



# FED UP: REPRESENTING EATING DISORDER IN DÓRA GALGÓCZI'S BODY IN THE PRISON OF SOUL: LET ME FREE, ANOREXIA!

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**Abstract:** Dóra Galgóczi's *Body in the Prison of Soul: Let me Free, Anorexia!* is examined for the fictional representation of Anorexia Nervosa, an eating disorder. The disease, which was first described by Sir William Gull in 1888, has over the period, undergone considerable diagnostic revision. The obsessive resistance to food is the major theme of the novel, as it manifests in Anikó the central character in her teens. The strategies that she mounts against eating and weight gaining, the support that she receives both from her family and health care personnel, its impact on her life, her fears and the challenges of growing up and the social perception of the adult female body are also part of this paper.

**Keywords:** Anorexia Nervosa, body image, resistance

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dóra Galgóczi's *Body in the Prison of Soul: Let me Free, Anorexia!* is a 2010 Hungarian novel, translated into English by Judith Sollosy narrating the moving tale of Anikó who struggles with Anorexia Nervosa, an eating disorder which the fifth edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* describes as having three key features: "1) persistent self-restriction of energy intake, leading to significant weight loss. 2) an intense fear of gaining weight, or persistent behavior that interferes with weight gain. 3) a disturbance in self-perceived weight or shape" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp.338-339). Divided into three parts, *Body, Prison and Soul*, the narrative, offers feasible representation of Anorexia Nervosa, an eating disorder, classified as a psychiatric one. The novel traces the slow and painful recovery of the central character from a disease once considered to be a purely western phenomenon. The narrative begins in the third person, with an image of eating and soon slips into the past:

A couple of years ago it seemed inconceivable that she would ever enjoy eating. Just like everyone who loved her, I too feared for her life. Anikó was easy to like. It was in her nature to do her best, always and it was this that gradually got her entangled in the web of anorexia. It had been a long and seemingly hopeless struggle, but she managed to wrangle herself free of its clutches. (Galgóczi, 2010, p. 5)

The narrative is in the form of a recollection of a crisis in the past. Though the disease is cured, she is not free from the thought that there could be a relapse: "At times I'm still afraid. I'm afraid that it will return and won't let me go" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.5). Sometimes she is confident in believing that it is behind her. Soon the narrative switches to a dialogue mode, mostly in the form of an interview. Anikó who has been reluctant to talk, now feels that the world should know her story. She confesses that she had only her diary as her friend, which she finds it difficult to see as an object and she admits that she could not write the diary while she was sick and could do it only after she was cured. The narrative then shifts its mode, with the narrator reading the diary of Anikó.

The diary begins with Anikó remembering her mother's encouragement during her fight to gain enough weight to live a normal life. She writes of what she has learnt: "Looking back at all the years I spent gripped by anxiety, I now saw one thing very clearly: if you are afraid of food, you're afraid of life. It is not a conscious rejection" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.5). Taking food is taken to be so natural and normal that one cannot think of not taking it. Anikó addresses this issue early in the diary: "It would be pointless telling anyone who has never been in my predicament, that it's more difficult to swallow a spoonful of food than to have nurses stick IV needles in your veins" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.6). Eventually, the reader comes to know that the Anorexia took ten years of Anikó's life and it is this struggle that forms the core of the narrative. The beginnings of Anorexia are well documented early in the novel:

I had no idea then why I was resisting food with such insistence and determination, but whenever it came time to sit down at the table, I felt a growing sense of anxiety and was incapable of swallowing another bite of food beyond what I had carefully allotted myself. (Galgóczi, 2010, p.10)

Gradually Anikó uses her reluctance for food as a method of resistance towards her parents. Denied even the freedom of a Sunday since everything is chalked out for her by her parents, food becomes her weapon: "But I had no other weapon to fight back with other than my refusal to eat, and when they realized that they were helpless against it, they took me to a psychologist again" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.11). Anikó, by hindsight, realizes the beginning of her troubles; it was her reluctance to grow up that made her evade food: "In my subconscious of course, this is what I was afraid of, and this is why I chose not to eat and nourish myself. It was safe. If I could remain a child, I wouldn't have to face the responsibilities of adulthood." (Galgóczi, 2010, p.12). Such thoughts make Anikó grow up different from other adolescent girls. She admits: "Though I was hoping to find the love of my life someday, for the time being, the status of a good student seems a much safer bet than the role of an adolescent femme fatale." (Galgóczi, 2010, pp.11-12)

