The Advent of Beauty Mannequins: Strategic Appropriation of Feminine Beauty in Bhattacharjya's *Mannequins*

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ABSTRACT

The glamour industry is an intersection where female empowerment parallels female objectification. The industry offers individuals an exclusive platform for exploring their inner beauty, owning their gender, and having financial independence. However, it has set many unrealistic beauty standards and myths, which the models constantly strive to achieve. This compels them to succumb to beauty demands, thus increasing the rates of plastic surgery and fat loss treatments. Capitalist giants take advantage of the tension between natural and ideal beauty, making huge profits out of the mental game. The middle ground is to strategically appropriate these beauty standards and femininity in favour of women to accomplish the more prominent targets of financial independence, social status, and individual identity. The present paper analyses the shift in women's strategy with reference to Manjima Bhattacharjya's Mannequins, which voice the emergence of a new generation of working women in India's glamour industry. This study explores how a woman's journey of empowerment in the Indian fashion industry diverts into a continuous process of commodification, obsession, and exploitation. It further attempts to view the platform of the glamour industry as a possible opportunity for women to strategically unite, own, and rule the social system, followed by analysing the present situation of the industry through a postfeminist lens. Finally, it connects how capitalist industries trigger this toxic version of beauty standards, which overshadows the immense opportunities that the glamour industry offers to women in both urban and global spaces.

Keywords: Fashion; Postfeminism; Strategy; Objectification; Beauty

INTRODUCTION

Bill Cunningham, a late American fashion photographer for the New York Times, remarks, "Fashion is the armour to survive the reality of everyday life" (Clavey, 2016, para.2). The growth of the fashion industry as a leading platform for consumerism marks its relevance in contributing to the economy. The apparent dominance of women in the industry is unexpected, given the male-oriented nature of the economy, in which men hold a monopoly on lucrative positions and areas of employment. The fashion industry has emerged as an inclusive space that encourages women to break free from their private prisons to own urban spaces of opportunities. It offers them a unique opportunity to embrace their femininity, love their bodies, and mould them to become a vehicle for financial liberation. The Indian fashion industry has a story of liberation and opportunity to narrate. The role of globalisation in promoting the fashion industry's boom is inevitable. "Globalisation also permits countries to share experiences and to learn from one another's achievements and difficulties and promotes a cross-fertilisation of ideas, cultural values, and aspirations"(Bhattacharjya et al., 2006, p.vi). The Indian fashion industry witnessed this

influence across borders, which they inculcated in their businesses to grow into a global market. Bhattacharjya states:

> In conjunction with India's win at major pageants, the reach of satellite media, and the realisation by Indian and multinational cosmetic giants that Indian women were a hugely profitable market for the beauty products and cosmetic industry, a foundation was set for the rise of a new type of glamour industry."
>
> (Bhattacharjya et al., 2006, p.viii)

Despite all the privileges of the industry, including financial independence, individuality, personal freedom, and liberty, the fashion industry is often accused of objectifying the female body and commercialising femininity. Manjima Bhattacharjya recollects Naomi Wolf's understanding of beauty as a myth as she remarks:

> Wolf explored the (inverse) relationship between female liberation and female beauty, stating that as women acquired more significant and greater levels of freedom, phenomena like eating disorders and cosmetic surgery became more common, as women became more enslaved to their bodies and to using beauty as currency.
>
> (Bhattacharjya et al., 2006, p.25)

She explains how women, in their journey of self-liberation, are misguided to become obsessed with the beauty and body standards set by the patriarchal setup. Thus, in the context of the fashion industry, the margin between women's empowerment and commodification is often blurred and communicated in a capitalist society. Manjima Bhattacharjya, an independent writer, researcher, and social worker, explored the realities of working women in India's glamour industry in her book *Mannequins*(2018). She provides a detailed account of the darkest truths of the industry, how the industry is commercialised, and to what extent the glamour industry can be an opportunity for women to enter the urban space and claim their deserving position to exercise power and authority. This study delves into the divergence between a woman's path toward empowerment in the Indian fashion industry and the ongoing process of commodification, obsession, and exploitation. It posits that the platform of the fashion industry presents a potential opportunity for women to collectively assert their feminine beauty and ascend the social ladder. However, the study later examines the situation in the Indian fashion industry through a postfeminist lens, where the female body becomes their power currency. Finally, the paper sheds light on how capitalist industries engender toxic beauty standards that obscure the myriad possibilities that the glamour industry can offer women in both urban and global contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dolly Kumar remarked, "Fashion is a phenomenon of communication, social development and a reflection of aesthetic values. These aesthetic values are constantly addressed through our body as we seek to define ways to present ourselves"(D. Kumar, 2014, p.1). This study examined the role of body alterations in establishing individuality and fashion statements. The researcher presents examples of Indian beauty icons that have radicalised their self-representation through fashion and have emerged as role models for Indian youth. Pavithra and Nag (2024) explored the impact of contemporary fashion on Indian youth. It shows that young people face social pressure to follow fashion trends. While they opted for clothes that suited their comfort, they also preferred brands that followed sustainable and ethical manufacturing. Magdalena Petersson McIntyre (2021) dealt with the role of choice in contemporary feminism and its usage by lifestyle influencers and gender

