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PCOS AND THE ALTERATION OF FEMININITY IN CRYSTAL MALDONADO'S *THE FALL OF WHIT RIVERA*

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ABSTRACT

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is a condition whose physical manifestations can place women in tension with socially established expectations of feminine appearance. In Crystal Maldonado's *The Fall of Whit Rivera*, PCOS is represented not simply as a medical condition but as a site where femininity is institutionally and socially regulated. Through Whit Rivera's encounters with weight-centred medical care, peer surveillance, and the shame attached to hirsutism, the novel reveals how thinness and hairlessness operate as disciplinary norms against which her body is measured. Drawing on Susan Bordo's Feminist Body Theory, particularly her understanding of the body as a cultural text, the docile body, and the internalization of insufficiency, this article examines how medical authority and social judgement transform bodily differences associated with PCOS into perceived failures of femininity. It also considers the significance of Maldonado's first-person narration, imagery, repetition, capitalization, metaphor and the representation of adolescent consciousness in exposing the emotional effects of these forms of bodily regulation. An intersectional reading further demonstrates that Whit's experience is shaped by the interaction of gender, age, Latina identity, family and class rather than by PCOS in isolation. At the same time Whit's narration creates space for resistance as she begins to distinguish bodily difference from personal inadequacy and to question the standards against which her body is judged. The article argues that *The Fall of Whit Rivera* exposes the cultural and institutional mechanisms through which femininity is regulated while creating the possibility of understanding womanhood beyond bodily conformity.

Key Words: Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, Female Body, Fatness, Hirsutism.

INTRODUCTION

Femininity is often associated with particular expectations about the female body, as physical characteristics such as body size, skin, hair and appearance become important markers through which feminine appearance is recognized and evaluated. Within such expectations, the feminine body is frequently imagined as slim, smooth and conventionally attractive, leaving little room for bodily differences that fall outside these ideals. When such differences are associated with a medical condition, the tension between bodily experience and feminine expectations can become even more pronounced because the body is judged not only according to its physical appearance but also according to the meanings attached to that appearance. This idea of femininity also resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women have historically been defined through their biological functions. As she observes, "a womb, an ovary; she is a female" (41) highlighting how womanhood can be reduced to particular bodily reproductive expectations. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity further suggests that femininity is produced through repeated social norms and practices that establish how a woman's body should appear and behave. The female body therefore becomes a significant site through which femininity is constructed, recognized and regulated.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) provides an important context for examining this relationship between the female body and femininity. PCOS is associated with symptoms such as hyperandrogenism, irregular menstruation, hirsutism, acne and changes in body weight. Rodriguez-Paris et al describe PCOS as the commonly diagnosed endocrine disorder among women of reproductive age (956). In May 2026, the condition was renamed Polyendocrine Metabolic Ovarian Syndrome (PMOS) to reflect its broader hormonal and metabolic effects beyond the ovaries. For this article, however, the significance of PCOS lies particularly in how symptoms such as weight gain and excessive facial hair can come into conflict with expectations

of feminine appearance. When femininity is associated with thinness and hairlessness, the body affected by PCOS can become subject to forms of judgement that extend beyond the medical condition itself.

The tension is central to Crystal Maldonado's *The Fall of Whit Rivera*, where Whit's experience with PCOS is represented through her changing relationship with her body. From the beginning of the novel, her weight becomes the focus of repeated medical attention, while her changing body attracts scrutiny from her peers and people around her. The appearance of facial hair introduces another source of bodily anxiety because hirsutism conflicts with conventional expectations of a smooth and feminine appearance. These experiences position Whit's body at the intersection of medical authority, public surveillance and cultural expectations of femininity.

The first-person narration of the novel is particularly important to this representation because it gives readers direct access to Whit's thoughts, emotions and changing awareness of her body. Her narration moves between the experience of being observed by doctors and peers and her own increasingly critical observation of herself. The narrative consequently reveals not only the scrutiny directed at Whit but also the process through which external judgement becomes part of her self-perception. Her experiences with weight and hirsutism therefore demonstrate how bodily differences can become sources of shame when measured against culturally established ideals of femininity.

Susan Bordo's Feminist Body Theory provides a useful framework for this examination because it draws attention to the ways cultural expectations become inscribed upon women's bodies. Bordo's conception of the body as a "cultural text" emphasizes that women's bodies are not understood independently of the social values imposed upon them, while her discussion of the "internalization of insufficiency" explains how culturally established standards can lead women to experience their bodies as inadequate when they fail to correspond with accepted ideals.

