

The Making of the Docile Female Body in Korean American Young Adult Literature: A Feminist Foucauldian Reading of An Na's *The Fold* (2008)

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Abstract

Using both feminist and Foucauldian critical lenses, this paper seeks to analyze some aspects of young adult (YA) literature in *The Fold* (2008), written by South Korean-born American novelist An Na (1972-), demonstrating how the young docile female body is produced through certain disciplinary practices. Michel Foucault's concept of 'the Docile Body' is drawn upon insofar as it can illuminate the role of centerless and invisible power/patriarchy in regulating the action of young women and constructing docile bodies and blurred identities among young women belonging to the Korean minority in America. In Foucauldian terms, the Western standards of beauty are considered disciplinary practices through which the docile female body is constructed. The paper argues that the female body becomes docile through self-surveillance and the internalization of the standards of beauty and body image prevalent in mainstream American culture. The paper shows that Korean female characters in the novel seek to define their body image and identity based on the notions of the dominant American culture. Their search for new 'Westernized' features leads them to internalize the Western standards of beauty, thus objectifying themselves and blur their Korean identities. The paper argues that these standards can also be considered modern patriarchal techniques that eventually produce docile, self-controlled, and self-objectified female bodies.

Keywords: Korean American YA Adult Literature; An Na's *The Fold*; Feminism; Foucault; Docile Body; Body Image; Self-objectification

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- “The body is a ‘text’ of culture; it is a symbolic form upon which the norms and practices of society are inscribed.”

(Lee 82-83)

- “[A] young girl’s body is seen as a defining characteristic.”

(Younger 19)

The epigraphs above demonstrate the extent to which the body has become a pivotal constituent of power relations within any given culture. As far as this research is concerned, a culture in which a girl’s body is both a defining characteristic and a reflection of the standards and practices of a given society is certainly a culture that, whether consciously or unconsciously, promotes lookism, objectification, and patriarchal practices which are considered a backlash against feminist efforts to empower woman. Janet Lee’s, and Beth Younger’s statements above are nowhere represented more conspicuously than in YA literary texts. YA literature refers to those literary works written especially for readers between the ages 12 and 20, a very fluid and unstable stage (Garcia 5; Alsup 1; Govindarajoo et al 274;). For this purpose, a major aspect of YA novels is that they are built around teenage characters with story lines meant to attract this age group. Not only do these novels have young adult protagonists, narrators, and focalizers, but they also focus on themes and issues relevant to young adults’ lives such as identity

formation, sexuality, beauty, and body image. (Govindarajoo et al 274)

Foucault's ideas on the body have proved influential on feminist readings and, therefore, are quite illuminating for the current feminist reading of Na's *The Fold*. In particular, the present paper refers to Foucault's discussion of the disciplinary practices of power through which the docile body is produced. The novel is then analyzed in the light of this discussion, demonstrating that disciplinary practices in the novel are considered modern forms of patriarchy, normalization, and objectification. Some of these disciplinary practices which are dramatized in Na's text are body image, body makeovers, permanent transformation of body features, temporal and permanent makeup, dieting, and body weight.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argues that modern societies have witnessed a transformation in the exercise of power. While in older systems the person of the monarch represented power, in modern societies, particularly in Europe, power becomes centerless, indirect, and invisible (187). In other words, modern power is not identified with a particular person, apparatus or organization. Rather, as Foucault puts it, modern power is "a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets" (215). As such, modern power is traced everywhere and in everything around us; it guides people's

actions, regulates their behavior, and makes sure that everyone is useful, docile, and productive within society. While modern power comes to be anonymous, it has produced a new form of individuality (193). The new individual, having internalized the dictates of power, comes to follow disciplinary practices actively and willingly, feeling that these practices are a display of his/her freedom. It is through these disciplinary practices that power can produce the docile body.

The docile body is one of the manifestations of discipline or modern power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault defines the docile body as a body which can be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (138). According to Foucault, the human body is not a mere biological concept, nor is it produced in a historical and social vacuum. The human body is the outcome of power relations or disciplinary practices that regulate how it looks and behaves (25). It should be mentioned that modern power does not regulate the body through repression; Foucault states that modern power is accepted because it “produces things, forms knowledge, and produces discourse” (127). Modern power makes sure that the person internalizes its dictates so that the control or surveillance comes from within the person involved. Once the person is convinced that certain instructions are for his/her own good, he/she comes to internalize and maintain these very forces that aim to control him/her. Thus, the effect of power is emphasized,

propagated, and extended by the very individuals dominated by it. Being indirectly trained to follow disciplinary rules or else to be punished, persons become subconsciously obedient and docile. Power here is no longer visible or direct; persons internalize these rules as part of their own construction and social image, and so they do not need to be threatened or physically punished to follow orders; they come to be guided by self-surveillance. Discipline creates and controls docile bodies through certain coded activities, tactics, mechanisms, and dominant norms. In the light of these norms, the individual is to be accepted or excluded. Some of these norms are the Western standards of beauty and body image and their ensuing activities such as thinness, dieting, body transformation, and makeovers which are all discussed by feminist critics and are traced in Na's *The Fold*.