consultants. This study shows that their entrepreneurial positions have offered them new liberty and financial security. However, the choice is understood to not be distributed equally. It offers individuality but with limits. Jessica Maddox (2019) analysed the social media hashtag #strongisthenewskinny as a postfeminist myth. This shows that while the new approach attempts to embrace diversity, the end results are not compelling.

Windels et al., (2019) explored advertisements (advertisements conveying pro-female messages aiming at their empowerment) and argued that the postfeminist discourses put forth through these advertisements contradict some of the feminist ideals. Nitika Seth (2019) discussed the gradual shift in perceptions of beauty in India. The researcher states that the incorporation of digital media has reinstated the necessity of achieving superficial beauty standards and pushing women to question those standards. Sonam Chandhok (2020) studied body image consciousness in women. Chandhok relates this to their attraction to the cosmetic industry and its psychological impact on their minds. Khosla (2024) examined the significant role of social media in developing adolescent girls' body image. This explains the negative and positive impacts it has on the minds of adolescent girls in defining their beauty. Vivek Kumar Shahi et al. (2023) stated that the conceptualisation of Indian body image is highly influenced by factors such as social media exposure to Western fashion and beauty images, globalisation, and access to fashion magazines and beauty articles. Juveriya Siddiqui et al. (2022) drew a comparison of the beauty standards of the East to that of the West. Further, it details the marketing strategy for cosmetic surgeries that disrupted the beauty standards of the country.

The existing literature mainly covers the following areas: fashion as an individual statement of self-identity, the role of Indian actors and models as fashion icons for youth, the impact of contemporary fashion on Indian youth, the role of choice in feminism through fashion, the role of social media in postfeminist fashion, an ideological contradiction in postfeminist femvertisements, shift in the perception of beauty in India, the relationship between women's body image and the cosmetic industry's bloom, the role of social media in developing body image consciousness, and comparison of beauty standards of East and West. While these studies provide a framework for the present study, they fail to address some crucial areas, such as the Indian glamour industry's voyeuristic gaze, the capitalist strategy of female objectification in Indian commercial markets, the postfeminist transition of the Indian fashion industry, and strategic solutions to counter exploitation and commodification. The present study addresses these issues with reference to related studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary objective of this research is to examine the socio-political standing of women in the Indian fashion industry through the lens of two theoretical frameworks: Strategic Essentialism and Postfeminism. The concept of Strategic Essentialism was introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal work *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* (1985). Spivak posits that while the notion of essentialism is problematic and leads to unfair divisions among people, strategic essentialism can be employed by marginalised and minority groups to counteract such discrimination. In accordance with Spivak's belief, the practice of temporary essentialism fosters a sense of unity, solidarity, and identity within a group, race, or ethnicity, facilitating collective action. This approach acknowledges that disparities may exist within or among the group members. Moreover, it serves as a tactical response to counter the misappropriation of anti-

essentialist ideas promoted by post-structuralist theorists. An illustration of strategic essentialism would be the alliance of diverse women's organisations to work towards a shared objective. Thus, strategic essentialism is the acceptance of an "essentialist" viewpoint, if only temporarily, to enable action (Mambrol, 2016).

Postfeminism is a recent development in feminism that elicits various interpretations. On one hand, it is understood as the culmination of feminist debates due to the achievement of all feminist objectives. On the other hand, it is seen as the next phase of postmodern feminism. The present study focuses on the latter interpretation, which explores postfeminist themes such as femininity as a bodily property, the female body as a desiring sexual subject, individualism and choice, self-surveillance and discipline, and the reassertion of sexual difference (Allen, 2024). These postfeminist issues divert attention from women's ongoing political struggles for equality, which remain a critical situation in several countries. By sidestepping politics, the potential for postfeminist debates is limited. The present study incorporates two theoretical frameworks, strategic essentialism and postfeminism, into the discussion of the social status of women in the Indian fashion industry. Strategic essentialism offers a potential response to the patriarchal commodification of the female body in the industry. On the other hand, postfeminism extends the discussion to critique the limitations of the movement and its obsession with the ideal female body, as well as its potential to transform the discussion into a more inclusive and positive one. This study utilises a qualitative research methodology to analyse Manjima Bhattacharjya's *Mannequins* through the application of these engaging theoretical frameworks to uncover the socio-political complexities faced by working women in the Indian fashion industry.

