
THE BEAUTY SYNDROME: A STUDY OF BEAUTY AND GENDER IN INDIA

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Abstract: “A thing of beauty is a joy forever”, said the famous poet John Keats. Not only Keats but most of us also appreciate and admire beauty, although it may be in many different forms. For instance, one can even find flowers, paintings or cars very beautiful and attractive. However, in common parlance, the words beauty and beautiful have become synonymous with women. We are taught from childhood that men are handsome and women are beautiful. It is conditioned within us. This is substantiated by the response that I got from one of the girls I had interviewed. When I asked what comes to her mind when she hears the word beautiful, she answered, ‘a beautiful woman’. At the outset nothing seems wrong or of much importance, but in this association with beauty and its pursuit, women are most often implicated negatively. This paper argues that beauty practices like the use of cosmetics (lipstick, fairness cream, etc.); grooming (waxing, pedicure, manicure, etc.) and various kinds of plastic surgeries enhance the process of commodification of women and inculcate in them a belief that if they are not beautiful according to the standards set by society, then they are worthless.

Introduction: Feminist theorists like Naomi Wolf and Sheila Jeffreys have argued that the use of beauty practices in the West have a negative impact on women as they are not only commoditized but also become pre-occupied with becoming ‘feminine’ in nature. In fact, women who ‘do not like to apply make-up are seen as unfeminine in nature’, said one of the girls I had interviewed, giving her own example. In this paper I extend this argument to the Indian context, keeping in mind a certain kind of population – college going students – and argue that beauty becomes an instrument of patriarchal domination. It is a form of ‘soft power’ (Nye, 2004) masked in an ideology of ‘women’s choice and benefit’. Many a time’s beauty practices are justified by attributing their use to ‘choice’ that is exercised. However, it is imperative that the very notion of choice should be questioned and analysed within the discourse of women’s commodification and oppression. By using methods like interview, questionnaire and observation, I argue how practices of beauty such as waxing and pedicure have become part and parcel of women’s lives. Another area of focus is the implication of beauty practices on women’s economic resources as they have to spend a lot of their money on beauty products. This in turn is intricately linked to the capitalist mode of production.

What is beauty? In the face of issues like education, health, law, poverty, migration and others, society’s fixation with how women look seem extremely trivial. But is this really the case? Can ‘beauty’ be excluded from a patriarchal definition? What exactly is beauty? According to Naomi Wolf, the quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual

and evolutionary (Wolf, 2002: 12). This definition clarifies that beauty is an aspiration, an ideal that society wants women to possess. There are beautiful women and men only like them. Therefore, a woman must want to become beautiful.

The term ‘beautiful’ has also come to include being graceful, elegant and presentable. Sujit, an engineering student, argued that a woman who is beautiful is a ‘lady’ – she can carry her personality well. Not only is her face pretty, she must have a ‘good figure’ and possess ‘lady like manners’. These are ideas that are inculcated by women. Many of them think that it is a choice that they are exercising and there is no harm in using make-up. Feminist critics of beauty have, however, pointed out that beauty is a cultural practice and one that is damaging to women. For Andrea Dworkin, the most important question was not the extent to which women could express agency and “choose” to wear makeup but what harm these beauty practices did to women. Beauty practices are time wasting, expensive and painful to self-esteem. In almost all cultures, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched and unaltered (Jeffreys, 2005).

But a significant thing is that women need not have to be coerced to be a part of this oppression. Sandra Bartky explains why no exercise of obvious force was required to make women engage in beauty practices. It is possible to be oppressed in ways that need not involve physical deprivation, legal inequality, economic exploitation; one can be oppressed psychologically too. This ideology works at various levels and through different ways.

Social constraint - Beauty is not a want but a need

“*Aisa nahi hai ki make-up lagana pasand hai par jaruri hai*” (It’s not like I want to apply make-up but I have to), says Daisy. This is a crucial statement as Daisy is

very clear about the fact that it is 'necessary' to look beautiful. According to her, women do not necessarily want to use beauty products to enhance their looks, but they are compelled to do so by the pressures created by societal forces. Even in an arranged marriage in many parts of India, the 'qualities' that are sought in a woman are that she should be fair, slim and beautiful, as can be seen in various matrimonial advertisements. One of the respondents also narrated a story in which a girl had committed suicide because people constantly compared her to her elder sister, who was fairer and thinner and consequently, she was finding it difficult to get a good match.

