

# ‘NIGHT MOTHER: WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF CULTURE

## ‘NIGHT MOTHER: KÜLTÜRÜN KURBANLARI OLARAK KADINLAR

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### ABSTRACT

This study is based on a systematic social, cultural and psychological analysis of contemporary woman’s relationship with the Body Politics and Eating Disorders especially in Western societies from the perspective of socialist feminism. The analysis is also enriched with a literary approach as there are illustrations from the feminist American playwright Marsha Norman’s play ‘*night Mother*’ which exemplifies women’s obsessive relationship with their bodies and, eating disorders in the form of excessive eating (obesity/ compulsive eating) or in the total refusal of eating (anorexia).

**Keywords:** Body politics, eating disorders, American drama

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, çağdaş kadının batılı toplumlarda Beden Politikası ile olan ilişkisini ve bu politikanın içselleştirilmesi sonucu ortaya çıkan ve genelde kadınların deneyimlediği sosyo-kültürel kaynaklı patolojik hastalıklar olarak değerlendirilen yeme bozukluklarını sosyalist-feminist kuram ışığında tartışır. Marsha Norman’ın bu çağdaş temaları sahneye koyduğu oyunu *Night Mother*, ana kadın karakterlerin sosyo-kültürel değerlere bağlı olarak beden politikası ve yeme bozukluklarının farklı boyutlarından ne şekilde etkilendiklerini irdelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Beden politikası, yeme bozuklukları, Amerikan tiyatrosu

### I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural and social norms have long shaped the life styles, belief systems, and ways of behavior and traditions of people in societies. Individuals have also been constructed by the cultural norms since the culture with its dominant functional structures and institutions has imposed values and norms on the individual minds. Women’s position and their individual memories in different societies are also products of the cultural conditionings. And in western societies the position of woman is shaped by the working mechanism of the patriarchal institutions molded by the patriarchal norms. This study is based on a systematic social, cultural and psychological analysis of contemporary woman’s relationship with the body politics especially in Western societies from the perspective of socialist feminism. In general, the socialist-feminist theory studies on the manipulation and

subordination of women in patriarchal societies. According to this theory, all the patriarchal institutions (such as the family, the educational system, the religious system, the military system etc.), the capitalist system, the hegemonic patriarchal culture, history and men are the basic elements in the victimization of women. Marsha Norman is one of the contemporary American feminist playwrights who depicts the victimization and subordination of women in the patriarchal societies they live in. This analysis is also enriched with a literary approach as there are illustrations from Marsha Norman’s play ‘*night Mother*’ which exemplify women’s obsessive relationship with their bodies formed and shaped by the patriarchal conventions in the societies they live in.

The predominant discourse of contemporary Western societies define and determine the appreciation of women with a body image generated by the standards of Body Politics.

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The prevailing standards of this Body Politics define the competence of women in terms of slenderness/thinness and physical beauty. Since women in Western cultures are taught to appreciate the physical beauty of their bodies through these dominant cultural standards, the belief that success and social acceptability can be accomplished with an acceptable physical appearance prevails in the sub consciousness of not only adult women but also adolescent girls. Since “the body is produced through the interventions of others who train it, shape it and encourage it”, in Western societies the patriarchal perspective becomes “the medium through which messages about identity are transmitted.” (Benson in Woodward, 1999, p. 123) In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf relates the source of this belief to the idea that the images of beauty that women are compelled to adapt themselves into are products of a politics that “keeps male dominance intact.” (Wolf in Peach, 1998, p. 182) And since this politics focuses on the physical appearance and slenderness, women are obliged to diet, that is, they refuse to eat. Susan Bordo refers to this condition of contemporary women as “our contemporary body fetishism” which “expresses a fantasy of self-mastery in an increasingly unmanageable culture.” (Bordo, 1995, p. 153) Therefore, women believe in the misconception that “by controlling their bodies they can control their lives.” (Chapkis qtd. in Peach, 1998, p. 174) However, the accomplishment of this body image accompanied with a pursuit of a self-mastery also contributes to some psychological problems that result in eating disorders.

