

## **Introspecting the Gendered Body through Women's Everyday Experiences**

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**Abstract:** *In the modern somatic upsurge, women's bodies remain trapped in the idealised body images and beauty standards endorsed by the dominant media, beauty industries and fitness centres. Arguably, the process of curating the body ideal, as well as the awareness and practice of the perfect among the women, styles the body as highly gendered. The body manipulation related to the need to fit into the dominant body ideal makes physical control over the body central in determining the body image and self-identity. Mannerism, disciplining, and monitoring the woman's body remain a prominent practice in almost all societies. The feminisation of the fashion, beauty and fitness industries/gym culture enables women to bargain in innumerable ways with their bodies. Against this backdrop, the paper reflects on the interactions made with women from various groups in Sikkim, including those based on age, ethnic community, level of education, and economic background. It explores how individuals subjectively experience their bodies in everyday life. The paper also highlights how women are negotiating the experiences of the body and beauty ideals, employing their agency to create a fit between the unvarnished body and the dominant body image.*

**Keywords:** Women's Body, Body Ideal, Capitalism and Body, Globalisation and Body, Consumerism.

### ***Introduction***

Modern culture and society associate women with the body, which makes them more vulnerable to being victims or falling prey to embodiment (Beauvoir, 1995). The presentation and projection of oneself as 'beautiful' among women have remained evident throughout time, space, and culture. The notion of beauty constructed at a cultural level and disseminated to be

followed at the individual level has, time and again, made women's bodies an object of stylisation and manipulation across time. Despite the cultural diversity, with the advent of globalisation, consumerism, capitalism, and mediated forces, a certain level of homogenization is prevalent among women in terms of dressing, consuming, and following the set 'trend' or style. In this regard, the body management practices undergone by women to attain the ideal body have not only been accentuated but have also become a routinised practice in everyday life. Therefore, it cannot be refuted that women are eventually falling into the trap of following the set 'trend' and presenting themselves within the spectrum of the dominant idea of beauty and body.

How the body ideal is set at a macro global expanse, fashioned to create discontentment towards one's bodies at micro levels and furnished with the body management practices has led to the evolvment of what Varga (2005) points out, 'the virtual body'. It is this notion of the body that goes on to question the realness of the body, its nature and its limitations in contemporary times. The roles played by modern agencies like capitalism through advertisements, beauty industries, as well as consumer culture and media in offering ways to obtain the body ideal remain convincing. Empirically, the practice of beauty and maintenance of the body (body care), which was associated with luxury, limited to high-class women over time, has evolved into a necessity for all women. Consequently, women in general are observed as undergoing bodily practices, making efforts and adjustments to fit into the 'set standards' of how a beautiful woman should look. In Ussher's (1997: 355) words, the women have long been negotiating with social norms and expectations as they seek to find a fit between what they want. . . and what they are supposed to be. With the technological advancement and opening up in the field of manipulation concerning one's body to fit into the desired shape, there is undoubtedly growing uncertainty about the 'natural' body and its embodiment. Thus, in this regard, bodily practices and physical control often go on to become the central factor determining the identity of the self.

Situating these instances and discourses in Gangtok, the capital of the mountainous Northeast Indian State of Sikkim, it is observed that social change in the process of westernisation, modernisation and globalisation has brought about tremendous changes in terms of lifestyle, culture, and tradition of people residing in and around the capital. Given the emerging

consumer society and prevailing dominant discourse on the body in the Sikkimese society, the trend of marketing and consumption of beauty products, the mushroom growth of body fitness training centres, gyms, and beauty parlour craze for online shopping has widely affected the presentation and body care. This, as a result, is fast emerging as a homogenised Sikkimese culture in contemporary times. Given the impact of modern forces and agencies in Sikkim, it is observed that a constant struggle to meet the set beauty standards has been there amongst women, irrespective of their age. The capitalist propaganda backed up by the globalised and neo-liberal era has made stereotyping of the body prominent by curating global body ideals. The growing consumer culture in Sikkim, on the other hand, has correspondingly made beauty and body maintenance practices an accessible necessity. The study, against this backdrop, attempts to understand the role of modern forces and reflect on the everyday bodily experiences and bargains women face with the body ideal.

#### ***Globalisation of the Female Body Ideal and Bodily Experiences***

Globalisation as a phenomenon has widely opened up the scope for transnational connections of the world and has strengthened the social, political, economic, cultural and geographical ties. On the one hand, it has strengthened the connection and aroused interdependence across geographical boundaries. On the other hand, it has encouraged the free flow of Western consumerism and global capitalism (Giddens, 1997) since the late twentieth century. Along the lines of Ritzer (1993), globalisation has facilitated the widespread adoption of modern traits that are grounded in the Occident, such as the Western lifestyle, consumerist culture, which has ever since remained hegemonic and normal to the Orientals. Therefore, the process does not limit itself to the free flow of goods and services, but also extends to modern trends, development, and advancement in almost every field, ranging from technologies to biotechnologies. The individuals now in the wake of globalisation are well acquainted with the technologies embedded in the modern Western lifestyle and consumer culture.

