

**Starving Consumers:  
Culture, Gender, and Consumerism in the  
Aetiology of Anorexia in Japan**

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## Starving Consumers: Culture, Gender, and Consumerism in the Aetiology of Anorexia in Japan

"The cherished child in five who 'chooses' to die slowly," writes Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*, "is merely doing too well what she is expected to do very well in the best of times." Wolf is writing about anorexia, an eating disorder that affects an estimated ten percent of all young American women and twenty percent of female college students in the US (181). Ninety-five percent of anorexics in the US are female, and the mortality rate for this disease is as high as 19% (181, 182). Although biological and psychological theories as to the causes of anorexia do exist,<sup>1</sup> there is overwhelming evidence that the causes of anorexia are sociocultural—that the disorder develops out of the symbolic meaning a culture assigns to female slenderness, fatness, and hunger. The anorexic is merely performing too well the femininity scripted for her by Western culture.

The characteristic features of anorexia nervosa, according to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, include "refusal to maintain body weight over a minimal normal weight for age and height...leading to maintenance of body weight 15% below that expected," "intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight," and "disturbance in the way in which one's body weight, size or shape is experienced" (67). While this dry, clinical prose clearly delineates the signs and symptoms of anorexia, it offers no explanation as to why one American woman in ten—and now an increasing number of women in Japan—chooses to starve herself, sometimes to death, over gaining weight.

Thinness or fatness have no intrinsic meaning unto themselves; they are given symbolic value through cultural mediation. The anorexic's "intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat" is not a fear of fat itself, but of embodying the values her culture associates with fatness. As transcultural psychiatrist Sing Lee points out in his discussion of the relationship between culture and anorexia, "among Western people, slimness has come to symbolize not only attractiveness but also self-control, youth and efficiency in both social and work-related domains. By contrast, fatness connotes ugliness, shame, and even sin" (24). As far back as the book of Genesis—as Susie Orbach points out in *Hunger Strike: The Anorexic's Struggle as Metaphor for our Age*, it was Eve's eating the apple that got humankind ejected from the Garden of Eden (62)—Western culture has vilified female fat and the female hunger implicit in it. Western men and women are so thoroughly trained to "read" thinness and fatness this way that the equation of slenderness with virtue and fatness with depravity seems self-evident and natural rather than culturally constructed. An anorexic's struggle to be thin, then, is not about thinness itself as an aesthetic ideal, but about embodying the qualities she has been enculturated to associate with thinness. Thinness is one component of the Western concept of "beauty," which, as Naomi Wolf illustrates in *The Beauty Myth*, is not a universal aesthetic ideal but rather one

of the last oppressive codes of femininity that even women who have been “liberated” by 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism still willingly adhere to.

Anorexic behaviour and thought patterns merely occupy the most extreme end of the spectrum of, as Susan Bordo calls it, “the continuum between female disorder and “normal” feminine practice” (2365). Anorexia results when Western ideals of femininity are pushed to the extreme. Because of the specific cultural values attached to thinness and fatness in Western culture, anorexia is often labelled a “Western culture-bound syndrome.” The phrase “culture-bound syndrome,” (CBS) as Raymond Prince notes, was “coined only in the sixties by Pong Meng Yap, a Western-trained Chinese psychiatrist working in Hong Kong” (198). Prince defines the term as “a group of signs and symptoms of a disease that is restricted to certain cultures primarily by reason of distinctive psychosocial features of those cultures” (198). The sharp increase in rates of anorexia in Britain and North America, argues Prince, is directly related to the fact that “the ideal of feminine beauty has become increasingly one of slimness over the last 20 years” (199, emphasis in the original).

