

## Beauty, Body and Modernity: Understanding Feminism in Contemporary India.

Koushiki Dasgupta \*

*'She was fairer than the champak flower  
Sweet innocence there was in every line  
Her winsome ways did reason o're power  
Her sidelong glances charged with wrath divine'*<sup>1</sup>

When beauty takes on a sensual tone, accentuating the sensual aspects of embodiment, enhancement of beauty and fulfillment of bodily sensations according to the senses largely depends on external resources to make it perfect and complete. Even if beauty lies within, its manifestation becomes necessary for the modern 'self' because at both the physical and sociological level, the body appears to be crucial for the cultivation and experience of the gendered identity.<sup>2</sup> Not making much points to the notion that women speaks through her body, it must be acknowledged that the embodied experience of womanhood could be articulated best by the interactions between bodily senses and the conditions addressing the elements of everyday experiences. Infact the body appears to be a means of commutation through which multiple identities of the subject are realized as parts of selfhood. Here the elements of speech, imagination, memory, cultural traits equally play their respective roles in constructing the embodied self like that of male and female gaze.<sup>3</sup> This question of gazing as well as the question of being looked at very often comes into a form of power culture where the rubric of controlling the 'self' primarily lays within the structure of practical and material aspects of gendered embodiment because here the body remains neither as subject nor object rather as 'the vehicle of being in the world.' Therefore body evolves as a site for introducing and shaping up worldly experiences in a context of different identities like caste, class, ethnicity and others.<sup>4</sup> However, it is class which provides the primary impetus of situating the female body into the modern world structured according to the languages of an embodied self in a multicultural milieu.<sup>5</sup> Keeping in mind the feminist critic on the naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality, it can safely be said that one may not born but rather becomes a women not simply by bodily experience but by a set of socio political experiences making way into the world of bodily senses.<sup>6</sup> The process is not a simple one .As soon as the so-called distinction between the 'female' and the 'women' becomes visible on the ground of cultural interpretations assigned to the body, femininity emerges as that a way of being which imparts its self definitions according to the embodied styles of presentation depending her position in the society.<sup>7</sup> Now the body turns to be a machine with parts to be changed, renovated and even modified and it is

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\* Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Gour Banga.

done only to conform the criterions of femininity approved by the embodied self in a world claims to be modern. This project not only denies agency to womanhood as master of her own historical situations but also makes her tool of experiments best fitted with the requirements of modernity sanctioned by the market and the society to a greater extent. This paper seeks to make an understanding of how the female body goes into extreme vulnerability when put into the context of cultural politics addressed by the languages of gender, class and beauty. It is a question to be asked and resolved to take up the challenges put before modernity as a whole from a last few decades. In this paper some selected issues of the Indian beauty industry have been taken into consideration just to open up the debates for further explorations. In the way of discussion the fashion magazines, fashion shows, beauty contests, cosmetic markets, life style products and related issues have been emphasized to interrogate the notions of 'danger' and 'crisis' into the world of beauty appropriating femininity as an embodied subject.

In the understanding of the social and cultural changes in India, the concepts like subjectivity, modernity and nativity have been used widely by the post modernist scholars while negating the meta-narratives of larger historical and institutional forces. But the colonial past and related historical experiences does not provide India an easy access into the world of modernism because the term 'modern' as 'progressive' and native as 'backward' could not be defined by the binary concepts of developed and underdeveloped in post colonial India. The relations of power might have gone through a complex process of change after independence but India could hardly make any escape from the dilemmas of getting into traditional at a time talking about modernism at large. The entire debate on beauty and women embodiment falls into certain norms of structural consequences because in India modernism seems to have been a vague term used differently for different sections of the society. It is not a mere concern but an alarmist issue to define beauty and style of Indian womanhood conforming modernism in a globalised world. The matter is not of 'what' and 'when' but of 'why' and 'how'. The religious rules ascribing the norms of beauty and fashion for women in ancient documents prioritized the caste, class and marital status of a women, however, in post colonial times beauty and fashion statements of any Indian women often creates confusion on her class, age and ethnic identity and the social adaptability of that woman largely depends on the ambiguous impressions drawn by her viewers of different class, age and ethnic backgrounds. For instance woman taking interest on western style of attires and making regular visits to the beauty salons are considered to be less 'traditional' and less 'Indian' in comparison to those adhered to Indian style of attires and beauty statements.<sup>8</sup> Indian women are forging a kind of physiological as well as sociological fight to look 'progressive' and 'modern' at a same time meeting contradictory demands. No one can deny the fact that women are empowered through their bodies to a greater extent and their class position in the society bears a close relation with their every day bodily experiences. Bodily experiences are being expressed better by self reflecting tropes than any other things but female body in India is being viewed always by the modes of national or community identities—an object of purity and sacredness.<sup>9</sup> Therefore a modern Indian woman carries the twin responsibilities of fitting her bodily experiences well into the domain of national pride as well as to take the challenges of the world around her. In this world the gendered selves are seen to be in an adjustment with her class and caste context which might have ensured