DISCUSSION

FASHION BECOMES VOYEURISM

Irrespective of the locale, the glamour industry faces criticism of objectification, exploitation, and corruption of the female body, where women fail to recognise that their bodies are being manipulated. Fashion is undermined as a profession. Instead, women working in the field were considered to have earned money easily. This is one major reason why the industry, despite being a major contributor to the country's economy, is not valued and respected as much as it deserves. Bhattacharjya writes:

> For someone who is identified globally as Miss India, to be told that she does not represent 'real Indian women' must have come as a shock. Not to mention the disdain that she is less than them and her achievement is questionable since there is little merit or real work involved (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.x).

It is disconcerting for women who regard it as their profession and endeavour to attain excellence in it, just like any other occupation. The hostile perception society extends towards the fashion industry is greatly influenced by the exploitative approach of designers, photographers, and agencies towards models. They are constantly prompted to maintain a zero-size figure, clear skin, a perfect nose, and a sharp jawline. Such an ideal beauty standard is often enforced upon young girls, who find it hard to resist it, as they want to be successful in their profession and earn money. Bhattacharjya recollects from interviews and shares:

> Mita was 19 and had joined an international modelling agency in Delhi, where she was advised to get a nose job. The agency felt she had tremendous potential for her nose. Mita told herself that there was no point in being in this industry if she didn't do it.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p. 56)

The industry purposefully violates the body of models to constrict them to certain standards. She writes, "This guilt-that the industry leads thousands of gullible young girls to starvation in pursuit of bodies similar to theirs- is a recurring feeling in interviews with better-known models and choreographers"(Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.60). The fashion industry has a notable focus on body politics, where individuals in positions of authority regularly strive to prescribe and regulate the manner in which models should exhibit their bodies. Bhattacharjya adds, "For a model, there is no scope for this duality between the fantasised body and the real body. Real body is the fantasised body, and the everyday struggle is to maintain this convergence"(2018, p.66). This constant interference with the body image of models is a consequence of the fact that they not only represent their identity but also serve as a marker for many aspects. Bhattachrjya adds:

> Being a model is a symbol, a euphemism for many things: for being fair, tall, 'classed up', made up, and desirable. It involves imbibing a certain way of walking, speaking, looking, and behaving as per the rules of the game in your field.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p. 98)

Therefore, serving as a model constitutes a form of conditioning in which models are expected to conform to a specific standard. This can be likened to professionalism observed in other professions. Nevertheless, this process becomes detrimental when it interferes with the natural state of the body. Bhattacharjya remarks:

> Professionalism is a double-edged sword. It is desirable because we all want to be valued and respected as 'professionals'. However, professionalism has been used to control or manipulate many of these young women into doing things that they are not fully sure of, like wearing bikinis or subsidising the costs of the client by doing their own makeup.
>
> (p. 105)

This approach dehumanises the glamour industry, in which models are reduced to objects subject to the capricious desires of designers, photographers, and makeup artists. Bhattacharjya writes:

> In the larger hierarchy of the glamour industry, most models were seen as mute mannequins or designer muses with little creative potential of their own. "We don't have a voice. That is known from the beginning. We are there to be looked at", Vanita had said to me grimly.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p. 178)

The work culture of the glamour industry reflects the agenda of objectifying the female body.

> Today, fashion and beauty practices, and the norms of glamour, continue to discipline the female body, and in a lesser instance, the male body, through disciplinary techniques such as dieting, exercise- the gym, beauty regimes/ routines/ cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, stretch fabrics, laser technology for hair removal, false eyelashes, hair, nails, skin protection and the like.
>
> (Bhattacharjya et al., 2006, p. 253)

The fashion industry is not alone in promoting an unattainable ideal of beauty, class, and living standards. Similar pressures exist beyond the glamorous facade. Individuals strive to attain these standards relentlessly. The case of fashion models is highlighted more because they have opted for it as their profession, through which more women attain larger goals, such as financial independence, social status, and individual identity. Although this does not justify the unending exploitation of the female body in the glamour industry, other factors responsible for this large-scale manipulation should be considered to understand the complete picture. The growth of capitalism and its hidden influence on the fashion industry to expand its market and exploit its female consumer population are crucial topics to be discussed.

