

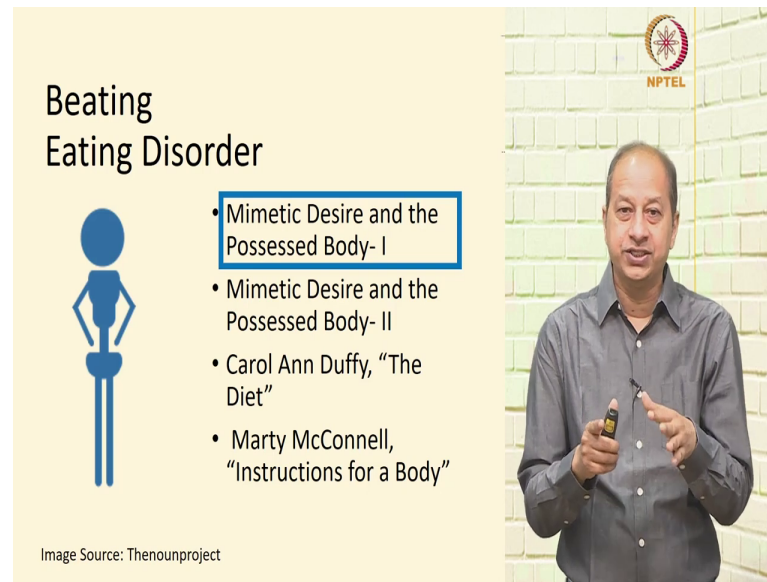
**Literature and Coping Skills**  
**Professor Ajit K Mishra**  
**Department of Humanistic Studies**  
**Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi**  
**Lecture 37**  
**Mimetic Desire and the Possessed Body - I**

Hello, everybody. I am Ajit K Mishra, your course instructor for Literature and Coping Skills. I am here again with the last module of the course. This is the last module but it is one of the most important modules of this course as it is going to introduce us to the very idea of a huge problem that is eating disorder. The module is very rightly called beating eating disorders; we need to beat eating disorders so that we can ensure our well-being.

If we are not able to do so, we will promptly fall into the traps laid by various environmental, hereditary and cultural factors that will ensure that we are there in the eating disorder trap. So, this is very important for each one of us to understand that eating disorders are a major global problem, the entire globe; especially the industrialised countries are struggling with eating disorders.

If we do not know how to check, how to overcome this problem, it will definitely engulf us in no time. So, therefore this module is going to focus on these important aspects of eating disorders which has to do with the body because it ultimately, severely and adversely affects not only the body, but also the mind leading to various mental problems. So, it is important that we take a close look at this particular problem. So, let us start.

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The slide features a yellow background. On the left, there is a blue silhouette of a person with their hands on their hips. To the right of the silhouette is a list of four topics. The first item, 'Mimetic Desire and the Possessed Body- I', is enclosed in a blue rectangular box. In the top right corner of the slide, there is a circular logo with a star and the text 'NPTEL'. On the right side of the slide, a man in a grey shirt is shown from the waist up, holding a small device and gesturing with his hands.

## Beating Eating Disorder

- Mimetic Desire and the Possessed Body- I
- Mimetic Desire and the Possessed Body- II
- Carol Ann Duffy, "The Diet"
- Marty McConnell, "Instructions for a Body"

Image Source: Thenounproject

This module has four segments, each of these segments is going to focus on a very important aspect of eating disorders. I will start with the first segment that is mimetic desire and the possessed body. Then in the next segment I am going to extend my discussion of mimetic desire and the possessed body yet further.

And then I will be taking up a poetic composition by Carol Ann Duffy, "The Diet," to show how eating disorder is a major problem and how the speaker in that particular poetic composition passes through various phases of struggle and then how the speaker manages to overcome the eating desired menace.

And then finally I will walk you through Marty McConnell's slam poem "Instructions for a Body," another very important poetic composition on eating disorders. And we are also going to see how we can develop certain standards for ourselves, so that we can help ourselves overcome the menace of eating disorders, so let us start.

