

THE PLATE IS POLITICAL: A Foucauldian Analysis of Anorexia Nervosa



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I investigate why anorexia nervosa emerged in non-Western nations after Western globalization efforts. Using Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gender from *The Second Sex* alongside Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the "docile body," I argue that the emergence of anorexia nervosa in non-Western nations reflects the Western sovereign's subordination of women. While patriarchal oppression is not exclusive to the West, I contend that the political ideology behind Western industrialization has allowed new avenues for patriarchal oppression to permeate. To conclude, I demand that mainstream discourse on anorexia nervosa consider the political conditions which are catalytic to its occurrence.



I. INTRODUCTION

In Apple's 1991 hit song, "Paper Bag," she melancholically declares that "hunger hurts but starving works."¹ Nearly two decades later, these five words flooded "pro-anorexia" blogs. Truthfully, I had never heard of Fiona Apple nor listened to her music when I first read those lyrics on a pro-anorexia blog back in 2011. While I am not qualified to speak on behalf of Apple's intent behind "Paper Bag," I am qualified to discuss the false sense of power by which many anorexics become disillusioned. This is by no means a unique qualification. Currently, it is estimated that at least 9% of the global population suffers from an eating disorder.² Despite this concerning figure, the global prevalence of eating disorders is increasing rapidly.³ While anyone can fall victim to an eating disorder's wrath, the deadliest disorder—anorexia nervosa—overwhelmingly occurs in adolescent females at three times the rate of their male counterparts.⁴ Additionally, the instances of anorexia nervosa in women are continually increasing, while the instances in men remain steady.⁵ An ongoing American study has revealed that the gender gap between the adolescents who experience anorexia nervosa has consistently widened over the past fifty years, because more women continue to develop the disease.⁶ Evidence highlighting the rising rates of anorexia nervosa in women is not limited to the United States. From the 1970s onward, the global rate of anorexia nervosa in adolescent girls has been consistently climbing within non-Western countries that are exposed to Western influence alongside globalization and industrialization.⁷ The emergence of anorexia nervosa in non-Western countries after exposure to Western culture raises a critical question: why does exposure to Western culture lead young women to starve themselves? In this paper, I will answer this

- 1 Fiona Apple, "Paper Bag," track 5 on *When the Pawn...*, Epic Records, 1999, compact disc.
- 2 M. Galmiche et al., "Prevalence of Eating Disorders over the 2000-2018 Period: A Systematic Literature Review," *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 109, no. 5 (2019): 1402-13, 10.1093/ajcn/nqy342.
- 3 Frédérique R. E. Smink, Daphne van Hoeken, and Hans W. Hoek, "Epidemiology of Eating Disorders: Incidence, Prevalence and Mortality Rates," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 14, no. 4 (2012): 406, 10.1007/s11920-012-0282-y.
- 4 Anna Keski-Rahkonen et al., "Epidemiology and Course of Anorexia Nervosa in the Community," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 164, no. 8 (2007): 10.1176/appi.ajp.2007.06081388.
- 5 Alexander R. Lucas et al., "The Ups and Downs of Anorexia Nervosa," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 26, no. 4 (1999): 397, 10.1002/(sici)1098-108x(199912)26:4<397::aid-eat5>3.0.co;2-0.
- 6 Lucas et al., "Ups and Downs," 397.
- 7 Kathleen M. Pike and Patricia E. Dunne, "The Rise of Eating Disorders in Asia: A Review," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 3, no. 33 (2015): 2, 10.1186/s40337-015-0070-2.

question by applying the work of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* alongside Michel Foucault's theory of the "docile body" from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* to form the argument that anorexia is nervosa is unique to Western culture because of the West's privatization of punishment coupled with its individualization of discipline.⁸ Thus, the existence of patriarchal social constructions of gender alongside the West's creation of the "docile body" has bred new avenues for oppression to express itself.⁹

To substantiate my claim, I first provide the reader with context regarding the current debates about the cause of anorexia nervosa. Within these debates, I will underscore the tendency of medical professionals to view gender as secondary to culture instead of as a byproduct of culture. Second, I use Beauvoir's commentary on the influence gender has on one's lived experiences to demonstrate that it is a social construction. Third, I affirm the theory that anorexia nervosa is a product of Western culture by connecting Beauvoir's idea that gender is a social construct to Foucault's argument that the contemporary Western sovereign relies on individuals to discipline themselves. Fourth, I use the synthesis between Beauvoir and Foucault to establish that anorexia nervosa is political. And finally, I highlight the dangers of framing anorexia nervosa as a strictly personal ailment.