FEMALE OBJECTIFICATION-A CAPITALIST STRATEGY

Globalisation opens up new flourishing spaces for countries to connect, share goods and services, and establish their world markets. The glamour industry is a major field that is strongly influenced and impacted by this process. The capitalist giants found fashion to be a very promising field to invest in, which has huge potential for profit-making. The Indian glamour industry joined this business campaign not too late. "A series of overlapping coincidences after 1990, the year India dismantled its barriers to foreign capital or got globalised, helped bring glamour further into our lives"(Bhattacharjya, 2018, p. 8). "Meanwhile, India saw spectacular international success at beauty pageants in 1994 when two young women, the 19-year old Sushmita Sen, and the 21-year old Aishwarya Rai, won the titles of Miss Universe and Miss World respectively"(Bhattacharjya, 2018 p. 9). The market demand and availability of products and services determine the beauty standards set in the glamour industry. This is not a coincidence but a well-planned and executed strategy. It can be analysed as a collaborative agenda between capitalism and patriarchy, as they hold power positions. Television and media platforms play a crucial role in propagating these beauty standards, whereby audiences witness their ideal actors and models in perfect shape and features. This has led to an increase in the number of cosmetic clinics, manicures, pedicures, and facials (Images Business of Fashion Bureau, 2022). Capitalism promotes beauty products and body alteration treatments, such as nose jobs, skin whitening, and plastic surgery, which assures women the possibility to attain ideal beauty, which in return can provide them with their social position. The perfect body became the norm, which constantly objectified women's bodies in the cover of glamorisation. Celebrities and influencers actively use their platforms to talk about such beauty procedures with the intention of normalising them. The huge rise in cosmetic surgeries and alterations across the country proves that they have succeeded in their mission (Saleemi, 2023). However, the ideal beauty standards set for female models are designed based on a misogynistic male gaze. This reinforces male dominance and eliminates the possibility of women owning their bodies and femininity.

Cosmetic surgery has gained a huge market in the glamour industry, both in India and globally. The models consider it an opportunity to improve their beauty as a personal choice for empowerment. However, the process becomes problematic when these women try to attain the beauty standard constructed by the male gaze. Consumerism has successfully perforated these standards into women's thought processes in such a way that they fail to recognise that they are constantly attempting to achieve unattainable artificial and ideal beauty by distorting their natural identity. Nonita Kalra, the editor of ELLE India, remarks, "I'm personally very anti-cosmetic surgery, but the magazine won't say anything about it. We maintain a strategic silence"(Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.77). Thus, there is debate on whether cosmetic surgeries are

empowering or exploitative. The feminist's take on these beauty myths has always remained negative, openly expressing their disagreement with the strategic exploitation of the female body. They say:

> We protest the marketing of a beauty myth that is fragmented, homogenising and standardising the notion of beauty itself- that is being defined and promoted primarily by the cosmetic industry that does not appreciate women's beauty but only seeks to appropriate it for obvious monetary gain (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.158).

The previous generation of feminists called out the financial profit earned by patriarchal power structures by joining hands with the cosmetic industry. However, contemporary feminists have purposely overlooked that political powerplay. Social media platforms and fashion magazines promote beauty myths, which present all these expectations as natural and part of daily existence. "In fact, issues like cosmetic surgery are by and by being portrayed as natural, easily accessible and an extension of an ordinary routine of cosmetic care for a person, or a natural extension of a woman's toilette"(Bhattacharjya et al., 2006, p.263).

Wolf writes, "The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it, and men must want to possess women who embody it"(1990, p.12). This is the myth of beauty constructed by consumerism for its market profit. Women and men continuously move in the loop that they naively perceive as the natural order of life. Every aspect of life is corrupted by politics, and beauty is no exception. There is an inevitable role of power in the construction of beauty, which is evidently in favour of profit-making capitalist giants. Thus, the female body, beauty, objectification, the global market, male gaze, and commodification circulate in a loop of power politics. The only way out of it is to strategically own this power dynamics and turn it in favour of women and their empowerment.

STRATEGIC APPROPRIATION OF FEMININE BEAUTY

Motamedi et al. remark, "Gayatri Spivak describes essentialism in her own view; it refers to a plan that nationalities, cultural groups or marginal groups can use to present themselves"(2017, p.95). Essentialism promotes the growth of binary, hierarchical and unequal divisions. Thus, Spivak introduced the possibility of a response to essentialism called Strategic Essentialism. Eide E. writes, "Strategic essentialism may thus be seen as a political strategy whereby differences (within a group) are temporarily downplayed and unity assumed for the sake of achieving political goals"(2016, p.2). Spivak clearly states that strategic essentialism is not the universalisation of essentialist qualities but the strategic usage of these factors to unite, fight, and earn social positions.

