

CHARLIE'S STRUGGLES IN CRYSTAL MALDONADO'S FAT CHANCE, CHARLIE VEGA

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Abstract

This study examines the personal struggles experienced by Charlie Vega, the main character of Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega*. The study investigates how Charlie survives the emotional and psychological challenges she faces as an obese Latina teenager. It focuses on the impact of intersecting factors—race, gender, and body image she experienced, and how these factors shape the way she responds to pressure from her environment. Using a qualitative method and psychological literary approach, the analysis categorizes Charlie's experiences into four types of struggles as defined by Maizler (2012): negative, positive, inevitable, and chosen struggle. The findings reveal that Charlie's life depends not only on emotional resilience, but also on strategic coping mechanisms such as writing, seeking community support, and changing her perception of herself. The study emphasizes that her struggle is not a metaphor for growth, but a real ongoing struggle for recognition and acceptance.

Keywords: Body Image, Intersectionality, Race, Self-Identity, Struggles

A. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary young adult literature, emotional and psychological struggles have become central themes, particularly for main characters navigating identity in a society dominated by narrow beauty and cultural standards. Adolescents, especially girls, are increasingly exposed to pressures surrounding appearance, race, and gender roles, which can significantly affect their self-perception and mental health. According to Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010), body image among young women is not merely shaped by personal perception but heavily influenced by feedback from close social environments. This influence often results in internal conflicts, leading to self-doubt, insecurity, and emotional isolation.

Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega* offers a compelling representation of these issues through the character of Charlie Vega—an obese, mixed-race teenage girl who faces criticism from her peers, judgment from her mother, and uncertainty in romantic and social contexts. While previous discussions of the novel have focused on empowerment and self-acceptance, this study highlights a different

dimension: the real-life experience of struggle. The question is not just whether Charlie changes, but how she survives. Her journey is more about resilience than transformation. This study identifies a significant gap in existing literature. While the themes of representation and acceptance are well explored, the types of emotional struggle and mechanism of survival faced by the main character like Charlie have not been analyzed in depth. Most academic studies surrounding young adult literature and identity tend to emphasize resolution like how the character overcomes hardship rather than focusing on the nature and complexity of the hardship itself. By shifting the lens to this internal process, this study highlights a more honesty and delicate depiction of adolescent struggle.

To investigate these challenges, this research employs a psychological literary approach with Maizler's (2012) framework of four types of human struggle: negative, positive, inevitable, and chosen struggle. This study also adopts Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality to explore how the intersection of gender, race, and Charlie's body image shapes how emotional experience. These two theoretical foundations help analyze the internal and external pressures that contribute to her struggles, as well as how she responds to them.

This study aims to examine: (1) how Charlie survives from her struggles in Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega*. (2) What factors related to the intersection of race, gender, and body image impact Charlie experience in Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega*. (3) the types of struggles experienced by Charlie in Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega* according to Maizler's typology of struggles. By focusing on these issues, this study offers a deeper understanding of how fictional narratives reflect the emotional complexity of real-life teenagers, particularly young women.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW/ TINJAUAN PUSTAKA

Understanding the emotional and psychological struggles of fictional characters requires both a theoretical and contextual framework. Several prior studies and theories are relevant in analyzing how young women, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, experience and navigate identity-based challenges.

One notable study is by Ventura (2024) entitled *An Intersectional Coming-of-Age: On Body Positivity, Agency, and Self-Expression in Fat Chance, Charlie Vega* who examined the intersection of race, body image in *Fat Chance, Charlie Vega*. Ventura's research highlights how the protagonist's process of self-expression through writing and social connection reflects a broader narrative of resistance against narrow beauty standards. While Ventura focuses on the protagonist's empowerment and self-expression, this study takes a different direction by focusing on the type and mechanisms of struggle Charlie experience rather than the outcome of empowerment. The current study expands on Ventura's findings by categorizing Charlie's experiences through Maizler's framework of human struggle.

Another relevant study is by Herika (2023) entitled *Oppression on Black Women in Bernardine Evaristos's Girl, Woman, Other*. Her analysis focuses on how black women face layered discrimination due to race, gender, and social class. This concept of multiple, simultaneous oppression aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality, which is also applied in the current study to explore how Charlie's identity as an obese Latina shapes her emotional conflicts. Although Herika's study does not examine body image, it offers insight into how identity categories compound lived experiences, which is relevant to Charlie's case.