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Before I talk about eating disorders or any further, let me first take you to the idea of mimetic desire. Mimetic desire has a very very important role in eating disorders, for long people could not figure out that mimetic desire can be extremely or extremely risky when it comes to eating disorders. So, before we can understand eating disorders, it is important for us to understand mimetic desire very very well, so that we can quickly move to eating disorders and its implications for a healthy existence.

So, let us take a look at mimetic desire. I must tell you all that mimetic desire was a theory that was developed by Rene Girard, the French historian and polymath who through his books and short essays talked about this particular problem and how this particular issue has a very close association with eating disorders.

So, it is all about an object which we all desire for and this object has a mediator and the mediator is presented as if imagining that particular object and then we see a subject who also develop a kind of desire for that object by copying the desire of the mediator and when that happens we call that mimetic desire.

And when mimetic desire happens that also can lead to some rivalry between the subject and the mediator. So, in the beginning, we have an object, the object of desire, it may not have any desirable quality about itself or desirable or element in it, but that desirability is given, is

assigned to that particular object when it is associated with a mediator, the mediator is going to mediate that particular desire for the object or a sign that desirability to the object to an imagined desire for that object.

So, if we have to understand this particular phenomenon, in the advertising world we can say the model develops a desire for the object, the object of desire. So, this desire that the model develops for the object of desire may not be a real one, it may be an imagined desire as well. So, in this case the mediator develops an imagined desire for that particular object.

And when that happens as we humans do not exactly know what to desire and how to desire, so when it comes to desirability or desiring things we lack a little, so the subject who wants to desire that particular thing, in fact, desires the object through the desire of the mediator, so the subject in fact copies the desire of the mediator.

And the subject wants to desire the object because there is somebody else who also desires that particular object. So, while copying the desire of the mediator for that particular object the subject develops a mimetic desire. So, this mimetic desire for that object is the result of a copying or a mimicking of the desire of the material.

So, now the subject also develops a sort of desire for that object which is a mimetic desire because there is somebody else who also desires that particular object. And in the process the subject might also develop some kind of rivalry for the mediator as well, because if the subject finds that there is just one object which is desired by the mediator the subject might very promptly develop some sort of competitiveness or a rivalry for that particular object, so that is how mimetic desire develops in subjects in us in fact, because we will begin to desire things not because those things are desirable themselves, but because there is somebody else who also desires that. So, this particular mimetic desire is created in us through a mediator. So, the mediator place our model plays a very very important role in mimetic desire.


So, when we move a little further and try to understand what mimetic desire is all about we can say according to Girard desire is initially triangular in nature as you can see in this diagram, it is initially triangle in nature with an object or with the mediator and the subject at the three points. So, desire is initially a triangle in structure in that it revolves around three points, you can see it

very well the desiring subject, the object of desire and the model of the mediator that inspires the desire in the object in the first place.

So, the desirability is ascribed to that particular object through the intervention of the mediator or the model. However, once the rivalry between the imitators the subject and his or her model intensifies, the object becomes of secondary value. In this case, the object will be secondary in nature, in comparison with the act of its pursuit and the rival's self is turned into the sole focus of attention that means it will be dyadic in nature instead of this triangular nature, it will acquire a dyadic nature.

There will be a kind of competitiveness between the subject and the model, the mediator, so the desire to have in this process will be replaced by the desire to be. So, the imitator of the subject wants to become like his or her model and still retain an essential part of his or her original self. So, what we finally get is not a triangle or a triangular dynamic, but a dyadic dynamic. So, ultimately it will be a competitive measure between the subject and the model or the mediator.

