GENDER AND THE ANOREXIC BODY IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Abstract

The relationship between gender role and anorexia nervosa or eating disorders was extensively investigated. Researchers, critics, and authors showed that femininity and feminine gender roles were implicated in the development of anorexia in Victorian era. Anorexia young women was almost always explained in terms of gender and played an important role in the construction of femininity and sexuality. Clinical studies consistently demonstrated a higher prevalence of eating disorders as a symptom of anorexia nervosa among women than men. Bearing in mind the rise in eating disorders in women, it is important then to understand the fundamental reasons that led to the experience of eating pathology. Studies indicated that there was a significant relationship between feminine characteristics such as passivity and eating disorders. The patriarchal views about women's thin bodies and their eating habits inevitably raised the risk of anorexic nervosa and led women to control their bodies through eating disorders. This article seeks to demonstrate how in Victorian culture and literature the anorexic body is represented in fairy-like terms, the opposite of the virginal and angelic body that stands in sharp contrast with the sexual body.

Key words: *anorexia nervosa, gender, anorexic body, sexual body, sexual appetite*

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1. Introduction: Definition of Anorexia Nervosa

Before examining the role of the anorexic body in the construction of Victorian gender ideology, one must be familiar with the term of 'anorexia nervosa' and its historical development. The latter was defined as "a serious illness of deliberate self-starvation with profound psychiatric and physical component" and regarded as a "complex emotional disorder that launches its victims on a course of frenzied dieting in pursuit of excessive thinness" (Neuman and Halvorson). Michelle M Lewica referred to the different aspects of *The Religion of Thinness* including myths, icons, rituals, morals that were provided by religion in order to encourage individuals to pursue specific spiritual goals. The obsession with the 'ideal' thin body was apparent in the history of Western culture and influenced both men and women by its ideas and beliefs. Biblical stories from Genesis onward associated appetite women with sin: it was Eve who ate the forbidden fruit and caused humanity to fall in sin (Lelwica 34). Accordingly, as this example involved the physical body of women, Genesis myth revealed that the origin of sin was the disobedient appetite of a woman. In contrast to Eve, Christ was able to enter the world through the "pure", desexualized body of a Virgin Mary (Lewica 34). Women had to ignore their appetite in order to be associated with sacred images of Mary as nurturers and not consumers.

2. Anorexic Nervosa in Medieval period

Scholars focused on the spirituality of the medieval times that was achieved mainly through fasting or eating disorders. In examining late medieval chastity and spirituality, they concentrated on the symbolic meaning of eating that was considered as "an occasion for union with one's fellows and one's God" (Bynum 3). In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Bynum referred to the example of Jesus whose relation with food had many spiritual meanings: "Because Jesus had fed the faithful not

merely as servant and waiter, preparer and multiplier of loaves and fishes, but as the very bread and wine itself, to eat was a powerful verb" (4). In other words, eating in late medieval Europe was not simply an activity marked by food consumption and digestion; however, it carried within it other symbolic meanings and connotations. It was not referred to food consumption but it was associated with the consumption of spiritual values: "It means to consume, to assimilate, to become God" (251). Not only did food function as a symbolic motif in late medieval spirituality, it also acted as a more significant motif in women's chastity and purity than in men. The term 'anorexic nervosa' recalled the 'medieval anorexia' experienced by some medieval young women who went through ascetic practices which implied severe eating disorders and fasting.

Medieval women's severe fasting was a form of religiosity and renunciation that were fundamental to achieving their chastity, purity, and spirituality. While men also practiced renunciation, women had to practice it through giving up food and controlling their bodies. As Bynum demonstrated it, "each gender renounced and disturbed what it most effectively controlled; men gave up money, property and progeny; women gave up food" (193). Accordingly, the kinds of renunciations proposed during the medieval period were gendered, leading women to be associated with their corporeality. The severe fasting practices that medieval women went through emphasized the idea that women could not achieve spirituality without denying their bodies. Bynum added that 'service and suffering' that were an important component of the spiritual theme of 'Imitato Christ' were experienced by medieval women through the denial of the flesh of their bodies (255). Fasting, for medieval women, was a means of imitating Christ, "fusing themselves with the suffering of Jesus, which, for those whose only food was the communion host, was joined into an ecstatic obsession with the Eucharist as an act of literally "feeding on the body of God"" (Collier 98). Therefore, the female body became the primary marker of exhibiting chastity and spirituality.