Situating these arguments in the light of body discourse, it becomes undeniable that the dominant idea of beauty and body in the wake of globalisation often leaves individuals unsatisfied and open to body work, body modifications and body maintenance. There are innumerable beauty and body care products in the market, which opens up a wide scope for choices and preferences. It

has expanded the choices and exposure to several products and global brands due to the free flow of information. Provided that, globalisation also goes on to directly or indirectly encourage transnational body projects. Study of Casanova and Sutton (2013) argues that globalisation has opened up cosmetic surgery tourism where people have been travelling across regions to undergo body modifications, transformation and maintenance through cosmetic surgery/surgeries. The consumer culture plays a major role in facilitating and normalising body work, including modification, transformation, and manipulation, as postulated by the cosmetic industry for the attainment of the global body ideal (Featherstone, 2010, cited in Nettleton, 2007). This indicates the hegemony of beauty politics, including the stigmatisation of plain face and the use of beauty products on hair, body and face as a normalised and institutionalised practice. The following narrative of a young doctor from Sikkim, in her mid-30s, who owns a private clinic in Gangtok and has an income of 90,000-95,000 per month shares:

*I feel society and people are very judgmental. Particularly, the opinions and comments of people about my body matter a lot to me. I believe that the importance of indulging in beauty and body care today is not only highly important to me, but to all women. When I was still an adolescent, I recall that my mother used to wear 'Fair and Lovely' and a dark-coloured lipstick, and that was her ultimate makeup routine. In my mother's time, natural beauty was considered more beautiful, and there were only a few people who were considered beautiful. However, many products have now come on the market, making everyone appear more attractive. My mother, irrespective of her age, is a victim of advertisements, and most of the time I find her with a lot of new beauty products. When I enquire about it, she tells me, 'I am growing old, getting wrinkles, so I need to maintain myself' (Interview, 2019).*

The way consumer culture drives people towards the attainment of the ideal body has been explained by Featherstone (1982) as being institutionalised through modern popular media, including print media, broadcast media, advertisements, and cinema. The media tends to glorify the 'stylised body image' that encourages the body to undergo forms of management, modification and cosmetic maintenance. Thus, the body becomes a consumerist site, where the consumption of beauty and body

care products and practices remains inherent to the attainment of the body ideal. The media, including print media (such as magazines on lifestyle, fashion, beauty, and similar topics), broadcast media (in the context of television shows, Hollywood and Bollywood movies, and music videos), and the internet play a vital role in showcasing the body as appealing and highly stylised. The advertisements for beauty products shown on television, as well as the flash advertisements that pop up while using social media or digital platforms, remain instrumental in the act of purchasing various beauty and body care products. This inference can be situated within the argument that the idealised images demonstrated by the media create a sense of dissatisfaction with natural bodies through the process of 'ideological interpellation' (Althusser, 2020), which subtly compels individuals to strive for the idealised body image. The role of the internet and social media in normalising the global body ideal by offering a fix to the unvarnished body is reflected in the statement of a 25-year-old respondent from Gangtok who is a senior sales executive by profession. Referring to her mongoloid features, she narrates:

*I watch a lot of makeup tutorial videos on YouTube, and I have been experimenting on myself to find out what kind of makeup suits my mongoloid features and looks good on me. So, now I have discovered eye shadow defines my eyes and wearing blush, highlighter enhances my facial cut. I have been doing it since I discovered it and have been receiving a lot of compliments from people (Interview, 2020-21).*

Similarly, the narrative of a 29-year-old respondent from Gangtok, who is a teacher by profession and stands at 4.11 feet tall, also reflects on how social media and the internet have encouraged her to enhance her appearance. She expresses:

*I am not tall, and this has been my biggest complex. I watch many videos on YouTube and Instagram where girls share videos showing how to appear extra tall, how to elongate their legs with the right clothing and shoe choices, and what type of posture to maintain to look taller. I try these tricks on myself. Now, God knows if those videos work, but I do it for myself, for a momentary satisfaction. Surprisingly, it works as when I follow these videos, it makes me feel less insecure (Interview,*

2020-21).

