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Femininity and the Beauty Ideal: Image of the ‘Woman’ in Indian Popular Media

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Abstract:

The cultural conception of the beauty ideal significantly influences the formation of discursive patterns of thought, images and ideas related to the gendered status of the woman. It also operates as an important mechanism of patriarchal control that regulates and organises the hierarchical relations maintained between genders. Popular cultural manifestations rely on idealised conceptions of female beauty articulated through narratives glorifying homogenised and universalised standards of physical perfection and personal attractiveness. The present paper makes an attempt to map the different dimensions associated with the societal understanding of female beauty and to uncover the ideological underpinnings governing such representations of femininity within popular cultural texts. Media images of women are analysed so as to identify the recurrent motifs and codes employed by cultural texts to further the existing norms and beliefs associated with patriarchal power and also to determine the extent to which the discourse of beauty works to limit the possibilities of subversion envisioned with respect to women’s liberation and independence.

Keywords: Beauty, Femininity, Body, Representation

The discourse of ‘beauty’ constructed around the image of the woman through patriarchal processes and formulations represents an underlying system of thought that functions in accordance with the dominant attitudes and ideologies of contemporary society. The female body is accordingly conceptualised in terms of a complex dynamics of power that appropriates the prevalent norms and standards based on gender. The ideal of femininity that is thus culturally conceived plays a significant role in determining the individual subjectivities and behavioural patterns of women who are conditioned to accept the institutionalised beliefs and principles laid down by society. Normative codes organised around the beauty ideal attempt to define the manner in which women are expected to live up to the notions of what is best and appropriate with regard to their personal appearance. The ‘womanly’ attributes of beauty are culturally valourised to the extent that women learn to cultivate the cherished goals of perfection envisioned in terms of the female body.

Though women have over the years attained notable advancement in terms of their quest for social equality and recognition, the debate around women's independence still continues to surface all the more vociferously owing to the prevalence of a number of factors that ingeniously ensure the oppression and subordination of women. The concept of female beauty, as furthered through the instruments of patriarchy, constitutes an important mechanism of control through which women are conditioned to accept their own subjugation and marginalisation. The feminist endeavours aimed at the liberation of women tend to be devalued when seen alongside such newer forms of oppression devised by male-oriented society. Wendy Chapkis makes a valid observation in this regard. She says:

Though feminism has changed the way women view the world and themselves, it often feels as if the world has turned feminism into a new kind of lip gloss. The daring insistence of early feminists that a woman is beautiful just as she naturally appears has been rewritten in a commercial translation as the Natural Look. The horrible irony of this is, of course, that only a handful of women have the Natural Look naturally. Most of us have flaws that must be disguised if we are to resemble the beautiful models setting the standard—a fact the beauty industry is banking on. (8)

In fact the very notion of female beauty attempts to thwart or rather undermine the emergence of an alternate discourse of resistance and resurgence for the woman within a patriarchal society. It can therefore be assumed that the power hierarchy, scrupulously adhered to with respect to gender relationships, is normalised and consolidated using such ideologies pertaining to bodily perfection and beauty. This obsession with the woman's body also threatens to confine women within the rigid boundaries of masculine authority and power. It is a means through which the expression of women's agency and initiative get strictly monitored and regulated with the aim of ensuring the continuance of male-generated principles and values.

Naomi Wolf, in her acclaimed work *The Beauty Myth*, offers a critique of this ideology of beauty and terms it as the "last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control" women (10). She explains:

We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth. It is the modern version of a social reflex that has been in force since the Industrial Revolution. As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control. (10)

The cultural control that is thus exerted, by means of what Naomi Wolf describes as the 'beauty myth', finds adequate representation through the varied artefacts of popular culture. Mass media images, in particular, cater to this idea of beauty in order to propagate a consumerist

