Gender Identity and Body Image in Contemporary Media

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Abstract - In recent years, the body has been radically rethought by both science and philosophy. The body is seen as a site for cultural representation, constructed through various media, especially language. Feminist writers have drawn attention to the way in which dominant discourses in society prescribe norms in relation to the concept of female 'body' and its representation in media culture. The representation of women in popular culture and media is no doubt contested as gendered and conspicuous. This paper seeks to explore the sensibility and preoccupation that characterizes and discusses the female 'body' in films, television shows, advertisements and other media products.

Keywords: Body, Media, Identity, Space, Self-perception.

According to Barbara Holdrege, "In the past decade there has been an explosion of interest in the 'body' as an analytical category in the social sciences and humanities, particularly within the context of cultural studies."[1]Though the 'body' is entirely a personal and individualistic space, the discourse on body has raised questions regarding ambivalence between the body and identity. The body does not simply manifest itself as a physical attribute. Gender, class, caste, colour, age, ethnicity , beauty are the various indicators which affect our perceptions about the body. Moreover, these socio-cultural processes also influence our experiences and relationship with the 'body'. The body in general is a biological object but feminists relate this in relation to sex which is biological and gender, which is a socio-cultural construct. The accounts of the relationship between subjectivity, corporeality and identity have given rise to the discourse on other aspects of our corporeal existence. The representation of female body in media and using it as an object for promotion and selling products is also seen as the denial of mental, emotional, psychological and physical space to women. This denial and objectification of the 'body' has been a matter of concern for feminists and social activists equally.

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In the aftermath of high modernity, the health, hygiene, shape, and appearance of the body have become among the most important expressions of an individual's identity so much so that women have started internalizing this objectification and focus on her body as part of her socio-cultural construct. Before we can generate an awareness among women about their 'bodies' and its representation, we must assess and seek answers to few questions viz , why is it that the body is the focus of so much attention? How can we explain the current explosion of publications on the subject of the body, in both the popular media and in academic circles? How does and to what extent does women's bodies as the site of femininity becomes the pervasive sexualisation of contemporary culture? And are the feminist discourses expressed within the media or they are simply being external, independent, critical voices?

According to French historian Bernard Andrieu, the twentieth century has been characterized by the "epistemological dispersion of the human body." [3] According to his thesis, it is only since the approach and methods developed by the Nouvelle histoire (New History) in the middle of the twentieth century that the body became an object of intense investigation. In the words of Le Goff, we not only experience our own body but also the bodies of others:

The body is a material organism, but also a metaphor; it is the trunk apart from head and limbs, but also the person [as in 'anybody' and 'somebody']. The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing—a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity.[4]

Closely related to the intense focus on women's bodies is also the pervasive sexualisation of contemporary culture. Sexualisation refers both to the extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms, referred to by Brian McNair as part of the 'striptease culture' as well as to the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls', women's and (to a lesser extent) men's bodies in public spaces. [5] The various forms of sexualisation that can be seen in print media, television and in tempting sources depict the female body as a site for discussion and interpretation. Television and news discuss and broadcast women related issues like domestic violence, rape, eve teasing acid attacks just in order to use these for popularity or rating.

We know that television, films, media, advertisements are flooded with the images of beautiful bodies of women. The connotation of beautiful has changed drastically so much that popular film and television actresses are becoming younger, taller and thinner.[6] Women are selling everything food, clothes, cars, toiletries, beauty products, watches and almost everything. According to Richardson and Robinson:

Products are frequently linked to idealized families where a mother provides healthy meals (breakfast cereals) or fresh clean laundry (washing powders) for her family. In particular women's bodies are central to adverts for both women's and men's products. Groomed, slender, attractive, made-up (mostly white) women's bodies are semiotically linked to products.[7]

Not just product selling women are guided and motivated to lose weight; women other than these are also dictated to look slimmer in order to enjoy a happy married life, healthy sexual life and also a promising and rewarding career. The reasons for imposing such standards of beauty on women are no doubt economic but what women have lost during this era of objectification is an irreparable loss to culture. The diet and cosmetic product industries are growing richer by promoting essential criterions of beauty but women are putting their lives at stake to achieve these ideals. On the one hand, women who are insecure about their bodies are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, and diet aids. On the other hand, research indicates that exposure to images of thin, young, air-brushed female bodies is linked to depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in women and girls.[8] Not only celebrities are obsessed, ordinary women under the influence of dominant media culture are obsessed to project themselves photo shopped and edited on social media blurring the boundaries of public and private. It seems as if they are always dissatisfied with their bodies and so crave to look beautiful and better than others.

Body dissatisfaction is experienced when one perceives that their body falls short of the societal ideal in terms of size and/or shape, regardless of a person's objective size or shape. In other words, body dissatisfaction is influenced not only by how we interpret societal ideals, but by how we perceive ourselves. Therefore, body dissatisfaction and perceptions of beauty are inextricably linked. The media and its messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells "ordinary" women that they are always in need of adjustment—and that the female body is an object to be perfected.[9]The contemporary media culture has thus attacked the notion of identity in relation to bodies. This has not only been conflicting but damaging too, more so due to the advent of popular culture and blurring of boundaries between the real and the virtual. The social dynamics of the 'female body' and its reconstruction in media is dissected in pursuit of a woman's 'true picture. This true picture or real image of woman's body has undergone severe transformations since the last three decades. Gender identities are at stake at all three levels viz. consumption, production and representation. The different feminist approaches to the body are trying to find answers to the problematic attributes of the mind beyond the mind/body split. According to Sumita Sarkar,the theoretical debates look at gender in the context of power dynamics and identity crisis:

According to feminist's discourse, there is a complex dynamics that exists among power, ideology, language (symbolic and semiotics) and its practice within a context of its socio-cultural milieu that could be manifested in the form of "doing gender" or "performing gender" (identity trouble or confusion). It is suggested that gender is a property, not of persons themselves but of the behaviors to which members of a society ascribe a gendering meaning.[10]

The relationship between identity and body image encompasses both sociocultural norms about appearance and one's self-perceptions and self-evaluations about the body. Gender, identity and socio-cultural factors thus play an important role in developing these perceptions.Given the impact and power of the media in influencing the world's view of the self," an individual's effort to retain an understanding of the self" becomes almost impossible. The media not only affects the socialization process and forms culture and thought by gradually influencing public sentiment, personal values and self-perceptions, but also creates a standard parameter of reality whose repeated exposure leads the viewers to embrace this alternate reality as valid. Because we are both the producers and users of media content, media dynamics profoundly shape our socio-political thought. It is time to rethink and question the body as a site of contest in political, social, cultural and economic discourses. It is time to apprehend the construction and representation of body in social and psychological perceptions. Among the most important principles for

recognizing the sense of subjectivity in the twentieth century is the recognition of one's self in the gaze of the other, and this is only possible if we are able to redefine subjectivities in the context of gender and not sex.

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