Anikó's attempts to get into Art School fail. Due to the steroid treatment she takes, she gains weight in all the wrong places. She becomes acutely sensitive of her body image; "The slightest remark about my looks played havoc with my self-respect" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.13). The need for independence becomes increasingly linked to food. Anikó comes to realize that food alone offers her some independence. She notes that she remembers having such problems even at the age of ten. Anikó reads about girls who have starved themselves to death. She narrates the scenario of eating disorders as: "In some cases it was fashion to blame, in others family problems (Galgóczi, 2010, p.15) Moskowitz and Weiselberg (2017) observe "Society has long been blamed for triggering AN, given its ideals equating beauty with thinness" (p.73).

Galgóczi presents Anikó as having insight into her illness, something not very common in psychiatric patients. Sitting in the waiting room of a psychiatrist to whom she is sent by a general practitioner, she sizes up the situation: "After all, my problem was that I'm too thin and am stressed at the very thought of eating" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.16). She is told by the sympathetic doctor that her condition is due to fear of life. Anikó is not surprised. She admits:

The idea was not new to me. Taking responsibility, standing on my own two feet and all the concomitants of being a woman- I had been afraid of all these. I wanted to remain a little girl because I was afraid of the consequences of distancing myself from my parents. (Galgóczi, 2010, pp.16-17)

Peterson & Fuller (2019) observe: "Patients with AN often present with mental health issues, including depression, obsessive tendencies, social anxiety, separation anxiety and phobias such as the fear of swallowing or gaining weight" (p.27). Anikó here, sees her problems as two separate but connected entities, the problem of growing up and taking responsibilities and of growing away from her parents.

Put on treatment, she responds to it well. The medicines to relieve anxiety work for a while, and she feels less anxious at the sight of food on her plate. But it is far from a cure. Anikó recalls in her diary: "But when you're in the grip of anorexia, it's no use trying to manipulate your appetite. The hunger you feel doesn't lead to eating. On the contrary, it turns you against food even more" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.17). She continues to prepare for the public administration course but gets admission only for the correspondence course. She is able to relate her problem with food to her general mental makeup: "I had always liked being in control, and it's this need to control and be in control that I now applied to my own life by controlling how much food I ate. I could always eat exactly the amount of food I'd decided beforehand" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.18). The problem with anorexics is succinctly put by Chernin (1994):

A woman obsessed with the size of her appetite, wishing to control her hungers and urges, may be expressing the fact that she has been taught to regard her emotional life, her passions and "appetites" as dangerous, requiring control and careful monitoring. (p.22)

Anikó will later realize that it is this obsessive desire to have control over everything that she does, a personality trait, that is the root cause of her illness too.

To reduce her feelings of boredom and isolation, she buys a dog, names it Jimbi but the dog's presence does little to relieve her of her problems. To live without much sense of agency and still be contented is possible and common. Anikó knows this, but cannot bring herself to it:

I continued to feel like a puppet that lives, thinks and acts as she's told. I know people who are perfectly content living like this.... I, on the other hand, always wanted to feel that I'm in control. I need to hold the reins of my own life in my own hands. Que sera sera-what will be will be, this kind of thinking was alien to me. (Galgóczi, 2010, p. 19)

Anikó passes her exams in flying colors but she becomes more and more conscious of her eating habits and becomes increasingly withdrawn. As her condition worsens, medicines do not have much effect on her. She accounts for her condition: "But I suspect that subconsciously I was rejecting everything related to adulthood and womanhood" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.21). Complications, Anikó tells the reader, visit her in the form of hormonal imbalances due to her being underweight. She gives an explanation which she believes in: "But I think I was afraid of being a woman" (Galgóczi, 2010, p.21).