ideology that is specifically oriented towards women. Among the diverse cultural meanings that are almost artificially replicated through such texts, the connotations associated with the construct of 'beauty' enjoy great predominance as they are able to instantaneously establish a connection with their target audience. Mass media images are infused with contingent truths that carry forward the negative perceptions and messages about women's worth and also deepen the gender divide that already exists in the different spheres of society. Stephanie Nicholl Berberick, for instance, notes that the representation of women in media is always an exploitative one as women are often reduced "to being nothing more than objects to be won, prizes to be shown off, and playthings to be abused" (2). Moreover, media also creates a definition of beauty that women compare themselves to and also concomitantly transforms themselves into victims of objectification, sexism and assessment (2). The images of beauty that are thus perpetuated signify a homogenised standard that categorises specific qualities and attributes as socially acceptable and relevant. The patriarchal notions of 'fairness' and 'thinness' play a significant role in establishing and validating the discourse of female beauty within the commercial social space of the media. The concept of 'beauty' thus becomes a powerful marketing tool that accentuates the internalisation of idealised and glorified representations of women within popular cultural media. Women are thus encouraged to look upon their own bodies rather self-deprecatingly, unless and until they acquire the required standards of 'perfection' determined by society.

The contemporary Indian cultural scenario, which faithfully reflects the rapid strides made with regard to women's roles and capabilities, also tends to accord primacy to those conventional beliefs and customs that have been traditionally manipulated to relegate women to the background. Though the notions of female beauty have undergone changes in accordance with the transitions happening in society, they have historically exerted a tremendous influence on the socio-cultural positioning of women in general. The same tendency recurs, albeit, in different ways, in the contemporary era and lend a new dimension to the conventional patriarchal bedrock of Indian society. The culture of slimness, fairness and beauty has been enthusiastically embraced by Indian popular media in conjunction with the growing demands and transformations brought in through globalisation. The woman's role as a consumer is repeatedly emphasised through media representations that specifically target the purchasing potential and attitudinal patterns of women and urge them to adopt a favourable stand towards a particular brand or product. Perhaps, this is an indication of the fact that the consumption behaviour of women has undergone a lot of changes owing to the greater sense of empowerment and economic freedom attained by women of today (Nila 98). However, the messages transmitted through such cultural texts tend to channelise women's decision-making capabilities towards the attainment of the fundamental requirements of femininity.

As a result of the prevalence and easy accessibility of mass media resources, the archetypal notions surrounding the image of the woman have also come to be almost effortlessly reinforced by culture. Such ideas are covertly or sometimes even overtly conveyed through the very conceptual framework of various cultural texts and products. The advertisement industry, in

particular, thrives on stereotypical ideas of beauty which try to equate personal success and fame with bodily perfection. It is noteworthy that the dependence on the body image is considered imperative primarily for women. The emphasis laid on flawless skin and long-lasting fairness indicate how women are taught to internalise extremely biased representations of the beauty ideal which tend to trivialise the woman's worth as an individual. If on the one hand, advertisements try to explicitly communicate this message through their narrative patterns and visual content, they also subtly express the ideological beliefs pertaining to the female body through their very choice of models and actors who epitomise the societal ideal of the perfect female body. Beauty is projected as indispensable to attaining not just societal approval but also male sanction and recognition as most of the advertisements portray women as becoming capable of pleasing and capturing the attention of the male after using the specific product advertised. A popular fairness brand, for instance, has for many years capitalised on the contrived relationship established between a woman's success and the complexion of the skin. Though the brand endeavours to grant recognition to the emerging crop of young, confident and assertive modern Indian women, the underlying thought which informs their advertisements necessarily prioritises the requirement of a fair skin tone as essential for achieving what women aspire for. As a result they create perfect images which try to inculcate the belief that women should strive to attain the degree of perfection showcased by these texts.

Though these advertisements appear to create an aura of women's progress and achievement, the ideological meaning propelling such narratives remains exactly the same. The cultural stigma associated with dark-skinned women is once again reinforced and the female body is objectified using the paradigms of beauty upheld by such advertisements. The female protagonists of these advertisements are depicted as undergoing a process of change, articulated mainly through the physical feature of skin colour, thereby also acknowledging dominant discourses about the cultural image of the woman. Television commercials also lay great stress on the necessity of women maintaining youthful skin and radiance, beating the visible marks of change induced by ageing. The extreme popularity enjoyed by a soap brand advertisement that uses the stock theme of a woman being mistaken for a college girl by the onlookers, bears testimony to the fact that for the woman, beauty exists as an integral component of her identity and therefore is to be painstakingly retained battling all odds, especially those related to age.