> So it is obvious that Strategic Essentialism occurs when there are two groups, one is superior and the other one is inferior. In such a society those who are inferior should use some strategies in order to get rid of being called other/ inferior.
>
> (Motamedi et.al, p. 96)

This concept is relevant for women because they are stereotyped as a class by essentialist qualities such as beauty, docility, sensitiveness, and dependence. The emergence and expansion of the glamour industry as one of the major contributors to the economy provides women with the opportunity to strategically appropriate their essentialist qualities and emerge as independent and powerful individuals, which was clearly discouraged by patriarchal society earlier. Fashion is a platform where women dominate the space, as the market demands more female models and their charisma. This is a golden opportunity for women, as they can own femininity and transform their beauty into power currency.

The glamour industry has been largely criticised for its objectifying nature. The alternative response of women must be to unite and own the fashion industry strategically. This industry provides women with a unique opportunity to enter urban spaces, engage with power structures, and climb the ladder of social positions. Bhattacharjya writes, "A new class of working women was being formed. Girls coming from across social classes, plotting to be part of this new workforce that seemed to offer a shot at something big" (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.177). Unlike other professions, the glamour industry offers women the opportunity to own their bodies and use them to define their individuality. "They were readying to plunge into this exciting new winning field where there seemed to be no English-speaking passport-demanding guards at the gate preventing entry. And where women seemed to be on top" (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.177). However, the line between empowerment and objectification is thin and often blurred. In other words, women should strategically upturn their situation in favour. Models working in this field have the option to either create or break the generalised stereotypes surrounding them. This is the choice they must make as their careers take off. Bhattacharjya opines, "Models aren't actually Xerox copies of one another. They have different body types based on the kind of work they do." (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p. 54)

Despite the huge amount that professionals can earn, the glamour industry lacks social value. She points out:

> The struggle to convince society that many of the things women do have economic meaning has been a long one. And even when they have been acknowledged as having some economic value, the social value is still missing. The status accorded to some types of work isn't always linked to money but on what that work actually is.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.180)

The undervalued nature of the glamour industry deters a significant number of women from pursuing a career in it despite its substantial potential. By recognising this potential, women can strategically work towards changing the social perception of their profession and unlocking its full potential. Women often face the wrath of their families when they express their desire to join the industry. Bhattacharjya's interviewee remarked:

> My mother was very vocal about her disapproval although my father did not say much. She burnt my portfolio to make her displeasure and disapproval more than clear. First, there was the issue that no woman had ever worked in the family, then the profession itself. They had absolutely no good things to say about air hostesses or models or these kinds of professions.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p. 27)

Therefore, the first step is to break down the domestic space and then eventually challenge social stereotyping. Women must be in constant negotiations with the system to claim the urban space that they have created by working in the fashion industry. The fashion industry has evolved in the way it perceives gender. An old-generation model remarks, "When we were crowned Miss India, we won things that would make us good homemakers, like sewing machines and fridges and irons. And a gold set, nominal cash…"(Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.23). She later adds, "But today's girls are given job opportunities…Here they are now encouraging you to earn your own money. That time, they said, no, you stay at home and look after your husband; look after the home with your fridge and iron!"(Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.24) This shift in approach is not an overnight process but the result of a long initiative of demand for gender equality in the workspace.

Similar to other professions, models must follow a work regime which their jobs demand.

> For women in the glamour industry, their bodies are not just something to be lived in, a biological entity which must be fed, cleaned, nurtured, and taken care of in an ordinary way, but something that must be actively sculpted, controlled, finely tuned every day to the rhythm of their work."
>
> (Bhattacharjya et al., 2006, p. 205)

"As a result, their everyday activities are filled in varying degrees with an unquestioned and normalised preoccupation with measuring, maintaining, polishing, beautifying, toning and making youthful and fresh-their bodies"(Bhattacharjya et al., 2006, p.205). However, their body regime is often perceived as the obsession of models in the glamour industry. Beauty myths and anorexia are a dark reality of the industry, but they cannot be generalised for all. Apart from these models, women working in other fields are also greatly influenced by these toxic practices.