The last study is by Rahmadani (2022) entitled *Sumarni's Struggle for Reaching Her Dream in Okky Madasari's The Year of The Voiceless*, present a more personal angle—examining the motivations behind a young woman's struggle to achieve her dreams against societal expectations. While Rahmadani focuses on ambition and class-based hardship, her study shares thematic similarities with this study in showing how external expectation influence personal struggle. However, the present study distinguishes itself by framing struggle not as a path to social mobility, but as an emotional response to rejection, comparison, and internalized shame.

In terms of theoretical framework, this study employs Maizler's (2012) classification of struggle, which divides human struggle into four types: negative, positive, inevitable, and chosen struggle. This framework is particularly useful in literary analysis as it allows the researcher to examine both emotional and behavioral patterns through specific moments in the narrative. Maizles argues that each type of struggle carries different psychological weight some lead to growth, while others reinforce emotional wounds.

To explore how identity categories affect struggle, this study also draws on Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality. According to Crenshaw, overlapping identities such as race, gender and body image create unique experiences of discrimination. Charlie's experiences cannot be separated into isolated categories; instead, they must be analyzed as interconnected system that shape her perception of self-worth and belonging.

Body image, a central theme in the novel, is explored through Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath (2010) research state that body image is formed not only by individual perception but also by ongoing feedback from social environments. In Charlie's case, this feedback often comes from her mother, peers, and school environment, reinforcing the message that her body is not 'normal' or acceptable. This perception becomes a core element of her emotional struggle, as seen in moments where she feels disgust, invisibility, or shame.

By critically examining previous research and theories, this study positions itself within existing academic framework while offering a focused analysis of the struggle experienced by the main characters. This study goes beyond internal struggles that occur when identity is under pressure from various directions.

C. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with a psychological literary approach to analyze the struggles experienced by the main character, Charlie Vega in Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance*, Charlie Vega. The study focuses on textual analysis to explore how the main character experiences and respond to emotional and psychological pressure related to body image, identity, and intersecting social categories. The primary data source is the novel itself, which serve as the main text for literary analysis. Specific narrative elements such as dialogue, inner monologue, character development, and emotional responses were selected as representative samples. These elements were chosen based on their relevance to the themes of struggle and identity conflicts as outlined in the statement of the problem.

The data were collected through close reading and annotation of the novel. Passages that reflect the main character's internal and external struggles were identified, categorized, and interpreted using Maizler's (2012) theory of struggle, which classifies human struggle into four types: negative, positive, inevitable, and chosen struggle. The analysis also incorporates Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality to understand how Charlie's gender, race, and body image collectively shape her emotional experiences. The analytical process involved identifying key moments in the text where the character's emotional response is triggered by judgment, exclusion, or self-doubt. These moments were examined to understand how Charlie survives these experiences, and how each type of struggle is reflected in the narrative. The study did not involve fieldwork or human subjects, and all data were derived from literary content, ensuring a focused and interpretive research process.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this discussion of women's struggle, through the portrayal of the female main character in the novel, women are shown to make various effort to gain freedom in terms of race and body image while surrounded by dominant societal expectations. A more detailed explanation of the struggles experienced by the main character, Charlie Vega, is as follow:

a) Charlie's Coping Mechanism in Dealing with Body Image and Identity Struggle

Charlie tries to escape from a reality that often makes her feel worthless, unworthy, and isolated in the eyes of her social and cultural environment. By joining an online writing community, Charlie attempts to distract herself from the pressures she feels on a daily basis. Writing becomes a temporary escape from the mental burdens that often weigh her down, particularly those related to her identity and self-image. The character she creates in her writing turn out to be idealized versions of herself—more beautiful, confident, and more capable of achieving the love that has always felt so difficult to reach. This shows that Charlie has not fully accepted herself as she is, but instead uses fiction as a way to present an alternative world where she can feel 'enough'. As Charlie says: "I try to throw myself into my online writing communities, which works temporarily, but here's the thing: I mostly write about love, dreaming about boys and their soft lips and all the ways they can kiss whichever main character I've created (who is always some version of the person I wish I could be)." (Maldonado, 2021: 48)

