

Reconceptualising Female Disordered Eating and Body-Image Perceptions: A Gynocentric Trajectory Through the New-media

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Abstract

Depriving the body from eating and developing a phobia about food is a vital attribute of the neurotic ailment, Anorexia Nervosa. Conspicuously, this is labeled as a female disorder. Various studies have examined that the germination point of this disorder is substantially based on the social presumptions such as, “Thin is beautiful.” In the psychoanalytical sense, this can be a response to ‘lack’ or ‘deficiency’ communicated through Lacanian Symbolic Order. This ‘lack’ unconsciously drives the female to look or become ‘thin.’ As proven in the various studies, this disciplinary project is marked by unattainability. Hence, this desire only ensues in female dejection and shame; further, it also restores her ‘deficiency.’ Nevertheless, in the last decade, new-media tools may have transformed the dynamics of female bodily-presumptions and their disordered eating. Various body-positive new-media handles seem to have deposed the Lacanian ‘lack’ and the ‘Symbolic Order’ only to replace them with an unrestrained and real female language. In this lieu, the paper theoretically critiques the Lacanian notions of female ‘Lack’ in the new-media domain. This study attempts to reconceptualise the trajectory of disordered eating and the female body-images from the twentieth century through the twenty-first century (i.e., with the augmentation of new-media).

Keywords: body-image, disorder-eating, female-language, Lack, new-media, Symbolic-order

Introduction:

The case of female body and the gastronomic-politics are among the rampantly researched domains of feminist studies. In this purview, general social presumptions associate the female beauty with the body image, wherein, ‘thin’ is connoted as beautiful and/or ideal and ‘fat’ as ugly and/or non-ideal. This societal obsession with female thinness is “not an obsession about female beauty but ... about female obedience” (Wolf, 2002, p. 187). Consequently, almost every woman, in this society that is obsessed with “thinness” not only deprives her body from eating and also develops a phobia about food. In psychological and medical terms, this trait is vital to the neurotic ailment, Anorexia Nervosa, an eating disorder which is conspired as female disorder. About “90 to 95 percent of anorexics and bulimics are women” (Wolf, 2002, p. 181). Anorexia Nervosa (which is characterized by starvation) could be a life-threatening condition characterized by “persistent energy-intake restriction; intense fear of gaining weight, or of becoming fat ... and a disturbance in self-perceived weight or shape” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 339). Feminist critics, such as Orbach (2005) define it as, a condition of the females who are “invested in not eating and have become scared of food and what it can do to them” (p. xi). The instances of women suffering from ‘eating disorders’ are rampant since the twentieth century (Bordo, 1992) and the mortality rates are the highest for eating-disorders (Smink, Van Hoeken, &

Hoek, 2012). This paper is theoretically-driven research that traces the gynocentric trajectory on female disordered-eating through the twenty-first century.

Owing to the incessant promotion of the unrealistic and unattainable body-ideals by the society, the desirability of slenderness is unconsciously conditioned into the female. A growing body of research suggests that “getting fat” (i.e., fat-phobia) was one of the worst fears that women have (Bordo, 1992, pp. 140-141). For plethora of women thin-body is the signifier for metaphors such as, being beautiful, attractive, well groomed, in-shape. Fat, on the other hand, connotes ugly, unattractive, not groomed, out-of-shape, disorganised and indisciplined. Women, therefore, strive to achieve this thin-body all through their life. To have a thin-body is “to project to those around you – as well as to yourself – that you are morally as well as physically ‘in shape’” (Benson, 1997, p. 123). The fear of not belonging may seem to supplement this fear of “becoming fat”. The UCLA survey further proves the obsession of women with “becoming thin”. Out of 260 male and female students who were interviewed, 27.3 % of women and only 5.8 % of men said they were “terrified” of getting fat; 28.7 % of women but only 7.5 % of men indicated their preoccupation with food (Bartky, 1997, p. 133). Further Bartky (1997) affirms that, “Today massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman’s body is met with distaste. The current body of fashion is taut, small-breasted, narrow hiped ... Since ordinary women have normally quite different dimensions, they much of course diet” (p. 132). These instances seem to convey that, the female “identity” is closely linked with the physical features of the body. This paper attempts to re-theorize the trajectory of female-body presumptions and their disordered-eating; in doing so, it critically analyses the aforementioned parameters from the twentieth century through the twenty-first century (i.e., with a closer analysis of digital-media products in the latter century). To achieve this, the paper employs Lacanian and post-Lacanian notions of female ‘Lack’ in the purview of female-body and disordered-eating.