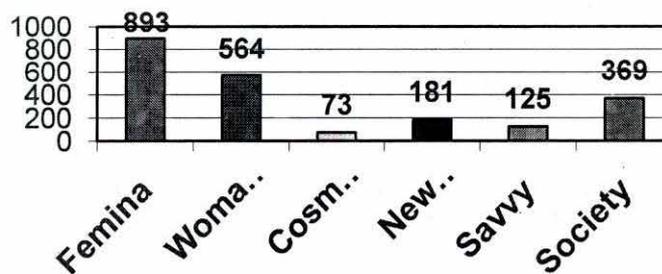
some sort of recognition for the woman in the society. A trend of upward mobility for more recognition could be traced in different caste and class contexts where identities were not made but 'transformed' for status and privileges in the society.<sup>10</sup> The booming beauty product markets in India indicates that within a next few decades India would become the largest cosmetic consuming country in the world. In spite of the global economic recession, the growing fashion consciousness and rising beauty concern of the Indian women, the cosmetic industry registered sales Rs 356.6 Billion in 2009 and the number is increasing rapidly.<sup>11</sup> A huge number of international and local beauty brands are opening outlets in the metro cities and huge range of beauty care products are entering into the Indian market every day.<sup>12</sup>

India's integration with the global beauty industry opened up other channels of interrogation of how the female body is getting being endangered apart from the glittering persona entrusted upon her by the so called beauty standards of the market. Marketing the beauty and making beauty marketable is the two parts of the same story. Beauty pageants in India are the best examples shown in this category. In India, *Femina*—the fashion magazine conducts Miss India pageants every year and this contest gives young Indian women a direct chance to step forward into the glamour industry in near future. The whole training programme prior to the event puts the maximum possible effort to create a future Miss India or Miss World by employing the best expert trainers from Indian film, fashion and beauty industry. By simply positioning the women body as not beautiful enough, the training programme makes the contestants objects of experiments and transformation.<sup>13</sup> Its fundamental attention was on a strict diet regime and a fairer skin. Both of these issues made the bodily experiences an important part of the cultural discourse produced by colonialism into the domain of what it called the 'third world'. In this domain of culture the non western women particularly those from the post colonial countries were placed on a homogeneous category of 'they', different from the white skinned women of the west—referred as 'we' in western feminist discourses. The stereotypes of a slim body and fair skin have been used as the mark of a strategic power relation where the western women appeared as the dictators and others simply as recipients or followers. This process should not be taken as a modified version of westernization or colonization rather it must be viewed as a component of the same cultural politics where power comes either in a form of social mobilization or in a form of psychological perversion.<sup>14</sup> The cultural tropes of slim body and fair skin, if not universally, sprang from the similar hegemonic relation of power in India. Interestingly that group of women, who shared a natural ability to connect themselves with this process, became the chief signatories of modernity in India. They proved themselves able to read the languages of power far more quickly than their other counterparts. The English medium trained girls from an upper class or upper middle class background responded easily to this new culture of modernity, defined and exploited in the languages of domination and control. One may argue in this regard that this process did not have the same impact on women of different class, caste or habitation; however, the drop-outs were not left untouched forever. The beauty pageants, knowingly or unknowingly became the prime markers of social change in India. The social prejudices on fair skin or slim body was taken to a height by these contests while the market forces appeared here as the main beneficiaries of change. But numerous cosmetic products used for conforming the