Although Foucault's ideas on the making of the docile body through disciplinary practices do not differentiate between men and women, these ideas are illuminating within feminist studies of the body, body image, sexuality, female identity, objectification, and modern patriarchal practices. In "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" (2003), feminist critic Sandra Lee Bartky employs Foucault's views of the docile body and disciplinary practices in her feminist examination of the regulation and normalization of the female body. One of the categories of disciplinary practices examined by Bartky refers to

those practices aiming to produce a body whose size conforms to the Western standards of beauty and body image (27). It is here that dieting and thinness represent one of the disciplinary practices that aim to regulate the female body. According to the current standards of body beauty, a woman's body should be as slim as possible (28). To be considered beautiful, a girl needs to follow these dictates of fashion, otherwise she may be excluded as ugly. This forces most women to diet in order to cope up with this body ideal: "Dieting disciplines the body's hungers: appetite must be monitored at all times and governed by an iron will" (28). To achieve the ideal of thinness, a woman must follow another discipline, namely exercise. Although exercise can be done out of one's free choice in order to achieve physical fitness, it is generally done "in obedience to the requirements of femininity." (29)

Another category of disciplinary practices that aim to produce the docile female body deals with woman's body as an ornamented surface. Bartky enumerates many procedures that involve ornamenting the female body. In addition to applying makeup and selecting clothes, these include skincare, haircare, manicure, and pedicure which take much time, effort, and money. In the whole, these procedures aim to hide any surface blemishes, age, worry, and fatigue (Bartky, "Foucault" 31-33). Although these activities are portrayed in the media as an expression of

individuality, they are merely a response to the standards of beauty and body image dominant in the mainstream Western culture (33). Women must follow the dictates of these standards or else be excluded as outsiders. For Bartky, these seemingly aesthetic activities are in reality mere disciplinary practices which produce docile bodies (33). Far from being a tool of beauty, freedom, and empowerment, the making up of the body is a tool of docility and objectification. The seemingly aesthetic activities are essentially disciplinary practices through which women's docile bodies can be constructed.

Foucauldian and feminist ideas of the body are appropriate critical tools for analyzing YA literature and its focus on female body image. According to Younger, the constraints and norms of a given culture “are reinforced and complicated through representations of young women” (xiii). For example, female body image and the focus on fashion and physical beauty as social constraints are major characteristics of YA literature. Postmodern Western culture has emphasized the significance of regulating the female body in general and the young adult female body in particular. Therefore, body image, with its related issues such as beauty, weight, and dieting, has become the most persistent issue for young female adolescents (Younger xvi). Because YA literature focuses on the interests of young adults especially fashion and beauty, it becomes a fruitful space for representing

young adult female bodies. The ideal body image and body weight are main themes in many modern YA novels such as Susan Terris's *Nell's Quilt* (1987), Cherie Bennett's *Life in the Fat Lane* (1998), Lois Ann Yamanaka's *Name Me Nobody* (1999), Paul Ruditis's *Rainbow Party* (2005), Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* (2011), and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011). In these novels, the female characters feel that they gain self-confidence, empowerment, and control of their life only after managing to maintain the weight and body shape propagated in the media and other parameters of American culture. By presenting certain standards of body image and physical beauty, these YA novels perpetuate certain stereotypical views in which those women who do not meet these standards are othered. According to these standards, "beauty is the ticket to romantic success, power and prestige" (Christian-Smith 43). It is thus circulated that beauty empowers women at different levels. This entails that a woman's success and empowerment reside only in the beauty of her body.

Thinness is one of the Western standards of beauty to which a woman should conform so as to fit in. Recent studies have demonstrated that young adults of all minorities have come to endorse these standards (Younger 6). According to these beauty ideals, a young woman should be as thin as possible. Linda Smolak and Sarah K. Murnen argue that "an unrealistically thin

ideal for women is promoted in various media” and comes to guide the behavior of both white women and women of ethnic groups (243). This thin ideal is seen as a major criterion of attractiveness and beauty. In YA literature, thinness positively affects young women; thin young women are portrayed as having better personalities, self-confidence, and more influence and power (Younger 8). On the other hand, fat characters in YA fiction are negatively portrayed. Younger uses the term “Weightism” to refer to this kind of discrimination against those women who do not fit the Western standards of physical beauty; she argues that in YA novels, a fat character is seen as abnormal and comes to be “marked as ‘other.’” (5)

From a feminist perspective, since women come to internalize the Western standards of beauty and body image, they indirectly experience objectification, self-objectification, and self-surveillance as postmodern forms of patriarchy which obstacle woman’s attempts at liberation and empowerment. Smolak and Murnen define objectification as “treating women as bodies to be looked at,” mainly for the male’s sexual pleasure (245). Defined by Bartky, a woman is said to be sexually objectified when the parts of her body represent her (*Femininity* 26). When women are reduced to the status of objects, they become vulnerable; they are exposed to manipulation and exploitation. An indication of woman’s objectification is that she is often judged by how her

body parts look. For example, Iris Marion Young considers the Western culture a patriarchal and objectifying culture in which a woman is often judged by “the size and contours of her breasts” (125). Being objectified by the patriarchal phallogocentric culture, woman no longer has control over her own body (Young 127; Smolak and Murnen 245). Thus, patriarchy is reproduced through what Foucault calls disciplinary practices which invade mass media and social institutions and become part and parcel of our daily life, escalating the intensity of docility and objectification.