The much highlighted public scrutiny of Bollywood actor Aishwarya Rai's body after the birth of her daughter is testimonial of the fact that a woman's appearance is always subjected to surveillance from the society. The most important aspect that hogged the media's attention was her inability to reduce the baby fat that she had put on after pregnancy! To cite another example, there was an incident in China in which a husband had filed a case in the court against his wife after he had found out that their daughter was 'ugly' and then it was discovered that the wife had had a plastic surgery before marriage. This clearly shows how overarching the social constraint is to look beautiful that one changes one's appearance in order to get married. Also, a father can think that his daughter is 'ugly' as there are set conceptions of what are beautiful and what are not. Women are understood to be different from men in being both potentially "beautiful" and in being interested in beauty and enthusiastic to put in huge amounts of time, money, pain and emotional distress to be 'beautiful'. This is assumed to be 'natural' to women and a most persuasive sign of women's difference from men (Jeffreys 2005).

Impact on women's self-worth: The social pressure imposed on women is in turn related to how a woman responds to these ideal and normative conceptions of beauty. A comment like her nose is out of place or she is too dark to be beautiful make many women feel worthless and they are thus forced to rely on various cosmetic items. "*Skin gora hota hai to confidence ata hai*" (If one is fair, then that person becomes confident), said one of the respondents. It is evident that beauty is connected to psychological factors like self worth and confidence.

Many women's confidence takes a beating when they are told that they are not beautiful. They get demoralized and feel that they are not worth anything. "*Muje dancer banna tha par nahi ban payi. Log kehthe the sundar nahi hai, nachegi to koi murke bhi nahi dekhega. Toh aaj mein parh rahi hoon taki kuch aur kar sakoon*" (I wanted to become a dancer but I could not. People said I was not pretty enough

to become one and nobody would look at me. So I am studying now to become something else), says Rekha. Her self-confidence had shattered and she too had resigned to the ideal conception of beauty and given up her dream of becoming a dancer.

The beauty syndrome in mass media: It is said that forms of mass media reflect the society's aspirations and ideals. Thus it is no surprise that TV shows, films, ads, etc. also portray the distinctions between ugly and beautiful women. One way of creating this distinction is by putting emphasis on skin colour. It is a powerful theme in India where a lighter shade of colour represents a higher status. This idea has been strengthened with the support of various advertisements which humiliates dark skinned people and lays an emphasis on the benefit of having a light coloured skin.

Advertisements are a popular form of visual culture which is usually created for the masses and as such the message propagated in them can have long term consequences. For instance, an advertisement run by the fairness cream *Fair and Lovely* shows a woman's 'miraculous' transformation from that of a girl with low self-esteem to a famous Cricket Commentator once she starts using the particular fairness cream. The implication is that if one is not fair (read beautiful) then that person cannot become successful. In another version, the parents of a dark-complexioned girl are unable to find a "*rishta*" (suitable match) for their daughter. In the end, they settle for a grey-haired man in his forties or fifties. The parents sigh and console themselves, "*Aise rang ki ladki ke liye to aisa hi rishta aayega*" (If you are dark, you will have to settle for such a match only).

The media also plays a crucial role in making women feel vulnerable in many other ways. For example, in one of the episodes of the TV show *Sex and the City*, a confident and independent woman like Miranda is intimidated by her boyfriend's previous girlfriend as she was a model. In spite of being a very successful lawyer, Miranda thinks that she is not good enough for her boyfriend. In Indian television serials, the female protagonist is always shown as a beautiful woman. Also, for a hero to fall in love with a girl, she must possess 'typical feminine traits' as shown in movies like *Main hoon naa*.

Not only movies and ads, but certain symbols and visual imageries also invoke patriarchal interests. For instance, the Barbie doll has captured the imagination of many girls and it has become a powerful visual imagery of portraying a woman. The Barbie is way thinner than any woman is and promotes the normative conception of a woman's body as slim. Interestingly, there are various versions of the Barbie that caters to the beauty standards set by different societies. The European Barbie, for example, is blonde and has blue eyes. There are also

Barbie dolls available that are made to wear burkhas in certain societies. This construction of beauty thus fulfils certain economic goals. The cosmetic industry thrives on its women customers and makes a woman feel inadequate if she does not adhere to the standards set by society.

Beauty and its harmful effects: Apart from the many negative social and psychological effects, beauty also has other harmful economic and physical side-effects. Many women complained that a lot of their money was wasted on buying a lot of cosmetic products. But according to them, they 'cannot help it'. Shikha, a student of Hindu College, who stays in a hostel, argued that she saves money by not buying fruits and other food items to get a haircut and other things done. "It is important to look presentable, especially for women. Otherwise you are not taken seriously. I don't mind skipping a meal or two but I cannot compromise with my looks", she says.

Many women stop eating or resort to dieting in order to achieve 'model like figures'. They suffer from many diseases like anorexia, anaemia and weakness, etc. "My boyfriend has a problem with me weighing more than him. Therefore I am trying to cut down on red meat and rice. Otherwise I am scared that he might leave me", says Sulekha, a Chemistry undergraduate student. She also adds that she suffers from less haemoglobin and should actually eat red meat, but is willing to take the risk. Thus, for many girls including Sulekha, "doing looks" is much more important than health. Interestingly, beauty in its ancient form as existed in Greek and Roman civilization was much more connected to a healthy skin rather than just applying make-up. Health seems to be bracketed off only in modern times at the expense of 'looking good'. Daisy, a student from DSE, stated that she has told her sister numerous times that applying too much of cosmetic products can harm her skin. But the latter does not pay heed and instead argues that 'there are stuff that can help you cover pimples and other scars'. Thus, one resorts to more cosmetic items to cover the harm caused by others!

