

Consumerism and The Social Construction of Female Body

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Abstract :

Globalization and open market economy have impacted the social life to a great extent. The process of globalization has exercised definite impact on how beauty should be viewed, assessed and judged and the ideology of market economy which is based on consumerism and commercialization has used this impact to its benefit to fulfill its purpose of profit. It intentionally has tried and helped in establishing the universalized homogenized norms and parameters of beauty as fair, white, blonde, and blue-eyed. The agenda behind the beauty contests which propagate and thrive on the myth "beauty with brains", is to completely deny the notion of natural beauty as it is the hindrance on their way to profit and success in the beauty-business. The ideal imagery of woman with perfect body and captivating smile is created and widely propagated through advertisements, films, and tele-programmes by media. This ideal is being internalized by masses as it percolates slowly but steadily into society. This paper aims at analyzing as to how market economy based on patriarchy is helping in commercialization and objectification of female body and sexuality. The treatment of the subject is being done in feminist perspective.

Key-words : Globalization, Patriarchy, Female-body, Sexuality, Alienation, Consumerism

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Globalization and market economy have exercised definite impact on how beauty should be viewed, assessed and judged. The ideology of market economy is based on consumerism and commercialization. To fulfill its purpose it intentionally has tried and helped in establishing the universal homogenized parameters of beauty as fair, white, blonde, blue-eyed and svelte. If we try to analyze the hidden agenda behind the beauty contests which propagates the myth 'beauty with brains', it will be clear that it is the total denial of the notion of natural beauty as it is the hindrance on their way to success in business. The ideal woman image is projected through advertisement, films and tele- programmes by media with perfect body and perfect smile. This ideal is being internalized by masses as it is percolating slowly but steadily into the society. Thus, contributing in the mushrooming of beauty business effortlessly everywhere.

This article aims at analyzing as to how market economy based on patriarchy is helping in commercialization and objectification of female body and sexuality. The treatment of the subject is being done in feminist perspective.

If seen in historical perspective, women have never been treated equally, sensitively and humanly by patriarchy. It always accorded primacy to things and products produced by men as they are related to market and cash. Women are marginalized as they spend their time and energy in caring and bringing up heir for which they do not earn wages. Patriarchy has always used women and their assets to its profit and convenience. It is a systematic and socially accepted way of oppressing, exploiting and subjugating women. This ideology has the prime motive to establish the superiority of male dominance. To achieve this goal it changes its face accordingly in different periods of time. Capitalist patriarchy originates in capitalist mode of production and a patriarchal structuring of the relations of therein. In the patriarchal capitalist order, the commodity production is a privileged activity.

Patriarchal set up works for the good of men as it has successfully and systematically justified the devaluation and underrating of the work done by women in their own eyes. Market needs labour to perform the so-called productive work for which women produce the labour force but the patriarchy doesn't consider it important enough as it is an unpaid work. The control of the sphere of wage labour lies with men which gives them social power. Sylvia Walby aptly terms it 'patriarchal mode of production' in which after performing hard and endless work women are considered dependent on their husbands. This strategy is doubly beneficial for the system as it works in the direction to make women dependent and docile to get the label of good women, consequently making the oppression and subjugation of women easier for men. Till the advent of market economy women were needed to reproduce life and

for the upkeep of the house, so they were socialized as home-makers and mothers and ,these roles were glorified for that particular purpose. This constitutes the definition of a normal woman. Thus, in a patriarchal set up gender becomes a normative system through which female behaviour is controlled. Michel Foucault (1978) offers a different perspective to look at the process of gendered socialization to control the behaviour. He deals with the changing forms of power and their relation to the 'body'. The body becomes the focus of power and was disciplined and trained to function with co-ordination and efficiency. The body thus becomes 'socially controlled'. Women are told to accept societal practices and told that not doing so would be unnatural.

Body : socially constructed

Turner explained the body as socially controlled and equated the study of the sociology of the body to the study of problem of social order. The sociology of the body turns out to be crucially a sociological study of "the control of sexuality, specifically female sexuality by men exercising patriarchal power" (Turner, 1984) . Turner thus proposed different way of looking at women's subordination which is to look at control of sexuality through control of the body to achieve societal goal instead of keeping the concentration or argument like nature culture argument.