II. THE WESTERN PLAGUE

In the 1980s, scholars were baffled by the rapid emergence of eating disorders across newly industrialized non-Western nations. Up until the 1970s, eating disorders were non-existent outside of the Western world.¹⁰ Previously, Western scholars had debated whether the causes of eating disorders were psychological or biological, but the data showing that eating disorders subsequently emerged alongside globalization efforts led others to question if eating disorders were neither psychological nor biological, but instead cultural. In 1985, psychiatrist Raymond Prince hypothesized that anorexia nervosa is a "culture-bound syndrome (CBS),"¹¹ which he defined as, "a collection of signs and symptoms which is restricted to a limited number of cultures primarily by reason of certain of their psychosocial features."¹²

- 8 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House US, 2012), 135.
- 9 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.
- 10 Pike and Dunne, "Rise of Eating Disorders," 2.
- 11 Raymond Prince, "The Concept of Culture-Bound Syndromes: Anorexia Nervosa and Brain-fag," *Social Science and Medicine* 21, no. 2 (1985): 197, 10.1016/0277-9536(85)90089-9.
- 12 Raymond Prince and Francoise Tchong-Laroche, "Culture-Bound Syndromes and International Disease Classifications," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 11, no. 1 (1987): 3, 10.1007/BF00055003.



With this definition, Prince argued that anorexia nervosa is a CBS precisely because of its presence in Western, industrialized societies and absence in non-Western cultures.¹³ Prince thus attributed anorexia nervosa's rise in non-Western countries to the countries' newfound contact with Western culture.¹⁴ While Prince drew attention to Western culture's ability to manifest anorexia nervosa, his proposed criteria to validate anorexia nervosa's CBS status excludes the group it primarily affects: women. In his article, "Culture-bound Syndromes and International Disease Classifications," Prince outlines the parameters in which CBS status may be applied to an illness, stating that, "epidemiological features . . . such as global prevalence or age/sex differentials of those affected should not be used as basis of CBS status."¹⁵ I find Prince's criteria ironic, considering that he also acknowledges that beauty standards exclusive to Western culture have a detrimental impact on women's self-esteem often responsible for the development of eating disorders.¹⁶ How is it plausible to separate the influence of Western culture from its impact on groups of people? Is it not culture that creates epidemiological distinctions?

In my view, Prince's attempt to draw a distinction between the Western ideal of thinness from the people it targets is an act of erasure. Given that 90% of those experiencing anorexia nervosa are female,¹⁷ gender cannot be reduced to a simple "epidemiological factor."¹⁸ To do so ignores the notion that gender is created and defined by culture. Western beauty standards are avenues for gender roles to assert themselves but are not primarily responsible for oppressive gender roles. Beauty standards cannot exist without the construction of gender. If gender did not exist, then the beauty ideal would have no subject to penetrate. And here lies the fundamental problem I have with mainstream discourse over anorexia nervosa: the reduction of gender to a neutral chromosomal factor pathologizes the sufferer and not the culture which led them to suffer; this perpetuates anorexia nervosa's prevalence. Understanding the social construct of gender is necessary to view Western media as gender's reinforcer. To prevent anorexia

13 Wioleta Polinska, "Bodies under Siege: Eating Disorders and Self-Mutilation among Women," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2000): 572, 10.1093/jaarel/68.3.569.

14 Polinska, "Bodies under Siege," 572.

15 Prince and Tchong-Laroche, "Culture-Bound Syndromes," 3.

16 Prince, "Concept of Culture-Bound Syndromes," 199.

17 Columbia University, "Anorexia Nervosa," Columbia, Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, last modified 2020, <https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org/research-clinics/eating-disorders-clinic/about-eating-disorders/anorexia-nervosa#:~:text=While%20many%20different%20types%20of%20people%20may%20have,adulthood%2C%20though%20onset%20may%20occur%20earlier%20or%20later.>

18 Prince and Tchong-Laroche, "Culture-Bound Syndromes," 3.

nervosa, the relationship between gender and the West's unique reinforcement of gender must be understood as political, not personal.

