



The Body in Fracture: Anorexia, Identity, and Existential-Struggle in *The Girls at 17 Swann Street*

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ABSTRACT

This research explores a scholarly approach to anorexia, body and identity of the character Anna in the novel *The Girls at 17 Swann Street* of the female author Yara Zgheib. The study adopts an integrated theoretical model that is an amalgamation of the theories of Jean Paul Sartre, postmodern body feminism of Susan Bordo and Judith Butler and the theory of identity developed by Jacques Lacan as a process which is constantly fluid and changing and is influenced by the external or social factors. The readers connect to a heartfelt depiction of Anna's insecurity of never being enough, her need for constant approval from society and an identity crisis. The research uses a qualitative approach based on text analysis of the primary text, and suggests that anorexia is not only a clinical neurological disease, but a psychological, existential and socio-cultural conflict. This study seeks to offer a comprehensive critical method which can be used as a basis for further research into identity, manifestation, mental health and gender in contemporary literature.

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Introduction

The Girls at 17 Swann Street (2019) chronicles the life of Anna Roux, a once famous ballerina whose existence spirals out of control as she suffers a serious emotional and physical breakdown largely due to a nervous eating disorder, anorexia. Dance was her purpose in life, her pivotal ambition and passion, it actually shaped how she saw herself and strived to stay in control. But with a terrible injury and sickness, her sense of identity and purpose collapsed. Later she ends up in a treatment house with days and nights tormenting and extended to their limit. Additionally, the other women at the facility at 17 Swann Street pose her with a part of herself that she had

hitherto avoided. Here, her mind is always shifting back and forth between wanting to be in charge and learning to be in control, from feeling invisible to trying to be seen. At the end of the novel, Anna is not cured nor does she suddenly become normal, but she starts to move step-by-step backwards towards life, albeit a little confused and unsure. The man she turns to for support is her husband Matthias, who emotionally stays by her side despite all the challenges to literally go through life with her. Anna returns home with Matthias, the man of her dreams, an old friend who is now her husband, but who is very helpful, and is left with a tenuous hope that she can live her old life again, but in a new way. Yara Zgheib is a Lebanese-American author who delves into psychological and emotional space with artistry. Born in Lebanon, she has parts of her heart in Paris, Beirut, London, Boston and a few villages in Tuscany. Her first novel *The Girls at 17 Swann Street* has been praised as an accurate and real description of women with eating disorders and the psychological traumas/experiences that cause eating disorders. Furthermore, Zgheib's characterization of anorexia as more than a medical issue, but rather a symptom of identity crisis, perfectionism and suppressed emotional suffering is sensible. Her writing is important for current literary interpretations as it offers a wide expanse of room to explore the intersection of culture, gender, and mental health in the modern female experience. Theoretical Framework

In this research, a unified and coherent theory is developed by combining psychoanalytic thinking (specially Lacan about the socially constructed identity), Sartre's philosophy of absurdity and coping, and the postmodern feminist body aspects. Rather than examine these theories individually, research has integrated them as a combined frame to understand how identities, meaning and manifestation are continually being created by external oppression, internal responses, and cultural conversations regarding the challenging perfection of woman's body. This framework enables me to go beyond the single assumptions and to replace the exploration of identity as a flow and irregular process, always in creation. The psychoanalytic view is in line with Lacan's concept that identity is not local or fixed, but is formed due to communication with others (social communication) and identification with the outside. Being is continually being shaped by the way it is received within social norms in this lens. This thought matches with Sartre's existentialism, where humans are thought as being 'thrown' into an absurd society which do not have an inherent meaning. In this kind of circumstance, people have to create coping process and meanings to adhere to unpredictable situations and psychological uneasiness. By combining these perspectives emphasize the truth that identity is neither stable nor self-made but is continuously produced by a negotiation between external social truths and internal existential reactions. The socially constructed identity and existential quarrel is further enhanced by postmodern feminist theories of the body. The role of the body is not a given or presocial, but is shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and repeated performative gestures as emphasized by intellectuals such as Susan Bordo and Judith Butler. The body is inscribed and expressed as a site, a site that represents the pressures and force of society and at the same time, a site of resistance and instability. In conjunction with Lacanian, Sartrean thought, this enables me to understand identity as psychological, existential, and embodied; always fragmented, always in process, never fully coherent. In this way, this integrated approach is an ideal fit for my novel *The Girls at 17 Swann Street*, where the novel's narrative offers multiple layers of understanding of identity constructed through psychological fragility, existential struggle and embodied experience. The central character's journey is an enactment of identity as it is always being created through social interaction and self-perception, in line with the notion of a self created out of external relations, as espoused by Lacan. Concurrently, her sense of isolation,

disorder and emotional disintegration mirrors Sartrean ideas of absurdity that are characterized by the absence of meaning and the failure of the mechanisms of coping to provide it. This is further developed from the feminist perspective offered by Bordo and Butler, as her body becomes a place of the intersections of society's expectations, discipline and resistance. The framework allows for her study of her identity as if it were not static or constant, but rather in division, transition, and formation by internal trauma and external stressors.

