

## **Facultat de Ciències Polítiques i Sociologia**

### **Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Títol: Gender and Religion: Holy Anorexia vs Anorexia Nervosa**

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My past struggles with an eating disorder has led me to want to write my dissertation on it in order to gain a deeper understanding of anorexia as well as bringing to light a different perspective going beyond what the media shows us and common preconceptions.

With this in mind, the aim of this dissertation is to outline anorexia nervosa creating a framework that examines the disease from a historical and gender point of view. Anorexia was only recognized and diagnosed as a mental disease in the 1870's entering the category of a modern disease. Interestingly though, research shows that the denial of nutrition and fasting is by no means modern, on the contrary, it is an ancient practice dating back to the Middle Ages, originating, specifically, among many religious nuns known as "Holy anorexics." My intention is thus to bring forth an examination, from a feminist lens, of the existing connection between these anorexic sufferers of the past and those of the present giving way to my first research question: **"What do the modern anorexic girl and her pursuit for thinness have in common with the medieval fasting saints in their search for religious holiness?"**

Men too have portrayed throughout history disordered eating but what remains clear is that this disease affects a higher range of women rather than men and there are also more historical documents on women experiencing food rejection than on the opposite sex. Therefore, the analysis of women's relationship towards food and body has been and is crucial, it is full of significance going beyond the mere want of losing a couple of pounds. This brings me to my following research questions: **What is the abstinence from food in both cases symbolic of? Is it a feminist issue?"**

Furthermore, my starting point is that anorexia is a socially born disease, it is not biological inherited but has to do with social values and beliefs. Additionally, anorexia is the reflection of a sexist culture that has, unfortunately, prevailed throughout the ages. Taking this into account, historical context and background is vital in order to gain a full understanding, therefore, I also tackle the role that religion and moral imperatives undergo in the development of the deadly disease. From this perspective, it is interesting how, going back to the very beginning of history, a woman's body was admired for its power of reproduction as we see reflected in the famous statue of the Goddess of fertility, a big curvy woman with a status within the tribe, holding the power

of life in her womb. However, in early Christianity she was replaced with the figure of the Virgin Mary characterized by the deprivation of her sexuality and her gift of reproduction, all in all, her strength. Thus perception of the female body also changed; it was regarded as corrupt and inferior to man hence Pandora's Box or Adam and Eve, something that has not left us until this very day.

Throughout time women have had two roles within society; as mothers and wives. Moreover, women have been accused of being irrational and corrupt and this conception has not completely disappeared in today's society and culture. From this perspective, starvation may seem, to many women, both ancient and modern, a way to reclaim **control** over their own bodies and a means to rebel against a masculine dominated society. Perhaps the objectives of both the medieval saint and the modern girl are much more similar than one may think.

My analysis, though, does not stop here. This is, after all, a sociological analysis, therefore, I also intend to do what Sociology does best and that is to deconstruct common and non-reflected perceptions that create stigma and stereotypes in our current times. The amount of times I heard people say "it is a girl thing" or "don't be stupid, just eat your food" is uncountable. Despite advances in medicine, there is still not enough awareness and knowledge regarding eating disorders in general.

Last but not least, I have gathered a series of objectives which summarizes my intentions explained above:

- Search for common points between modern sufferers and those of the past known as Holy Fasting Saints
- Examine how the role of morality and Christian religion has impacted women throughout history and its involvement in the development of the disease
- Comprehend how the need for control over one's body is the outer manifestation of a deeper frustration; the liberation of women from a patriarchal society.
- Deconstruct the current perception of the "typical" anorexic girl and disregard of her illness considering variables such as age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.
- Demonstrate that the disease is a social acquisition rather than a biological inheritance.

Finally, in order to undergo this analysis, my main source of information has been through articles, books, documentaries and manuals as well as statistical data which provides more scientific credibility and objectiveness. This literature and statistical review is also accompanied by interviews with ex-sufferers, their relatives and a psychologist.