These concepts are particularly relevant to Whit's experience because the physical manifestations of PCOS become meaningful within a cultural context that places specific demands on feminine appearance.

The representation of Whit's body therefore reveals that the difficulties surrounding her experience of PCOS are not confined to its physical manifestations. Her encounters with medical doctors, her awareness of peer judgement and her experience of hirsutism demonstrate how femininity can become regulated through medical authority, social surveillance and bodily discipline. At the same time, her first-person narration allows the narrative to move beyond the experience of regulation towards an awareness of the cultural standards that shape her understanding of her body. The novel consequently creates space for examining how femininity might be understood beyond conformity to prescribed bodily ideals.

This article argues that *The Fall of Whit Rivera*, represents PCOS not simply as a medical condition but as a site where femininity is institutionally and socially regulated. Through Whit's encounters with weight-centered medical care, peer surveillance, and the shame attached to hirsutism, the novel reveals how thinness and hairlessness operates as disciplinary norms. At the same time, Whit's first-person narration exposes the instability of these norms and creates the possibility of understanding femininity beyond bodily conformity. The discussion therefore examines how medical authority, public surveillance and bodily discipline shape Whit's experience of femininity and how the narrative creates space for her to question these expectations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article draws on Susan Bordo's Feminist Body Theory, particularly her examination of the relationship between bodily appearance, cultural expectations and femininity. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Bordo examines the ways in which cultural

practices and ideals shape women's relationships with their bodies. In her discussion of "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," Bordo argues that the female body should not be understood as purely natural or pre-cultural, since cultural expectations and forms of social control continually shape the ways in which women experience and present their bodies. She observes that the body, including what women eat, how they dress and the daily practices through which they attend to their bodies, function as a medium through which culture is expressed. This understanding is useful to the present study because it draws attention to the cultural meanings attached to female bodily appearance and the expectations through which femininity is defined.

A central concept in Bordo's theory is body as a cultural text, through which social expectations of femininity are expressed. Within Bordo's framework, women's bodies can be read in relation to their appearance, grooming, behaviour and size because these features may reflect wider cultural values and expectations. Bodily conditions can therefore reveal the pressures imposed upon women when their physical characteristics do not correspond with socially preferred forms of femininity. This concept is particularly relevant to *The Fall of Whit Rivera*, where the physical manifestations associated with Whit Rivera PCOS become significant in relation to cultural expectations concerning the appearance of the female body.

Bordo's discussion of the docile body, developed from Michel Foucault's concept of bodily discipline, provides a dimension to this analysis. The female body becomes "docile" when social expectations encourage women to regulate and modify their bodies in accordance with culturally defined standards of improvement. This regulation can occur through everyday practices including dieting, the use of makeup and forms of dressing that conform to accepted standards, while sustained attention to the body can gradually produce self-surveillance and continuous body modification. In relation to Whit, this concept makes it possible to examine

the pressure to manage physical characteristics associated with PCOS, particularly those that become visible and are therefore subject to judgement.

Closely connected to bodily discipline is Bordo's concept of internalization of insufficiency, which explains how cultural expectations can become internalized to the point that women experience their bodies as inadequate. Bordo argues that through bodily disciplines, women can develop a persistent sense of lack and of never being "good enough." The significance of this concept to this analysis lies in its shift away from treating feelings of bodily inadequacy as purely individual insecurities. Instead, such feelings can be understood in relation to cultural standards that establish forms of appearance as desirable while positioning bodies that depart from them as deficient.

Bordo's framework is particularly applicable to the representation of PCOS because the physical manifestations of the condition can conflict with dominant expectations of feminine appearance. The symptoms associated with PCOS such as weight gain, facial hair can disrupt cultural expectations of slimness, smoothness and bodily control.

In *The Fall of Whit Rivera*, this framework therefore allows Whit's experiences with her body to be examined not simply as the physical consequence of a medical condition but in relation to the cultural expectations that give those physical differences their social significance. The analysis that follows applies Bordo's concept of the cultural text, the docile body and internalized insufficiency to examine how Whit's experience with fatness and hirsutism complicate conventional constructions of femininity.

