



## DYING TO BE THIN: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF ANOREXIA AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN JULIA BELL'S "MASSIVE"

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### ABSTRACT:

This research paper attempts to delve deep into the intricate relationship between young adults and food, with specific reference to Julia Bell's novel "Massive." This study aims to explore the multifaceted connections that young adults establish with food and the consequential impact on their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. By analyzing the protagonist's experiences in "Massive," the paper investigates how food serves as a means of coping, self-expression, and identity formation for young adults. The gripping tale of 'Massive' explores the life of a young girl named Carmen whose mother is obsessed with her weight. For her, thin equals beauty and success. But life takes a toss for Carmen when she is forced to leave her father, her friends, and her city. The book is an exploration of Carmen's journey and her correlation with food. The study uncovers how characters in "Massive" use food as a means of emotional support, escapism, and defiance. This paper aims to shed light on the significance of promoting positive food relationships and fostering body positivity among young adults.

**Key words:** food, beauty standards, self-exploration, identity, body positivity.

### Introduction:

Food is essential to human survival. It is a crucial aspect of each individual's existence and one of the primary reasons why humans work so hard every day to establish successful careers. About two-thirds of all human needs are met by a nutritious diet and a safe haven. The materialistic comforts by which the entire human race is driven, are not as essential as food. All of the nutrition that the human body needs to function is provided by food. Not only does it play a crucial role in a person's physical health, but also in their psychological well-being. A healthy body is a sanctuary for a rational mind. Plenty of problems arise when people's relationships with food become unhealthy. This research paper focuses on exploring one such food-related issue in detail.

Eating disorders are disorders caused by non-linear eating patterns. Eating disorders cause people to consume food either in excess or in deficit. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and obsessive eating disorder are the three main eating disorders that are frequently observed in people, particularly women. Anorexia nervosa, the most prevalent eating disorder among these three, is experienced by the majority of females around the world. A person with anorexia nervosa may experience drastic weight loss and they struggle to gain or maintain healthy body weight their entire life. Individuals suffering from anorexia nervosa are highly critical of their physical appearance. They are generally fat-phobic and they are characterized by their obsession for thinness as they consider thinness as the only way to remain beautiful and attractive.

Considering the definition and the main characteristics of anorexia nervosa, it can be described as —a refusal to maintain body weight over a minimal weight normal for age and height; [...] an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight; and [...] a disturbance in the way in which one's body weight, size, or shape is experienced, for example, the person claims to \_\_feel fat\_\_ even when emaciated (Pollice, 1997, p.367-368).

The obsession over thinness and the perception that only thin equals "beautiful" is a derived concept from the Western world. "Thinness" and its correlation to beauty was emphasized by Americans whereas fat phobia was emphasized mostly by the British. One can see the existence and the influence of these beauty standards even today in these countries. The mainstream media from these countries feature women who are of 15% less body weight than an average woman who is in her healthy body weight. In America, historically women who had blonde hair, blue eyes, and slim body has been considered beautiful regardless of the time periods in which they existed. A 19th-century illustration titled "The Hottentot Venus in the Salon of the Duchess of Berry" by Sebastien Coeure featured an enslaved young black woman who was voluptuous in appearance. The illustration shows that the woman was displayed at fairs and exhibitions in England and France. This demonstrates how historically, women with bigger bodies have been continually disregarded and mocked merely for existing.

### Historical background of Anorexia Nervosa:

Self-starvation was a common practice during the Mediaeval period among both men and women. The more an individual denied the consumption of food, the closer they were to God. In Christian preachings, one can still see evidence where gluttony is considered to be one of the sins.

Anorexia was first regarded as a serious mental illness only in the subsequent periods, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. On the same timeline, more women than men were diagnosed with anorexia. They were forced into asylums and given medical care to cure the illness. Europeans also had a widespread misconception that anxious and depressed women would purposefully skip meals to gain attention. Thus, a serious psychological disorder in women was considered as a mere cry for attention and women were categorized as mad, hysterical, and complex beings.

“Generally, those mentally suffering and rejecting eating were thought to be yearning for attracting attention through their self-starvation” (Brumberg, 1988, p.102-104, 142).

Researchers and scientists applied a similar approach to Anorexia until the late twentieth century. Only in the last twenty years, more scientific studies have been carried out in the field and Anorexia is now considered as a serious psychological disorder that can be cured through the combined efforts of therapy, psychiatric treatments, and medication. Today a lot of women folks around the world suffer from this eating disorder and even third-world countries are badly affected by this mainly because of the portrayal of “thin and perfect women” in the mainstream media.