III. THE BODY AS A BATTLEGROUND

Beauvoir famously wrote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman."¹⁹ For Beauvoir, the word, "Woman," extends beyond the chromosomal category; instead, the status of "Woman" is relative to her negation of "Man." Because Woman is defined by her relationship to Man, Beauvoir writes that "She is the Other."²⁰ Woman's status as Man's "Inessential Other" determines her movement in the world which surrounds her.²¹ Thus, the definitive characteristic of a Woman for Beauvoir is not biological, but the political status given and assumed by those who negate Man's authority to define and govern the virtue of humanity. The process of becoming Man's Other does not begin until puberty. In childhood, Beauvoir argues that children fail to recognize sexual difference since both girls and boys use their bodies as "the instrument that brings about comprehension of the world."²² Further, Beauvoir notes that both the boy and girl "apprehend the universe through their eyes and hands, and not through their sexual parts."²³ This fact is instrumental to refute Prince's classification of gender as an "epidemiological factor."²⁴ And while it is true that male and female bodies carry anatomical differences, these differences are not inherently meaningful unless society gives them meaning. The problem is when anatomical differences are weaponized to assign the category of Woman against one's own will. In other words, if Western society did not weaponize sexual differentiation to assign identity, then Prince's decision to exclude gender from basing CBS status would be valid. But since Western culture does weaponize sexual differentiation, it is necessary to analyze the political ramifications of sexual differentiation in Western culture.

In childhood, girls may notice differential treatment compared to their male peers, but these differences do not solidify until puberty. In addition to 90% of anorexics identifying as women,²⁵ it is not a coincidence that the average age of onset for anorexia nervosa is

19 Simone de Beauvoir and Constance Capisto-Borde, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 283.

20 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 6.

21 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 6.

22 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 283.

23 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 283.

24 Prince and Tchong-Laroche, "Culture-Bound Syndromes," 3.

25 Columbia University, "Anorexia Nervosa."



eighteen.²⁶ Beauvoir notes that when the girl begins puberty, her body transforms “into a screen between the woman and the world.”²⁷ If Man and his body represent humanity, Woman and her changing flesh are thus inhuman, alien. Whether or not the child consents to the gendered identity assigned to their changing anatomy, the process persists. Puberty marks the solidification of Woman as Man’s Other, not because her flesh is inherently inferior, but because she is thereby unable to escape how others perceive her. According to Beauvoir, “she becomes a stranger to herself because she is a stranger to the rest of the world.”²⁸ The feeling of estrangement that engulfs the pubescent girl as she observes the public, cultural perception of her flesh is immutable.

During this tumultuous transitory state, adolescent girls may attempt to confront or accept the looming threat of imminence associated with their changing body. Adolescence, for the girl then, is articulated by Beauvoir as, “the divorce between her properly human condition and her feminine vocation.”²⁹ As she becomes aware of the powerlessness prescribed to her physical features, she loses confidence in herself. Beauvoir refers to the Woman’s body as the “hysterical body.”³⁰ According to Beauvoir, the girl’s realization that her body is “hysterical” is what leads to low self-esteem.³¹ Rather than project her anxieties outwards towards the world, rendering her passive, she is forced to internalize them. Unlike her male counterpart, the girl is unable to express herself publicly. Her body then becomes the means through which she communicates with the world. Here, it is important that I reiterate my earlier claim—one cannot claim that Western beauty standards are responsible for the rising cases of anorexia nervosa in adolescent girls unless the signification of those beauty standards are understood. At the heart of women’s desperate attempts to achieve the Western beauty ideal is the power and privilege that thinness represents. However, patriarchy is not exclusive to the West. Thus, it is now necessary to explore why Western culture plagues women with anorexia.

IV. THE MEDICAL MYTH’S DOLL-CILE BODY

Now that I have demonstrated that gender is inseparable from culture since it is culture which defines gender, I wish to highlight

the following question that Beauvoir raises: “How will she decide to become the inessential? If I can accomplish myself only as the *Other*, how will I renounce my *Self*?”³² Even though Beauvoir acknowledges that there are many ways in which adolescent girls will respond to this question, I analyze only one of the potential responses. First, I argue that anorexia nervosa in marginalized bodies is both the acceptance of and the rebellion against her politically mandated passive role. Second, I explain why anorexia nervosa is unique to Western society by applying Foucault’s theory of the Western “docile body”³³ to Beauvoir’s argument that women are men’s “Other.”³⁴ My goal in this section is two-fold: to explain why anorexia nervosa is unique to the West even if gender-based oppression is common worldwide and to illustrate the political nature of anorexia nervosa that the medical model seeks to erase.