As mentioned earlier, Bynum suggested that women's fasting practices must be interpreted within the context of medieval Christianity, with its heavy dependence on imitato Christ and the connection of women with food and bodies. The spiritual connotation of medieval

women's fasting practices demonstrated the principle role of women as givers of life, nurturers of children, and helpers of the poor through giving them food. Their acts of fasting recalled "[l]ate medieval theology [that] emphasized Christ as suffering and Christ's suffering body and food" (Bynum 260). Medieval women like Christ were viewed as food and the source of existence and human life—the image of Virgin Mary that was the symbol of women's chastity of the time. The breast milk of women was seen as "transmuted blood," allowing an analogy between "God who feeds humankind with his own blood in the eucharist and human mother whose blood becomes food for her child" (qtd. in Collier 98). As such, women like Christ have to suffer through their own bodies and giving up food. Women were described by Christian authors as the "physical" part of the world and the human existence. Therefore, women were considered more responsible than men for controlling their bodies' flesh, desires, and appetite. They are expected to prepare meals, feed their children, and give food to the poor. Women's bodies by virtue of their capacity to give birth "were seen as analogous to both ordinary food and to the body of Christ" (Bynum 30). By refusing to eat and directing their hunger toward the nourishment of Christ, medieval holy women became the suffering and feeding humanity of the body on the cross (Bynum 30).

3-Anorexic Nervosa in Victorian Era

The inquiry into the relationship between fasting and anorexia nervosa began during the Victorian era. It was until the nineteenth century that anorexia nervosa became a recognized illness and the "fasting girl" became a serious problem for Victorian doctors. From around 1850 to 1900 many women "carefully concealed their appetite for food in fear that it would be misconstructed as a desire for sex" (Brumberg). The anorexic body in Victorian era recalled the discourse of body-mind dualism that divided the world into what is mental, rational, spiritual, and what is physical. Whilst the mind was privileged, the body is constructed as alien, as an enemy that threatened our attempts at control and must be controlled (Bordo). It was within the socio-cultural context of this discourse of this dualism that the body was considered as a threat or alien and in need of control, and that the slim/anorexic body was viewed as the controlled one (Malson 124).

3.1 Anorexic Body and Beauty Myth

In the case of anorexic nervosa in the nineteenth century, particular discourses coalesced in order to produce the ideal female body. The cultural and social aspects of anorexic nervosa were important in the construction of the female body. Siler assumed that the history and origins of anorexic nervosa was traced back to the Victorian period, adding that Victorian England had a "culture of anorexia" (19). According to Silver, the "culture of anorexia" referred to the way in which "culture itself manifested an anorexic logic; in other words, that several of its gender ideologies meshed closely with the etiology of anorexia nervosa" (27). Silver addressed the relationship between the Victorian "culture of anorexia" and Children's literature. The latter "praises girls for denying their appetites and limiting their consumption of food, often connecting that denial to femininity" (Silver 52). In addition, this kind of literature connected fat bodies with immorality: "the Victorian culture of anorexia is already apparent in children's literature that associates eating, especially for girls, with traits such as greed, lust, and aggression" (Silver 54). The domestic ideology of Victorian era that attached women to the private sphere acquired women to possess thinner and slender bodies than men. The association of women with the private sphere inevitably led them to embody the 'angelic' characteristics of the ideal womanhood such as female purity and emphasized "women's spiritual power as a moral guide with the home" (qtd. in Heller and Moran).

Until Victorian times a woman's body "had been expected to reflect a "mother-earth" image. This maternal expectation was codified through imposing on mothers' bodies the cultural norms of the era. Victorian mothers' rejection of food involved preoccupation with the serving and preparing of food. The anorexic Victorian mothers insisted upon feeding children and preparing meals for them and the family. The image of the angelic mother was valorized in many Victorian novels including Dickens's novels that displayed this image from consumer ideology. In *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens's Novels*, Gail Turley Houston argued that Dickens related the issue of gender and class to women's starvation and hunger. Dickens's heroine was silent, like the anorexic as they use "both her appetite and her body as a substitute for rhetorical behavior" (48). He perpetuated the Victorian idealization of woman as "a self-scarifying and ever-renewing source of physical

and emotional nurture who was without need of nurture" (Houston xi). The angelic nature and maternal daughters were prominent in Little Dorrit whose heroine as Houston describes, is "little" because she sacrificed her self-nourishment and food in order to nurture her needy father (139-153).