At a crucial moment, Charlie felt her place in society was being questioned. While participating in Zumba with her mother, she realized that most of the other participants were thinner than her, which made her feel awkward and uncomfortable. It wasn't just a lack of confidence, but a feeling that she 'didn't belong' or 'shouldn't be there.' This feeling was reinforced because since childhood she had been taught to feel different, especially regarding her physical appearance. However, when she saw a woman with a similar body type, her presence became a symbol that she wasn't alone/ the thought, "If she can do this, I can do this" became a source of motivation and a reflection of how Charlie began to shape her view of herself. As she says: 'I steal a glance around the room and it feels like everyone is much thinner than I am, except for one woman in the corner who's maybe my size. All right. If she can do this, I can do this, I tell myself.' (Maldonado, 2021: 123).

After feeling isolated even from her family, Charlie searched for a replacement for that connection in online communities. There, she found people with similar experiences who rejected narrow beauty standards and supported each other in the face of stigma. This community became a safe space that she couldn't find at home or school. Charlie became more involved in the fat acceptance community on Instagram and Twitter in an effort to find a place where she was valued and accepted, as she said: "Since the fight with my mom, I've been trying even harder to immerse myself in the fat acceptance community, both on Instagram and on Twitter." (Maldonado, 2021: 128)

Charlie's transition from virtual space to real space can be seen when she finds a place she calls 'quaint center of a perfect New England town' which becomes a symbol of comfort and security in her struggle with self-identity and social pressure. This place is not just an ordinary space, but a corner where she can be herself without pressure and judgment about her body, identity, and social relationships. The atmosphere and sense of connection she feels there provide her with peace, especially when she is emotionally unstable. The place becomes an escape and a space for inner healing. The line 'the smell of the used books greets me like an old friend' illustrates Charlie's familiarity and emotional closeness to the place, which contrasts with other environments that make her feel isolated. As she says: The moment we push open the door, the smell of the used books greets me like an old friend. I've spent many mornings, afternoons, and evenings here after fights with my mom, licking my wounds by treating myself to a bunch of new additions (as if my collection needs more). (Maldonado, 2021: 225)

b) Factors That Impact the Intersection of Gender, Race, and Body Image

In Charlie's social environment, Charlie faces various pressures and degrading treatment, especially regarding her body size. The insults she receives are not only personally hurtful, but also reflect how layered body stigma and stereotypes can worsen the social isolation she experiences. The line "Oh, sorry, man. I thought that was an elephant stampeding toward you." (Maldonado, 2021: 35) not only highlights Charlie's large body but also reduces her entire being by comparing her to a large animal symbolizing excessive strength or loss of control. This illustrates how Charlie's body is viewed as an object of ridicule and even a threat. Furthermore, this insult is made openly

in public, indicating how body shaming has become normalized in her social environment. As a teenage girl with a large body and Puerto Rican, Charlie bears the double burden of gender, racial, and body stereotypes.

In the dynamic relationship between Charlie and her mother, there is intense emotional tension. Charlie expresses her anger because her mother continuously imposes her own idealized version of herself, an image that has been shaped by societal expectations and narrow standards of beauty. Charlie feels she has never truly been seen, appreciated, or acknowledged as an individual with her own desires and feelings. Throughout this time, Charlie feels that her mother only cares about the 'perfect' version of her in her imagination. "not the me you make up in your head" highlights the significant gap between her mother's idealized image and her own reality. As seen in this quotation:

"God, you are impossible! You want to know why I didn't tell you about Brian, Mom? This is why I didn't tell you! Because you don't give a shit about me and what makes me happy—the real me, not the fake me you make up in your head, not the me you wish I'd turned out to be, not the me you hope will someday exist, but me. The actual person standing in front of you. You don't give a shit about anyone but yourself!" (Maldonado, 2021: 230)

Caught between her own desires and the shame arising from external standards, Charlie feels the imagining something romantic is embarrassing. Yet, longing for love is a very human thing for a teenager her age. This shame is not without reason, but arises from social pressure that indirectly teaches that women with bodies like Charlie's are not worthy of feeling desire or living a beautiful love life as often depicted in movies or social media. She even feels guilty just for having romantic hopes and fantasies, as if such feelings are only worthy of those who meet certain beauty standards. She realizes that such romantic stories are typically not meant for overweight Puerto Rican girls like her. As she expresses: "I hate to admit how romantic I think this entire thing is, and I'm embarrassed by how lonely it makes me feel." (Maldonado, 2021: 48).