To study the sociology of body it is essential to look at the social construction of the body. It is believed by some theorist that "the body is simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact, both naturally and culturally produced and securely anchored in a particular historical moment" (Freund 1998). The human body is socially constructed in changing setting of production and consumption. Some gender differences are socially constructed and used to justify belief about natural differences in physical strengths, performance and mental abilities. Women, for example learn pattern of movements such as how to occupy space, to walk and appropriate posture. Women also develop a certain body structure showing that physical ability is connected to socialization and not merely biology (Widge, 1994). Sociology of body has addressed how social definition of bodies have entered into general conception of youth and aged which have attached to them different symbolic values. The young, slim and sexual bodies are highly prized in contemporary consumer culture whereas aging bodies tend to be vanished from public attention. In a particular social set up, this body assumed specificity: that is the body of the female.

Social Construction of Female Body: Commodification and Objectification

The female body in consumer culture has become increasingly central and it has helped promote the perfect bodies. Douglas argues that the human body is most readily available image of a social system, and suggested that ideas about human body correspond closely to prevalent ideas about society (Douglas, 1970).

Capitalist mode of production which is rooted in patriarchy has been quite successful in disguising itself in the name of modernity where objectification and commodification of women, its body and sexuality have gained alarming heights. The beauty contests can be seen as an instrument of market economy based on patriarchal capitalism. Cosmetic and body care industry are getting ready to grab upon every opportunity to exploit this unexplored, virgin domain to its benefit. According to feminist concept of the caring for the self for attaining beauty has necessarily one function to cater to male lust is an offshoot of consumerism of capitalism. Michael Foucault (1978) stood firmly for this argument only which has become discourse of morally indignant women who oppose beauty pageant. These contests play the role of beacon light in what in Freudian term can be called 'spectators sport', exhibition of a female body for blatant male voyeurism. The cause of this is deeply rooted in gender based stereotype against women that still exists in every walk of life in the patriarchal set up.

To control women's bodies is to control their personalities and represents an act of authority over the body in the interest of public order organized around male values of what is rational (Turner, 1984). Male and female bodies are seen to be different in structure and function. A woman to the male world is a body who is always expected to look beautiful, smiling, sensuous and seductive. Men's bodily appearance does not matter that much as Martin (1987) observes, "the active male said to have bigger brains, more intelligence and females were said to be sluggish and passive". These beauty contests are still nursing and nurturing basic dualities defined as feminine and masculine by patriarchy where women are considered related to body, nature, emotion, subject and private whereas male qualities are mind, culture, reason, object and public. Not only these qualities are polar to each other but the hierarchy is also based on these qualities. Mind has been placed on higher slab to body, culture superior to nature, rationality and objectivity are considered not only superior but valued more than emotional and subjective. Therefore women are bodies and men are the mind, who can think rationally, objectively and by this they can transform nature into culture according to their wishes and needs. The exponents of these patriarchal attitudes believe that women produce perishable bodies' and men produce 'enduring symbols'. Therefore men are superior to women and must control women (Ortner, 1974). Thus female bodies and sexuality are controlled to maintain the superior status of men. In this light, these beauty contest work under the deceptive slogan 'beauty with brain' where contestants in the past have won the title even without correct answers just because their bodies were more close to universal homogenized standard of feminine beauty established by consumer capitalism. To win the title it requires, not only perfect grooming but manners, speech and poise,

qualities defined as feminine according to basic dualities of patriarchal attitudes. To that matter being beautiful has nothing to do with facts of world and intelligence. The real goal behind this highly egalitarian looking deceptive beauty contests becomes all the more evident by the fact that after crowning ceremony the beauty queens have the busy schedule around the world but only to beautify the event and to look pretty at the gathering just like an object d'art. These events are directed and governed by the basic principle of dualities defined by patriarchy as these title winning beauty queens are not involved in any intelligent conversation and in decision making. They are only meant for commercial advertisement and to sell the commodities and in the process they themselves become an object of desire and a commodity to be bought and sold according to market needs. In this capitalist consumerist set up they are considered only a body, an object, a thing or a commodity because after a certain time new faces and beauties are brought in the market for the purpose of novelty and to promote its consumer goods and the old once are relegated to oblivion.