While labelling anorexia as a Western culture-bound syndrome does acknowledge the toxicity of Western ideals of femininity, it makes determining the origins of anorexia in non-western cultures difficult. Prince’s definition of anorexia as a Western CBS relies on the continued absence of the disorder in other areas of the world—such as India, New Guinea, and West Africa. “[Anorexia] has, however,” he notes, “been reported as quite frequent in contemporary Japan and may occur in other rapidly Westernizing countries” (199). According to Prince’s argument, if rates of anorexia—a Western CBS—are rising in Japan, it must be because Japan is rapidly westernizing. “Westernization,” however, is an often mentioned but vaguely defined process. To say that Japan is rapidly westernizing implies that the country is willingly accepting Western economic, technological, political, and/or cultural values wholesale; the relationship between Japan and the West, however, is not that simple.

As Arjun appadurai illustrates in his analysis of what he calls the “global cultural economy,” global cultural flow—including the cultural flow between Japan and the West—is much more complex than the simple “McDonaldisation of the world” implicit in Prince’s view of Japan’s westernization (325). “If ‘a’ global cultural system is emerging,” Appadurai writes,

it is filled with ironies and resistances, sometimes camouflaged as passivity and a bottomless appetite in the Asian world for things Western...What [the Americanization argument] fail[s] to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or another way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions (326-28).

Japan's seeming complete openness to Western culture, according to Appadurai, masks a complex process of negotiation and hybridization/indigenization of Western influences and Japanese cultural tradition. Psychopathologies like anorexia are not excluded from the indigenization process. Much like baseball or jazz in Japan, anorexia becomes integrated into Japanese culture, albeit in a more insidious and sinister manner. While there does seem to be a clear link between Western models of femininity and anorexia, the disorder in a Japanese context will take on cultural meaning that is specifically Japanese.

Even if we reject the passive "westernization" of Japan in favour of Appadurai's more complicated theory of global cultural exchanges, we still need to account for the fact that, as Sing Lee notes, "anorexia nervosa remains a rare condition in nearly all non-western societies with the exception of Japan" (24). We need to understand how this disorder is introduced to Japanese society and how it is given cultural meaning—that is, how constructions of femininity in Japanese culture so successfully incorporate the cultural logic of anorexia. Lee suggests that in order to get a more accurate idea of the true causes of anorexia, both in the west and Japan, we need to replace the "Western" in "Western culture-bound syndrome" with a more accurate term. "Anorexia...is no longer bound to specific Western localities," he argues. "Instead, it may be conceived as being grounded in the transnational culture of 'modernity;...and composed of increased affluence" (21). While Lee's article recasts anorexia as a modernity-bound rather than a Western culture-bound syndrome, his use of the term 'modernity' is almost as vague as Prince's notion of 'Westernization.' However, if we substitute 'modernity' with 'late capitalism' or 'consumerism,' the common ground between Japan and the West in which anorexia takes root becomes clear.

As Cindy Davis and Joel Yager note in their review of the transcultural aspects of eating disorders, "anorexia nervosa has been frequently reported in Japan since at least the mid 1970s" (381). According to Japan's National Institute for Mental Health, in 1980 the number of cases of clinical anorexia was 2 in 100,000. In 1985, it was 3 in 100,000; in 1995 it had increased to 5, and in 1998, the Institute puts it the number at 19 in 100,000 (Huggins 1). These figures reflect only the number of clinically diagnosed anorexics; researchers investigating subclinical forms of anorexia in Japan in 1997 found the number of young Japanese women with some level of eating disturbances to be much higher. In their survey of 3032 female high-school students in Fukushima, Nakamura et al (1997) found that 5.4% showed signs of eating disturbances.<sup>2</sup> A government-funded survey of junior high school girls in Tokyo confirms this number, finding that 5% of their sample suffered from anorexia. In a comparative study of eating attitudes among Japanese and American elementary school girls aged 8-11, 20% of the Japanese sample "reported feeling overweight, 50% wanted to be thinner, and 35% reported having tried

to lose weight" (Mukai and McCloskey, 1996). Although still below the American rate of anorexia (which most sources put at 10%) Japan now has the highest rates of anorexia in Asia—a well as the most developed capitalist economy. These figures point to a clear link between consumer capitalism in Japan and anorexia.