Anikó's body image plays havoc in her relationship with boys. She recalls: "My college years were marked by a couple of superficial relationships, but none blossomed into real love. A shame, because then I wouldn't have had to wear my self-imposed skinniness like a mask or shield" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.22). This dissatisfaction with the body image extends further into poor self-esteem, and Anikó is told by her doctor: "A person with anorexia, regardless of how much she knows or how talented she is, will feel insufficient and worthless. And she will avoid trying to put her knowledge to the test. Which is exactly how I felt" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.23). The fear of whether she would be able to meet the expectations, makes her avoid challenges and she finds a way out - Anorexia:

I was afraid of anything new, of new and yet untried roles. If I lose enough weight so that the very idea of having to try myself out, whether in a relationship or at work is out of the question, I'll have nothing to worry about. Anorexia was my weapon. Anorexia was my shield. (Galgóczy, 2010, p.23-24)

Marriage and family are challenges that Anikó wishes to avoid. The same need to be in control makes her shy away from thoughts of marriage. With her mother's marriage right in front of her she cannot help thinking: "Your independence is gone, your independent thoughts and actions are left abandoned outside the door" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.25). The feeling of having no independent space, makes her wary of growing up and all that it accompanies: "It's thoughts like these that prevented me from seriously and consciously entertaining the eventuality of married life" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.25). Fearing that she would have to work, she regresses to her childhood state and writes of how the world would take her illness and how she might benefit from it:

If you're anorexic, life is all black and white. I was approaching the state of being a non-entity at an alarming pace. Holding on to a false security for dear life, I lost another couple of pounds and, along with them, my zest for life and my ambition" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.29).

Anikó sees her illness as a cover and defence. She admits of her use of Anorexia to shield her from new jobs, experiences and expectations. But occasionally she is forced to take a look around and realize that her friends of her age are working and some even have families of their own and she reaches a point of desperation when she asks herself in great anguish: "Why can't I be like other normal people?... But I'm like a child, afraid of everything, and even my body is horrible, my bones are sticking out. I'm as ugly as a praying mantis" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.32). Anikó recalls that her parents were there supporting her, but they were also not naive enough to believe that the disease had an invariably good prognosis: "They knew as well as I, that anorexia is as real as pneumonia, except that there are no miracle cures" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.32). She knows more or less what is in store for her, the tough battle ahead of her: "Many suffer from it, but if the thick net of this illness won't release you, it's very hard, if not downright impossible, to fight your way out" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.32). Galgóczy uses the image of treatment and cure as kind of rebirth, a long way off, which begins with realizing what is buried deep inside oneself: "Seeing yourself in the mirror at long last, instead of the mask you've been hiding behind. It is like being born again" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.32). Anikó knows that rebirth is not an easy process and realizes that there could be moments where one, due to the pressures and pains suffered, does not want to emerge out of the womb but to go back to it and remain there. Anikó recollects that her parents were with her in her illness which made the struggle more bearable.

The narrative moves to the scene with Anikó at the hospital. She is referred to Internal Medicine for her low weight. Before starting psychotherapy, she is told that she has to strengthen her weak body. Offer of food is not happily received. Anikó writes in her diary: "And so the IV stand became my daily companion. Bags that were frequently replaced swung over my head. The perfect solution" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.34) She compares eating a heavy meal on a Sunday, making it hard to move, to a catastrophe which becomes a symbol for everything that she dreaded - growing up and becoming a woman. She preferred, she says, needles stuck in her arm. The intense treatment she receives at the Internal Medicine department is described at length:

They gave me insulin, hoping to give my sense of hunger a jolt. Then came the intravenously administered dextrose. As a result, I managed to gain four and half pounds in two weeks, quite a spectacular feat. We were all happy that we had somehow negotiated around the impasse. (Galgóczy, 2010, p.34)

On discharge, Anikó is in high spirits: "Hurray, I can eat without help!... My weight will be normal. I'm going to have a family of my own, just you wait and see!" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.34). She undergoes family therapy and when she loses one more pound, she is admitted again to the Internal Medicine ward. Put on IV she feels a false sense of security. She describes her experience in the ward:

I surrendered myself to the tubes and needles. I relegated to them the responsibility I craved but feared, responsibility of being a grown up, for the struggle to be free of my illness, the responsibility for my life. If they'd tried to force food down my throat with a spoon, I'd have felt like being raped. (Galgóczy, 2010, p.36)

Anikó here compares her fear of being fed to being raped. Such is the level of violence that she associates with food and feeding against her wish. Mother's visits with a predictable menu, Anikó writes in her diary, give her some sense of security. "If there was an irregularity in my strict schedule, I felt that control had slipped out of my hands and chaos would soon hold sway over my life" (Galgóczy, 2010, pp.36-37). She shows a pathological obsession in her fussiness with the order of things around her and she is unable to tolerate even the slightest change.

The infection that she contracts from the central vein tube and the fever, result in the removal of the tube and the suggestion of a new tube, which she violently refuses. The gastroenterologist offers a solution with a smile: "We'll insert a feeding tube into your stomach. It's routine" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.40). She agrees to it. Later she appraises the act of pushing food into stomach with a huge injection needle:

I saw the situation as comic. While the others were happily eating their meal off their plates with knife and fork, there I sat on the edge of my bed with a syringe, stuffing puree through a hole into my stomach. Funny or horrible? Both. But I preferred it to eating. (Galgóczy, 2010, p. 41)

Anikó devises a way to get out of this treatment by going to the toilet soon after the injections and the doctors put her back on infusion bags and soon she reaches the desirable sixty-six-pound mark and is discharged. She describes the discharge as both a relief and a responsibility: "They placed the discharge papers in my hand and with it, the responsibility for my fate as well, with all of us hoping that this time, perhaps I could live a real life with real food without supervision at home" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.41). At home conditions do not improve dramatically. Anikó is still plagued by doubt:

Should I let go of my existence as a child? I saw myself as small and weak, someone who, though she'd like to break out of her bonds, is nevertheless scared to death that, flinging away the crutches of extreme thinness, she won't be able to take the first steps along the path to her own future. (Galgóczy, 2010, p. 41)

Events take a turn for the better once she is under the treatment of a middle-aged psychiatrist who assures her that she can be cured and tells her how to go about it: "To reach the point where your personality won't need anorexia any more is the real challenge" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.42). Anikó is confronted with a difficult proposition: "Letting go of the past, replacing it with the unknown, revealing something of the real me? That was a scary proposition, and I preferred to stay hidden behind my protective shield of thinness." (Galgóczy, 2010, p.42). Back home, she remembers her doctor's words: "You have a strong will but you are using it to hold on to your illness" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.43). Anikó's images of recovery are expressed in images of acceptable feminine shapes and lives that may follow out of it: "I daydreamed a lot. I imagined the New Me. The person. The woman. A shapely posterior, an attractive figure" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.43). The image of a family attracts her as well as repels her but finally she takes an appointment with the psychiatrist.

Her stay at the psychiatry ward releases her from parental supervision. Anikó's mood improves and she understands her illness better with the help of her doctor: Anikó notes in her diary:

If you feel you've been deprived of the chance to make decisions, you desperately hold on to anything stable so the current won't sweep you away. And what you're holding on to so desperately is the illusion of decision making: you decide not to eat. You eat just enough to keep your precarious balance on the borderline of life and death. (Galgóczy, 2010, p.45)

She slowly recovers though she knows she is far from being fully cured: "Many pounds and milestones were still missing before I could declare myself cured, but at least I knew that I was not headed towards a dead -end" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.57). She had thought that reaching the desired weight was the first step in achieving other things in life but later realizes it was the other way round: "I must start taking larger bites out of life, and then I will start eating more food, too, without a sense of guilt" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.61). The second part 'Prison' thus ends with the possibility of an escape route out of the illness.