An equally visible tendency is the 'size-zero' image projected as the 'normal' standard for the ordinary Indian woman. As mentioned earlier, the constructed image of the woman, which is used to sell almost anything ranging from cookies to vehicles, incorporates the accepted societal notions about a woman's right size and shape. This obsession with 'slimness' is again visible, mainly in representations pertaining to the woman, and this explains why most advertisements, both print and visual, consider it proper to employ a female image that caters to this gender stereotype. Such an image is also internalised by women as the ideal image of female beauty authorised by society. Sumita Sarkar speaks about this process of conditioning to which women are constantly subjected to:

Images in the media today project an unrealistic and even dangerous standard of feminine beauty that can have a powerful influence on the way women view themselves. From the perspective of the mass media, thinness is idealized and expected to be considered “attractive”. By woman images in advertisements, television, and music usually portray the “ideal woman” as tall, white, and thin, with a “tubular” body, and fine glowing hair. (52)

A woman who does not fit in with this ideal is shown as possessing a serious ‘lack’ that is enough to brand her as an exception and marginalise her within the existing societal set up. This supposed ‘imperfection’ is meant to be rectified by the use of appropriate products which will not only help her regain her lost value but also ensure her both applause and recognition. A commercial for a green tea brand, endorsed by a popular young Bollywood actress, shows ‘shapeless’ women attempting to hide their belly fat, feeling embarrassed to expose their ‘flaw’ before the male.

Such advertisements explicate the manner in which the beauty ideology gets repeatedly employed so as to foreground the position of the woman as an object to be looked at and evaluated. The beauty ideal is therefore expressed in close alliance with the requirements of the ‘male gaze’ or in other words in terms of male pleasure and satisfaction. The factors of ‘fairness’ and ‘thinness’ become saleable commodities not just in the consumer driven economy endorsed by advertisements but also in personalised cultural products such as matrimonial columns where there is a commodification of the very individual self. A cursory glance at some of the common matrimonial advertisements appearing in the prominent newspapers of India, both regional as well as national, reveal the extent to which the fair-skin fixation is understood to determine the marital prospects of individuals, particularly women. A majority of such advertisements highlight the aspect of ‘fairness’ as the most acknowledged expression of beauty. Equal prominence is also accorded to the element of ‘slimness’ as ‘fairness’ and ‘slimness’ together constitute the most desirable elements of a woman’s personality and represent the degree of her attractiveness. This explains the recurrent occurrence of personal signifiers that denote the complexion and body-type of marriageable women and also the privileged status that women supposedly gain on account of possessing these cherished qualities. Very often such attributes of the body are emphasised bypassing the professional achievements and career choices of women, while for the male, the ‘likeability’ quotient is invariably related to the professional stature and educational credentials of the individual.

Matrimonial advertising, which thrives upon the marketing of the individual as a ‘product’, exists as an important cultural indicator of such underlying prejudices and sexist patterns of thinking mediated by patriarchal formulations. The gendered reality envisioned for the woman is thus inextricably linked to preconceived notions of femininity which are taken as ‘natural’ and biologically ordained. Beauty, in this sense, becomes a ‘normal’ standard for the woman that conveniently excludes or even marginalises all others who do not satisfy the conditions of the required ideal. As a result, significant number of women also gets negatively

influenced by such inflated notions of beauty projected through these matrimonial columns. It has been observed that “women, especially those with low self-esteem, are likely to make comparisons between themselves and media ideals, and even internalize these media messages that thinness and fairness are essential for being considered beautiful, attractive, and ‘marriageable’” (Ramasubramanian and Jain 264). Therefore advertisements seeking grooms display a certain eagerness to highlight the woman’s attractiveness more importantly than her individual attainment as the concept of the ‘ideal’ woman is necessarily reliant on an idealised version of female beauty as well. Beauty thus also becomes a discriminatory tool that aggrandizes the structured levels of distinction maintained between the genders. When the woman is thus defined purely in essentialist terms, she exposes herself to not just social stratification but physical stratification too (Dave 265). The linguistic signifiers which matrimonials constantly use to connote the desired physical attributes of women, in fact, reflect the societal validation of the dominant ideological myths and beliefs pertaining to femininity. This is also an indication of a more subtle way of exercising patriarchal control and power as women are perpetually made aware of their own selves, their appearances and are consequently made to view themselves as objects of male surveillance.