The greatest link between Japan and the West is, as John Clammer argues, is "the common devotion to consumption as a way of life" (199). As Clammer illustrates in "Consuming Bodies: Constructing and Representing the Female Body in Contemporary Japanese Print Media," consumption and the female body in Japanese Popular culture have become inextricably linked. "In the case of women's magazines," he writes, images of the female body "are largely to promote consumption—of fashion, appliances, food, travel, or cosmetics especially; in men's magazines the image itself is consumed—by the male gaze" (197). Used either to promote consumption or to be consumed, "the female form is presented within the realm of commodity aesthetics" (199); it is depersonalized and presented only to signify consumption or as a consumable commodity. "In essence," he concludes, "the social construction of the body that takes place in Japanese print media can be seen as the commodification of the body: its presentation in such a way as to induce desire" (216). This commodification co-opts the female body from the social subjects to whom it belonged, strips it of any subjectivity, and presents it as an object, as the signifier of consumption.

More than ten years before Clammer published his article addressing the relationship between consumption and the commodified female body in Japanese culture, Orbach addressed the same dynamic in Western culture in *Hunger Strike*. "Commodities from cars to Cokes to chemicals," she writes,

are displayed with young women close by signalling availability and sexuality...[T]he sexuality of women's bodies becomes split off and reattached to a whole host of commodities reflective of a consumer culture. Cars, cokes, and centrifuges become a form of sexuality, a means of access to one's own and/or another's body (35).

In both Orbach's analysis of Western culture in the mid-80s and Clammer's study of Japanese culture in the late 90s, young women's bodies are exploited by the media as consumable signs of consumption; their sexuality becomes inseparably bonded to "cars, cokes, and centrifuges." Left with neither sexualities nor bodies to which they have unmediated access, women in both Japan and the West must negotiate their personal identities in economic and cultural systems that construct them as both the consumer and the consumed. They must enter adulthood and establish themselves as social subjects while, to borrow the title of John Sour's book on anorexia, "starving to death in a sea of objects."

Like any commodity in a capitalist system, the 'use value' of the female body in Japanese culture is subordinated to its 'exchange value.' The body has the greatest and most obvious use value of any "commodity," yet female bodies in Japanese magazines exist only to promote the consumption of themselves or commodities. The female body has meaning only in terms of the cultural capital, to borrow Bourdieu's concept, that it acquires by conforming to the slender, youthful, pro-consumption model provided by the media. Or, to return to Wolf's idea that "beauty is a currency system like the gold standard," (12) the female body in the consumer-driven economies of the West and now of Japan is appropriated by the media and paradoxically reduced to the status of a consumable commodity, while at the same time presented as women's only means of obtaining cultural capital, personal identity, and social recognition. For increasing numbers of young Japanese women, "being socially approved of means being thinner or trying to be thinner" (Mukai et al., 1998, 760). Viewed not in terms of what their bodies can do but in terms of the social position women can access by possessing the 'right' body, the commodified female body is fetishised—made to represent an unattainable whole. Anorexia rises out of the commodification and fetishisation of the female body, denying it the food it needs to maintain its use value as a healthy, functioning body while seeking the illusory power and cultural capital offered in the exchange value of a slender, youthful body in the "currency system" of beauty.

Rising rates of anorexia in Japan indicate how difficult it is to function as a healthy adult woman in a culture that reduces the female body to an advertising tool. The disorder reflects the complexities young Japanese women confront as they try to become empowered social subjects while inhabiting bodies that are so frequently read only as objects. The work of popular Japanese writer Banana Yoshimoto, in particular her novel *Kitchen*, reflect the ambivalent triangular relationship between consumption, the female body, and young women themselves in contemporary Japanese popular culture. The debate continues as to whether Yoshimoto's writing can be classified as 'high' literature or if it is merely an example of, as John Whittier Treat writes, "the victory of popular, which is to imply non-oppositional, culture over...*junbungaku*, or 'pure literature' (1996, 278). Settling this question would require us not only to re-examine the definition of 'pure literature,' but also to question the validity of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture itself. While the commodification of literature and culture no doubt parallels the commodification of the female body, Yoshimoto's literary legitimacy or lack thereof is really a tertiary concern. The significance of *Kitchen*, for the purposes of this paper, lies in the way it constructs food, consumption, and femininity.