Synopsis of the Novel

The Fall of Whit Rivera, follows the life of the protagonist known as Whit Rivera, a young Latina teenager, who is plus-size. The novel shows the life of Whit Rivera as she struggles with

the challenges accompanied with PCOS. She is a senior student in high school and one of her biggest dreams has also been to organize the school's annual "Fall Fest" which is one of the most important events of the year. Unfortunately, her plans get complicated when she is assigned to work alongside her ex-boyfriend Zay. Their separation while they were younger, left Whit heartbroken and she never fully recovered from it. As the story progresses, while Whit and Zay stay in constant communication for the preparation of the Fall Fest, they slowly reignite, which rekindles their friendship and brings them back together.

Whit Rivera on the other hand, struggles with insecurity, unbearable pain and being afraid that her body is giving up on her and also scared that her body size and health condition may have influenced the end of their relationship. She is also trying to navigate her friendships, constantly questioning her identity and is faced with the physical and emotional effects of PCOS.

As the story progresses, Whit starts to face her fears, speak up for herself and has come to the realization that both people and relationships can grow and change. The title of the novel, does not just speak of the Fall Fest but it also speaks on Whit's journey, the battles she faced emotionally, her vulnerability and she opening up her heart to love again.

PCOS And The Feminine Body Under Medical Scrutiny in *The Fall of Whit Rivera*

Whit Rivera's experience with PCOS first becomes significant through the medical attention directed at her body. The narrative presents medical authority not simply as a source of diagnosis and treatment but as a form of scrutiny through which Whit Rivera's body is measured against expectations of weight and bodily control. This is established through Whit's recollection of her earlier medical appointment: "In appointment after appointment, under offensively bright lighting with parts of my expanding body spilling out of a blue gown, I'd be told the same

thing: lose weight.” (9) From this excerpt, the repetition in “appointment after appointment” immediately establishes that Whit’s experience is not an isolated encounter but a recurring pattern. The repetition also creates a sense of frustration and exhaustion, suggesting that each medical visit produces the same response rather than a new attempt to understand her symptoms. The phrase “lose weight” becomes particularly significant because of its brevity. The doctors’ response is reduced to two words, making their approach appear dismissive and formulaic. Rather than investigating the range of symptoms Whit is experiencing, her weight becomes the central explanation through which her body is interpreted.

Maldonado’s use of visual imagery further intensifies Whit’s vulnerability. The description of the “offensively bright lighting” places her body in a space where it cannot escape observation. The adjective “offensively” transforms what might ordinarily appear to be neutral feature of a medical room into something intrusive. The lighting exposes Whit at the very moment when she is already physically vulnerable. While the image of her body “spilling out” of the gown suggests a body that exceeds the boundaries expected of the medical setting. The verb “spilling” is especially significant because it gives her body a sense of excess as though her size itself has become something that must be contained.

This representation connects with Susan Bordo’s understanding of the female body as a “cultural text.” Whit’s body is not treated by the doctors as a neutral biological body, but it is read through assumptions about weight, health and self-control. The medical gaze therefore becomes connected to wider cultural expectations about what an acceptable female body should look like. Contemporary PCOS research similarly identifies weight stigma as an issue in health care and specifically recommends that healthcare professionals be aware of weight stigma when discussing PCOS.

Maldonado makes this reduction of Whit's experience even clearer when she recalls; "They couldn't – or wouldn't – confirm that there was anything medically wrong with the soft brown girl standing before them, insisting instead that it was the circumference of her hips that was her grave undoing." (9) the reference to "the circumference of her hips" (9) The phrase "the circumference of her hips" reduces Whit' to a bodily measurement. Instead of her symptoms being treated as evidence requiring investigation, the size of a particular part of her body becomes the explanation for her condition. The contrast between "soft brown girl" and "circumference" is important because the former identifies Whit as a person, while the latter reduces her to a measurable physical feature. Maldonado therefore exposes the tension between the person experiencing illness and the institutional gaze that turns her body into an object of measurement. Whit is left questioning whether her symptoms were not understood or whether they were deliberately not taken seriously. Her first-person narration is important because the reader encounters the medical authority through Whit's consciousness. We are not given an objective account of the consultation, instead, we experience the frustration of a young woman who knows that something is wrong with her body but cannot make those in authority properly hear her.