Beauty and the creation of differences between the two sexes: It is thus quite clear that beauty practices promote patriarchal interests and lead to oppression of women. Women who do not want to be 'feminine' and do not use beauty products are somehow characterized as deviant. The practices of reading bodies constitute some bodies as normal and others as deviant, aberrant or perverse (Murray 2008). For instance, the fat female body becomes subject to intense societal surveillance. She can everywhere see 'signs' that are asking to cut her weight down like "Fat free food", "Cholesterol free sugar", various fat losing exercises and classes, etc. According to many feminist theorists, use of beauty practices help in maintaining a clear

demarcation of the differences between the two sexes. It separates the dominant class – men – from that of the subordinate class – women. The masculine is clearly separated from the feminine. These practices also rigidify binary oppositions – men and women, beautiful and ugly, masculine and feminine, fair and dark, fat and thin, etc.

Beauty is not only a cultural construct but also politically and economically created. It is a culturally defined quality that is a reflection of and a political tool of the culture that defines it. These practices show that women are obedient, willing to do their service and to put effort into that service. They show that women are not simply "different" but, most importantly, "deferential". The difference that women must embody is deference. Women are afraid and use any available information to alter their behaviour in ways that make interactions with men go smoothly. One of the things that they do is changing their bodies in order to win men over. Practices such as makeup, cosmetic surgery, shaving and waxing body hair, high-heeled shoes and restrictive clothes reflect the extent to which women seek to make themselves acceptable to men, the extent to which women seek to connect to men and thus the extent to which women feel the need for men's affection and approval and the degree to which women feel unworthy of men's affection and approval just as they are (Jeffreys 2005). Thus, until and unless a woman is not stared at or complemented for her looks, she feels unfulfilled and in a way thinks that she has a vacuum that needs to be filled. Deepti, a SRCC Economics graduate, has a similar story to be told. Insecure because of her pimples, she opines that in spite of being good at everything she does; men will not value her because 'she is not pretty'.

The beauty myth at work in today's culture encourages girls to equate their value with their adherence to the current beauty ideal so that they can land a husband, not to how smart they are, how much money they make or how productive they are. By "assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard," women are forced to compete amongst themselves. Women who internalize cultural standards of beauty "experience them coming from their own desires" and "connect achievement of these standards with their sense of self-worth." Consequently, women will try to achieve beauty standards. Girls experience the double standard of having their value attached to their appearance. On the one hand they are deemed not valuable if they don't adhere to the beauty standard; but on the other hand, they are deemed stupid for pursuing such a standard. Consequently, they experience low self-esteem for not reaching the standard, but also low self-esteem for pursuing it (Hall and Bishop, 2007). Thus it is a no win situation.

Many women said that they envied models for the attention that they received from men, especially from the men in their lives. They complained that even their boyfriends wanted them to become like their favourite actresses or models. According to the women, it is difficult to attain such 'high' standards when there is not enough time to work out. Thus, there is a clearly defined class of those explicitly paid for their "beauty": workers in the 'display professions' - fashion mannequins, actresses, dancers and higher-paid sex workers such as escorts. Until the process of women's emancipation began, professional beauties were usually anonymous, low in status and unrespectable. The stronger women grow, the more prestige, fame and money is accorded to the 'display professions': they are held higher and higher above the heads of rising women, for them to emulate (Wolf, 2002: 28). It is the bodies of these very women that make other women feel inadequate. Thus, patriarchy successfully transforms one category of people against another. It is not achieved through coercion or physical force but is hidden in an ideology of 'soft power'. It has the ability to persuade

and attract (Nye, 2004). This soft power operates through beauty parlours, pageants and the cosmetic industry that promotes the use of various products by linking them to success and confidence. Women are not only objectified but portrayed in a way that they actually want to be commodified. Their consent is coerced but it is not implicitly visible.

Conclusion: Through the exploration of certain issues and with the aid of methods like interview, questionnaire and observation, this paper seeks to present a view that questions the wide-spread use of beauty practices. There are social, economic, political, psychological and physical side-effects of using make-up and other cosmetic items. Not only that, beauty practices also help in creating and maintaining the differences between the two sexes and rigidifies the binaries like ugly and beautiful, masculine and feminine in society. The argument that it is a woman's choice to beautify and glorify herself must be re-examined as choice itself is a societal construction. It cannot be seen in a vacuum. Thus, the process of beautification of women is part of the discourse that objectifies and oppresses women.

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