For several years, women have been accused of being beautiful with no brains. The glamour industry provides women with an ideal opportunity to strategically organise and enter the workforce, where the same beauty and femininity become their currency of freedom. They groom their bodies and fit into the requirements, which assists them to excel in their job and establish their identity in the global space. This alteration was a monumental leap from domestic subjugation to the urban acknowledgement of individual personalities. Naturally, there will be strategic opposition from power positions as the rise of women into the global space challenges male dominance and control, which has flourished for centuries. Unlike earlier, there is a very evident protest among the models against the marketing of beauty myths, which challenges the male gaze that was internalised earlier. Several promising initiatives are emerging in this industry, assuring that fashion is emerging as a much better space for women's empowerment than in earlier days. Bhattacharjya writes, "Amena's blog Fashionopolis focuses on plus size fashion, body positivity, and fat activism, born of her own experience of years of body shaming and body image issues" (2018, p.168). Currently, there is no perfect body that the glamour industry promotes openly. All bodies are represented as beautiful and fashionable, which represents a revolutionary move. The role of the internet in breaking these myths and stereotypes is crucial.

> It is this image the internet has shaken up by allowing those inside the image to break through and represent themselves as living, thinking beings. It has opened up an unusual space to talk about how someone can choose to be apparently 'objectified' but still be a feminist icon-two things that were once hard to reconcile.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, p. 170)

Although strong campaigns challenge the inclusion of all body types, practical actions are still scarce. Khushboo Sharma, a plus-size model, points out that despite many brands promoting inclusive body types, they are often left to choose from unattractive outfits which do not exhibit creative beauty (Sengupta, 2023). The conservative perception of beauty celebrated by the Indian cultural system has been shifting. While all body types and body colours demand visibility in the Indian public space, capitalist giants have restructured their strategies in newer forms. The discussion has shifted from fairness creams to permanent plastic surgeries, where individuals are given the choice to opt for permanent perfectionism. Nitika Seth (2019) writes:

> The cosmetics industry is a billion-dollar industry around the world and is a booming one in India as well. The popularity of fairness creams and bleaches specifically, are off the charts in India. There is so much more weightage being given to appearance owing to social media that an increasing number of people are motivated to alter their looks. Plastic surgeries are becoming a very common practice as women aspire to achieve superficial perfection.
>
> (p. 6)

The question of whether cosmetic surgery represents a form of exploitation of women's preoccupation with physical perfection or whether it constitutes a personal choice of empowerment continues to be a matter of ongoing discussion and contention. Sonam Chandhok (2020) critiques that these cosmetic surgeries are perceived by women as ' beauty elixirs'' which can be a solution for eternal beauty that does not fade over time (p.29). On a macro level, the agency that women exercise appears to be exploitative and influenced, while on a micro level, it is liberating and challenging the system. Bhattacharjya elaborates on this when she opines:

> But at the micro level, it still involves engagement with self and sexuality that challenges patriarchy and offers women the potential to discover sexual autonomy, dismantle patriarchal shame, and experience sexuality as a site for some sort of liberation from traditional strictures and roles.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.186)

Thus, she affirms that the glamour industry possesses the capacity to bring about innovative advancements in the realm of women's empowerment, provided it successfully alters the work environment to be more progressive and inclusive in nature.

FASHIONING POSTFEMINISM

Fashions call attention to the female body. Similarly, postfeminism successfully brings the discussions of feminism towards the female body. Riley et al. (2023) write:

> Although much of the early work on postfeminism focused on sexualisation, a central element to postfeminist sensibility was that the body had become a site of women's worth and identity and how appearance work was the process by which many women could make and understand themselves as feminine.
>
> (p. 2)

Therefore, postfeminism celebrates working on one's body, which is purposefully associated with choice and empowerment. The fashion industry encourages models to undergo surgery in order to reshape different body parts for perfection. The industry projects the necessity of ideal beauty, which becomes the standard for other women to follow. Postfeminism argues that women are naturally entitled to make decisions to undergo such plastic surgeries if they wish because it is one of the means for their empowered existence.

The Indian fashion industry offers women a feasible platform for earning financial independence through modelling. Unlike other areas of work, this industry is easily accessible to women because it runs primarily through women's forces. Despite the postfeminist evolution worldwide, the Indian fashion industry is still struggling to break away from its patriarchal hold. Earning individual identity via the fashion industry results in bodily exploitation, which is willingly allowed by the affected woman to not lose the social position of respect. This complicates the purpose of Indian female movements. A producer of a television model hunt opines:

> …historically, feminism and fashion have been pitted against one another. I was aware that the existing system defined unrealistic standards of 'beauty' and promoted unhealthy body images for women, focused on profit over anything else, and used certain tropes of desirability and sexiness to sell products. It appeared to reduce women from thinking beings to bodies for display. I struggled to understand why women would participate in something that seemed to not value them as human beings.
>
> (Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.xv)