## 2. EATING DISORDERS AS CULTURAL ILLNESSES

Eating disorders which result from a “contemporary body fetishism” is also studied as a psycho-pathological case by Jules Henry and explained as “the final outcome of all that is wrong with a culture.” (Henry qtd. in Bordo, 1995, p. 139) In this respect, in western societies, eating disorders reflect some of the central patriarchal socio-cultural and psychological problems of our age in which the suffering women are compelled to a standardized construction of femininity representative of its era and, it is observed that contemporary women and adolescent girls who are oppressed by the patriarchal cultural pressures are more likely to become the victims of eating disorders. As Benson suggests, eating disorders “reflect anxieties about food and anxieties about flesh, and the relationship between these and ideas of self.” (Benson in Woodward, 1999, p. 133) In addition, there are some categories within the specific context of eating disorders which are the results of different pathological situations, and each of which reflects one of the diverse factors

of the actual phenomena. However, there is “a unifying element” in the cultural frame which is called a “modulating factor” and which refers to the understanding that “culture provokes, exacerbates and gives distinctive form to an existing pathological condition” (Bordo, 1995, p. 49) Therefore, the modulating factor is not only the product of the Body Politics, but it is also characterized by the family ideology, the human psychology and gender roles shaped by the patriarchal culture. This perspective is also shaped by the feminist-cultural ideology since this perception also claims the role of society, culture and especially gender to be primarily productive in the emergence of eating disorders. As a matter of fact, eating disorders are most frequently traced in three categories: “Anorexia nervosa is probably the most extreme and dangerous form of health risk. Anorexics refuse eat... Bulimia involves repeated ‘binging’ (excessive eating), immediately followed by purging through vomiting or enemas. Compulsive Eating involves eating to excess frequently in response to tension, stress, pressure, depression and other forms of anxiety.” (Peach, 1998, p. 176) Despite the prevailing diversity and different categories of eating disorders, the common thing traced in all these disorders is women’s obsessive relationship with food. And this obsessive relationship, its reasons, and consequences compose the point of analysis which are traced in Marsha Norman’s play *‘night Mother*. Throughout the play, it is possible to observe that eating disorders arising from the obsession with conforming to the standards of the contemporary society lead women characters to resort to health-risking body modifications and also contribute to the health problems they face.

## 3. ‘NIGHT MOTHER: AN AMERICAN PLAY TO EXEMPLIFY WOMAN’S SEARCH FOR AUTONOMY

Briefly, *‘night Mother* is the story of two women, Jessie and Thelma – also a mother and a daughter-, who share the same house and who are totally dissatisfied and disillusioned with their lives. In this respect, they become the embodiment of two diverse aspects of eating disorders with all the socio-cultural indications, which are anorexia nervosa and compulsive eating. In the beginning of the play, Jessie informs her mother Thelma that she has decided to commit suicide that very night and the whole play within its eighty-minute duration, elaborates on Thelma’s struggles to change her daughter’s decision, whereas Jessie certifies her decision with her preparations against all her mother’s attempts. In their quarrel, the reader/audience can also trace all the reasons for Jessie’s decision, which are based on cultural and social incidents. Within the development of this plot, the

reader/audience realizes that Jessie is an anorexic and her decision of committing suicide is closely related to this psycho-pathological illness when the play is analyzed within a feminist-cultural context. Since socialist-feminism emphasizes the power of the patriarchal structure on the lives of women, Jessie's decision of suicide is her reaction to the patriarchal structure which controls her life in all aspects. From the very beginning of the play, the playwright depicts the Jessie character as a woman who is trying to assert her autonomy and to assume control of her mind and body: "Jessie Cates, in her late thirties or early forties, is pale and vaguely unsteady physically. It is only in the last year that Jessie has gained control of her mind and body and tonight she is determined to hold on to that control." (Norman, 1983, p. 2)

Within the development of the play, it is possible to trace for the reader/audience that Jessie activates her control mechanism at first by refusing to eat and then by committing suicide. In one part of the play, Jessie confesses that the roots of her dislike of eating (anorexia) lie in her past memories. When her mother Thelma offers her some cake to eat, her answer gives the reader/audience hints of this situation: "Yeah, its [taste] is pretty bad. I thought it was my memory that was bad."(1:45) The presence of Jessie's relationship with eating or not eating within her past memories leads us to perceive her anorexia, that is, her relationship with food as a heritage of individual memory shaped by the patriarchal society which should be analyzed within a socio-cultural context.

#### 4. THE SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF JESSIE'S ANOREXIA IN 'NIGHT MOTHER

In this respect, it also becomes essential to analyze Jessie's anorexia within a feminist-cultural paradigm which brings forth the necessity of a systematic social analysis because in the society Jessie lives, an anorexic's relation with food can be seen as a psychological battle experienced by contemporary women "who deeply feel flawed, ashamed of their needs, and not entitled to exist unless they transform themselves into worthy new selves." (Orbach qtd. in Bordo, 1995, p. 47) An anorexic's relation with food is also her protest both to her society and to herself. In this psychological battle, her refusal to eat emphasizes her desire of maintaining self-control and self-mastery since she believes that by controlling the amount of food that she eats, can she accomplish her female autonomy and self-control. And the only way for Jessie to "transform [herself] into [a] worthy new self" is by committing suicide. At this point, it becomes essential to perceive "anorectics as freedom fighters" and anorexia as "a voiceless, unconscious, self-destructive

scream of protest" (Bordo, 1995, p. 64) since Jessie's reaction, which is actualized in the form of a suicide, no doubt becomes her "self-destructive scream of protest" towards her life:

*Jessie: And I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it, shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. And it's going to stop. And I'm going to stop it. (1:36)*

On the other hand, anorexia is a "multidimensional disorder with familial, perceptual, cognitive and possibly biological factors interacting in various combinations in different individuals to produce a final common pathway." (Garfinkel & Garner qtd. in Bordo, 1995, p. 140) Within such a frame work, interpreting anorexia requires an awareness of the many layers of cultural significations that are unified in a common disorder. Susan Bordo refers to these different layers of significations as "axes of continuity" which include "the dualist axis, the control axis, and the gender/power axis." (Bordo, 1995, p. 142)

In 'night Mother, Jessie's anorexia mostly fits to the control axis since in this axis, anorexia is regarded as expressing entirely contemporary anxieties, fears and attitudes. In this axis, the emphasis is on self-mastery, self-transcendence, and power over others all of which can only be actualized in the context of control mechanism. In this respect, by controlling the amount of food she eats, the anorectic gains the total mastery of her body since "the young anorectic, typically, experiences her life as well as her hungers as being out of control." (Bordo, 1995, p. 149) Therefore, the inclination of an anorectic is "to construct a body without needs, a fantasy of autonomy and self-sufficiency." (Benson in Woodward, 1999, p. 137) And in 'night Mother, Jessie confesses to her mother that her life is like a bus which is out of her control:

*Riding the bus and it's hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy and more than anything in the world you want to get off and the only reason in the world you don't get off is it is still fifty blocks from where you're going? (1:33)*

Besides, an anorectic "can never carry out the tasks as he gets herself in a way that meets her own rigorous standards. She is torn by conflicting and contradictory expectations and demands." (Bordo, 1995, p. 149) This characteristic can also be traced in Jessie's personality since she has been unsuccessful in her various attempts to work in the public sphere even though she has tried hard:

*Jessie: I took that telephone sales job and I didn't even make enough money to pay the phone bill, and I tried to work at the gift shop at the hospital and they said I made people real uncomfortable smiling at them the way I did [...] I can't do anything [...] The kind of job I could get would make me feel worse. (1:35)*

Therefore, Jessie, unconsciously locating on this axis, no longer feels that she can control the events occurring outside herself, but she knows that she can control the amount of food she eats: "I will not eat a caramel apple". (1:36) In this way, abstinence becomes for Jessie a test of endurance and a way to prove her self-sufficiency. On the other hand, since loss of self-control becomes her major characteristic, the anorectic, for fear of losing control, confines her behavior and herself to specific boundaries, as Smith points out: "The anorectic often states that she will not venture from the security of the home because of her fear of losing control... Pressed, she may say she fears going berserk, going out of her mind, or running amok." (Smith in Redmond, 1991, p. 286) This situation has also become a habit for Jessie and thus she has defined her social world within the boundaries of her home, as her mother Thelma bursts out to her face:

*Mama: You're acting like some little brat, Jessie. You're mad and everybody's boring and you don't have anything to do and you don't like me and you don't like going out [...] and you never talk on the phone and it's your own sweet fault of control. (1:34)*

Jessie's inability to leave home can be interpreted as "textuality" because according to Bordo "loss of mobility, loss of voice, feeding others while starving oneself, taking up space, and whittling down the space one's body takes up" (Bordo, 1995, p. 168) have symbolically political implications which manifest the dominant cultural hegemony on the construction of gender. All the behaviors of Jessie can be seen as a result of the cultural conditioning of women. Besides, her decisions and behaviors are also her reactions to the dominant hegemony which has repressed her for a very long time. Working within this framework, the woman who has the eating disorder is inscribed with the ideological "construction of femininity" of the culture she lives in. In addition, Bordo states that an anorectic's "disordered relation to food" and her "restrictions on her own appetite are not merely about food intake." But "the social control of female hunger operates as a practical discipline that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities." Therefore, "denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse." (Bordo, 1995, p. 130) And in *'night Mother*, the limitations Jessie puts on her own self

depict the working of her control mechanism, which actually is proof of her feminine self-restraint set up by social compensatory binges.