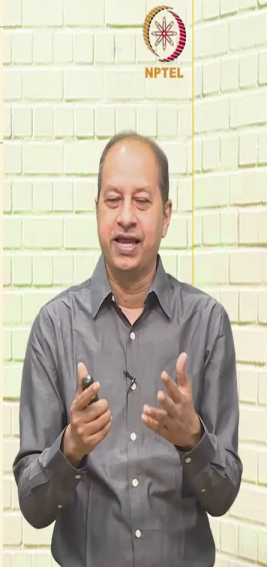
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## Mimetic Desire

- The concept of mimetic desire, first proposed by René Girard (1961), is based on the premise that imitation plays a key role in human motivational and behavioural processes
- “Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind. We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires.” (Girard, Generative Scapegoating)
- Humans are apt at imitation. Their neural structures also promote imitation (mirror neurons)

Cont.



So, that is why mimetic desire is a very very important, a very powerful concept which helps us with or greater insight into the very process of our desires. So, as I have already told you, the

concept of mimetic desire was first proposed by Rene Girard in 1961 and it is based on the idea that imitation plays a key role in human motivational and behavioural classes.

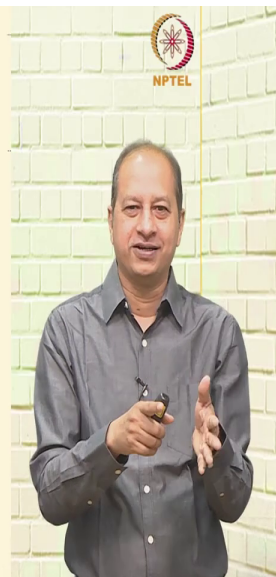
So, imitation is a mimetic desire, it is of utmost importance, it plays a huge role in human motivational and behavioural processes. Why do we develop certain kinds of motivation when we desire something and how do we behave in a certain manner? All these things can actually be understood once we understand the idea of mimetic desire.

So, man is a creature who does not know what to desire, this is exactly what Girard suggests. And that is the reason why we humans turn to others in order to make up our minds; we desire what others desire, because we imitate their desire that means all human desires can be called an imitation of the desire of others. So, when I desire something, I may be doing this because of the reason that somebody else is desiring the same thing, so that is very important.

So, we humans are very apt at imitation, we all know that our neural structures also promote imitation, for example, I have talked about mirror neurons, how they helped us imitate the actions of somebody else, while not performing those actions ourselves we can still imitate, we can still feel as if we are performing those actions. So, therefore it is very much inherent in all humans.

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- Girard distinguishes 'imitation' from 'mimesis' regarding the former as positive and the latter as negative
- 'Mimesis of apprenticeship' – human ability to copy the behaviour of others, 'mimesis of appropriation' – mimesis is an intention and an act of acquisition
- We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires
- "To say that our desires are imitative or mimetic is to root them neither in their objects nor in ourselves but in a third party, the model or mediator, whose desire we imitate in the hope of resembling him or her" (Girard)



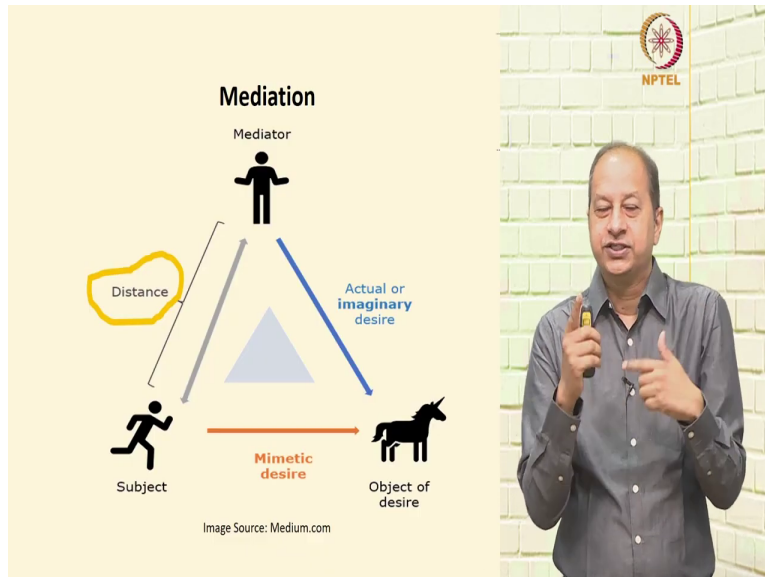
And then Girard distinguishes imitation from mimesis in the sense that imitation has more positive values attached to it whereas mimesis can be negative as well, for example, I may end up copying or imitating negative objects of desire as well; so that is how Girard distinguishes imitation from mimesis.