*Kitchen*—which had sold over six million copies in Japan by 1990 (Treat 1995, 276)—tells the story of a young Tokyo woman named Mikage Sakurai. After she is orphaned by the death of her grandmother, Mikage moves in with an acquaintance,

Yuichi, and his transsexual mother Eriko. Mikage lives with them for six months while she recovers from her grandmother's death. Eventually she finds a job as a chef's assistant and moves into an apartment of her own. Months later, Yuichi tells her that Eriko has been murdered. Just before the end of the novel, Yuichi retreats alone to a hotel in the countryside, and Mikage decides to bring him, via long-distance taxi ride, a hot take-out *katsudon*.

The novel's plot is unambitious and its style is sometimes trite—Masao Miyoshi even goes so far as to call it “baby talk, uninterrupted by humour, emotion, idea, not to say irony or intelligence” (236). However, the way *Kitchen* connects food and femininity is worth critical analysis, in the context of a discussion of anorexia in Japan. Eriko is an interesting character in this respect, since she chose to become a woman after her wife's early death. “I have cheerfully chosen to make my body my fortune,” she declares (952). Female by choice, having purchased through plastic surgery a woman's body and the dubious “fortune” that comes with it, Eriko shares with Mikage her view of womanhood:

“It's not easy being a woman,” said Eriko one evening out of the blue...“Because I have a lot of faith in you, I suddenly feel I ought to tell you something. I learned it raising Yuichi...If a person wants so stand on her own two feet, I recommend undertaking the care and feeding of something” (41).

Eriko's advice, along with Mikage's fervently professed love of kitchens, her work as a chef's assistant and her delivery of the *katsudon* to Yuichi, associate womanhood with the care and feeding of others.

This is not a new phenomenon in either Japanese or Western culture; throughout history women have usually been in charge of preparing and serving food to their families. While the images of the perfect 1950s housewife in the West or the “good wife, wise mother” of World War II Japan no longer seem to hold much cultural sway, both cultures still value a woman's ability to feed her family over her ability to satisfy her own needs. Hearing Eriko, a transsexual in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Tokyo, promote these codes of behaviour indicates that women still operate in, as Susan Bordo phrases it, “a totally other-oriented emotional economy.” In this economy, she argues,

the control of female appetite for food is merely the most concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of femininity: that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited (2368).



*Kitchen's* merging of food and femininity reflects how persistent this "other-oriented emotional economy" still is in Japanese popular culture. *Kitchen* subverts traditional concepts of the stability of gender and the family unit through the temporary and unconventional family Mikage finds in Eriko and Yuichi and through Eriko's life experience as both a man and a woman. However, by so strongly equating womanhood with "the care and feeding of something," the novel reinforces the cultural suppression of female hunger that is so crucial to anorexic logic. Within a culture that encourages women to subordinate their own desires to those of others "the anorexic woman" gathers strength from the knowledge that she can ignore her needs and appetites" (Orbach 14).

It is not just young Japanese women who experience unease over the way they (or at least their bodies) have come to signify consumption. The immense amount of debate over the literary value of Yoshimoto's work suggests that its adoption or rejection as 'pure literature' is more than just a matter of theoretical interest. The perplexed and ambivalent responses of literary critics to Yoshimoto reveal this older (predominantly male) segment of Japanese society's discomfort with the way Yoshimoto's target audience (adolescent females) has come to epitomize consumption. As Treat relates, "the Japanese *shojo* [adolescent female] is a sign, one uniquely positioned as a master trope for all social forms of consumption" (1995, 281). If critics admitted Banana Yoshimoto into the realm of 'high' literature, it would signal their capitulation to the total consumerization of Japanese society.