Having a docile body which is disciplined in the light of the dominant standards of beauty and body image, a woman becomes self-objectified, internalizing the very codes of patriarchy. Women’s shame owing to their failure to achieve all the requirements of the beauty ideal indicates that many women come to internalize patriarchal standards of body image. In this way, those women unconsciously become self-controlled and self-objectified. Self-objectified women inevitably internalize the male gaze and become accustomed to being looked at. According to Bartky, contemporary culture is a patriarchal one in which, “a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment.” (*Femininity* 72). Bartky considers woman’s attention to how she physically looks a kind of self-surveillance which reflects her “obedience to patriarchy” and indicates that she has

become a mere body whose goal is to satisfy man's desire ("Foucault"42). Women are even lured into accepting self-objectification and enjoying the male gaze. According to Lee, women are often encouraged to feel pleased the objectification of their own bodies, especially when they are seen as objects of male desire. (88). It is through these disciplinary and patriarchal practices that the docile body of the young adult female is constructed. Although this issue is represented in many YA novels, Na's *The Fold* is particularly typical of how young adult women of ethnic groups, seeking to live up to the Western standards of beauty and body image, have internalized manifestations of modern patriarchy in the form of self-surveillance and self-objectification. As a result, their bodies become docile and their identities blurred.

Although *The Fold* was written by a writer who won the Printz Award and the Asian/Pacific American Award for her distinctive YA and Children's literature, few studies have been based on her novels, including *The Fold*. This reflects the general tendency to ignore YA literature written by authors belonging to ethnic and minority groups in America. One reason for this may be that the novel questions the futility of the American standards of beauty that not only threaten to obliterate or blur the identities of young girls belonging to minority groups but also perpetuate woman's docility and objectification. Based on a sample of

secondary school American students, Sarah Donovan's "Trauma in the Beauty Ideal in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and An Na's *The Fold*" (2021) is an applied study that shows how teachers can use texts like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Na's *The Fold* in order to encourage their students to critically evaluate the role of media in circulating ideals of beauty and the impact of this on youth. In the same vein, Joanne Yi's "Beauty Is in the Eye of the West: An Analysis of An Na's *The Fold* (2015) discusses the novel from a cultural perspective and uses qualitative methods to relate the novel to children's media such as Disney animated films. In "What Defines Me?" – Performativity, Gender and Ethnicity in Korean American YA Fiction" (2017), Sung-Ae Lee and John Stephens use a cultural perspective to focus on the ethnic performativity of Asian American communities, cultural conflicts, and how characters in Korean American novels enact and maintain the main aspects of Korean Neo-Confucianism such as filial piety, female obedience, and family ties.

In addition to the scarcity of critical studies on Na's *The Fold*, there are other reasons for conducting this study. One major aspect of American YA literature is that it focuses on white American teenagers, thus perpetuating the marginalization of minority groups. According to Antero Garcia, YA literature portrays the life and culture of the rich White people while ignoring the life and interests of young adults belonging to

minority groups such as Asian Americans and African Americans (5). Although there is a growing increase in multicultural populations and, consequently, an increase in the number of students of color in America, books about young adults of color are generally absent from both the publishing industry and school libraries (Garcia 5-8; Kuo 31). In particular, Asian Americans, including Korean Americans, are rarely represented in the American publishing industry. According to the 2007 census, the number of Asian Americans living throughout the US is more than 13.5 million; however, those people are poorly represented particularly in YA literature (31). Hence, YA novels by minority writers like Korean American author Na, in a sense, is a sort of resistance; it resists the hegemony of White American culture and ways of representing life in America.

Moreover, academic scholarship on the negative impacts of focusing on beauty and body image is still limited. Yi argues that there is an obvious gap in academic studies regarding how the beauty ideal negatively affects young adults as well as children especially in the field of YA literature (48). This paper, therefore, attempts to address this gap by exploring a feminist Foucauldian perspective on the standards of beauty and body image through an examination of Na's novel *The Fold* as a representative text of YA fiction. The purpose of this paper is to prove that the Western standards of beauty and body image can be read as disciplinary

and patriarchal practices that keep women docile, objectified, and even self-objectified.

Set in Los Angeles during the first decade of the twenty-first century, *The Fold* tells the story of Joyce Park, a 16-year-old high school Korean American teenager. Like Young Ju, the female protagonist of Na's first novel *A Step from Heaven* (2001), and the 16-year-old Grace, the female protagonist of her last novel *The Place Between Breaths* (2018), Joyce struggles to cope up with life in America. She tries to assimilate herself into the mainstream American culture by internalizing its standards of beauty. Her infatuation with American beauty ideals and her fondness of John Ford Kang, her half Korean and half Caucasian classmate, leads her to attempt to transform her Korean looks and her body into something that seems more Western. Her aunt, Gomo, offers her to have a plastic surgery through which she can have Western-shaped eyes with permanent eyelid folds. Her experience with temporary transformation and the humiliation she undergoes, however, leads her to question whether fitting in is really worth suffering the surgery for permanent transformation.