And then there are two very important things one is mimesis of apprenticeship that is our ability to copy the behaviour of others, we can always do so and there is the mimesis of appropriation that means we can do things we can act in a certain manner, so as to not only show our intentions but also ensure that particular thing for ourselves.

For example, if I find a model expressing or projecting a certain kind of desire for a piece of chocolate, I may end up acquiring the chocolate and eating it up, so that is mimesis of acquisition or appropriation, so that is how we generally approach our objects of desire. And then we come to this particular thing that is we desire what others desire, because we imitate their desires.

And that is the reason why we desire what others desire. So, our desires are largely dependent on the desires of others. And then to say that our desires are imitative or mimetic is to root them neither in their objects, the object of desire, nor in our sense, but in a third-party, the model or the mediator, whose desire we imitate in the hope of resembling him or her; so that is one of the biggest reasons why we desire an object. So, our desire for that particular object ultimately turns out to be our desire for the mediator of that particular object, since we want to be like that mediator, like the model, we also begin to desire that object of desire which is imagined to be desired by the model or the mediator.

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So, that is why mediation becomes a very very important concept here because without mediation this particular thing can never ever happen, that is mimetic desire can never take place without the intervention of a mediator or a role model. So, therefore the mediation process is a very very important process although a little complex but it is an important process.

This particular aspect is a distance between the mediator in the subject, in fact, and determines to a great extent how the subject will develop a kind of relationship, a kind of infatuation and kind of association with the mediator. So, therefore the distance is very very important.



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**Mediation** is the process through which a person influences the desires and preferences of another person

**External Mediation** is the process of mimicking a role model (mediator) who belongs to a different world and is far from the subject's immediate reality

**Internal Mediation** is the process of mimicking a role model (mediator) who is in the subject's proximate reality, thereby increasing the chance of a rivalry

**Metaphysical Desire** is a condition in which the subject eventually desires to be the mediator leading to obsession with and resentment of the mediator



So, when we take a close look at how this particular process happens, the mediation process happens, we can understand the mediation as a process through which a person influences the desires and preferences of another. So, if this happens we can say mediation has happened. So, there is this type of mediation that is external mediation in which the process of mimicking a role model, the mediator, who belongs to a different world and is far from the subject's immediate reality, for example, celebrities.

So, they belong to a different world than ours. So, there is a huge distance between or a great distance between the role model, the mediator, and our world. So, even though we mimic or imitate the desire of our role models or the mediators, the possibility of a rivalry between the two of us will always be very very less, because we are separated by this great distance. So, therefore, there will be a less possible way.

Then there is another type of mediation that is internal mediation. Internal mediation is again the process of mimicking a role model or mediator who is in the subject's proximate reality, that means the person is closer to us, belongs to the same world as we are, thereby increasing the chance of a rivalry. So, in external motivation or mediation the chance of a rivalry is very very less, because the mediator and the subject are separated by a great distance.


So, there will be a very less chance of rivalry, but in internal radiation, there is always a greater chance of rivalry. For example, you are working with, your supervisor who is very very popular, is treated as a great intellectual, a great researcher, hugely knowledgeable person, so you may also want to be like your supervisor or your research advisor, so then you begin to imitate the ways, the practices, then you begin to do the things your supervisor or your advisor does and you end up copying or imitating every behaviour act of or preferences of your supervisor.