standards of international beauty somehow spoiled the vision and mission of Indian beauty—a state of purity emanates from within and comes to get manifested fully either by proper cultivation or nourishment. This nourishment had little to do with a diet control slim body or a technical regime of enhancing fairness by external chemicals. Skin bleaching materials, lesser treatment equipments has flooded the market already and the beauticians are not hesitant in prescribing them in the name of making the girls more and more confident. The beauty pageant contestants and the glamour world women are appearing here as the role models for the common Indian women although the doctors and dermatologists are equally paying their concern on the use of chemicals on female body. V.K Sharma, Head of the dermatology department at the All India institute of Medical Sciences said that if anybody applies anything on the skin, there will be side effects obviously,<sup>15</sup> but the advertisements have completely washed up the minds of the people and its now not a concern for Indian society only. Dr. Eliot F. Battle Jr., a dermatologist in Washington echoed that the skin lightening creams “not only contains corticosteroids, but mercury,” a poison that can damage the nervous system also.<sup>16</sup> In India where skin lightening is related with social standards and higher social adaptability, the side effects are rarely been observed or even acknowledged. The steroids used in the products may lead to high blood sugar, hypertension and other fatal diseases like skin cancer. In this regard it may be pointed out that growing incidents of skin cancer have been traced in India from a last few decades. It was proved in medical research that dark skin people are less affected by skin related diseases in comparison to the white skinned people because of the level of melanin present in their skin, protects it from Ultra Violet induced damages and acts as a natural barrier to the penetration of Ultra Violet rays into the skin<sup>17</sup> Dark skin containing more melanin than the fair skin is better protected against Ultra Violet related diseases. The regular use of different fairness creams reduces the level of melanin pigments from our body and the skin lacks its natural resistant against sun burn and other skin related diseases. Side by side continuous use of fairness creams makes our skin photosensitive and a sudden withdraw of those creams cause skin problems. The common concern is that in most of the cases these fairness creams do not mention the amount of bleaching agents on the pack and the consumers use it without any scientific safeguards. Unfortunately there is no law in India which could make the consumers sure about the ingredients used in a fairness cream because the manufacturers are not bound to mention it on the pack and due to lack of chemical knowledge the common consumers do not even understand the meaning of the ingredients. Such a condition does not indicate a healthy picture of medical consciousness in India and the female body has ever remained to be the chief victim of the situation. the first fairness cream, *Fair & Lovely*, was launched by the *Hindustan Liver*, in 1976 . It assured to make skin fairer and beautiful, however, in the era of globalization a host of skin lightening products like the *Fairever*, *Fairglow*, Emami's *Gold Turmeric and Naturally Fair*, and Revlon's *Fair & Glow* entering the market. It has been noted that there was a 25 percent increase in the gross domestic sales of cosmetics and personal care products from 1996 to 2000 with the Indian cosmetic market in 2000 estimated at about \$160 million (p. 11) In 2003, the fairness products scored 40 percent of the profits of the Indian cosmetic industry with a rapidly increasing market.<sup>18</sup>

The Indian women's understanding of their embodied self was influenced by the international beauty standards to an extent that the beauty contests were seen to transforming the classical notions of beauty in India. Femina, the women's magazine as well as the organizer of Miss India contest very year, is performing the same job of transforming Indian beauty standards in the print media.<sup>19</sup> The image of an Indian beauty with voluptuous body and an overexposed aura of sexuality have been replaced by the western standards of beauty because Femina believes that India women are now exposed to the same stresses and workloads like her western counterparts. As a result the entire vision of beauty must go for a change and the female body should be the focus of these changes. Now the female body, as the Femina interprets is being viewed more than a machine of reproduction rather a mirror of the self which could be the right choice for 'All the Women You Are'.<sup>20</sup> Echoing Parmeswaran, it can be said that the women of this society redefine themselves and they employ the pages of a magazine to alter the terrain of society and produce multiple identities for themselves, making sure that representations of femininity, race and nation become alloyed with global culture. However, the Femina has proved be the highest rating magazine in India while the beauty contests holding by Femina already went to a point of imagery from where the Indian women could hardly make any return.<sup>21</sup>

The following figure by the National Readership Survey 2006 on Comparative Readership of Women's Magazine shows the popularity of Femina in a national context.