The third and final chapter "Soul" begins with Anikó taking up a job in the hospital where she was a patient. The job does her good and Anikó recalls in her diary: "I started gaining weight without effort and without anxiety. As my life began to take shape, my body started taking shape too (Galgóczy, 2010, pp.64-65). Looking at the mirror she cannot but help observe: "My arms, which had been skeletal, were showing real muscles I'd developed hauling boxes of patient's records, and for the first time in a long time, I could wear short sleeved blouses once again" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.65). She realizes that her soul had changed sides; now it was with her. Anikó's feeling of the fight between the body and the soul has a long history dating back to centuries. Bordo (1995) writes "The body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects: these are common images within Western philosophy" (p.3). Her attitude towards food which was one of outright rejection and enmity disappears. "Now on the other hand, I truly and sincerely wanted to live a full life, and so every bite did double duty providing me with nourishment" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.65). As Anikó gains weight, she is often confronted with the question of marriage and she gives an explanation which is equally about her past as well as her of the present. "I fled



behind the shield of thinness to divest myself of traditional expectations and show the world that I didn't want to take up the traditional role assigned to women" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.67).

Anikó is constantly worried about the roles that she would have to play in the world. She puts it thus: "It was like living behind a shop window. If you're too dependent on what others think of you, you can say goodbye to acting naturally." (Galgóczy, 2010, p.70). What she suffers is part of the consequences of internalizing normative standards of body image circulated in the society. MacSween (1995) notes:

She must act in pursuit of her own interests. Her gender membership imprisons her within the constraints of femininity. She must respond to the needs and desires of others. The mutual exclusivity of these demands remains submerged in the ideology of gender-neutral individuality: their resolution, thus, is covert, subconscious, indirect. (pp.3-4)

Anikó's release from her illness is not smooth, it is fraught with relapses and frustrations and back to square one situations: "But my feminine figure was gone again, and I looked on helplessly as the self-confidence I'd gained with such effort was slipping away now, along with my hard-earned pounds" (Galgóczy, 2010, p.70).

Anikó's condition rapidly improves, she is able to let go of sleeping pills, hormonal therapy and even medicines for allergic conditions. The narrative takes a turn for the better with Anikó getting an appointment in a designer company and she imagines her designs being accepted. "One of these days, a tall, thin model just may walk down the runway in one of my designs. Thin, but not scrawny, with a clanking skeleton" (Galgóczy, 2010, pp.111-112). A better understanding comes to her about her condition and the text ends with a burst of lyricism. She compares her condition to a chestnut that she sees lying on the ground:

A soft crackling sound, the prickly sphere lets go of the branch, and quicker than the blinking of an eye, it reaches the ground. The prickly shell cracks open. And next to me, there's the chestnut. Both of us have just reached the ground. Its gleaming brown skin stretches proudly over its luscious body...Right now it has everything to look forward to. We both do. The early morning sun climbs higher up in the sky and we look at each other. Yes. This is how it had to be. We're not sorry. We've done it. We have finally stepped out into the light. (Galgóczy, 2010, p.113)

Anikó's struggle against Anorexia Nervosa moves from darkness to light, from overdependence to independence, free from the fears of new experiences to an embrace of it. The ordeal is over. It is to be noted that the novel begins with a reference to Anikó's obsession with perfection. In a thirty-year outcome study on Anorexia, Dobrescu et al. (2020) raise some relevant questions "Could it be that the perfectionism that drove the illness was diverted to driving recovery, i.e. perfectionism can both help and hinder in attaining a goal? (p.101). Anikó's case validates the relevance of these questions.

*Body in the Prison*, though a fictional account of AN, thus adheres closely to the symptomatology of the illness. Galgóczy, in a deeply moving manner, approaches the subject, addressing the emotional problems experienced by the central character Anikó and by resorting to the diary format, succeeds in bringing the narrative to a conclusion that is logically feasible. The internal conflicts of Anikó, her determination to defeat the illness that troubles her, the psychosocial interventions that form a part of the narrative all tell persuasively the story of a girl who is fed up with her eating disorder and decides to free the soul and feed the beauty and takes a decided move in the direction of life and not towards death - not an insignificant fact considering that Anorexia has the highest mortality among psychiatric illnesses.

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