The contrast becomes particularly clear when Whit eventually encounters Dr. Dianalys Delgado; "The first doctor to let me share all my symptoms without interrupting. The first doctor to ask how I felt. The first doctor to actually look at me from her notes and meet my gaze. The first doctor to see me." (9) Here, Maldonado uses repetition to mark the difference between Dr. Delgado and the doctors who came before her. The repeated phrase "first doctor" emphasizes how unusual basic medical attention has become in Whit's experience. The repetition also builds towards the final statement, "The first doctor to see me" the meaning of "see" shifts beyond physical vision. Earlier, Whit's body has been visually examined and measured but Dr. Delgado's

act of “seeing” involves listening to her symptoms, asking about her feelings and meeting her gaze. The novel does not present medical authority as inherently oppressive but rather it distinguishes between a medical gaze that reduces Whit to her body size and a form of medical care that recognizes her as a person whose experiences deserve attention. Dr. Delgado disrupts this pattern of bodily regulation established by earlier consultations.

This is also where the novel’s representation of adolescent consciousness becomes important because Whit is not simply a passive recipient of medical judgement. Through her first-person narration, readers see her trying to make sense of the contradiction between what she feels physically and what medical professionals tell her about her body. Her eventual encounter with a doctor who listens to her gives narrative significance to her earlier experience of being dismissed. The contrast suggests that the problem is not Whit’s failure to understand her body but the failure of certain medical encounters to recognize her account of it.

Public Surveillance, Fatness and Internalization of Shame

The scrutiny surrounding Whit’s body does not end within the medical space. After repeatedly encountering medical attention that reduces her symptoms to her weight, Whit becomes increasingly conscious of how her body may be perceived by those around her. The transition from medical scrutiny to public surveillance is evident when she anticipates returning to school after gaining weight;

I’ve tried to brace myself for what it’ll be like when I step into school tomorrow: the whispers and the loaded glances as everyone realizes I’ve gotten bigger. It doesn’t matter that I don’t actually mind so much, because others will have opinions. Even if no one says anything at all, can we all agree that the silence is its own special kind of torture? (18)

The first-person narration immediately places the reader inside Whit’s anticipation of judgement. The phrase “I’ve tried to brace myself” suggests that entering school has become

something she must psychologically prepare for, as though she is preparing for an encounter rather than simply returning to an ordinary school environment. The verb “brace” conveys defensiveness and vulnerability indicating that Whit expects her body to become a target of observation. The use of “whispers” and “loaded glances” is significant because neither necessarily involves direct verbal criticism but Whit understands them as forms of judgement. The adjective “loaded” gives glances a weight that suggests that the gaze of others carries assumptions about her body. The statement “others will have opinions” further demonstrates how Whit’s concern is connected to others.

Margo Mine and Joe Kelly’s argument that body image is partly a “shared body image” (140) is useful here because Whit’s experience demonstrates how family, peers and wider cultural expectations participate in shaping how the body is understood. Her fear of returning to school is therefore not simply fear of her physical appearance but fear of the meanings others may attach to it. The novel presents the adolescent body as particularly vulnerable to this form of social evaluation because school becomes a space in which appearance is highly visible to peer judgement. The narrative develops this further when Whit recalls the attention she received after losing weight;

When I lost a lot of weight the summer before junior year, everyone seemed to comment on it: the classmates I’d never exchanged a word with, the people I’d known all my life, my tias, my teachers. It was like my body had suddenly become public property and every single person felt it was their right – no duty – to inform me that I had vastly improved it. (18)

The metaphor “public property” is central to the representation of bodily surveillance, by describing her body in these terms, Whit exposes the sense of entitlement behind the comments she receives. Her body remains physically hers, but the reactions of others make her feel as though its appearance has become a matter of public discussion. Whit is not being judged by a single group, because attention comes from her classmates as well suggesting that her body

operates across different social spaces. The fact that even people who she has barely interacted with feels entitled to comment, emphasizes how normalized this surveillance has become.

This realization becomes more complicated when she reflects on her relationship with her own supposed confidence;

Fat hate, always internalized, sinks into every pore like poison. It's only because I'm big again that I've had to have an internal reckoning with myself. Like, girl, you thought you had healed from the trauma society places upon you, but really, you just got better at fitting into society's expectations of beauty. (18/19).

The metaphor "sinks into every pore like poison" transforms social prejudice into something that penetrates the body. "Pores" are part of the body surface, yet the metaphor suggests that fat hatred has moved beneath the surface and become internalized. The image is therefore important to Bordo's internalization of insufficiency, social standards no longer need to be imposed externally because they have become part of individual's own consciousness.