And then you suddenly find yourself as a competitor of, as a rival of your supervisor, because you begin by developing a desire for the thing that is recognition, academic recognition, so then ultimately your desire for that particular object, the academic recognition, shifts its focus and now you desire to be like the supervisor. And when that happens the dyadic nature of your relationship with the supervisor now turns into a kind of a rivalry between you and the supervisor.

Because you belong to the same world and there is not a great distance or gap between the both of you; so that is the biggest difference between external mediation and internal mediation. And then this is a very peculiar kind of mediation, when this happens it leads to some serious consequences as well, this metaphysical desire. Now, this is a condition in which a subject eventually desires to be the mediator, which leads to an obsession with and resentment of the mediator.

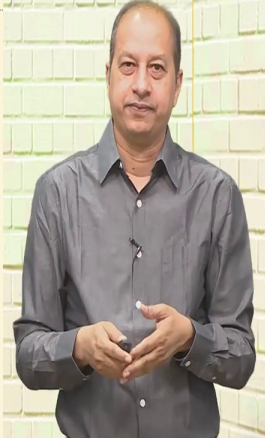
Now, this rivalry between you and the mediator which originates in the internal mediation will go to the next level and it will have serious consequences as well, because now you want to replace your mediator and take his or her place. And this will become an obsession with you and this obsession will be extended through your continuous resentments of the mediator. So, this metaphysical desire is again a very very powerful form of desire- so that is how the mediation process in mimetic desire takes place.

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## Mimetic Desire and Eating Disorders

- EDs emanate from identifying with the people who really count in our adolescence and who are our peers and contemporaries
- Both the anorexic and the bulimic manage to reduce their calorie intake to a level that will reach or exceed the degree of thinness generally regarded as desirable at any given time.
- The true anorexic is able to reach this goal directly, simply by refraining from eating. The bulimic reaches this goal indirectly by eating as much as she pleases and then by vomiting much of the food she absorbs.



Mimetic desire has serious implications for eating disorders because all our desires we know now are influenced by some kind of mimesis, imitation, copying, so if we can copy the desire of somebody else, we can also copy the adverse, the not-so-good desires of others as well. So, this is one big reason why mimetic desire and eating disorders are very closely associated or related ideas.

So, EDs or eating disorders generally emanate from identifying with the people who really count in adolescence and who are our peers and contemporaries. So, what do we do? We begin to imitate mimic the desires of those people around us are contemporaries, especially our peers and then people who matter to us, we begin to imitate the desires of those people, for example, if I find one of my peers to be highly fit, then I will definitely develop a desire for that fitness.

In this case fitness will be the object and then there is a mediator who is extremely fit and then I will begin to imitate the desire of the person that is fitness. So, I will develop a mimetic desire and that will create our triangular dynamic, but it will lead to a dyadic relationship. So, I will end up the person, I would like to look like the person, I would like to behave like the person, so that is one big risk factor, because it can promptly lead to eating disorders as well, if the person is extremely fit I may also do things that will lead to eating disorders. And then when it comes to the anorexic and the bulimic both of them manage to reduce your calorie intake to a level that


will reach or exceed the degree of thinness generally regarded as desirable at any given time, is exactly what Girard believes in.

Because once you begin to mimic the desires of others and then you enter the vicious cycle of eating disorders then you begin to cut down on your calories and you exceed the degree of thinness which is generally regarded as desirable at any given time. So, you also join the race, race to thinness, race to slenderness and you will always want to excel, excel the desirable limit at any given point in time; so that is also something that will emanate from your mimetic desire.

And then if somebody is a true anorexic, such a person is able to reach this goal directly, simply by refraining from eating, you do not eat, you make yourself starve and then you stay away from eating and then you achieve your goals, less eating more goals, even less eating more goals, so the bulimic on the other hand reaches this goal indirectly by eating as much as he or she pleases and then by vomiting much of the food she absorbs.

So, that is how both the anorexic and bulimic achieve their goals, so it will be all about your intention to achieve the goals, this is that the mimesis is of appropriation, how exactly you appropriate those standards. So, mimetic desire has a very close relationship with eating disorders. So, we need to understand this particular relationship if we have to understand the seriousness of eating disorders as well.