The thin/anorexic body signified Victorian women's control of their bodies that was restricted to the conventional role of female domesticity. Because of their physiological component, their responsibilities were determined by the maternal role which was considered as the primary indicator of her proper gender identity. Their bodies metaphorically linked them to the domestic roles of nurturing and feeding children through their breasts that revealed feminine softness in child rearing. Erik Erikson revealed that the relationship between mothers and babies represented the natural role of mothers as nurturers and not consumers: "first felt and touched and tasted and ate—all sensual knowledge—was of a woman's body" (14). Erikson further demonstrated the original feeding relationship in which the child "lives through and loves with his mouth" while the mother "lives through and loves with her breasts" (15). The fact that Victorian mothers had to sacrifice their self-nutrition in the benefit of the nutrition of their babies and children was considered as a sign of holiness and recalled the image of the mother goddess. The idea that the mother "loves through her breast", as presented by Erikson, revealed the ideal image of motherhood and the careful mothers who tended to sacrifice their own nutrition and health for the sake of their babies or children. This image was developed by Dickens whose ideal women tended to be "little mothers" since thin mothers as protective, while he presented fat mothers as selfish (Holbrook 171).

The sexual division of labor in Victorian society was based on the belief that the principle female role was perceived to be mothering and childrearing. Anorexic mothers were visibly identified by their role as nurturers and breast feeders. Their physical equipment (the fact of having breasts) categorized them as the providers and distributors of food rather than consumers. This image is symbolized in the mythology and popular culture of the Victorian era. Images of the nursing Christ asserted the proper role of women as mothers, protectors, givers of food as her breast symbolically were interpreted by many critics as a symbol 'for

spiritual nourishment' (Fletcher 67). Painted images of Mary breastfeeding played an important role in the identification of mothers as the producers of life and food:

> Mutual regulation with a mother who will permit him [to get] as she gives. There is a high premium of libidinal pleasure on this coordination. The mouth and the nipple seem to be the mere centers of the general aura of warmth and mutably which are enjoyed and responded to with relaxation not only by these focal organs, but by both total organisms. (qtd.in Dotterer 102)

Bearing in mind the Victorian women's weak biological and rational disposition, the domestic ideology of separate spheres naturalized and justified sexual division of labor. Associating women with the role of mothering and breastfeeding as the only fundamental role inevitably led them to go through a process of self-starvation in order to conform the patriarchal norms that identify them as breast feeders and nurturers. Because of their biological capacity to bear children, Victorian women were viewed as nurturers who experienced the denial of their appetite and committed themselves to nurturing their children through the pattern of self-giving. The Victorian ideal of motherhood was metaphorically represented through women's self-starvation of their bodies in order to feed their children.

6. The Sexual Body

After subverting the domestic ideology and refusing the subordinate situation of its female figures, the mythical women became aligned with the monstrousness of the fallen and New Women who appeared in the post-feminist and industrial revolution. The myth of the vampire dominated the Victorian popular culture in the form of literary or artistic works. After the socio-economic changes that affected British national order, Victorian authors became fascinated with the vampire figure that was inherited from the Biblical stories that were full of vampires with "supernatural powers". The authors of Victorian Gothicists adopted female vampires from ancient traditions, focusing on "man-eating characteristics" (111). There is a similar being from the Gothic tradition: the vampire. The breakdown of the fairy and feminine traits that were associated with the principles of the dominant domestic ideology was accompanied by the revival of aggressive women who constructed a physical

threat to the Victorian masculine reputation and a feeling of emotional castration for him. The association of vampire images and aggressive sexual women was meant to dehumanize them and to Gothicize the collapse of the domestic ideology that was characterized by order and fairy feminine qualities. As Bram Dijkstra warned : "To fantasise about warlocks and witches, about vampires and werewolves is to perpetuate a world eager for war and to remain complicit in the fetishization of others as 'evil', as 'alien', as 'inferior" (40).