(The National Readership Survey was conducted by A.C Nielsen, covering population 12 years and above, all India urban and rural areas and a sample size over 200,000).<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the stereotype of a fair skin, body weight seems to take the next important place in reconstructing womanhood in contemporary India. An obsession with the body weight affected more or less all the young Indian women including the aspirants of different beauty titles. The urgency of leaving perfect impression on the viewers not only indicates the points of social insecurity of the women but also creates an illusion of getting higher social acceptance on virtue of a slim body. Interestingly the medical benefits of a slim body are widely recognised to get rid of obesity and other diseases, the Indian women's craze for a perfect body shape mainly centred round the very parameters of fashion and beauty. The body is simply appropriated here by the media culture which has evolved as the single tool of constructing multiple identities for Indian women to meet up the western standards. the ideal of an ultra thin female body has widened up the

markets of fitness and beauty industry in India. But the worst effect of this weight obsession is being felt in eating habit disorders resulting in a chain of disease.<sup>23</sup>

India is a fast-developing country that has been exposed for more than a decade to Western culture in the form of Western media. With an increase in globalization of the Indian economy and greater emphasis on meeting international standards in every sphere, girls and women in India are increasingly exposed to Western media images.<sup>24</sup> However, India is not an exception here. The other Asian countries are also thriving with the same problems of weight obsession among young women population. For an instance in Japan it has been observed that Plumpness has been well accepted in many non-Western cultures as a sign of prestige and affluence. Consequently, many researchers felt eating disorders and the desire for thinness would be rare in Asian countries. Therefore, the recent phenomenon of a desire for thinness in Japan is quite surprising.<sup>25</sup> In Africa where body weight and eating ideals had never been an issue but the Black and mix races are now 'in a socio-cultural flux between traditional cultural values and the values installed by the modern western society.'<sup>26</sup> If this is rising as a global concern, in the societies like India weight obsession is changing the outlooks of women on their clothing and hairstyle also. In a society where wearing western dresses is getting acceptance as a sign of looking progressive and 'modern', thinness has become a necessity to fit the body into those western attires. As a result both the western clothing and fitness industry is rising day by day in a country like India.<sup>27</sup> Side by side the advertising and modeling industry is also making profit out of the trends. Indian females wearing traditional Indian dresses are not considered to be modern or even 'sexy' in comparison to those exposed to these values. However, this trend did not go unparallel. The idioms and aesthetics of multiculturalism is giving way to a similar trend of 'indigeniousim' which has authenticated a new standard of looking 'modern' and 'ethnic' at a same time. But such an impression has mostly been carried by a section of the upper class urban women than the common masses. Infact the determination of an authentic Indian look and beauty has not yet been defined and whose defination would prevail—is a question coming within the beauty industry itself. The sheer anxiety of overlapping the term modernism with westernism has been reduced to a third arena of interrogation where looking sexy and accessible interacted with the ideas of modernity and sensuality on the same tune. This feature particularly posed a threat to the pattern of iconicization of the figure of the women as symbol of the national society. A great deal of writing has already devoted on the way by which the figure of the women has supplied the idiom of nationalism during colonial struggle and in the articulation of post colonial modernity. However, the most influential thinking on the power of 'gazing' comes from the writings of Michel Foucault who has talked about the relationship of knowledge and power in area of practices.<sup>28</sup> His theory on the controlling power of the 'gaze' might be seen on the ground of gender discourse where the controlling power of the 'male gaze' has been overemphasized. The clothing style, the beauty fashion statements are the sites of control where the female figure has been projected according to the male gaze fantasy and it is this pleasure of looking which depicted women 'in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male'.<sup>29</sup> However, the question of female gazing has never been taken into priority because it is believed that female gaze has less to do with eroticism and the women have

hardly any control over the politics of business prevalent in beauty industry and media culture. Female gaze is obsessed with the imageries of one's self and a dominant part of this gazing is influenced by the judgement that whether these imageries would be able to satisfy other's expectations or not.<sup>30</sup> The definition of this 'other' may change time to time according to the growing priorities of a women in the society the gendered identity of this 'other' could hardly have any change. Mass mediated images of beauty is completely dominated by the male world and its capitalist profit. Fair skin, ultra thin body as well as the tricks to look more 'sexy' are related with a chain of beauty related businesses and the entire beauty industry profits of off female body to the maximum extent.