Throughout the novel, the Western standards of beauty and body image are presented as disciplinary practices prevalent among all ethnicities. They affect all female characters in general and young female adults in particular. As disciplinary practices, these standards should be followed by young women of non-white

groups, otherwise they may be excluded and labelled as ugly. Gomo tells Joyce that in America “everyone wants to look more American” (*The Fold* 159). That is why many young women diet and try to change the way they look through plastic surgeries, as Gomo says (159). The impetus here is one of adaptation rather than aesthetics; those women just try to fit in. For Lee and Stephens, the American culture is a consumer one in which physical appearance affects status and social acceptance (76). Therefore, a young girl is forced to try to have a socially acceptable body image. As a young girl in Korea, Gomo was so beautiful that a white American soldier fell in love with her, married her, and brought her with him to America. However, based on the American standards of beauty, Gomo was not accepted by her husband’s family who wondered how he had fallen in love with an ugly woman with slanted eyes (*The Fold* 158). Gomo had to change the way she looked through several plastic surgeries so that she could assimilate into the American life. She did not transform her Korean looks to American ones out of free will, but in obedience to a discipline that threatened to punish her by means of exclusion. Thus, plastic surgeries were Gomo’s “way of seeking self-empowerment and confidence in the face of discrimination she experienced” (Baxley and Boston 127). In this way, the Western standards of beauty negatively affect Gomo and other Korean American women in that those women, to be accepted by mainstream American culture, have to

Westernize themselves, thus blurring their true selves and original appearance.

Moreover, by assuming that real beauty resides only in Whiteness, these Western standards of beauty can be said to be racialized. The pretty Gomo, no matter how pretty she was in her youth, was stamped as ugly because she did not bear the same physical features predominant in the West. Throughout the novel, the preferences of Korean American characters, insofar as body image is concerned, are influenced by Whiteness. According to Yi, studies on the reasons motivating Asian American women to undergo cosmetic surgeries found that those women “regard the look of White Americans as the height of attractiveness,” and, therefore, they come to associate non-white features with ugliness (51; 53). This may interpret Joyce’s infatuation with John; Joyce is attracted to that part of him which is Caucasian because it is a symbol of the alluring West. Using Joyce as a focalizer, the narrator gives a description of John in a way that shows how Whiteness is idealized by nonwhite groups:

John Ford Kang emerged from the waves like a surfing god. He flipped his head back, and his wet hair flew off his forehead. He carried his surfboard under one arm as he ran onto the beach and then set it down next to his towel. Bits of seaweed clung to his muscular chest.

Joyce could feel her mouth hanging open. (*The Fold* 184)

Joyce's infatuation with John is symbolic of how she internalizes the mainstream American standards of body image. While wandering inside a local mall with Gina, Joyce sees makeup advertisements and compares her eyes to those of the models in the advertisements: "Her eyes had never seemed narrow before" (75). Joyce realizes how thin and small her eyelids are only when comparing them to those of white girls. This means that Joyce's eyelids in themselves do not constitute a problem for her and do not denote ugliness; only when seen against Whiteness as a reference point or a standard of beauty does Joyce perceive the distinction. The comparison here is racialized because it assumes that beauty is white; the looks of white women are the norm, and for a woman to be perceived as beautiful, she should conform to that norm. This means that the many plastic surgeries and makeovers performed by Asian American female characters in Na's novel are racially motivated.

One of the tools through which power propagates its disciplinary practices is the media. Certain standards of beauty and body image are indirectly imposed on people through different types of media. According to Donovan, media not only recommends how people should look like, but also suggests that individuals who adhere to cultural norms of beauty will thrive (137). Observing that the ideal eyes in the American society are

not those slanted eyes, Joyce desires to change her own eyes so that she can adapt to the American standards of beauty like her aunt. These ideals of beauty, however, are not forced on people but are normalized and propagated through the media as technologies of power. In Na's novel, characters are conscious of the role of the media in guiding people's choices. Helen tells Joyce that "we're bombarded with images of beauty every day through the media" (*The Fold* 202). Discussing the disciplinary function of the media, Bartky almost echoes Helen's words about the negative role of the media; she argues that "the media images of perfect female beauty that bombard us daily leave no doubt in the minds of most women that they fail to measure up" ("Foucault" 33). The frequent broadcasting of these images of beauty is one of the techniques used by disciplines to indirectly establish their domination over individuals. Media represents a major tool for activating what Susan Bordo calls the "culture's grip on the body" (17). That is because the advertisements and images circulating the media lead to the normalization of the disciplines of weight, diet, body shape, dress, and makeup, thus instilling in women the need for pursuing self-modification and conveying to them the everlasting feeling of insufficiency. In this way, the Western standards of beauty and body image, as disciplinary tools, guarantee the permanent regulation and docility of women.