These compensatory binges, which result in various limitations of feminine practices, allows us to further analyze Jessie's eating disorder within a gender-focused field of study. As a matter of fact, this field is the "gender/power axis" in the "axes of continuity" (Bordo, 1995, p. 142). In studying *'night Mother* from a gender-focused perspective, we realize Jessie's anger at the limitations of the traditional feminine role and her inability to refuse this role: "Whoever promised a woman like me... Jessie... a good time?" (1:33) The reason for Jessie's reaction is that everything is wrong within her life. Her husband has left her and her marriage has turned out to be a fiasco. Although she has a son, Ricky too has abandoned her since they have never been able to get along with each other: "He's hurt me, I've hurt him. We're about even." (1:25) Hence, the point is that Jessie has been successful neither in fulfilling her feminine roles as a wife and a mother, nor in becoming the autonomous person she has yearned to be. She explains her situation as follows:

*Jessie: I found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me [...] that's who I started out and this is who is left. It's somebody I lost alright, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. (1:76)*

As a matter of fact, Jessie's situation is also the other-oriented situation of women in which women must "learn to feed others, not the self [and] develop a totally other-oriented emotional economy." (Bordo, 1995, p. 171) This "other-oriented emotional economy" defines the content of the whole play since on the surface level, *'night Mother* depicts Jessie's preparations to leave Thelma the most comfortable environment possible after she kills herself. For this purpose, Jessie stocks as much food as possible, orders all the requirements for the house, cooks the meal Thelma most likes, washes and irons Thelma's clothes and even makes a list for her brother Dawson to buy the necessary presents for Thelma's birthdays and Christmases for the next ten years. These preparations are all Jessie can do to nurture her mother both physically and emotionally in her female-gender role.

Furthermore, another reason for Jessie's rebellion against the feminine role can also be traced in her relationship with her mother, Thelma, since with her anorexia she also silently criticizes her mother and her mother's femininity. Anorectic's contempt of the mother figure is explained by Bordo as follows: "Some authors interpret anorexic symptoms as a species of unconscious feminist protest, involving

anger at the limitations of the traditional female role, rejection of values associated with it, and fierce rebellion against allowing their futures to develop in the same direction as their mother's lives." (Bordo, 1995, p. 156) In *'night Mother*, Thelma senses but cannot comprehend Jessie's contempt for her: "Mama: Nothing I ever did was good enough for you and I want to know why." (1:55) Jessie's rebellion against her mother's feminine role is culminated in Thelma's relationship with her ex-husband Cecil as it is revealed to the reader/audience during their confessional conversation:

*Mama: I never thought he was good enough for you, you know.*

*Jessie: What are you talking about? You liked him better than I did. You flirted him out here to build your porch or I'd never meet him at all.*

*Mama: All right! I wanted you to have a husband.*

*Jessie: And I couldn't get one on my own of course.*

*Mama: How were you going to get husband never going out and opening your mouth to a living soul? (1:57-58)*

Thelma's actions can be better comprehended in the light of feminist-cultural paradigm because as Orbach suggests "The mother-daughter relationship is an important medium of the anorexia process. But it is not mothers who are to blame [...] for they too are children of their culture, deeply anxious of their own appetites and appearance and aware of the fact that their daughter's inability to 'catch a man' will depend largely on physical appearance, and that satisfaction in the role of wife and mother will hinge on learning to feed others rather than the self." (Orbach qtd. in Bordo, 1995, p. 47) Thelma's constant criticism of and advice to Jessie about her clothes, make up, in short, physical appearance reflects Orbach's thesis throughout the play:

*Mama: Maybe if you didn't wear that yellow all the time. (1:22)*

*Mama: Why don't you wear that sweater I made for you? (1:56)*

*Mama: Your hands aren't washed. Do you want a manicure or not. (1:11)*

*Mama: I said don't make a mess. Your hair is black enough, hon. (1:6)*

*Mama: Your eyes don't look right. I thought so yesterday. (1:26)*

Another socio-cultural dimension of Jessie's anorexia in *'night Mother* emerges in the 'dualist axis' which brings forth the discriminations in the male and female gender roles. On this subject, Bordo gives the following information: "Through her anorexia, by contrast, she has unexpectedly discovered an entry into the privileged male world, a way to

become what is valued in our culture, a way to become safe, to rise above it all – for her, they are the same thing. She has discovered this, paradoxically, by pursuing conventional feminine behavior [...] to excess. At this point of excess, the conventionally feminine deconstructs [...] into its opposite and opens onto those values our culture has coded as male. No wonder the anorexia is experienced as liberating and that she will fight family, friends and therapists in an effort to hold onto it – fight them to the death, if need be." (Bordo, 1995, p. 179) In relation to the characteristics of 'the dualist axis', Jessie makes the most autonomous action of her life firstly by deciding and finally by managing to commit suicide. Although the whole action of the play is composed of Jessie's accomplishing the feminine gender duties such as cooking, packaging the food items, washing the dishes and tidying the house, her courageous decision and her stability in the actualization of her decision despite all her mother's struggles locates Jessie on the male territory:

*Jessie: I'm not giving up! This is the other thing I'm trying. And I'm sure there are some other things that might work, but might work isn't good enough anymore. I need something that will work. This will work (1:75)*

## 5. THELMA AS A COMPULSIVE EATER IN 'NIGHT MOTHER

While anorexia represents one aspect of the eating disorders continuum, compulsive eating or obesity becomes another characteristics of the same continuum. In *'night Mother*, Thelma character represents the other end of this continuum since she suffers from compulsive eating or obesity, which can be defined as "the extreme development of hunger for unrestrained consumption exhibited in compulsive eater's uncontrollable food binges." (Bordo, 1995, p. 201) Thelma's obsessive relationship with food and her unrestrained desire to eat, which are repeated in many scenes, are first revealed to the reader/audience in the very beginning of the play: "Mama stretches to reach the cupcakes in the kitchen... She's eager to have one, so she's working pretty hard at it. This may be the most serious exercise Mama ever gets. She finds a cupcake, the coconut covered, raspberry –and –marshmallow-filled kind known as a snowball, but sees that there's one missing from the package." (1:15)

Contrary to Jessie, Thelma consumes sweets, snowballs, apple-pies, caramels or cocoas throughout the play. As a matter of fact, this obsessive relationship with food is a prevailing gender situation since compulsive eaters are women who are denied any genuine human relationships as love, sincerity or understanding and thus, they are in search of satisfying these humane requirements in excessive eating.

Food is a “relationship” and “food as appetite” is “the metaphor for other appetites – emotional need, sexual desire.” (Benson in Woodward, 1999, p. 135) Therefore, overeating becomes for Thelma a substitute for the genuine human interaction she has been yearning for. Although she lives in the same house with Jessie, their conversations in the play reveal that even her daughter is not able to understand her:

*Nothing I ever did was good enough for you (1:55),*

*You never should have moved back in here with me. (1:27)*

Besides, female hunger and women’s appetite for food are also interpreted as the sexual requirements and desires of women: “When women are positively depicted as voracious about food, [...] their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for sexual appetite [...] In the eating scenes for example, the heroine’s unrestrained delight in eating operates as sexual foreplay, a way of prefiguring the abandon that will shortly be expressed in bed.” (Bordo, 1995, p. 110) Thelma’s pathological relationship with food can be analyzed from this perspective since the reader/audience is informed that throughout her marriage she has failed to receive understanding, love, or a sense of fulfillment from her husband:

*Mama: It didn’t matter whether I loved him. It didn’t matter to me and it didn’t matter to him [...] He felt sorry for me. He wanted a plain country woman and that’s what he married, and then he held it against me the rest of my life like I was supposed to change and surprise him somehow. (1:50)*

It is significant that Thelma complains about her husband’s indifference towards her and his refusal to communicate with her even the night he died:

*Mama: He didn’t have anything to say to me, Jessie. That’s why I left. He didn’t say a thing. It was his last chance not to talk to me and he took full advantage of it. (1:53)*

Thelma physically and emotionally abandoned by her husband, seeks the contentment and joy she has yearned for in food.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Therefore, taking place on the extreme ends of the eating disorder continuum and generated by the modulating

factor, Jessie’s anorexia and Thelma’s obesity symbolize the pathological situations of contemporary women who are firstly shaped and then victimized by the dominant patriarchal cultural memories and their standards. Since women are shaped by the dominant institutions, their socio-cultural norms and their teachings in patriarchal societies, women’s position is the product of the working mechanism of those institutions molded by the patriarchal norms. In addition, these eating disorders also reveal the dichotomy faced by the memory of contemporary women, since neither anorexia with its absolute quest for hunger nor obesity with the search for fulfillment is tolerated by the consumer social system, even though both are generated and encouraged by the same system as Bordo briefly summarizes: “Far from paradoxical, the coexistence of anorexia and obesity reveals the instability of the contemporary personality construction, the difficulty of finding homeostasis between the producer and the consumer sides of the self [...] Anorexia could thus be seen as an extreme development of the capacity for self-denial and repression of desire (the work ethic in absolute control); obesity as an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire (consumerism in control). Both are rooted in the same consumer-culture construction of desire as overwhelming and overtaking the self. Given that construction, we can only respond either with total submission or rigid defense.” (Bordo, 1995, p. 201)

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