In the United States, the *DSM-5* defines anorexia nervosa as a condition “assigned to those who become preoccupied with maintaining a low body weight.”³⁵ Furthermore, the *DSM-5* lists three symptoms that must be met for the diagnosis of anorexia nervosa to be made: one, caloric restriction resulting in a “significantly low body weight”³⁶ relative to the individual; two, the “intense fear...of becoming fat, even though underweight;”³⁷ and three, the “disturbance in the way in which one’s body weight or shape is experienced.”³⁸ The issue with these listed characteristics is that they attempt to individually pathologize a political reaction. When I speak of pathologization, I speak of the process in which the medical model attempts to separate the patient’s actions against their body from the political ramifications that their body carries within their respective society. In other words, pathologization occurs when the medical model attempts to subtract the patient’s body from the patient’s actions against their body. The foundation of my argument is that everybody existing in society—in public life—is a political subject. Political status, in itself, is neither negative nor positive. It simply exists. But as Beauvoir spends the entirety of *The Second Sex* explaining, socialization shapes a person’s essence which permeates the body’s expression. Beauvoir’s partner, Jean-Paul Sartre, famously declared, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*,

32 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 348.

33 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

34 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 6.

35 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 338.

36 American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 338.

37 American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 338.

38 American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 339.

26 James I. Hudson et al., “The Prevalence and Correlates of Eating Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication,” *Biological Psychiatry* 61, no. 3 (2007): 363, 10.1016/j.biopsych.2006.03.040.

27 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 342.

28 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 342.

29 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 348.

30 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 345.

31 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 345.



that, “existence precedes essence.”³⁹ While it is true that existence precedes essence, society precedes both existence and essence, thereby rendering any body born into it a political actor. The problem, then, is not the body’s inherent political status but whether socialization has given the body a negative essence to carry. An individual’s specific upbringing undoubtedly varies, but the body’s inherent political status is immutable.

It is through the process of pathologization that the body becomes depoliticized; and it is through depoliticization that an individual’s agency is erased. Under the mask of medicine, the pathologization of anorexia nervosa further dehumanizes its victims by framing their active revolt against cataclysmic political conditions as an irrational illness. The inability to comprehend the logical motivation for why a person, especially a woman, would go to such lethal lengths as a desperate attempt to impose control over their body is largely due to the medical model’s depoliticization of the body as a whole. The medical model’s pathologization of those suffering from eating disorders enables the catalytic conditions of eating disorders to persist. To eradicate the existence of anorexia nervosa, it is necessary to frame them as political.

I have already demonstrated that much of the adolescent girl’s distress during puberty is due to her inability to exert sovereignty over how she is perceived in her new body. Whether the adolescent female wishes to be perceived as a woman is beyond her control. The same mechanisms that prohibit the girl from choosing how she is perceived also determine the space she is allowed to occupy. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault argues that in the eighteenth century, the West began to shift the nature of punishment from a public practice to private.⁴⁰ Even though punishment disappeared from the public eye in the mid-nineteenth century, Foucault is careful to note that this does not mean punishment’s “hold on the body” also disappeared.⁴¹ What allowed punishment to privatize its practice in the eighteenth century was the West’s creation of the “docile body” as a disciplinary modality.⁴² The “docile body” is defined by Foucault as “something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body the machine required can be constructed.”⁴³ The “machine” which Foucault references is the sovereign power which used the compliant,

malleable “docile body” to build their “political anatomy.”⁴⁴ Rather than rely on its own jurisdiction to discipline its constituents, Western sovereignty was able to rely on the collective membership of “docile bodies” to execute its demands.⁴⁵ Simply put, alongside the shift from public to private modalities of punishment, the responsibility of discipline shifted from the authority of the sovereign down to the hands of the individual.

In contemporary Western society, the “docile body” is complicated when it belongs to a woman.⁴⁶ In her analysis of childhood, Beauvoir argues that little boys can “boldly assume their subjectivity” since they are able to grasp the world around them as their own alter-ego.⁴⁷ On the contrary, little girls cannot imagine themselves in a world that has erased their existence. To compensate for the inability to form an alter-ego beyond herself, Beauvoir adds that the little girl is given a doll.⁴⁸ These modalities for children to channel their alter-egos are not equal. Beauvoir highlights that the doll “represents the whole body . . . and is passive.”⁴⁹ From this view, the “docile body” is like the little girl’s doll.⁵⁰ Both the “docile body” and the doll are mediums for which the owner’s consciousness can solidify the role of its body.⁵¹ As such, the connection between universal, patriarchal oppression and the West’s creation of the “docile body” validates Prince’s hypothesis that anorexia nervosa is a culture-bound syndrome.⁵² The emergence of anorexia nervosa in non-Western nations that are exposed to Western culture is not because it is only the West that defines women as “Other,” but because Western culture’s utilization of the “docile body” manufactures more possibilities for women to discipline themselves in place of their respective sovereign.⁵³