By following the dictates of the beauty standards propagated in the media, Joyce and the other Korean American young female characters in the novel internalize these disciplinary practices, turning themselves into docile bodies. For Yi, women's obsession with body beauty as reflected in *The Fold* is not a mere matter of aesthetic preference; rather, it is a tool for supporting "dominant hegemonies" by creating docile and obedient female bodies (48). Observing that she becomes more beautiful and comes to be accepted in America after having a plastic surgery to modify her Korean looks into more Western ones, Gomo ironically believes that she has transformed herself for her own sake: "I did not do it for them. I did it for myself" (*The Fold* 159). She comes to love the very disciplinary practices which were imposed on her in the first place. Gomo becomes so docile and disciplined that she believes that being beautiful means to 'look' American. She resorts to plastic surgeries because she wants to seem beautiful again (159). Thus, for Gomo, it is only in obeying these disciplinary practices that she can achieve her dream; realizing her dream of beauty and acceptance lies in following and internalizing these disciplines. Connecting disciplinary practices imposed on an individual to something positive like the achievement of one's dream means that this individual becomes in good terms with the very forces that coerce him/her in the first place. For Joyce and other female characters in the novel, the eyelid crease they aspire to have is "a modification that

assimilates one into a Westernized view of normalization and beauty” (Yi 52). Having internalized the Western beauty ideals, Joyce sees herself not beautiful enough to attract John. When John goes to her family’s restaurant for dinner with his father, Joyce finds it impossible for her to face him without full makeup (*The Fold* 137). In this way, one can say that disciplinary practices are internalized and maintained without direct coercion or surveillance.

There are several manifestations that young Korean female characters in Na’s *The Fold* have already internalized the Western standards of beauty and body image. One of these manifestations is their reliance on plastic surgeries. The high turnout of Americans to perform plastic surgeries, breast augmentation, buttock lifts, and Botox injections shows the extent to which disciplinary practices are normalized and internalized. According to Calogero, Americans spend an estimated eight billion dollars every year on body modification (284). In addition to Gomo, who had eight plastic surgeries to modify her Korean looks, the narrative abounds with references to many other Asian American young girls such as Lisa Yim, So Young Choi, and Christina Chang who had surgeries to transform themselves into Western looks (*The Fold* 138). The narrator states that most Asian American girls knew about the fold surgery. Even in Korea, the general attitude of young girls is to have the surgery. Joyce recalls

that when she visited Korea with her family several year ago, her cousin told her that she wished she could get the fold surgery which many other Korean girls got as birthday and graduation gifts (75). Gina's statement that "some lucky few are born with the folds, but many Asian women have to surgically create them" implies that the surgeries are internalized and taken for granted (81). This is also implied in the words of Dr. Reiner who tells Joyce that a lot of Korean American teenagers come to his clinic to get plastic surgeries to transform their Korean features into Westernized ones. (164)

In addition to plastic surgeries, *The Fold* examines the issue of permanent as well as temporal makeup as a form of modification practice used by female characters to conform to the Western standards of beauty. Makeup, whether temporal or permanent, is used heavily by almost all the characters in the novel. Early in the text, Gomo offers Joyce's mother a gift in the form of "permanent makeup tattoos" on her face (*The Fold* 67). Sam, Joyce's neighbor, tells her that his mother and aunts all went as a party and got permanent makeup (95). Gina also has tried all types of temporal makeup in pursuit of the beauty ideals prevalent in the West. Having her eyes done with temporal makeup, Joyce is astonished by how her eyes become bigger and the blemishes on her face concealed (85). Joyce's makeover has the function of giving her the illusion that she "can transform her life and thus

realize her full potential” (Lee and Stephens 76). In reality, however, Joyce’s makeover does not advance her status nor does it lead her to realize her dreams; it only demonstrates her docility and her obedience to the disciplinary practices of American culture; it reflects her objectification rather than her agency and subjectivity.

Lisa is a typical example of how young adults of minority groups come to internalize the Western standards of beauty and how they come to believe that it is only when they have White-like features that they become beautiful and more confident. When Joyce wonders why Lisa had the surgery to change her looks since she is already very pretty, Lisa replies that “it’s not so much the way you look but the way you feel” (*The Fold* 148). Lisa claims that the surgery has given her the confidence and makes her appeal to her crush (148). Lisa’s words here imply that no matter how pretty young women of ethnic groups look, they need to transform those features into Western ones to be accepted. They also entail that Korean American young girls, no matter how pretty they look, lack self-confidence and feeling of accomplishment; confidence resides only with those who have the same features enjoyed by white girls. Joyce comes to endorse the same view; she aspires to Westernize her eyes as her only gate to confidence and happiness. She believes that she cannot get these privileges with her Korean looks. For her, to have confidence and

success in life, she needs to conform to the Western ideals of beauty: “I want to be a part of the fold” (150). When Dr. Reiner fixes a temporal fold for Joyce just to see what is suitable for her, she is stunned by the change: “She felt like she was looking at someone she knew but didn’t know” (170). Ironically, the fold gives her the illusion of self-confidence and satisfaction, while, in reality, it blurs her true self.