The phrase "internal reckoning" marks an important moment in Whit's development. She begins to question the assumption that her previous confidence represented as complete acceptance to her body. Her realization that she had merely become "better at fitting into society's expectations of beauty" exposes the instability of the standards she had previously associated with healing. Her smaller body allowed her to experience greater social approval but it did not mean that she had overcome the shame attached to fatness.

The novel further demonstrates the persistence of public surveillance through Brock Moore's reaction to Whit's changed appearance; Whoa Whit. You look...different." He makes a show of puffing out his cheeks." (30) The ellipsis in the excerpt creates a pause that communicates hesitation while also allowing the word "different" to carry implied judgement. Brock does not explicitly say that Whit has gained weight, but his accompanying gesture makes the meaning

clear. The “show of puffing out his cheeks” converts her changed appearance into an object of mockery.

Hirsutism, Feminine Appearance and the Reclaiming of the Body

While fatness places Whit under scrutiny because of expectations of thinness, hirsutism challenges another important standard of feminine appearance, which is facial hair. The novel presents Whit’s discovery of facial hair as an intensely personal moment in which a physical symptom of PCOS becomes connected to her understanding of herself as a young woman;

Is that a SMATTERING OF GIGANTIC BLACK HAIRS ON MY CHIN? I examine the small but very – much – there dark hair peppering my jaw. How long have these been there for? It’s no use; the tears I’ve been fighting escape from the corners of my eyes and roll down my cheek. (19/20).

The Capitalization of the question reflects shock and panic of Whit’s discovery. Her exaggerated description, magnifies what may physically be a small amount of hair, revealing how threatening it appears to her within a culture that associates femininity with smooth, hairless skin. Her immediate tears further demonstrate that the distress comes not simply from the presence of hair but from what the hair appears to signify about her femininity.

Susan Brownmiller’s discussion of facial hair in *Femininity* is useful here because she demonstrates how even a single hair can become a source of anxiety under feminine beauty standards. Whit’s reaction illustrates the cultural pressure, she does not initially treat the hair as a neutral bodily change, instead she immediately attempts to remove and conceal it. When she considers shaving her face, she asks; . Is it the same as shaving your legs? Should I be in the shower? Is there any special direction I should shave in? How easy is it to cut myself? (23) The series questions reveals Whit’s uncertainty while also showing how quickly she turns to bodily discipline. She has learned that hairs on her legs requires removal to maintain conventional femininity and she now applies

the same logic to her face. Her body therefore becomes something that must be managed and corrected before it can be publicly seen. The pressure becomes even more personal when she tells Abuela; “It makes me feel disgusting. Like I’m a boy, but I don’t want to be” (151). The comparison demonstrates how deeply she has associated facial hair with masculinity.

The use of her scarf to conceal her face similarly demonstrates the extent of this pressure; “I wrap the fabric around my neck despite the warm evening, because I absolutely cannot take a chance on letting anyone see me like this.” (22) The scarf becomes a physical representation of concealment and discipline. Whit modifies what she wears not for comfort but to prevent her body from being seen.

As the novel progresses, it shows how Whit begins to reclaim her identity and begins to accept that she is more than her diagnosis, she begins to realize that she worried about the wrong things. In the ending pages of the novel she says; “I’m making room for myself. I’m embracing every single moment and I’m not apologizing for it.” (317)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Crystal Maldonado’s *The Fall of Whit Rivera* presents PCOS as more than a medical condition by revealing how its bodily manifestations become entangled with regulation of femininity. Through Whit’s encounters with weight-centred medical care, public scrutiny and the shame associated with hirsutism, the novel demonstrates how medical authority and social surveillance work together to establish thinness and hairlessness as desirable forms of feminine appearance. Whit’s body is repeatedly measured, interpreted and disciplined according to standards that extend beyond her health.

At the same time, the novel's use of first-person narration makes visible the psychological effects of these expectations. Whit's reflections expose how external judgements become internalized, but they also allow her to recognize and question the standards that have shaped the understanding of her body. Her growing awareness that acceptance cannot depend upon conformity creates a space for resistance and for a broader understanding of femininity.

The article contributes to feminist literary criticism by showing how the representation of PCOS expose the cultural and institutional processes through which femininity is produced and regulated. It also contributes to medical humanities by demonstrating that experiences of illness cannot be understood solely through medical symptoms, since the meanings attached to the body can profoundly shape how illness is experienced. *The Fall of Whit Rivera* ultimately challenges the assumption that a feminine body must conform to particular standards of size and appearance, presenting Whit's embodied experience as a site through which those standards can be questioned or reimagined.

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