to represent the girl's emotional and psychological journey. Pink, associated with love, affection, and innocence, contrasts with the meaning of grey, a color that visualizes the girl's feelings of doubt and fading self-esteem. This color representation signifies the girl's journey to grow back her self-esteem and confidence to finally be able to stand against fat shaming and overcome it.

At last, this study found Harrison's critical position strongly criticizes fat shaming and the societal biases against plus-sized individuals, particularly children. She promotes self-acceptance and challenges the notion of body or beauty standards. This is portrayed at the end of the girl's journey, where the girl gains confidence and freedom to show herself. Harrison's personal experience with body stigma further deepens the authenticity of her message, reinforcing her critique through her narrative.

The author of children's book entitled *Big* represents a plus-size girl, her emotional struggles and her fight to regain her self-esteem. For children readers with fat bodies, this story exemplifies how to cope insults related to their body size and how to regain their self-esteem. For teachers and parents, this book can serve as a means of promoting children's awareness of differences among peers, including body shape and size. As Kucirkova (2019) points out, picture books—though not the only means—can help foster empathy in children.

However, a notable limitation of this research is that it focuses on only one children's picture book. Further study with deeper analysis needs to be

conducted across a wider range of children picture books so as to be more impactful for the readers and the science.

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