These narratives correspond to what Varga (2005) has argued, the evolution of a virtual body which is created by digital technology and is maintained by the public presentation of the body. The projection of a sleek and slender body has been evident since the early times in movies and beauty magazines. Even though in contemporary times, minor rectification has been attempted in the context of the visual projection of the body. However, the grounded concept of having an appealing body is something that cannot be done away with easily. A suited example of this argument could be the change in the name of a fairness cream in 2020 from 'Fair and Lovely' to 'Glow and Lovely' after receiving criticisms on cultural and biological grounds. Though the term fair has been dropped, the concept of having a glowing face still prevails. Featherstone (1982) argues that the dissatisfaction with one's natural appearance of body, face is largely due to the awareness one has with regard to the comparisons being made daily with the body image that is highly idealised by the larger media and particularly visual media. Interestingly, the role of the media and information technology in disseminating the foreign culture is highly evident, as a section of the young generations was found to be highly influenced by the Korean body ideals. The narrative of 16 years 16-year-old school-going respondent from Gangtok substantiates this argument:

*I like Korean fashion, so I always wear oversized hoodies, skirts, chunky boots, and crop tops and blazers. I like dressing Korean and also looking like one. I watch many Korean shows on YouTube, and my favourite K-pop star is Lisa from Blackpink. She is a singer and dancer. Above all, her body is perfect and she is very beautiful. Mostly, her looks and style are what I take up inspiration from, and I dress in a similar style while going out (Interview, 2019).*

The conformity to the dominant body ideal, however, is not limited to the younger generation, as evident from the narrative of a 62-year-old housewife from Gangtok. She comments:

*When I was young, my friends and I used to cut our hair imitating some actresses. We also used to part our hair on the side and cut fringes. I recall that after watching Hema Malini's*

*Dream Girl movie, I had my eyebrows shaped with my friend's help and also curled my hair using kitchen tongs for the first time, just like her (Interview, 2024).*

The role of media in promoting the globalised idea of the body is reflected in the way women subjectively experience their bodies and resort to Goffman's (1959) concept of 'performance'. To substantiate, the body inviting modification, styling, reshaping, and management through performance or the effort(s) put in presentation of self to create an impression on others is highly evident in the narratives presented above. The manner in which women's body in contemporary times is subjected to scrutiny and provided with solutions to fit into the dominant body image draws necessary attention to the role of capitalism. The following section, therefore, discusses how the women's body has turned into a useful catalyst for capitalistic management. It also reflects on how women are conforming to and bargaining with the standardised body ideal.

### ***Women's Body: The Effective Catalyst of Capitalism***

The consumer culture that leads to a compulsion to consume products continually, or at the very least, strive for the dominant body ideal, leaves individuals with limited choices. Such that of, resist the dominant ideal; or conform to the body ideal, thereby becoming a consumer by converting the body to what Featherstone (1991) has pointed out, a lifestyle accessory, a thing to be shaped, sculpted and stylised; or to negotiate and bargain with the body ideal in numerous ways with the perfect. In the latter two contexts, the body has been transformed into a consumerist site where a wide array of capitalist arrangements prevails. For instance, the natural process of ageing is often supplemented with a range of anti-ageing beauty and body care products, as well as cosmetic services provided in aesthetic clinics in Gangtok. For instance, a 55-year-old woman who works in a government office in Gangtok shares:

*I have received comments from my peers and colleagues on how my face apparently shows signs of ageing. I have developed wrinkles around my eyes and mouth, which have made me feel self-conscious and created a complex. I know ageing is natural to everyone, but I personally feel irritated when people comment on my face. I have tried face yoga every*

*morning to reduce my smile lines and wrinkles, but it has not yielded much of a result, even after three months. I recently learned about the services provided at Thea Aesthetic Clinic in Gangtok from a colleague of mine. I took the appointment, consulted with the professional, and I am taking Botox fillers and anti-ageing therapy now, which is a non-surgical procedure. I can definitely see the results, and I am happy (Interview, 2024).*

Therefore, this narrative also points out the synergy between the fashion/beauty industries and the capitalistic management underlying the beauty politics. Capitalism plays a vital role in the somatic society by providing concepts of modern bodies, trendy bodies, standard sizes and beauty standards as a useful catalyst that shapes the dominant discourse on body. The role of capitalism furthermore remains heightened in making products of various kinds attainable, accessible and affordable for consumption. That is either by producing and marketing the supplementary products (height growth capsules, slimming tea, a wide range of beauty and body care products, trendy clothes, and cosmetic procedures) or through their industrial management set up, which disseminates and normalises the dominant body and beauty standards. The bodily experiences of the women are often found as being determined and influenced by the structural contingencies of transnational capitalism, media, and consumerism, which endorse the beauty standards and body ideals that the women find no escape from. Nonetheless, the women are also using their agency to negotiate and bargain with the set standards in numerous ways. The following narratives highlight the various bargains taken up by the women to find a fit between their natural bodies and the body ideal.

