Research Paper English

The Ideology of Beauty and Devaluation of the Womankind: A Reading of Contemporary Indian English Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The present study endeavours to read, taking examples from Indian English Novels how the societal beauty standards create an impediment in the psychological wellbeing of women and literally devalue them.

Literature holds a mirror to the society. The writers do not write in a vacuum. The express the lived realities. The present paper intends reading the concept of beauty and the devaluation of the womankind contextualizing it in the Indian social melieu. Inorder to delimit the paper four works ---- The Dark Holds No Terrors by Shashi Deshpande, The God Of Small Things by Arundhati Roy and The Thousand faces of the Night by Githa Hariharan, Socialite evenings by Shobha De --- are chosen to analyse how the yardsticks created by the dominant society chrush and have a deep impact on the psyche of a woman.

How does one define beauty? How does one assess the other as beautiful? What is the yardstick to measure the extent of one's beauty? These are some of the questions that goad and bamboozle a common person. The present day beauty contests resolve to discover the most beautiful lady of the year. The winner represents what women are supposed to be -- tall, thin, with ideal weight, thin-waisted, full-busted, perfect figurines -- setting the cultural definition of beauty. The big questions are that are these beauty contests socially useful? Are they in the interest of women and good for them? And how far are they right in their evaluation?

Beauty today bears a totally different meaning. It is more of ugliness in disguise and a product of a spectacular feat of cultural and scientific engineering. What nature didn't supply, commercial products bestow generously. There is foundation to cover up one's skin, concealers to mask the blemishes, different hair dyes, lip glosses, cheek blushes, false eyelashes, eyeliners, cosmetic lenses to beautify one's eyes and if this is not enough any beauty flaw can be corrected through plastic surgery. Are these procedures meant to ensure desirability? Beauty parlors in conjunction with health clubs, some of which claim to reduce two to three kilos in one sitting are minting money. Discontentment with one's body image due to failure to match the cultural or set standards of beauty draw women to make themselves up and bear the brunt of expensive beauty treatments. Isn't this beauty hidden ugliness? Is this intentionally produced beauty real, natural beauty?

To be natural sans makeup and accept one as one is, is a difficult choice but not impossible. Nafisa Ali is a perfect example of natural beauty. It is the force of value which a culture places on beauty that drives women, who do not measure themselves up to the societal expectations, into discontentment. One may argue that it feels good internally if one is well made up but recent studies show that the most frequent concern of women today, especially adolescent girls is too much preoccupation with one's body image. Making oneself up is more of a norm today. One may feel utterly inferior and inadequate for failing to possess the ideal weight and figure set by the beauty queens. Often women come to judge themselves as weak-willed, with a chronic sense of deficiency built into their sense of self if they are unable to posses the ideal standards of perfection set by the trend. Of special concern are the women suffering from eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Dieting or fasting, purging through vomiting, compulsive physical activity is suggestive of the hold of the current "beauty Crisis." If one happens to question girls whether they are satisfied with their body image and if there is a part of it that they would like to alter, almost all would reply in affirmative. This is not said merely for the sake of saying but is an empirical observation. The beauty Pageant sears the image of beauty on our minds thus exercising control over our thoughts. They epitomize beauty ergo, it is not a hazard to say that when one thinks of or has to adjudge whether a woman is beautiful or not, one bears the image of Miss Universe or Miss World in mind.

Beauty today has also become synonymous with fairness. The word fair is a new incarnation of the word beauty. Society's sexist bias is perceptible in its practice of colour apartheid. This is validly substantiated by the matrimonial ads where the groom's parents desire a fair bride and the bride's side claim their daughter to be fair, homely and adjustable. Does anyone realize that such pressures and pulls to match the cultural standards of beauty must be causing immense damage to the very psyche of a girl?

In The Thousand Faces of Night Devi like the other girls is "prepared" by her mother "for show" to be viewed "as a potential bride" by the Srinivasans (16-17). Srinivasans are, like in the matrimonial ads – looking for a "fair, beautiful, home-loving and prepared to 'adjust'" bride for their son (17). Girls are brought up in a way to please the groom and his relatives. Stress is laid on physical beauty especially fairness. Devi's grandmother would rub her with coconut oil and turmeric till she is "fair like Damyanti" (19). There are, however, instances, rarely though, when talent is recognised as more precious than complexion. In Devi's mother Sita's case her dark brown skin was overlooked for "overwhelmed by her talent" the examiners "had forgotten about her dark skin" (102).

In The Dark Holds no Terrors Saru's mother's command her not to go out in the sun. "Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker … we have to get you married" summarizes the Indian attitude towards physical beauty (45). In The Thousand Faces of Night Devi's father-in-law recites a story where Muthuswamy Dikshitar remarries for his first wife was "as dark as the sky on a moonless night" and he desired "a beautiful, fair-complexioned girl" (51). Keeping the beauty standards in mind and to avoid ugly marks, Rahel in The God of Small Things is vaccinated on her thigh where as Estha on his arm (93).