The societal fascination for aspects related to female beauty is equally visible in the women images naturalised through highly influential representational systems such as women’s magazines. The symbols and messages conveyed through such texts encourage women to perceive themselves in accordance with the mythical values and beliefs framed around masculine fantasy and desire. By exclusively concentrating on the cultural ideal of beauty, women’s magazines, especially the ones which wear a clearly perceptible cosmopolitan aura around themselves, strive to create a standard of femininity that solidifies the objectification of women. Though the proposed intention of any average women’s magazine is to emphatically establish the woman’s perspective through narratives of female power, resistance and resurgence, the extent to which such textual critiques of social conformity attain fruition is debatable. This is largely because such magazines attempt to promote universally acknowledged norms of bodily appearance and beauty and disseminate ideas about physical perfection that are largely organised around the conventional image of the woman. This is exemplified by the very stylistic and thematic framework adopted by these texts in an attempt to privilege the ubiquitous model of the female body.

Many of the articles that constitute women’s magazines tend to be advisory or cautionary in nature, reminding women about the need for cultivating the socially accepted parameters of female beauty. The standardised norms pertaining to female body and appearance is best explicated with the assistance of advertisements that command a sizeable amount of space in such magazines. It is least surprising that most of the advertisements featured endorse high-end, branded cosmetics, clothing and fine jewellery, these items being traditionally perceived as being integral to woman’s identity and subjectivity. In addition to such generalised conceptions of beauty that these advertisements invariably convey, the notions of thinness and fairness are

passionately embraced granting recognition to the social equation established between women and physical perfection. The idea of the desirable female body is concretised through innumerable images of actresses and models flaunting their well-toned, well-maintained bodies, thereby also signaling the text's intention to project them as symbols worthy of adoration and emulation. The readers are also sometimes advised to follow the right style of dressing adopted by a celebrity and to avoid the fashion blunders committed by other equally well-known personalities.

Popular Indian women's magazines, especially those which generally target the urban, educated, financially sound modern Indian woman, often resort to such glamourised conceptions of beauty that are quite frequently disguised within a market-driven consumerist ideology. Within the text's conceptual framework, the concept of female beauty is inextricably linked to excessive commodification brought in through the showcasing of designer products and services that are meant to enhance the social stature and appeal of women. Thus the beauty industry is understood to have undeniable connections with the flourishing consumer-driven market economy engendered by globalisation as well. The discourse concerning the appropriateness of the female body, enforced through women's magazines, utilising the possibilities of the visual and the textual, also leads to the production of a culture where women are habituated to a limited, socially correct, male-defined female world of perfection. Women are urged to consider their bodies as the most important concern of their lives and this concern is certainly not voluntary but rather the result of hegemonising control exerted by patriarchy. P.Sita Chanda makes a very valuable observation in this regard in the course of an analysis of the images projected through women's magazines. She says that "magazines exist within an interstice of a reciprocal system—they create demands and advise on the ways to fulfil these demands...The fact that technology is being substituted for equality or that a woman now has a double burden of work to maintain a particular standard of living is being obliterated by the glittering sops of 'modern', 'liberated', 'feminism'" (68). She also adds that the strategy adopted by these magazines is to "essentialise an eternal feminine within an universal milieu" and to cast their narrative and presentation patterns "in a unique mould that implicitly denies agency to the reader" (68).

The beauty ideal, is however, most effectively communicated by co-opting it into a discourse of bodily health and fitness. Feminist researchers have critically analysed the manner in which the fit body came to be "reproduced within the ideological domain of media representation as a body 'feminized' according to masculine, patriarchal representational logic" (Markula and Kennedy 2). As a result of the endeavour of such critical feminists it has been revealed that "women's fitness, through representation of the ideal body, reproduced heteronormativity by 'feminizing' women's physical activity" (2). In most popular texts, therefore, "looking good (the ideal body) and feeling good (health) become closely intertwined. The thin and toned body is also celebrated as the healthy body. In this equation, the responsibility of the healthy looking body is assigned to individual women" (3). The idea of

slenderness thus becomes for the woman a medical necessity that requires rigorous self-monitoring and individual discipline. Accordingly, factors such as dieting, weight management and exercise are conveniently appropriated into this health discourse manipulated by the beauty industry. This explains the continual and almost unavoidable presence of articles, features and personal columns focusing on the topic of a healthy and perfect body for the woman. The incorporation of the beauty ideal into discourses of health facilitates the easy promulgation of ideological power and also augments the textual production and reproduction of idealised and fantasised conceptions of female beauty. Any average women's magazine therefore considers it extremely imperative to provide necessary tips and instructions related to the proper maintenance of the female body. Commonly occurring blemishes and spots on the skin, wrinkles and skin-darkening are treated as imperfections that have to be avoided at any cost by the woman as these are regarded as repulsive and loathsome. These are considered as equally despicable as the descriptor 'plus-size' that is often used to define women who over step the limits of the ideal beauty image.