Postfeminism removes the political angle from understanding human action. It aims to celebrate a woman's choice to either work outside the home or become a homemaker and take care of her family members. However, in the case of Indian society, it was very early to occupy such a stand. The patriarchy operates strongly in all contexts in India, which makes it crucial to address such purposeful manipulation and exploitation. As discussed in the above section, India is now facing a fatal combination of patriarchy and commercialisation, where the female body becomes the subject of exploitation. Misogyny can provoke animosity towards women, which may eventually culminate in hate crimes and physical abuse. A pertinent and contemporary illustration of this is the sudden surge in the popularity of Andrew Tate, mainly attributed to his remarks related to patriarchy and misogyny (Sayogie et al., 2023). The fashion industry is a typical example of power structures that utilise the female urge to become the best, independent version of themselves through beauty. Sathya Saran, the editor of a women's magazine, remarked, " The urban Indian woman. The aspirational Indian woman who wants to look better, be a better partner, worker, colleague, whatever. We are talking to her. And beauty is part of her arsenal"(Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.10). While postfeminism propagates the significance of choice, we are forced to question the authority of that choice. Maddox (2019) rightly remarks, "Postfeminism (which privileges autonomy, self-surveillance, and the bodily) and neoliberalism (which encourages autonomy, self-surveillance, and self-help) are interwoven, and one discourse cannot be discussed in this context without the other" (p.3). In the fashion industry, women are indirectly encouraged to misunderstand commercial exploitation as a conscious choice over their bodies.

Voyeurism is not a novel concept in the fashion industry. As the industry mainly comprises women, it becomes a convenient space to incorporate voyeuristic pleasure. However, the fashion industry has consciously transformed this gaze into economic capital by building a fast-growing industry. On a larger scale, the industry has been successful in achieving success, but often at the lowest level, the body of the model pays the price for it. The voyeuristic gaze desires an ideal beauty, which is presented in different forms through fashion.

Sugandha Singh writes:

> Postfeminism, by widening the choices for women through its have-it-all attitude, has plunged women today further into self-doubt and increased their anxiety about the choices they have to make to maintain their individuality in society as well as to achieve happiness in their life".
>
> (2017, p. 870)

Women are under constant pressure to be their best within the competitive circle, which has started to push them further into deep holes of delusions that have turned out to be fatal for their existence. Bhattacharjya remarks:

> Anorexia popularly refers to an obsession with body image, particularly being thin, which manifests itself in the behaviour of (mostly) women and girls who either starve themselves for fear of putting weight or induce themselves to forcibly vomit or purge themselves after eating meals so that the act of eating itself does not affect their propensity to gain weight".
>
> (2018, p. 59)

Liberty of choice has been strategically manipulated to keep women within the discourse of ideal beauty. The change here is that women now make the choice for themselves rather than having it made for them by men. This mental process provides them with a sense of validation for their actions. This critical situation questions the transformative arguments of feminism in which

women ultimately succumb as victims. Angela Macrobbie has pointed out the tendency of the younger generation of women to:

> absorb sexist images without thinking. They appreciate the irony of such representations as "cool" but fail to adequately take up feminist politics. One assumes then that only older women possess the ability to critically engage with popular culture and take up feminist positions without hostility".
>
> (Robinson, 2008, p. 37)

This approach is reflected in interviews conducted by Bhattacharjya with top Indian models. She writes," In the conversation that followed, they echoed the overall refrain that cosmetic surgery is a matter of 'choice', it is a 'right' like any other, and we were lucky that we had the opportunity to avail such advances in technology"(Bhattacharjya, 2018, p.62). This choice, emphasised by postmodern Indian women, brings in a comparison between choice feminism and postfeminism. McIntyre (2021) argues that both types of feminism claim that the issues of gender inequality have been solved, and currently, women have earned the liberty to choose. Their point of difference is that while postfeminism mainly focuses on presenting women as empowered individuals through consumption, choice feminism narrows down its discussions to protect women's lives as a result of their life choices. The fashion industry witnesses the combined work of both, where women uphold their right to choose and become effective consumers of the beauty industry. Kumar states that the natural body undergoes modifications to enhance beautification and establish unique identities. She added:

> In some sense, the boundaries of the actual physical human body have been erased today, as technology allows us to modify our flesh and its underlying structures to create a composite 'fashion' body, a fantasy valued for its impossibility.2 The periphery of fashion has impregnated a radical shift in aesthetic preferences and an extreme quest for beautification and individuality.
>
> (D. Kumar, 2014, p. 2)