Viewing the body as a social object means a continuous process of making and unmaking. Therefore, the concept of a embodied or gendered self centers round producing and experiencing and transforming the body into one of a subject body. The body and the self are related with each other so closely and both of them interact with the society in the same mode of communication. In this process of communicating with the society, the public body appears to be different from the private body. The public body remains too much vulnerable to the challenges and threats of a modern world more, but that vulnerability could be transmitted easily into the private body and sense of beauty might have been used here as an tool for negotiating with the languages of vulnerability. In India, the female body as a colonial as we a post colonial construct is easily accessible and open for subjectification by different external forces. In the name of globalization the western standards of beauty are simply stepping into the most vulnerable versions of a female body which has already been perceived as a site of struggle in post colonial India. The growing obsession for fair skin and slim body has brought some new areas of concern into focus. In a poor country like India how the question of eating disorder among the women affects the social condition and economic condition of the people or how the women from lower middle or lower classes are tackling these issue of beauty in opposition to their long standing cultural believes and attitudes. What happens when the spread of western body ideal creates different notions of modernity within the same society, the idea of modernity itself becomes a site of contestation between multiple identities assigned to the female body at certain historical points? These are not mere question rather these issues must be treated as human right issues in a country like India. When the Indian women will be empowered enough to act as agents of active social change, the situation may go for a change. Wide scale media literary and useful policies of the state could help to reconstruct a new image of womanhood in India because it is the woman herself who is the real master of her destiny at last. Making women confident about their power of changing the society, the mental fixity for fairness and slim body could be diminished and only then the real modernity could be achieved by the women. This modernity will not treat her as a body rather an individual self, embodied not as a gendered subject but as the mark of eternal aesthetic beauty.

### Notes and References

1. Quoted from Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*, (translated from the Urdu by Khushwant Singh and M.A Husaini), New Delhi, 2006, pp.21-22

2. Women's embodiment is closely related with the idioms of gender and identity in the everyday life of the woman. Body appears as a ground of appropriating the experiences of the world. Detailed analysis body and embodiment has done by Meenakshi Thapan, *Living the Body, Embodiment, Womanhood and Identity in Contemporary India*, New Delhi, 2009, pp.1-2
3. For a detailed analysis on the controlling power of 'gazing' see Stuart Hall's comments in Evans. Jessica and Stuart Hall, ed. *Visual Culture, The Reader*, London, 1999, pp.309-14 also Brooker.Peter, *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory*, London, 1999, pp.89-91. Jamman orraine and Margaret Marshment ed. *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, London, 1988, pp.1-7 among others.
4. The body and bodily experiences lay at the heart of the society and our sense of the self. How the body is related with the society and how the body is getting being exposed to worldly experiences is a matter of sociological concern. Anthony Synnott described,
 

'The body social is many things, the prime symbol of the self , but also of the society, it is something we have, yet also what we are, it is both subject and object at the same time, it is individual and personal, as unique as a finger point or odourplume,yet it is also common to all humanity. The body is both an individual creation, physically and phenomenological and a cultural product, it is personal and also state property.' Synnott Anthony, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*, New York, 1993.

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8. See R.Burnes and J.B Eicher ed. *Dress and Gender, Making and Meaning*, (Providence 1/ Berg, 1992, pp.202-7
9. For example see, Kumkum Sangeri and Suresh Vaid, *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*, Delhi, 2006, pp.1-26; Partha Chatterjee, 'Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in the Kumkum Sangeri, *ibid*.
10. See, Sharmila, Rage, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently; A Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position', in Maitrayee Chaudhuri, ed. *Feminism in India*, New Delhi, 2011 pp.211-225.
11. See Upadhyaya, U, India's 'New Economic Policy of 1991 and its Impact on Women's Poverty and Aids', *Feminist Economics*, 2000, 6(3),. pp.105-122

12. Pentecost, J.E and Moore. T, 'Financial Liberalization in India and a New Test of the Contemporary Hypothesis' in, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 2006, pp.487-502
13. Susan Rankle, 'Manufactured Beauties; India's Integration with the Global Beauty Industry' in R.B.S. Verma, H.S Verma and Nadeem Hasnain ed. *Study of Women's Problematic in India; Assessing Contemporary State of Art*, 2009, New Delhi, pp.57-72
14. See, Parameswran, R.E, 'Spectacles of Gender and Globalization; Mapping Miss World's Medi Space' in the *News, The Communication Review*, 7, pp.371-406.
15. Quoted in *India's Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Shantanu Guha Roy, BBC Newsa, Delh, 23, March 2010
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24. *Ibid.*
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