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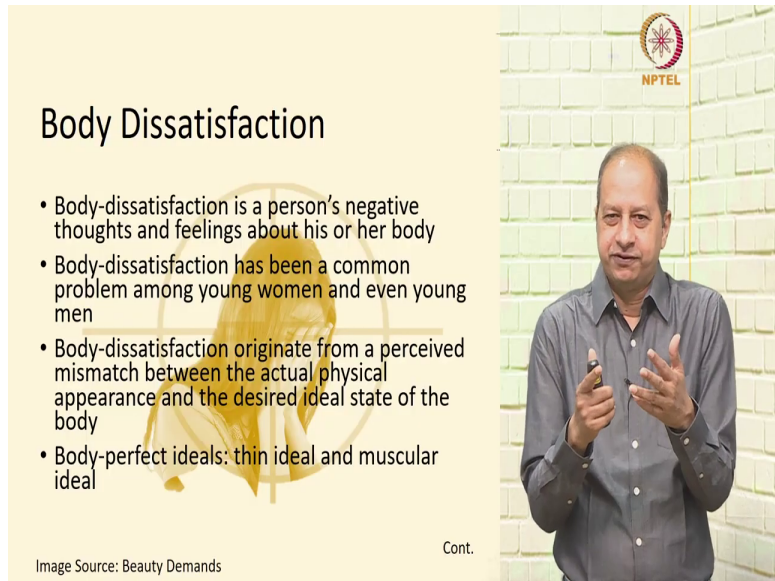


## Body Dissatisfaction

- Body-dissatisfaction is a person's negative thoughts and feelings about his or her body
- Body-dissatisfaction has been a common problem among young women and even young men
- Body-dissatisfaction originate from a perceived mismatch between the actual physical appearance and the desired ideal state of the body
- Body-perfect ideals: thin ideal and muscular ideal

Image Source: Beauty Demands

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So, that brings us to the idea of body dissatisfaction, why it is so, is something that we need to address at the very beginning. So, body dissatisfaction is one big reason why most people either suffer from eating desires or eating disorders or promptly disappear or vanish into the realm of the darkness that we call eating disorders. So, body dissatisfaction is a very very important phenomenon, we all have our body images, because this is the body that gives us a sense of identity we exist, which is proved by this body.

Since this body exist we want to exist this body matters most to us, because it is a passport to our existence not only that it is also the passcode to our identity both social cultural individual all types of identity, therefore this body is one of the most important things that we have, one of our most precious possessions and that is one big reason why we all have a sense of our body and image of our body and that particular image helps us create a particular type of impression about this body, whether we are satisfied with this body or not satisfied.

Several researchers have found that most people generally develop some kind of dissatisfaction with at least one body part that is a serious concern of course and this body dissatisfaction if not checked at the beginning can lead to serious problems, so therefore it is important that we understand what body dissatisfaction is all about.

So, in a general sense it is a person's negative thoughts and feelings about his or her body. If I feel positive about my body that means I have a I do not have any body dissatisfaction, I love my

body and I like it, if I have negative feelings about my body that means my hands are too long, I am too thin, my legs are too long, my nose is a little pressed, the colour of my skin, the hair, everything, if I begin to evaluate each of these things then I may end up finding at least one part or aspect in body with which I may not be satisfied and that will lead to dissatisfaction.


So, body dissatisfaction has been a common problem among young women and even young men, it is not that this is a problem which affects women only and it does not affect men, no men are also equally affected by body dissatisfaction. For example, if I do not have biceps or triceps or a muscular body, whenever I look at somebody with the muscular body I developed dissatisfaction, I may begin to curse my body myself.

So, body dissatisfaction is there irrespective of the genders. So, body dissatisfaction originate from a perceived mismatch between the actual physical appearance and the desired ideal state of the body and that is exactly where we can locate the problem that is body dissatisfaction, we all have an ideal sense of the body, the ideal image for our bodies, I look this way, I look that way, if that ideal state of the body is not achieved, it will promptly lead to a negative body image.