c) Classification of Type of Struggle Charlie Experienced

Charlie experiences various forms of internal struggle that reflect the complexity of the internal and social conflicts she is facing. In her negative struggle, she feels intense anger and rejection toward her own body, which is not merely a lack of self-confidence but a complete denial of her existence. Aggressive actions such as scratching, shaking and extreme fantasies of 'realizing' parts of her body reveal the deep impact of social pressure and narrow beauty standards that grip her, to the point where she wants to 'disappear' from herself. This condition highlights how deeply damaging the psychological trauma caused by stigma toward bodies that do not conform to the standards. As seen in this quotation: "I am feral. I stare at my fat, round belly and grab it violently with my hands and shake it. I don't even know why. Then I grab at my arm fat, and my leg fat, and my face fat, and it takes everything in me not to scream. I stare at myself until I'm so overwhelmingly disgusted that I can't handle it. I want to rip my skin off." (Maldonado, 2021: 78).

In contrast to negative struggles, positive struggles arises from the desire to grow and evolve. Charlie began taking small but meaningful steps toward self-acceptance by searching for inspiration through the hashtag #fatfashion on Instagram. There, she found visual and emotional support from a community that celebrated bodies like hers. This journey demonstrates the courage to express oneself and begin creating space for an authentic self, not driven by fear or shame, but by the desire to be more authentically oneself. As it seen in this quotation: "After a few lastminute looks at the #fatfashion tag on Insta for some inspiration, I make a vow to step outside my comfort zone and try some things on that I might not have before." (Maldonado, 2021: 164).

In addition, an inevitable struggle arises naturally, for example when Charlie has to face the reality of loss and change, especially after her father's death. Grieving together with her mother causes them both to experience physical and emotional changes that affect family dynamics. Pressure from her mother, who implicitly expects Charlie to change, actually increases her sense of isolation within the family. As seen in the line: "It went like this: my dad got sick and died, my mom wallowed for a long time, we both got fatter together in our sadness, she had trouble feeling good about herself, she decided to throw herself into losing weight, and then— bam. Things were different." (Maldonado, 2021: 25).

Lastly, the chosen struggle arises from Charlie's conscious decision to manage her social discomfort. While those around her are busy partying and socializing, she chooses to step away to a quiet corner to be alone, as a protective strategy against feelings of isolation and fear of judgment. This choice was not forced by circumstances, but rather an act of self-management in the face of social pressure. As is shows in this passage: "So as those around me have fun dancing, drinking, playing party games, and eating, I find myself sneaking away to corners where I can mostly be alone." (Maldonado, 2021: 119). These four forms of struggle collectively illustrate the complex journey Charlie has undertaken from destructive self-rejection, the courage to build self-acceptance and self-confidence, facing inevitable life changes, to self-management through conscious choices to maintain emotional well-being.

E. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis above, this study examines the emotional struggles experienced by Charlie Vega in Crystal Maldonado's *Fat Chance*, Charlie Vega focusing on the factors causing the struggles, how she survives from the pressure, and the types of struggles she experiences. The findings shows that Charlie's body image, racial identity, and gender interact to form a complex pattern of emotional distress. Pressure from her social environment, pressure from her mother, and dominant standards of beauty make it so difficult for her to feel accepted. To cope with this, Charlie employs various coping strategies such as writing, leaning on supportive friendships, and participating in inclusive online communities. Her journey reflects an evolution from self-doubt to self-affirmation and layered emotional growth. This novel emphasize that the formation of a young woman's identity is not only influenced by her inner world but also by how she is treated

by others, making intersectionality a relevant theory in understanding the marginalization she experiences. Using Maizler typology of struggle, this study shows that Charlie's experiences move between internalized pain and empowering resistance. The importance of emotionally safe spaces, such as writing and affirmative communities, is key in navigating the emotional survival of adolescents, especially those from marginalized groups. This study encourages educators, parents, and adolescent to create supportive environments that celebrate diversity, as emotional resilience does not mean being without pain, but rather the willingness to endure and grow amid challenges.

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