The Victorian era witnessed the revival of ancient dangerous women who were the femme fatale of Biblical Jewish stories in which women were viewed as immoral and uncivilized: "the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his seduction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in Western culture" (qtd. in Becker 218). The femme fatale that circulated in Victorian novels owed much to Victorian Gothic writers' interest in dehumanizing women who transgressed the boundaries of the domestic ideology by comparing their appearances and behaviors with the Biblical femme fatale ranging from Lilith to Salomé. The latter were reduced by God to curved spirits or witches as a consequence of their betrayals of the first step toward patriarchal order (Becker 218). This revival then was part of the pervasive manifestations of male-female relationships in the aftermath of industrial revolution and feminist movement.

The monstrosity of women was apparent in the interconnection between the female and male protagonists in the novel in which the female villain stood in dark contrast to the anorexic women, possessing "a hungry and emasculating womb equipped with phallic powers of penetration [that] marks a Victorian horror of female sexual appetite" (Hurley 194). The Victorian representations of female sexual appetite conformed to the conventions of Gothic literature and the horror genre through which women turned into monsters or witches, bypassing their 'natural' human existence identified by patriarchy. While the Victorian angels were supposed to possess anorexic bodies, the visual marker of their sexual purity, and to "demonstrate their incorporeality through the small appetite and correspondingly slender body" (Silver 9), the New Women of the Victorian Gothic novels became the signifiers of immorality because of their sexual and unrestrained hunger for sex. In this regard, Victorian Gothicists attempted to demonize the features that threatened the

patriarchal order, crystallizing male anxiety over women's possession of power. As Silver pointed out, "the female vampire illustrates, in hyperbolic form, cultural anxieties about women and hunger, in which hunger is symbolically related to women's predatory sexuality and aggression" (117). During the Victorian period when female appetite was considered as a threat to the moral characteristics identifying the image of The Angel in the House, the association of women with vampire legend served as a social critique of the decay of the impurity and immorality of the fallen women.

The femme fatale's body became further intelligible in contrast to the Victorian's conception of the anorexic and pure female body. In other words, women who followed the domestic ideology were often displayed favorably compared to those who displayed an opposition to the conventional patriarchal order. Heroines like Agnes of *David Copperfield*, Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Esther of *Bleak House*, Amy Dorrit of *Little Dorrit* and Lucy of *A Tale of Two Cities* are mostly "modest, loyal, self-scarifying, caring, and subordinate to men and nurturing" (Tierney 696). Agnes, for instance, acted as a domestic angel who looked after David and compensated for his motherly love. The femme fatale, however, was represented through the spectral phenomena, a vampire or man-consuming figure.

The hunger for food is tightly associated with the hunger for sex which is expressed metaphorically through vampirism. In *Dracula*, hunger stands for immorality as the female vampire's hunger symbolically represent women's sexuality and aggression (Silver 118). In this novel, the mouth was Gothicized as it looked for desire and sexuality. The main character Jonathan Harker is haunted by the female vampires' "voluptuous lips" or "red lips" (qtd. in Silver 121). She was depicted as attractive female figure who stood outside the parameters of the passive women and so could use her own sexuality and beautiful physical attributes as she wished. This made her dangerous to men, for she sought male lovers by seducing them.

The image of the seductive woman was also present in *Tess of the D'Urberville*, when Hardy represented Tess as a temptress whose monstrous mouth allures men into evil deeds: "redtop lip" and mouth" (180). It was the hungry mouth that called to mind Eve's mouth, the

myth that represented the hungry for the apple which was responsible for the fall of man (14). Female vampires that circulated Victorian Gothic novels were inherited from Greek and Biblical mythology, revealing abject sexuality, immorality and the uncivilized situation of women before the creation of patriarchy.

Conclusion

When studying the inferiority of women within a patriarchal society, it is fundamental to examine the philosophical concepts that led to such differentiation. The presence of dualism in Western culture contributed to some extent to the hierarchical structure of patriarchal society. Common was the association of woman with body and man with mind in patriarchal society. This connection with the traditional soul-body dualism was apparent in the patriarchal relation between man and woman. Males were identified essentially with what was rational, while women with what was erotic, the body that needed to be controlled. This view of dualistic divisions led to the rise of hierarchical controls. Women in Victorian culture and society had to ignore the desires of the body and concentrate more on spirituality and purity. The anorexic body represented purity, chastity, and domesticity, while the sexual body referred to vampiric and sexual women.

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