Women chasing the beauty standards are often weighed down with tensions and depression, if they fail to attain them.

In Socialite Evenings Anjali, Karuna, Ritu and others are obsessed with personal looks and glamour. "Food, weight, eating, patterns and body image have become intense preoccupation in many women's lives today" (Surrey 1991:237) for "our cultural norms reflects a value shift to extreme thinness, flatness and smallness in all areas (except the bust)" (ibid:242). Anjali in De's novel worries because Mimi "doesn't have any boobs" and wants her father Abe to "at least pay for a new pair of tits for his darling daughter" (73). Sita's is overanxious with Devi's thinness and tries to hide it under a silk sari draped around her. Her worry is as much on personal grounds as for social propriety. She fears lest people should think there is something wrong with Devi. Seen from this angle her fears and worries are not unfounded.

The stereotype ads concerning their role keep appearing in the media, which are the chief promoters of feminine traits and inequality. Marya Mannes puts it thus in The Roots of Anxiety in Modern Women:

What I call the destructive anxieties are not the growth of women's minds and powers but quite the contrary. The pressures of the society and the mass media make women conform to the classic and traditional image in men's eyes. They must be not only the perfect wife, mother and home-maker, but the ever young ever slim, ever alluring object of their desires. (1964:412).

The attempts to meet the rigid standards of cultural attractiveness result in conflict and depression. To validate their claim to societal membership and fulfil the societal expectations these victims undergo undue strain and suffer mutely the psychological violence. The desire to be fair is perpetuated and honed by beauty lotions, soaps advertisements—commercialized by beauty queens to allure others into buying things they don't really need---that appear incessantly on the small screen. The ads are quite damaging to a girl's image and points to the devaluation of a girl child. For example the use of Kumkumadi Tailam transforms a dark girl into a fair damsel, helping her to win the hand of a suitable groom !The gawky Fair and Lovely advertisement shows a dark girl grow a fair complexion, eventually succeeding in becoming an unbeaten cricket commentator, which otherwise she would not have accomplished. These fairness ads are quite unfair in the fact that neither they advocate fairness for men nor does our society. The common adage Larke ki sirat aur larki ki surat dekhi jaati hae provides a good mask. What if a groom happens to be dark and his future daughter takes after his looks? This goes all the way to show that such publicity by media is the chief promoter of feminine traits and gender bias. Women thus get ensnared in the quest of to-be-fair trap and suffer from numerous anxieties and often from low self esteem which results in conflict and depression.

One may ponder over the question that who wouldn't like to be good-looking? This quest must be common to all men and women. Then why is it that women spend more time and money on their appearance or are obsessively concerned with their looks? Why have the women to be beautiful, as stated in matrimonial ads, in relating to others? The answers to these queries lie in the roots of the patriarchal ideology. The old saying also runs thus: Men are judged by their actions, women by their appearance. Does the men's pursuit for beautiful partners and women's awareness of the power of feminine beauty that attracts and interests men, lead them to beautify their selves? Besides the feminine desire to be attractive to men, there can be other reasons to preen oneself. One may debate that improvement in personal appearance also leads to an inner feeling of well-being. Isn't this made up self too a result of the motivation to enter the beauty-system and look for cultural validation? If women feel they can wield power through the charm of their beauty—which they do, as is obvious through the involvement of cine-stars in wooing the voters these days--- it is only pseudo power. Another question that disturbs our minds is as to why do the professions like that of air-hostesses, receptionists, PR's insist on physical beauty when beauty as such has no important role to play there. Shouldn't the rational minds oppose this concept of beauty that abuses numberless people? Shouldn't our approach to beauty change in favour of an authentic, natural beauty, stressing on sterling inner exquisiteness achieved through and built on evergreen qualities of care and compassion?

We have examples of Chinese women who bound their feet and suffered immense pain to attain small feet, a cultural symbol of beauty. Aren't such attempts to fit into the cultural beauty moulds one's restriction to patriarchal hegemony? Aren't the beauty contests reminders of country cattle fairs where the uneasy animals are judged for their teeth, fleece, hide etc. and the best is awarded a ribbon? Don't these beauty pageants parade a socially approved form of desire? An incident that happened some years ago where one of the contestants for Miss India, Laxmi Pandit, was made to surrender her crown just because it was discovered that she was married, questions the justification of these contests. How can marriage be a hurdle in being beautiful? Inspite of being married she is adjudged the best, shouldn't it go to her credit rather than bring her into disrepute? The media, beauty contests and the cultural beauty value-system, working in conjunction, form a powerful nexus that forces an individual to easily get sucked into their vortex. The only way out is to launch a crusade to resist, thus liberating oneself from such a beauty system that is cruel, and accept oneself as one is.

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