One quote in Treat's article, from Horikiri Naoto,<sup>3</sup> expresses quite succinctly the apprehension that the *shojo* inspire in these older critics. "I wonder," he writes,

if we men shouldn't now think of ourselves as 'shojo', given our compulsory and excessive consumerism, a consumerism that in recent years afflicts us like sleepwalking...The 'shojo', that new human species born of modern commodification, has today commodified everything and everyone (1995, 182).

Horikiri's telling choice of words reveals more about his own fear of losing, through the consumerism to which young Japanese women are so closely linked, the social capital he enjoys as an older male than it does about the *shojo* themselves. Young Japanese women are not "a new human species born of modern commodification" on a mission to commodify "everything and everyone." The only thing modern commodification has done to these women is appropriate their bodies and sexualities and turn them into advertisements. While Horikiri vaguely worries that his consumerism will turn him into a *shojo*, the *shojo* themselves constantly experience being consumed by the male gaze. One in twenty members of this "new human species," according to a government survey of Tokyo high school girls, is too busy starving herself to commodify anything or anyone.

Caroline Giles Banks mentions in “‘Culture’ in Culture-Bound Syndromes: The Case of Anorexia Nervosa” how some researchers of anorexia (specifically Orbach, Chernin, and Turner) symbolically read the disorder as a way for women to resist oppressive ideals of femininity (873). The anorexic’s refusal to consume food, they argue, is on a symbolic level her refusal to participate in the consumer capitalism that commodifies her body and sexuality. Anorexia is an attempt to avoid a consumer identity. It is to perform the cultural script of femininity with a vengeance—and find liberation in that vengeance. Banks disagrees with this interpretation of anorexia because it “overlooks the evidence for unconscious meanings and motives,” (873) and because it theorizes a positive assertion of identity in a disorder that actually destroys any form of personal identity that deviates from the social script. Banks quotes Joan Blumberg in her argument against this reading of anorexia:

The effort to transform [anorexic women] into heroic freedom fighters is a sad commentary on how desperate people are to find in the cultural model some kind of explanatory framework, or comfort, that dignifies this confusing and complex disorder (873).

I also disagree with the theory of anorexia as a “hunger strike” against the beauty myth, on the grounds that maintaining a healthy body and body image and a stable personal identity in the face of toxic cultural ideals of femininity is ultimately the most effective form of protest.

Anorexia is no longer the “Golden Girl Syndrome,” striking only affluent white women in the West. Not only has it spread to other socioeconomic and ethnic groups in the US, (as Becky Thompson documents in her book *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*), but also to Japan, which now has the highest rates of anorexia in Asia. The disorder is not—and never was—about the desire to be thin. In cultures where anorexia flourishes, thinness and fatness take on symbolic significance as indicators of a woman’s morality, productivity, and willingness to subordinate her own appetites in order to perform a culturally scripted gender role. The significant rates of anorexia in Japan have forced researchers to reconsider the status of anorexia as a Western culture-bound syndrome, devote more attention to the role of consumer capitalism in the aetiology of the disorder, and re-theorize the process of westernization. Whatever else they do, the rising rates of anorexia in Japan indicate that the country’s young women are under tremendous pressure to adhere to an increasingly destructive cultural definition of womanhood.

## Notes:

1. Biologically-based theories focus on abnormal hormone-regulating mechanisms or a malfunctioning hypothalamus, but it is not clear whether these are the causes of effects of anorexia. These physiological abnormalities occur in all cases of starvation, with or without anorexia. Psychological theories focus on the anorexic's fear of adult female sexuality, dysfunctional parent-child relations, or anorexia as a variant of other psychiatric conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, hysteria, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (Banks 870-73).
2. I.e., 5.4% of the subjects scored higher than the cut-off point of 20 on the 26-item Japanese version of the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26).
3. From the Japanese-language anthology *Shojo Ron* (Honda Masuko et al., eds. Tokyo: Aoyumisha, 1991) and translated into English by Treat.

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