A young woman in the age of 29 from Gangtok who is an entrepreneur by profession, owning her business of scented and designed candles and soaps, said:

*I am on the healthier side and have a plump body. But since I have a business to run I usually don't have time for exercise and also fail to maintain a proper diet. My work schedule is not flexible with the gym timings; therefore, I don't have any option right now but to live with the body I have. However, I prefer only wear high-waisted straight pants that conceal the*

*flabby stomach and wear flowy skirts that do not accentuate my waist area. I will not wear body cone dresses, which I love and tight-fitted jeans until I lose some weight because I know that will make me look fatter (Interview, 2024).*

Another 14-year-old respondent whose family income falls between Rs 5000-10,000 per month talks about sharing clothes and cosmetics with her siblings. In her words:

*I am the youngest sister, and we are four daughters in total. My sisters always let me wear their clothes, and because of that, I always have plenty of choices to wear. It is the same with beauty products and make-up. As I am the youngest, I get the least amount of pocket money, but I don't even have to buy any cosmetics as I always use my sister's make-up (Interview, 2019).*

Commenting on her alternative way of negotiation about body maintenance and management, 33-year-old respondent from Gangtok, who is an Assistant Professor by profession, remarks:

*I have to go to college every day, which requires a lot of clothes. I recently discovered a new thing, and this thing has become my solution to all needs. Since we are women, no wonder what, we always end up buying so many things. We don't always make calculated decisions when shopping, and love experimenting with new beauty and body care products, which results in hoarding products unnecessarily. My friend has a thrift store in Namchi, and I am now involved in thrifting. I thrift my old clothes, shoes in good condition and also some unused cosmetics (which I impulsively bought) and once the item is sold, I receive the payment from my friend. With the money, I can always buy things I like and maybe save a little (Interview, 2020-21).*

Evidently, though the bodily experiences and expressions, such as body management and maintenance practices, remain socially conditioned by what Giddens called 'constraining structure' but the reflexive choices of the individuals on their bodies also find relevance in the way the bargains are being made to find a fit between the global body ideals and their own

bodies. Conformity to global body ideals, dominant beauty standards, and the everyday bargains that emerge from subjective experiences with the body ideal suggests that the body is malleable to social constructs. Arguably, it is the female bodies that are subjected to a matter of social construction across time and space. The way female bodies are put under surveillance, scrutiny and perceived as flawed that needs to be adjusted does not only indicate the objectification of a female body, but also explains how the body and its embodiment in everyday life are codified through gender. This argument also finds reflection in a 28-year-old woman's narrative, who is from Gangtok but currently works in a corporate firm in Mumbai. She shares:

*I went to Goa for a summer vacation with my boyfriend last year. I had uploaded a picture of my boyfriend on my social media handle, where he was wearing trunks and no shirt. I was standing next to him on the beach, wearing a bikini and a sarong tied at my waist to cover my lower body. The moment I read comments on the photo; I was traumatised by how people started judging me for wearing a particular kind of clothes. They went to the extent of judging my character based on one photo. However, my boyfriend, who was standing next to me, did not receive any negative comments; rather, people were pitying him because of me, as I was being judged poorly. I simply switched off the comment section and made my account private. Although I felt bad, I overcame the feeling over time (Interview, 2024).*

The above narrative highlights how the body is often categorised based on gender. While the body of a man is natural and unproblematic, a woman's body is a female body that is subjected to objectification and sexualisation. This argument corroborates with Slipp (1993), who points out that the historical patriarchal society views women and their bodies as something to be controlled, and thereby, the way the society exercises control over women, their bodies, and sexuality explains the body as gendered. Moreover, the way in which the body is governed and controlled, while the practice of the same is normalised and embedded in society, draws relevance to Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation.

### **Conclusion**

The role of modern forces of globalisation, transnational capitalism, consumer culture, and media in institutionalising body ideals in everyday bodily conduct may go on to challenge the notion of the body as 'taken for granted'. The body, specifically the women's bodies, that has long been projected along the lines of sexual contours across time, has further, with the advancement of modern, global forces, been developed into a commodity. Strategic capitalist arrangements have transformed the body into a potent catalyst of capitalism, whereby it has been commodified and turned into a site of consumerism. In such cases, with the consumption of body maintenance, stylisation, management regimes, and practices, the body may also come to connote a capital. Therefore, the body in this line remains a component of exchange value based on the resources it possesses, such as attractiveness, acceptance, and admiration, among others. The body oscillates between being a commodity and a capital, nonetheless remaining a fit for the capitalistic arrangements and consumer culture, poses challenges to perceiving the body as solely 'taken for granted'.

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