Discussion:

Lacanian Metamorphosis and Gendered Difference in Eating and Hunger

Eating is a drive-based activity and hunger is the most rudimentary need. At birth, the infant’s hunger is gratified instantly. In the Lacanian theory of psychosexual development, this immediate gratification is predominantly and relatively less predominantly practiced in the “Real” and the “Imaginary” stage respectively (Lacan, 1966, p.7). However, with the emergence of talk (i.e., language) which implies the emergence of the third stage, “Symbolic Order” (Lacan, 1966, p.7), the act of eating transforms into a controlled social activity. In this stage, consuming the right food at the right is rewarded and vice-versa is punished. This connotes that hunger, eating and Symbolic Order are interlinked for individuals.

Furthermore, a bird’s eye view of the Lacanian stages reveal that although boys and girls are equal in the ‘Real’ and ‘Imaginary’ stage, their entry into the ‘Symbolic Order’ is marked with gender-difference. The male and female are differently *signified* within the Symbolic. In the ‘Imaginary,’ the individuals (i.e., the being) are driven by a desire for the (m)Other. This connotes their desire for “identification and homogeneity” with the (m)Other (Ragland-Sullivan, 1982, p.9); but, it is only met with a ‘lack.’ This ‘lack’ sets the ‘being’ in motion towards the “Symbolic Order.” It is in this stage that the ‘being’ emerges as a ‘speaking-subject’ (Hook, 2006, p.77). Here, the individual experiences difference with the (m)Other, substitutions and recognitions with ‘o’ther, control and transformation with the act of eating so as to become inclusive (Hook, 2006). For the ‘speaking-

subject,' in the Symbolic, the state of 'lack' as well as the gender difference in subject-position in connection with the Imaginary object, 'Phallus' becomes a constant and continuum; this affects the female adversely owing to her less-privileged position in relation to the Phallus. Correspondingly, with regard to the gastronomic-politics, studies suggest that eating is "our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality, and language. *We eat before we talk*" (Atwood, 1988, p. 53, *author's emphasis*); nevertheless, the female entry into the Symbolic signifies paternally-constructed, unattainable, unrealistic norms for eating too. Her state of 'lack' and farther subject-position to the Phallus is a cardinal reason for this transformation. Lacan describes this female 'lack' as she, "is in it *not not* at all," and "her being not all in the phallic function" (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p.145). This reinforces the androcentric nature of the Symbolic Order. Thus, hunger/eating, female-body and female 'lack' are predominantly interlinked.

Analysis:

The Gynocentric Language of Food and Hunger in the Pre-new-media Era

This section theorizes female hunger/eating, female-body and female 'lack' in the pre-new-media era. To achieve this, it theoretically critiques the agents of the Symbolic Order (i.e., mass-media) and the female 'speaking-subject' in the twentieth century. Drawing on the Lacanian analysis of the female 'lack' in the Symbolic Order, the dialectics of 'desire' can be further examined. This study draws a primary hypothesis that the female who strives to overcome her 'lack' and establish homogeneity with the 'other' may seem to *desire the other's desire*. An anatomical definition of the "desire of the other" is that it is a desire "to possess' or 'to assimilate'... to be 'desired' or 'loved'" (Kojève, 1969, 6). Based on the Lacanian theory and the prevalent gender-differences of female subject-position in Symbolic Order, this study argues about *who is the 'other'* for the female? Theoretically arguing, Lacan's synonymy of Symbolic Order with the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan, 1966, p. 230) implies that the 'other' is a 'paternal' metaphor. Specifically, the agents [i.e., Ideological-State-Apparatuses (Althusser, 1971, p.181)] such as, media, magazines, television, advertisements communicates the notions of the 'ideal' female-body in the pre-new-media era and attempt to regulate the unattainable. To achieve the desire of the 'other,' women barter 'food' in exchange for belongingness, love, assimilation, or inclusion. Research demonstrates that, "Eating is the prototype of all transactions with the other, and food is the prototype of every object of exchange" (Ellmann, 1993, p. 53). The female desires to achieve the *desire of the other* may consequently aim at being closer to the phallus in the Symbolic Order. Conversely, her desires only ensue in dejection, shame and restoration of her 'lack.'

Another hypothesis, in this purview, is the possibility of dual antagonistic subject-positions within the female in the process of disordered-eating, wherein she desires to eat as well as not eat; "they are often required to be *both things at the same time!*" (Hall, 1997, p. 229, *author's emphasis*). The female aversion as well as desire for food can be highly traumatizing. A psychoanalytical trajectory of this condition suggests that she may achieve this through repression of unfulfilled desires which emerges into the conscious frequently seeking fulfillment. In this regard, relevant theory and research suggests that nowhere is the "collaboration with repression more clear than in the case of anorexia" (Bordo, 1992, p. 144). The antagonism, in the Lacanian sense, is that women strive for homogeneity and individuality. Homogeneity demands a submission to the Law; individuality, on the other hand, is powerful only in the 'real' stage; it is subsequently silenced when 'misrecognition' is constructed in the Imaginary stage. This can be further be analogous to Ragland-Sullivan presupposition that the female is, "Split between language and individuality, between 'being,' and saying, the subject is operated by the structures of Desire and Law" (1982,

p.9). This hypothesis further concludes that, the female 'speaking-subject' is silenced due to the androcentric nature of language in the pre-new-media era.