The first characteristic of anorexia nervosa that the *DSM-5* lists—caloric restriction that leads to significant weight loss—calls attention to the actual act of starvation. The “docile body” which starves itself affirms its passive role dictated by the sovereign.⁵⁴ Starvation is both an act of surrender to the Woman’s passive role and an attempt to reach the privileged status of the Man. If the Woman’s body represents immanence, inhibited by its own immutability, then the physical

44 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135; 138.

45 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

46 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

47 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 293.

48 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 293.

49 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 293.

50 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

51 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

52 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

53 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

54 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

39 Jean-Paul Sartre et al., *Existentialism is a Humanism: (L’Existentialisme Est Un Humanisme); Including, a Commentary on the Stranger (Explication De L’Étranger)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 20.

40 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 15.

41 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 15.

42 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.

43 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.



contortion required to shrink oneself regards movement that is exclusive to the Man. However, the Woman quickly learns that the sense of control she experienced, which is the first time she ignored her grumbling stomach, was disillusioned. Starvation quite literally encapsulates Beauvoir's statement that "the anguish of being a woman eats away at the female body."⁵⁵ The Woman's manipulation of her physical body will never release her from the chains of immanence since it is that Man who demands thinness as the price for her existence.

The second characteristic of anorexia nervosa illuminates the failure to understand the anorexic's act of shrinking as the pursuit to rid one's body of its immutable status. The *DSM-5* states that anorexics possess an "intense fear" of fatness even if they are clinically underweight.⁵⁶ It is not fatness that anorexics fear; instead, it is the fear of occupying space that they have been conditioned to avoid. Setting unattainable beauty standards allows Western culture to gatekeep women's public existence. By exclusively displaying images of thin, "desirable" women, little girls receive the message that they must earn their existence through bodily comportment. But since there is no possible way for every single woman to look like Kate Moss, women begin to fear that their existence is unwanted. What emphasizes the message to her that she is unwanted is the constant threat of ostracization accompanying the occupation of public space. In a desperate search for an out, the anorexic resorts to self-starvation in hopes of gaining control over the cumbersome body. It does not matter whether the anorexic is starving to control the agency of who and when the public can see her body or if the anorexic is starving to gain closer proximity to the privilege thinness promises. Both paths carry the same result: death.

Anorexia nervosa's mortality rate is ten times higher than the mortality rate of any other causes for women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.⁵⁷ The mortality rate of anorexia nervosa makes the *DSM-5*'s final characteristic of anorexics its most insulting: "disturbance in the way in which one's body weight or shape is experienced."⁵⁸ As I have attempted to convey thus far, it is not the anorexic's brain that is disturbed; it is the culture, which the anorexic's emaciated body reflects, that is deeply egregious. Similarly, the question we all ought to be asking is not whether anorexics experience their physical body in a disturbed manner. A much more horrifying question to pose—but one that's inquisition is imperative to eradicate the

existence of anorexia nervosa—is whether anorexics are experiencing their bodies in the way that patriarchal power wants them to.

V. WAS FIONA APPLE CORRECT?

So, does starving "work" quite as well as Apple led pro-anorexia bloggers to believe? I have refuted Apple's figurative line by proving to you and me both that no—starving does not work. Then again, the answer depends on how you define "work." If you aspire to knock on death's door and hate yourself more than you had ever imagined to be humanly possible—sure, starving works. As a recovering anorexic, I am well aware that nobody aspires to become so frail that a simple slip fractures your back. If your goal is to become powerful, to gain control, or to be beautiful, starving is the least productive strategy you could possibly employ. In fact, starving makes you powerless. I was not "in control" when I was too weak to walk and had to crawl across my floor to reach a bottle of Gatorade on my desk. As long as discipline, through means of self-mutilation, remains the sovereign's primary way to punish its marginalized groups, the anorexic will never be in control. Real power consists of challenging punitive beauty standards. And most importantly, real power is making the decision to live even though society wants you dead.

55 Beauvoir and Capisto-Borde, *Second Sex*, 345.

56 American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 338.

57 Smink, van Hoeken, and Hoek, "Epidemiology of Eating," 406.

58 American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 339.





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