So, if there is a gap between what we desire for our bodies and what the body actually turns out to be, if this gap is not felt that will probably lead to body dissatisfaction. So, if we go for a random finding of whether or not I am dissatisfied with my body I will definitely find one aspect of my body with which I am not satisfied. So, this is how we all have body dissatisfaction.

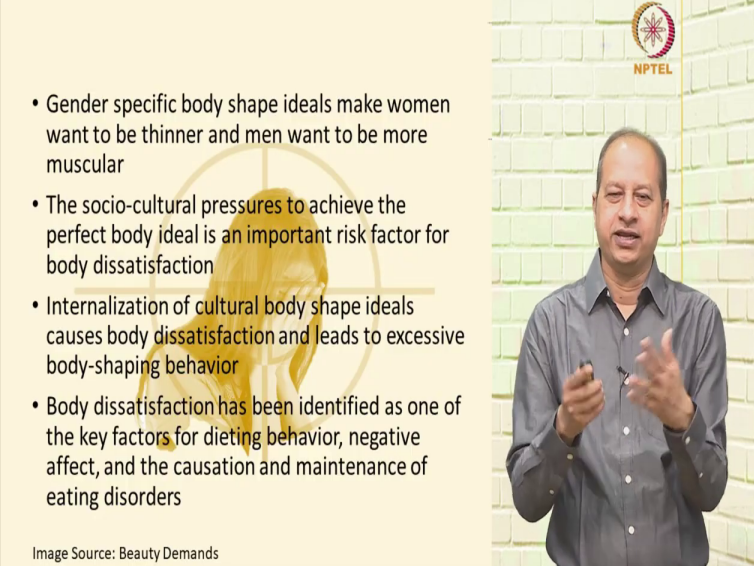
And this is one reason why we all have body dissatisfaction because we all want to have that body perfect ideal, which is for women it is a thin ideal and for men it is a muscular ideal. So, these two ideals are the most important ideals which men and women want to achieve, want to appropriate and that is the reason why most of us no experience body dissatisfaction, if we do not meet these respective ideals, the thin ideal for women and the muscular ideal for man, if we do not achieve that particular ideal I may experience body dissatisfaction.

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- Gender specific body shape ideals make women want to be thinner and men want to be more muscular
- The socio-cultural pressures to achieve the perfect body ideal is an important risk factor for body dissatisfaction
- Internalization of cultural body shape ideals causes body dissatisfaction and leads to excessive body-shaping behavior
- Body dissatisfaction has been identified as one of the key factors for dieting behavior, negative affect, and the causation and maintenance of eating disorders

Image Source: Beauty Demands



And then there are gender specific body dissatisfaction or shape or shape ideals which make women want to be thinner and men want to be more muscular, because it is all about the shape that we have, that we carry with us, if that shape is not recognized, not appreciated in our social and cultural environments then we begin to develop serious suspicion for that particular shape which we have.

So, it is a race that we join, the race is to achieve that particular shape, that particular ideal, the perfect body idea, so women want to be thinner and men want to be muscular by every passing day. There are socio-cultural pressures as well, to achieve the perfect body ideal, in fact these socio-cultural pressures turn out to be important risk factors for body dissatisfaction.

If somebody lives in a culture that prefers a certain body type, they have well-defined body types for men and women and if men and women in that society do not accommodate to those particular standards and structures they are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction. Because they will be subject to social criticisms and that will also aggravate the problem.

So, and then this internalization of cultural body shape ideals also causes body dissatisfaction and leads to excessive body shaping behaviour. So, this is something that can also be called body-sculpting behaviour as if you are not a human with flesh and blood, your piece of rock that can be chiselled into a particular shape; so that is a kind of behaviour people generally adopt when they think or they perceive that they are not being able to meet the perfect body ideals

prescribed in a certain socio-cultural situation or condition, so they will begin to adopt excessive body shaping behaviour that may be dieting, that may be starving, that may be going for over exercise, anything, but they will suddenly indulge in excessive body shaping behaviours.