Fashion is a fantasy world in which individuals strive to create their perfect selves while living in a traditional setup. Although this fantasy appears appealing, it is not free of exploitative traps. M. Kumar (2023) notes:

> Cosmetic surgery and fashion are both industries that focus on enhancing physical appearance. While fashion offers temporary changes through clothing and accessories, cosmetic surgery offers more permanent changes through surgical procedures. Both industries can influence and be influenced by societal beauty standards and cultural norms.
>
> (para.1)

Although feminism has historically been a vocal opponent of sexual inequities and unequal opportunities, the concept of "opportunity" has become distorted in recent times. Unfortunately, women are passively embracing these modern definitions of opportunity, which permit the commercialisation of their bodies for industrial gains. They are the leading consumers of plastic surgery and anti-ageing creams. Fashion has emerged as a symbol of personal-self-assurance, with individuals courageously accepting their natural selves. However, commercialisation has effectively concealed its strategic silence and manipulated the perception of beauty in women. Despite the recent emphasis on body positivity by the industry, fashion has somewhat undermined the social and political objectives of the women's movement in India to a certain extent.

CONCLUSION

The fashion industry is a highly engaging platform that has transformed the lives of many women. The field of fashion has its own unique set of advantages and disadvantages. Although it has brought about positive changes, it is often criticised for its negative aspects. Sahej Jaggi (2022) noted:

> Beauty has been transformed into an industry whose control lies in the hands of media that can singlehandedly produce and disseminate beauty ideals and norms. It contributes to the mental and intellectual subservience of people's minds, especially women, from a very young age.
>
> (para.6)

As much as the fashion industry has evolved, beauty myths and ideal standards have also evolved into newer versions. An old model remarks:

> In our time, the body was secondary. What mattered more was our face. Today, you can't say that any of them have very pretty faces. The industry has really come up; fashion is so big right now! I mean, you just have to throw a ball at a party, and you will hit a model.
>
> (p. 28)

Consumerism has emerged as a profitable venture by promoting plastic surgeries and the use of chemical beauty products to achieve clear skin, prevent ageing, eliminate dark circles, and so on. However, this influence is not limited to the glamour industry but also extends to women working in all workplaces. Thus, when analysing the work profile of models, it is crucial to focus on the micro picture, where one can observe the individual changes that this field has brought into the lives of these models.

Women have strategically used this platform to escape their domestic spaces and establish their positions in the social circle. The glamour industry, which flourishes in urban spaces, opens opportunities for women from across the world to own their individuality and take control of their lives. The financial independence and fame that they enjoyed working in this field was a completely new experience for many women, who earlier could not imagine anything beyond their homes and families. They embraced femininity and transformed their bodies into places of worship. This experience is more empowering and engaging for women, who earlier always felt that neither their physique nor their personality had a charm of its own. The daily reality of being subjected to scrutinising and suffocating the male gaze is not a novel experience for women. Nevertheless, within the fashion industry, models have the power to control and determine how they are viewed when they walk down runways or pose for photographs. This empowers women as they feel more powerful and authoritative than the remaining mute victims of subjugation.

The Indian fashion industry is still strongly fighting against previous misogynistic attitudes and working patterns. Unlike developments in Western countries, Indian models continuously encounter abuse and harassment in the industry. However, this does not imply that development has not occurred. New initiatives aimed at promoting plus-size bodies, challenging industry abusers, and advocating respect for their work have become the new standard. Many models aspire to undergo plastic surgery to conform to the idealised reality portrayed by fashion. Regrettably, this inclination towards bodily alterations has a detrimental impact on the entire female population. A substantial number of young girls in the country are now preoccupied with their bodies and unsatisfied with their natural selves. This trend is perilous and can have severe

consequences for the younger generations of the country. Instead of perpetuating this trend, it is essential to shift the focus towards valuable initiatives, such as body positivity and body neutrality.

At the macro level, the fashion industry has long faced criticism for promoting unrealistic beauty standards. However, there is a growing movement to challenge these myths. Advocates of body positivity and racial inclusivity are working to redefine the industry's narrow beauty ideals and demonstrate that glamour is more than just physical appearance. They argue that fashion is a fusion of beauty and personal identity. As more fashion shows, magazine articles, and advertisements embrace these ideas, they are having a significant impact on public perceptions. Therefore, it is crucial to support the emergence of a new class of working women in the fashion industry who can disrupt traditional hierarchies, gain global recognition, and challenge toxic beauty standards.

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