As docile bodies, women in the novel internalize the male gaze, thus triggering self-surveillance and self-objectification as a form of modern patriarchal practices. The novel starts with a scene showing how Joyce as a young girl is obsessed with her body image and how others see her. Using her beauty tools, she spends more than an hour in the bathroom determined to conceal a zit in her forehead (*The Fold* 1). It is noticed that Joyce only thinks of her zit and her body image when she is going to see John. This means that she prepares herself for the male gaze. With that zit on her face, Joyce feels that she is not ready to be looked at. In an attempt to hide the zit away before going to school, she uses a beige marker to paint it so that it could match the color of her skin; she also pulls her hair forward to hide the forehead (3-4). Joyce’s actions here stem from her conviction that, based on the Western standards of beauty, she does not fit in. She tries hard to look pretty in the eyes of onlookers, especially her crush John. When she goes to school and sees John, she is overwhelmed by

how she looks to him; her obsession with the male gaze at her body parts makes her highly confused:

She crossed her arms in front of her, but then thought they looked too weird that way. Would he look at her, she wondered, burying her hands in the front pockets of her jeans. Look at me, she whispered in her head. Look at me. Look at me. Her zit throbbed. No, don't look at me. (8)

A similar situation takes place later when Joyce goes to buy a yearbook. Being sensitive to the male gaze, she feels that the student behind the counter is staring at her zit while handing her the change: "Joyce could feel the egg pulsing with attention" (14). Later, when John and his father go to have dinner at Joyce's family's restaurant, she accepts to go and see him only after Gina makes up her face and assures her that she is "perfectly presentable" (115). The word 'presentable' here emphasizes Joyce's obsession with her body image and how she looks to men. For Bordo, the Western culture devalues women by focusing on their bodies; however, women themselves are "willing (often, enthusiastic) participants" in those practices that tend to objectify them. (28)

A pivotal part of the Western standards of beauty and body image is heterosexuality or heteronormativity which is a major feminist aspect of YA literature. In Foucauldian terms,

heterosexuality is one form of disciplinary practices through which the docile female body is produced. According to Garcia, heteronormativity is the norm in most of the relationships in YA literature (87). While heterosexual relationships are represented as normal, lesbian and gay relationships are generally suppressed and negatively represented particularly in those novels written by minority writers (87). Beatrice Sparks's *Go Ask Alice* (1971) is one of the well-known YA texts that reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is the norm. Homosexuality is even considered in the narrative to be as dangerous as drugs. By presenting characters that are motivated by romantic relationships between males and females, YA novels reflect readers' concerns and attitudes insofar as sexuality and gender are concerned. They also encourage young readers to internalize social ideas about heteronormativity. In particular, the Korean American community does not welcome gay relationships. Jongsun Wee even claims that Na's novel *The Fold* is the first Korean American YA book with a homosexual character, namely Helen, to be published in America (12). Yet, Na refers to gay relationships in her narrative only to warn against, rather than celebrate, them.

In *The Fold*, gay relationships are not welcomed because they violate the heteronormative discipline. Helen has lesbian tendencies represented in her intimate relationship with Su Yon, one of the workers at her family's restaurant. Joyce's shocking

reaction to the news that her sister is gay asserts that non-heterosexual relationships are not the norm in the community: “Her sister was gay? This was crazy. Gay? Joyce didn’t know one single gay person” (*The Fold* 199). Unlike Joyce who yearns to transform herself into a Westernized heteronormative girl who welcomes the male gaze, Helen resists the demands that she be a heteronormative girl. Because Helen attempts to subvert the American standards, she is excluded and seen as an outsider. The community’s desire to suppress gay tendencies is expressed in several ways. In the first place, Helen’s intimate female friend suddenly disappears from the whole city. Secondly, Helen’s aunt seeks to transform her into a heterosexual girl; Gomo’s gift for Helen is a membership in a dating service in which she will be able to date “appropriate men” (66). Third, instead of defending her position, Helen feels it easier for her to pretend not to be gay. (134-35)

The narrative strategies here lead the reader to internalize the message that only heterosexual relationships are normal. In the first place, Helen is not given a voice in the narrative. The whole text is based on a third-person omniscient narrator with Joyce as the sole focalizer. The novel gives voice to Joyce who attempts to adapt to the mainstream American culture through plastic surgeries, makeovers, and makeup, whereas Helen is silenced, and the novel ends without giving her the chance to

speak out. The few instances in which she is allowed to have a direct discourse further ascertains her unstable stance and her inclination to transform herself so that she might conform to the discipline of heteronormativity: “Maybe I should go out with Mr. Moon again. Maybe it’ll change me. Plastic surgery for the heart” (*The Fold* 201). Ironically, while Joyce needs to get a plastic surgery to be able to obey the Western standards of beauty, the pretty Helen’s task is much harder: she needs to change her nature, sexuality, and attitudes. Helen’s words here indicate that she, like Joyce, has internalized the disciplinary practices which seek to coerce her; she seems to endorse the general standards of heteronormativity and believe that she is abnormal. The last time Helen is seen in the narrative is when her family is quickly escorting her away from a church gathering and hiding her from onlookers after her being gay is revealed by Lisa. Scolding Helen’s mother, Gomo reflects: “If you had made Helen keep dating Mr. Moon, we would not have to face these ugly rumors” (240). This scene shows how weak, excluded, and marginalized gay persons are. Helen and her family cannot face the community when it is rumored that she is gay. Further, Helen is going to leave the whole city and move to another place where her homosexuality is not known so that she can have a normal life. Suppressing Helen’s gay tendency as well as encouraging Joyce and other characters to have plastic surgeries and makeovers is part of the project to construct female body in the light of the

standards of beauty and body image dominant in the mainstream American culture.