And then body shaping will also lead to body dissatisfaction because it has been identified as one of the key factors for dieting behaviour, negative affect, and the causation and maintenance of eating disorders. So, if we have to find the causes of eating disorders, we can find those in body dissatisfaction and before that in mimetic desire. So, mimetic desire makes us desire the things that are mediated by the models or the mediators and once we fall into the trap of mimetic desire we will also develop a very very strong desire for the object.

And then have a very strong desire for the mediator as well and that will lead to a state of comparison in which we will begin to compare ourselves with others and whenever we find others to be better or perfect will promptly develop body dissatisfaction. And this body dissatisfaction will ultimately lead to eating disorders and mysterious and strange eating behaviours, so that is why it is very very important that we understand body dissatisfaction.

So, a research study was reported in a journal, this research was conducted by a group of researchers who found that television when it was introduced in a certain part of Fiji, Fiji islands in 1995 promptly led to body dissatisfaction among Fiji teenagers. When we look at the cultural practices of Fiji they generally say you have gained weight when they want to compliment somebody.

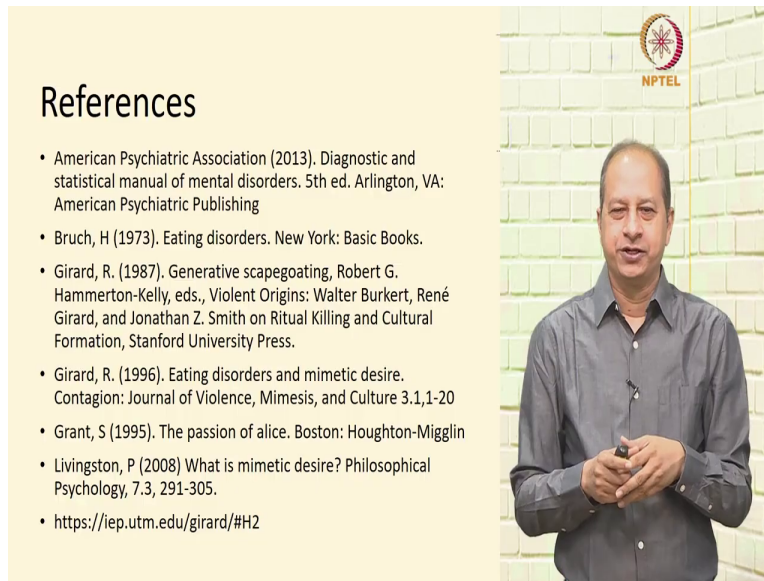
So, this phrase 'you have gained weight' is generally treated as a compliment in Fiji that means in Fiji culture gaining weight is not treated as a failure, it is in fact, treated as a form of success that somebody is gaining weight, but then when television was introduced in 1995 in a certain part of Fiji, thereafter it suddenly changed the mindset, the behaviour of the teenagers, so the full body which used to be a storehouse of positive qualities in Fiji was suddenly treated as a sin.

So, within a few years, within three years in fact, after the introduction of Television that part of Fiji, around 70 percent of girls reported feeling too fat and then they also promptly went on diet, so that was the impact of the mediator that is television in this case, the mediator was a television who suddenly changed the behavioural patterns of this Fiji girls; so, that is the impact of our



body dissatisfaction, the moment somebody experiences body dissatisfaction then the person begins to innovate or experiment ways that may not be clinically or medically good for the part which will prompt will lead to eating disorders. And eating disorders are one of the biggest and most serious consequences of body dissatisfaction.

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So, that is how we come to the end of this lecture. I hope I have helped you understand body dissatisfaction from the perspective of mimetic desire and how these two potential threats can lead to some serious eating disorders in us. When I meet you next, I will talk about some more aspects of eating disorders. Thank you very much for joining me.