Literature Review

The novel *The Girls at 17 Swann Street* by Yara Zgheib is a faithful narrative of a young woman's battle with anorexia in a rehab center. Rather than focusing on significant external events, the story is about the internal struggles of the main character, Anna, and her journey towards confronting illness, identity and healing. Written in a profoundly personal and introspective voice, the narrative immerses readers in the psychological burden of eating disorders, offering insights through disjointed recollections, clinical protocols, and emotional introspection. In the critical responses to the novel, it is noted that the novel is emotional and realistic about the mental illness. The story is documented in such reviews as *Library Journal* as a convincing account of starvation's psychological effects and the experience of anorexia. Similarly, *Kirkus Reviews* calls the novel a "nuanced character portrait of an individual grappling with herself," highlighting both its simplicity and emotional depth. Other reviewers comment on the author's compassionate and authentic style, which is both painful and effective in the narrative, and illuminates the devoutness of eating disorders and recovery. Meanwhile some responses highlight aspects that could be examined further, for example a lack of background information or a limited scope of narrative. There has been no significant academic work done on this novel, although it has received a wealth of strong critical and reader reception. My study is thus situated at the beginning of academic study of the text. The research will use a focused theoretical approach to analyze the novel, and in doing so, contribute to literary studies by introducing new discussions about the portrayal of mental illness, identity and recovery, in contemporary fiction. It will also offer a starting point for upcoming scholars to write on related subjects in new literature, which will further enrich the scholarly dialogue and make new realities of the novel more intimate and familiar.

Material and Methods

The methodology used in this study is adopted from a qualitative approach which is supported with a coherent theoretical framework, that is, the concept of the development of identity through action around the outside world by Lacan, and Absurd by Sartre in addition to the contribution of Susan Bordo and Judith Butler who consider the body as a locus of identity which is socially influenced and performative. The research focuses on the experiences of a woman whose sense of self becomes weak and disjointed as a result of external pressures, internal conflicts and a hyper focus on controlling her body. The main data source for this study is the novel's original text. Analysis of the text with a view to uncovering meanings, themes and salient features of the narrative have been undertaken to show how the concept of identity is negotiated in terms of the body and how this is shaped by social norms and how also there is vulnerability and subtle defiance.

Discussion and Analysis

This study is inspired by the combination of ideas of thinkers to try to understand the story of *The Girls at 17 Swann Street*, more precisely the main character Anna Roux. It examines the nature of our sense of self, as it is formed by others and by the world, as well as our need to seek meaning in our lives. It is an idea that originates from the Lacanian philosophy that proposes the identity of the subject is not predetermined and is defined by the outside, from the existential philosophy of Sartre that asserts life has no meaning, and from postmodern body feminism that addresses the control and evaluation of women's bodies. The study demonstrates how we develop a sense of self through others' perceptions of us, how we are supposed to act, and how we seek to conform to norms. At the time it looks at how people, especially women feel isolated and try to cope with the difficulties of life. The research also reveals the perception of women's bodies as a field of control, perfection and resistance in the discourses of thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Susan Bordo and Judith Butler. Anna, Emm, Valerie, Julia and Sarah are all caught up between notions of womanhood and their own quest for meaning, comfort and survival in the novel. Lacan's concept as described in his book *Ecrits* is that the sense of self in us is not static and rather is created by various factors, such as the way others see us, the symbols and systems we encounter etc. This is evident from the first of the novel, when Anna sees a reflection of herself in a mirror. As she attempts to understand who she is, she says "...and hit a tidal wave of panic". The *Girls at 17 Swann Street* novel portrays women who are struggling to find their place, in the world and to define themselves.. "That I don't know the girl, or the reality that I just described" (Zgheib, 2019, p.08). Anna's impaired perception of herself is a representative of the concept of misrecognition as proposed by Lacan, where the perception of self is split between the internal self and the self that is seen externally. She is alienated from her own existence by her sense of self being judged by her body and the expectations of society. Later in the book, this lost identity will become psychological dependence on anorexia as Anna says, "It keeps me company, comforts me. I can control it so I choose it" (Zgheib, 2019, p.17). This disorder is an alternative symbolic identity that serves as a means for Anna to find a way to calm herself in a turbulent world. Also, Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness* relates to this because anorexia is a strategy to deal with the emptiness and absurdity of existence. At the same time Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* explains the process by which the female body becomes culturally disciplined as a site of control and perfection. Anna's body is a body that she pays attention to. She says "I cry in front of mirrors too; I see fat everywhere" (Zgheib, 2019, p.18). This is similar to what Butler states in *Gender Trouble*. As a woman is something which people do and is governed by the society's thoughts. Anna's body isn't a natural part of her; it's something that people think of as beautiful. The concept of the mirror-stage by Lacan will help us to understand why Anna does not see her body in a certain way. What is considered perfect in society affects how she thinks about her body more than it does. This is also connected with Sartre's notion of the absurd. Anna feels very sad and out of place in her body because she isn't in the body that she wants to be. Anna's idea of what being a woman means is something that impacts her relationship with Matthias. Anna argues with Matthias, Matthias asks her, "how would you know Matthias? You are not here!" (Zgheib, 2019, p.21). This indicates that Anna is feeling isolated and needs Matthias to be with her. According to Lacan's interpretation of psychology, people's desires are frequently directed toward what they feel others think of them; in this instance, Anna desires Matthias's attention and to have him feel better. This makes Anna feel more divided apart. Anna isn't just suffering physically, she suffers from being all alone and not having anyone to help her. This is what Sartre referred to as loneliness. When Anna says