Failing to cope up with the Western standards of beauty as disciplinary practices, young female characters in the novel are haunted by feelings of shame and body dissatisfaction. According to feminist critics, shame arises when one cares about one's social image. For example, Helen Block Lewis argues that shame occurs when a person cares about another person's evaluation (107–108). Other feminist critics argue that the shamed person inevitably feels worthless, naked, excluded, weak, inferior, dirty, and defeated (Tomkins 133; Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* 87; Johnson and Moran 4). Physical standards of beauty as a modern form of patriarchal power, lead to shame because young female characters fail to cope up with them. Throughout the novel, Joyce feels ashamed of her body image: with her zit in the forehead, slanted eyes, small breasts, fat knees, she feels that she is so deficient that she cannot face her crush. Comparing herself to her beautiful sister who has larger eyes and breasts, Joyce reflects: "I hate being the ugly sister" (*The Fold* 117). Early in the novel, Joyce hesitantly goes to John and asks him to sign her yearbook. Reviewing what John has written for her, Joyce discovers that he has mistaken her for another Korean American girl called Lynn who, Joyce believes, is very ugly. As a sign of withdrawal and defeat, Joyce "closed her eyes. Every pore of her skin stung with

shame and embarrassment. Joyce covered her face with her hands in humiliation” (25). When Joyce visits Dr. Reiner and gets a temporal fold, she feels confident enough to go to a beach party and talk to John. However, when John looks at her, she remembers her fat knees which do not conform to the discipline of thinness dominant in her community. Therefore, Joyce feels that she is “shrinking,” and she tries to cover her fat knees with a towel (180). Few pages later, the narrator tells us that one of Joyce’s temporal eyelids falls down, causing her to feel so deficient that she has to leave the party immediately (193). It is obvious that throughout the novel Joyce tries to cover parts of her body in front of John; she covers her forehead with her hair to hide the zit; she covers her eyes with her hands for lack of the fold; and she covers her fat knees with a beach towel. She seeks to hide herself because she always fails to cope up with the Western standards of beauty. According to J. Brooks Bouson, individuals who experience shame see themselves as imperfect, inferior, or unsuccessful (5). Having internalized the Western standards, Joyce blames herself for being unable to adapt.

Although female young characters in the novel remain docile and controlled by the grip of disciplinary and patriarchal tools, the writer seems to question the futility of coping up with the Western standards of beauty and body image at the expense of one’s true self. This can be traced indirectly in Joyce’s lack of

higher goals and plans for self-improvement. Her focus on physical appearance occupies her time and drains her energy. Pursuing artificial beauty hurts her feelings, makes her feel inferior and deficient most of the time, and gives her but depression and unhappiness. Through Helen, the writer advises young adult female readers to think carefully before undergoing surgeries for permanent makeovers because this blurs their true selves. Helen tells Joyce that it is her right to try to be happy, but if this happiness is “built on false pretenses, then the only person you’re fooling is yourself” (*The Fold* 174). According to Yi, Helen’s advice here “is pertinent to teenagers, whose identities are still in the process of developing qualities, beliefs, and values” (57). Sam also advises Joyce to think of the worthiness of physical makeovers. (*The Fold* 216)

The turning point in the narrative takes place in the last few pages of the novel when Joyce reconsiders her views about physical appearance. Assessing the significance of the folds, Joyce wonders if they are “really true to who she was” (*The Fold* 216). For the first time, Joyce seems to think critically, analyzing the necessity of undergoing the plastic surgery. This turning point occurs after much suffering, failure, disappointment, shame, and embarrassment. It is here that Joyce begins to realize the futility of pursuing dreams of beauty which are endless and elusive. Thus, Joyce starts to have agency only near the end of the novel.

During the church gathering, Joyce's artificial folds fall down, and she has to reattach them so that she could talk to John. However, having no time to do this tiring job, the new Joyce decides to face John without the folds. Talking to John as her equal, Joyce "felt like herself around him" (238). To her surprise, she realizes that John does not notice that she is without the folds. When Joyce becomes intrinsically motivated, she no longer needs the folds to provide her with confidence. The writer here wants to indicate that body makeovers are just an illusion; they place one in a blurred space from which to look at the world he/she aspires to be in, but he/she can never get in. Na seems to demonstrate that a young adult girl should not attempt to live her life through the eyes of others; her beauty or agency lies in her ability to live her own identity and self.