The influential medium of cinema also plays no less a role in perpetuating such fantasised conceptions of beauty and 'womanliness' as popular films resort to highly idolised and romanticised images of the female that are expected to match international standards. Most contemporary film actresses rigidly adhere to this notion of the perfect, well-toned body and often seem to be quite vocal about the fitness regime that they strictly follow in pursuit of the modern standards of beauty. A Bollywood heroine who does not cater to this ideal is very often criticised and treated as a misfit in comparison with other female movie stars who conform to this norm. Moreover, different forms of media also employ narratives that highlight the weight-loss endeavours of heroines and the work-out schedules that are stringently maintained along with their busy work lives. Great importance is given to stories of leading heroines attaining the 'size-zero' image and confidently exhibiting their exquisite bodies. More than the attribute of fairness, it is this image of the perfect female form that is valorised in popular Hindi films as the supposed disapproval of dark-skinned female actresses that existed in the past has literally taken a back seat with the arrival of popular actresses having 'dusky' complexion. 'Dusky' is indeed a more welcome word for the dark-complexioned heroine according to the accepted linguistic conventions prevailing in the film industry. So long as the 'dusky' heroine integrates herself into the beauty discourse of 'slimness' she is supposed to exude not just oodles of charm but also sexual appeal.

The notions of beauty and sexuality are very often conjoined to underline the image of the woman as a sexualised object of desire meant for male possession and consumption. Therefore when women are constantly exhorted to accept and acknowledge the messages of beauty perpetuated by mass media it is also a surreptitious way of consolidating the prevalent notions about masculine power and influence. When popular media images grant excessive attention to this socially formulated ideal of beauty, women are desperately made to conform to an almost impossible standard which is rather illusory in nature. They are conditioned to view

their own bodies as objects of experimentation, as they have to continuously adapt themselves to the changing requirements of the beauty ideal. It is equally disheartening to note that beauty is conceptualised in totalising terms when equated almost unilaterally with certain chosen features of physical attractiveness. When beauty is thus defined dogmatically in relation to certain culturally chosen paradigms of acceptability and respectability, it tends to offer an all-encompassing understanding of what a woman's appearance ought to be. Such a generalised understanding of beauty appears to be largely inconsistent with the idea of diversity offered by cultural differences and contexts existing across the social landscape of India.

When the beauty image, formulated and reinforced by mass media exercises tremendous influence on the female psyche, it also concomitantly reflects the extent to which objectified images of femininity evolve as tools of exploitation and subjugation as well. Even though there exists a concerted attempt to extol the 'new woman' concept through popular forms of media by emphasising the transformation of the Indian woman from a meek, traditional and restricted being to one who is free and liberated, the fact remains that such narratives which purportedly laud the expression of the female self, choose to do so firmly remaining within the confines of societal convention. Therefore media conveys subtle suggestions about the need for women to adhere to the regulations of patriarchal society even while laboring to provide a message about female independence and empowerment. In a male-oriented society like India, in particular, the perpetuation of orthodox values and beliefs is ensured by reiterating the importance of female allegiance to the accepted societal standard.

Though alternative discourses of resistance do emerge within the context of popular media representations of the 'new-age' woman, it cannot be denied that there is an equally conscious attempt made by such texts to affirm the woman's secondary position within the sexist hierarchical structure of society. Accordingly, conventional gender roles are vindicated in support of the traditional assumptions of patriarchal culture and the notion of beauty along with its assorted meanings constitute a powerful discourse of male control manipulated by society to sustain the existing patterns of gender relationship. The 'myth' of female beauty functions as a regulatory mechanism that monitors and contains the possibilities of subversion envisaged in terms of female defiance to the norm and seeks to sustain the societal equilibrium built upon the supremacy of the male. In other words, beauty is a construct imbued with cultural meanings and beliefs legitimized by the male and operating as an important manifestation of ideological control.

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