"They were signs. They were always signs for those who know to look for them. They just never flash in neon warning" (Zgheib, 2019, p.29), she is discussing how signs were always present for those who know to see them, but never in neon warning. It's like Sartre said. That people are alone and have to deal with their suffering without any help or guidance. Only when it's too late does Anna begin to understand what's happening to her.

Anna's body and relationship with Matthias reveals that 'woman' is socially constructed. It is something that people create and enforce than something that is natural. This can cause a sense of isolation and alienation, such as Anna feels. The Feminine perfection that Anna strives for is a concept that is constructed by society. It impacts her relationship with Matthias and, with herself. For instance, there's the pressure to be socially constructed as a ballerina, as is the case with Anna. For her ballet is exhausting but necessary: "Exhausting and demanding, actually. I joined the corps de ballet when I was seventeen and that's what and who I wanted to be" (Zgheib, 2019, p.40). It is possible to trace parallels between Anna's story and the theories by Judith Butler and Susan Bordo in this case. Butler says that the body of the woman is created through the performance of femininity, while Bordo asserts that the female body is continually disciplined. The requirement to conform to institutional expectations is thus inscribed in the identity of the thin, elegant woman, which becomes Anna's identity. Her confession that "I suffered in all these places where I should have been happy and fulfilled" (Zgheib, 2019, p.40) emphasizes how much women are oppressed by beauty norms that make suffering attractive. Ballet also suggests the discipline of a woman's body as evidenced by the black dress that fit a bit too tight when she had tried it on for him in Philippe's words (Zgheib, 2019, p.45). A few words of praise to a woman's attire can actually end up harming her mental health because Anna's sense of self relies on others' approval. According to the Lacanian view, this can be attributed to the symbolic male gaze and control which constitute Anna's identity. Also, as she is getting less and less able to eat, this further illustrates how the theories are compatible. Anna tells us that "I used to eat. I used to like to eat and then I became scared to eat and then I stopped eating" (Zgheib, 2019, p.69). Bordo says that food and hunger are politicized and culturally charged experiences for women. When the appetite is denied it is part of a social conditioning process of women who are supposed to deny their appetites as proof of virtue and self-discipline. However, Sartrean existentialism can also account for Anna's actions since she is trying to take control of the situation and have the opportunity to make her choices when it is absurd. Anna's sense of loneliness is a theme that is echoed throughout the novel. Anna reveals that, "I wish Maman were here. I wish I were anywhere, anywhere but here" (Zgheib, 2019, p.95). The quote encapsulates Sartre's sense of abandonment and existential loneliness. That is, Anna wants to conquer not only the location but her own and the emotions. Additionally, Anna says that, "I find my footing and comfort in repetition. All other aspects of life are volatile; at least the routine is safe" (Zgheib, 2019, p.122). Repetitions and routines are Anna's means of coping with the chaos of existential absurdity. This idea is evident because, from the Sartrean perspective, people require routines and rituals to have to cope with the existential instability. Additionally, Lacanian perspective helps to understand how Anna's repetitive actions are related to constructing a coherent sense of self. Another indication of psychological starvation is when you want a bit of confirmation that you exist outside of your own body, outside of your own self. The child's desire to eat with someone else is met, "I am not hungry anymore and I told them, 'I am more than enough'" (Zgheib, 2019, p.155). The mentioned quote illustrates how Anna's starvation transcends the need of having food and focuses on the need of affection and recognition from others. Lacanian theoretical view suggests that individuals cannot define themselves outside of their relations with others, and