“Anorexia has generally been recognized in women, so the high rate of this disease in females has led to the misbelief that women are more mentally problematic than men —and this gendering of anorexia involved both the feminization of the patient and the pathologization of women in general” (Malson, 1998, p. 75).

One can see the graph on how women were treated as problematic individuals who lacked rationality and the ability of reasoning because of an actual disorder they were suffering from. These women generally picked up such unhealthy relationships with food due to various reasons such as having abusive or traumatic childhood, bullying by parents and friends, lack of postpartum care, the demise of a loved one, etc., Due to the influence of patriarchy, they were deemed to be “mad” when in fact they were in dire need of physical and mental health care.

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### **The portrayal of anorexia and its effects on one's psychological well-being in Julia Bell's "Massive":**

Bell's novel “Massive” features a female protagonist who suffers all her life with anorexia nervosa. Carmen is a young woman who is forced into dieting culture because of her mother Maria's obsession with thinness. Carmen's mother Maria suffers from anxiety disorder and depression and she hardly has any control over her life. This condition leads her to develop a dangerous relationship with food. She starves herself and finds peace in it. Over time this unhealthy starvation becomes a serious addiction and she is diagnosed with several health issues. The mother is so critical of Carmen's relationship with food throughout the novel. Rather than seeing Carmen as a being of her own she sees her as a part of her and insists she follows all her rigid food rules. Carmen on the other hand develops an unhealthy obsession for food where she uses every opportunity to consume food in excess. She struggles all her life to please her mother yet all she can think about is food.

As Carmen's mother gets hospitalized because of her multiple organ failure caused due to starvation, she is left to live alone with her stepdad. Carmen explains this period as the most glorious phase of her life as her stepdad allowed her to indulge in all the delicacies that she desired. But this happiness did not last longer for Carmen. As her mother Maria gets discharged from the hospital. The family goes through a traumatic phase where Carmen's mom and her step dad decide to split up. This pushes Maria into deeper grief and Carmen thinks that it's her sole responsibility to bring her mom out of this sadness. She tries to please her by starving herself more to become thinner.

she says: “If I was beautiful, I could have everything I wanted. I could stay with Dad, and Mum wouldn't hate me [...]. I hate you, I say to myself under my breath. I hate you” (Bell, 2015, p. 144).

She isolates herself and tries harder to lose weight. One can see that all the conversations between the mother-daughter duo are mainly about calories, foods, strategies to lose weight etc., Even in the magazine, she reads to distract herself from her hunger she only finds women with perfect bodies flaunting their thinness. This plays a vital role in the development of her psyche. She sees herself merely as a body and not as a human with feelings. One can see the effects of such a hostile environment in the psychological development of a young adult. It completely alters them as a person and influences their perception of life forever. Individuals like Carmen who has had such experiences in life find it difficult to unlearn certain toxic practices in life even after their recovery.

Carmen's instant coping mechanism is starvation. As she cannot process the emotional trauma in her life, she over-fixates on starving herself. She seeks refuge in starving and tries to avoid the emotional neglect she faces due to her mother's ill-treatment.

I'm starving. My belly feels like it's caving in. I run my hand across it to see if it's got any flatter. I haven't even got any emergency chocolate: I ate it all last night. I flick through the copy of Elle that has been on my floor for weeks. It's full of women like Victoria: gold women, thin women, women who feel hungry all the time. I check myself in the mirror to see if I look any thinner. (Bell, 2015, p. 150)

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### **Conclusion:**

Through the analysis we can see that “Massive” poignantly explores the intricate dynamics of eating disorders through the lens of its protagonist, Carmen, and her relationship with her mother. The novel sheds light on how societal and familial pressures perpetuate unhealthy body standards, contributing to disordered eating patterns and psychological struggles. However, Bell ends the story with a note of optimism, emphasizing the possibility of healing and the importance of fostering self-acceptance. The narrative serves as a powerful reminder of the critical need to address these issues in young adult literature and beyond, encouraging dialogue and awareness around body positivity and mental health. By acknowledging the impact of media, familial relationships, and societal expectations, this paper underscores the significance of promoting supportive environments where individuals can cultivate healthier relationships with food and their bodies.

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