In the final scene of the narrative, the writer's call for resisting the hegemony of Western standards becomes more obvious. Waiting for Dr. Reiner to start the plastic surgery that would permanently transform her eyes, Joyce questions the futility of what she is going to undergo:

What was she doing here waiting anyway? Was this what she really wanted? She had believed the folds would make her more attractive and confident, but it was feeling more and more like an obstacle to all the things that she really wanted to be doing. Who was this girl, woman, young

adult sitting here waiting to change? Did this define her? And if she didn't really know herself, know what was true to her, then how could she begin to permanently change her face? Would she regret it later? Joyce didn't know. (*The Fold* 245)

Like Mina, the female protagonist of Na's *Wait for Me* (2006) who does not know what she wants, Joyce does not really know what defines her. It is only in the final scene of the novel that Joyce comes to realize that it is not the beauty of the body that should define her as a teenager. She realizes that her obsession with her physical appearance leads her to suffer. Therefore, Joyce's decision to leave the surgery room as well as her statement "I'm okay with being just me" represents a new beginning for her, a movement towards agency and empowerment (246). Joyce here seems to have come to terms with herself; the most important thing for one's integrity and well-being is not whether she is physically beautiful or not, but whether she is willing to accept her body as part of her. Accepting herself, Joyce admits that she "might not be the prettiest or the smartest"; however, she now realizes her true needs as a teenager (246). For the first time, then, Joyce is going to live her own body through her own eyes, not others'. Joyce's words here indicate that she is now moving from self-objectification towards agency and subjectivity. The final message here is that a young girl is still in

the process of identity formation and that a girl's physical beauty is not all that should matter to her.

In conclusion, Na's *The Fold* does not merely depict the priorities, aspirations, and frustrations of Korean American young adult women, but it also pinpoints the forces shaping these priorities and questions the repercussions of following them. Young adult women who rigorously and obediently follow the road drawn to them by the dominant standards of beauty and body image are not empowering themselves as they may think. Rather, they have been disciplined to have docile bodies and engage in self-surveillance and self-objectification. In mainstream American culture, woman is objectified by the very standards which are claimed to bestow upon her beauty, attractiveness, and empowerment. While these standards make woman seem more beautiful, they assume that woman is not intrinsically beautiful, and they turn woman into a mere body to be gazed at. If the billions of dollars spent every year on female body modification went to the improvement of woman's social, intellectual, economic and political status, it would do better for woman's cause. If a young girl's body is her only tool for empowerment and agency, it is a mere tool of objectification that she mistakes for a tool of empowerment. The true transformation a girl really needs is not physical but rather mental, psychological, and social. The end of the novel ascertains that a young adult woman needs

to move from docility and self-objectification to subjectivity and agency. It is only then that she can find out what really defines her.

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صناعة جسد المرأة الطيِّع في الأدب الأمريكي الكوري للشباب: قراءة فوكولديه نسوية في رواية الطيِّع للكاتبة آن نا (٢٠٠٨)

ملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استخدام الآراء النقدية النسوية والفوكولديه لتحليل بعض جوانب أدب الشباب في رواية الطيِّع للكاتبة الأمريكية من أصل كوري آن نا (١٩٧٢ -)، موضحاً كيف يتم إنتاج جسد المرأة الطيِّع. ويتم الاستناد إلى مفهوم فوكوه "الجسد الطيِّع" إذ أنه يسلط الضوء على دور السلطة/الأبوية الذكورية اللامركزية وغير المرئية في ضبط وتنظيم سلوكيات الشباب، وإنتاج أجساد طيِّعة، وطمس هوية الشباب المنتميات للأقلية الكورية في أمريكا. وتأسيساً على آراء فوكوه النقدية يمكن اعتبار معايير الجمال الغربية ممارسات انضباطية يتم من خلالها صناعة الجسد الطيِّع. تفترض هذه الدراسة أنه يتم تشكيل جسد المرأة الطيِّع من خلال المراقبة الذاتية واستيعاب الشابة لمعايير الجمال وصورة الجسد الموجودة في الثقافة الأمريكية السائدة بحيث تكون المراقبة نابعة من الداخل. توضح الدراسة أن الشخصيات النسائية الكورية في الرواية تسعى لتعريف صورة الجسد والهوية لديها بناءً على المفاهيم السائدة في الثقافة الأمريكية. إن بحث هذه الشخصيات عن ملامح أو هويات غريبة قادها إلى استيعاب معايير الجمال الغربية كأنها نابعة من داخلها، وهكذا شبيئت هذه الشخصيات نفسها، وطمست هويتها الكورية. تفترض الدراسة أن هذه المعايير يمكن اعتبارها أيضاً تقنيات أبوية ذكورية حديثة تُنتج في النهاية أجساداً أنثوية سهلة الانقياد وذاتية التحكم وذاتية التشيؤ.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الأمريكي الكوري للشباب؛ رواية الطيِّع للكاتبة آن نا؛ النسوية؛

فوكوه؛ الجسد الطيِّع؛ صورة الجسد؛ تشيؤ الذات