thus, it becomes more apparent why Anna starves. Sartre's thoughts also come in handy to show the agony of being alone, which is a part of existentialism. Finally, Bordo and Butler say the women are taught that to receive love and acceptance, they must be perfect. The postmodern feminist viewpoint is clearly visible in the following statement by Anna: "As for my body, I think it's fine. But the world just disagrees" (Zgheib, 2019, p.156). Bordo's idea that society has an ideology of the female body rather than a freedom of it is affirmed. Social norms, medical systems and chauvinistic expectations control Anna's body. The concept of performativity of Butler is applicable here as society continually imposes femininity through repeated actions and monitoring. The mutual experiences at Swann Street enrich this integrated view all the more. Anna notes, "Within the community space we are gushing and gossiping like a bunch of adolescents. It feels nice but odd" (Zgheib, 2019, p.189). Treatment centre: helping to reshape identity through the support and emotional connection between women. The socially unengaged person with disabilities start to discover their common humanity. Emm is an integral part of Anna's healing process. Emm allows for emotional strength and kindness, whereas Anna's behaviour is self-destructive, helping Anna to regain her will to live after losing Valerie. Valerie's death has a profound effect on Anna, as it forces her to confront the reality of anorexia. Valerie is symbolic for the tragic results of bodily self-destruction and giving up on life. Her death elevates the treatment center to a space of routine, but also of courtesy to remind of the fragility of life.

This is a theoretical amalgamation that is further substantiated by Julia's persona. Though she is cheerful in front of others, Julia is emotionally and psychologically abandoned by her. How women have internalized patriarchy's expectations and ask for consent is illustrated in the following passage: "I think of the men I tried so hard to be perfect for" (Zgheib, 2019, p.207). Humor and politeness mask Julia's pain as well, but her family seldom comes to visit, leaving her to feel abandoned in the midst of her apparent joy. Her statement "It solved many problems, Anna, comfort food was comforting, but purging was a revelation" (Zgheib, 2019, p.311) highlights the emotional difficulties of living through. Purging seems to be a trick that is used to make the emotional and identity issues go away. The body becomes a way to work out sadness, psychological pain. The sense of normalcy that is created at Swann Street further illustrates existential absurdity and bodily autonomy. As Anna says, "Manicure for the girls at Swann Street is a respite from the usual, a blip in a community treatment center's agenda, pasted to a board in the community space" (Zgheib, 2019, p.235). The girls are trying to assemble bits of normal womanhood in the face of pain and managed care settings. Butler's concept of performativity reveals that these rituals aim at bringing back socially acceptable femininity and Sartrean absurdity highlights the fragility and impermanence of such comfort. Through their cumulative experiences, Sarah and the women at Swann Street prove that eating disorders are not only attributed to individual pathology but also by emotional neglect, cultural pressures, fractured identity, and existential despondency. They also find that women become self-deceptive and start to believe that their destructive behavior is a form of empowerment or control, from their own experiences. Eventually, over time, the women begin to recover their pieces of themselves through companionship, vulnerability and shared suffering.

Conclusion

Finally, the study on *The Girls at 17 Swann Street* clarifies the entanglement women experience between society's conceptualization of self, a sense of emptiness, and the body's normativity. In

the novel, the use of Lacan, Sartre, Bordo and Butler's integrated perspectives, reveals how women lose connection with their own bodies and themselves as they seek to find validation and meaning in perfection. The body of the woman is represented as a site of conflict that has been built from the surveillance, discipline, emotional deprivation, and cultural norms. But the novel also offers hope of healing achieved through solidarity, understanding, emotional connection and self-acceptance. Further, Anna, Emm, Valerie, Julia and Sarah have demonstrated together that the recovery process is not only a physical one, but the difficult journey of restoring oneself as a person, as a woman, as a human being, as a one who exists outside of the restrictive and oppressive boundaries of what is expected of women.

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