The Gynocentric Language of Food and Hunger in the New-media Era

This section theorizes female hunger/eating, female-body and female 'lack' in the new-media era. To achieve this, it conducts a gynocentric analysis of the female 'speaking-subject' in the new-media (i.e., twenty-first century). Unlike the Mass-media and other agents of the Symbolic Order, new-media tools (such as, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Instagram) are a hypertextual, bidirectional, virtual, public-network platform that is "social, mobile, and interactive" (Shaw, 2017, 592-93). Alongside these features, their extensivity, higher-perceived-credibility and democracy possess the potential to depose the Symbolic Order. The previous section demonstrated that the female 'speaking-subject' until the emergence of new-media was silenced, vulnerable and powerless. In the pre-new-media era, the agents (i.e., Mass-media) portrayed thinness as the Ideal female-body and resultantly, exerted detrimental influences on the female. On the contrary, new-media as an augmented technology has enabled female to "reveal the real" (Heidegger, 1977, 24). To elaborate, research suggests that new-media tools have immense potential to qualitatively change the cultural role that individuals play in body-image construction. One hypothesis, in this regard, can be drawn from the gynocentric descriptions of the female-language. As such, the hypothesis suggests that the metamorphosis in the female-language is directly proportional to the female 'speaking-subject'. Gynocentric critics affirm that the 'female language' is characterized by individuation, relationality; it is also "symbolic and sensory" (Toronto, 2005, p. 33). This implies that, expression of female sensory experience and female-body can express the female-language adequately. Criticizing the female 'speaking-subject' in the Lacanian Symbolic Order, gynocentric critic, Irigaray (1985) suggests, the woman does not desire "to speak the same language as man's" (p. 25). New-media tools, with their features, enable the uncensored expression of female-language through her body and sensory experiences. Consequently, she "has become a producer of [her own] content" in this era (Marshall, 2006, 638). Drawing on the dialectics of the 'other,' an intersubjective feminist approach suggests, "The other's difference must exist outside; not be felt as a coercive command to 'become' the other and therefore not be defended against by assimilating it to self" (Benjamin, 1998, pp. 96-97). Accordingly, in the new-media era, the female does not seem to be coerced to become the 'other' (i.e., to homogenise) because she is a 'speaking-subject' who reveals the 'real' (i.e., a credible content 'producer' who can disregard the norms by the Symbolic Order).

This section also compares the hypothesized impact of female hunger/eating, female-body and female 'lack' in the pre-new-media and new-media era. In the pre-new media age, studies show a correlation between goals related to thin-body images and feelings of power; "bodily self-control was their primary means to exert control in the social world" (Goodman, 2002, p. 722). Various content analyses of *thinspiration* and *fitspiration-related* content on new-media have affirmed that idealizing thin and toned bodies induces guilt about diet, weight and exercise in the woman (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Conversely, studies in the recent past, suggest that there is a positive correlation between body-positive new-media handles, the body-image perception as well as the level of body-satisfaction among women (Cohen et al., 2020). #BoPo, #selflove, #selfcare, #bodypositivity, #allbodiesaregoodbodies, are some of the popular hashtags on Instagram handles which support body-positivity. #BOPO images that portray non-normative beauty ideals such as, cellulite, stomach rolls and stretch marks suggest body-neutrality and body-satisfaction among the females (Cohen et al., 2020, pp. 1-9). Based on the current state of empirical research, certain preliminary evidences and the

proposed theoretical perspectives, this article articulates the need to re-theorise the female-language, female-body, and hunger/eating from the pre-new-media era through the new-media era.

Conclusions:

The female-body is analogous to the prisoners in the Panopticon (as cited in Foucault, 1977, p. 200) who are constantly watched, judged and criticized. The Symbolic Order has until recently silenced the female-language and enforced thinness as the female body-ideal; hence, she starves to attain the unattainable. This could nudge the woman into a higher risk of developing Anorexia. However, the new-media tools seem to have begun a transformation. They have engendered the female as 'content producers' free from the constraints of the Symbolic Order. Body-positivity, body-neutrality and body-satisfaction seem to positively affect the risk of the female succumbing to starvation or anorexia. This study is a preliminary attempt to trace the trajectory of the female 'speaking-subject' in the Symbolic Order, her bodily presumptions and her disordered/ordered eating from the pre-new-media era through new-media era. This theoretical undertaking can be employed to generate empirical research on female starvation (i.e., Anorexia), female-body and new-media. Further investigations are necessary to determine more definitive conclusions about their correlations.

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