The corporate world and cosmetic empire is quite ruthless that they are working on the emotions of common women and the treatment is not humane but exploitative physically, psychologically, emotionally and economically as well. The success formula of the corporate world is to propagate widely that beauty contest are based on egalitarian values and are fair. They select the winners from the developed and underdeveloped nations as these nations are considered an unexplored markets to be captured. Models are chosen on the regional basis instead of foreign faces from alien culture to advertise and to sell the products. So that every woman cutting across race, class and nation lines can relate and identify with their products through that particular model. This systematic and strategic business plan lures the girls even from the middle- and lower- middle class families and results in enhanced desire and ambition level by showing that they can also be at the top of the world. Urban elite class girls do not monopolize over these international beauty titles. Media industry works hand in glove with cosmetic empire to fulfill its commercial interest by giving headlines like "small town girl conquers the world". As it consequently helps media to do thriving business and to make lumps of profits to through these beauty contests and advertisement.

Thus, through commodification today the market has objectified and metamorphosed the female body and sexuality into a commodity and a material which can be bought and sold or changed according to market needs. Female are always shown beautiful, smiling, sexy, seductive, gorgeous and what not in the media, advertising and glossy magazines. They are projected what they really are not, contrary to their original self. They have to craft their bodies on the parameters

fixed by global consumer market. To survive and to maintain their salability in the market models work against cut throat competition, always try hard to remain in the shape of 34-24-34 and in the process become victim of anorexia nervosa and malnutrition. As such cosmetology a branch of science is now being used to achieve these goals. The beauty contests create a fragmented view of woman's beauty in terms of her hair, her skin, her teeth, her toe nails, thereby rejecting the notion of holistic and natural beauty. Consequently the beauty becomes objectified and it exists outside her independently as something alien to her, leading to alienation of self from the body.

Regulation of the female body is maintained by dieting management. In consumer society, enhanced desire to maintain the body exterior is fulfilled through modern diet. This is contrary to dieting for religious and medical reasons where the goal is to achieve control of body interior. The consumer diet is to maintain body exterior, fitness, youth and beauty. The pressures placed on women by diet, cosmetic industry and media are innumerable, that it becomes women's conscious desire to be thin. The stress placed on appearance means that women become vulnerable to the huge fashion, diet and cosmetic industry that put forward strong but very limited images of what women should look like. The one constant quality in these images is that women should be thin or totally free of excess fat. According to Orbach (1989) many women become seduced by these images and get trapped in a vicious circle of self destruction and unhealthy diet. Kate Chermin (1983) points out that women are socialized to dislike and to be ashamed of their bodies, in contrast to men who are brought up to take pride in their bodies. The only quest of woman's life is to be liked by a man or to have a man because to achieve socially approved goal i.e. to become a wife or mother she has to have a man. The disastrous and damaging results of this quest have become increasingly public and range from increased use of cosmetic surgery to liposuction. It is not only the women who are working in media and advertisement world or films but women in general under the impact of these images, are toeing the lines of beauty pageants and consequently becoming unhappy with their own bodies, they are born with. It is evident that beauty contest, diet, cosmetic and fashion industry have successfully created a quest and a craving for perfect body. This is a boon for cosmetic industry as it says 'if you don't have perfect body we can carve and craft it for you'. The slim waist and shabby looks have become universal favourite that they work as constraint and women all over the globe are almost killing themselves to look like supermodels i.e. Kate Moss, Gisele Bundchen, Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell, Catherine Zetazones, Aishwarya Roy, Pop-diva Madonna and above all plastic icon of beauty the Barbie. Slimming centers and perfect body care centres are mushrooming in every nook and corner of the country. The growing number of fatalities which stem from the pressures women face to

loose weight to look perfect illustrates the point that women suffer more from living 'in the body than men do'. Thus, there is an obvious relationship between beauty contests, female body and consumerism.

CONCLUSION:

It can therefore be concluded that there is an obvious relation between female body, beauty contest and market economy. Female body is socially constructed and controlled. Patriarchy makes this construction and control more rigid through the value inculcation. It plays a major role in formation of women's attitude towards their own bodies. They assess themselves with their own eyes through the spectacles of patriarchy. They have low self esteem, if they don't fit into the ideal frame designed for so called beautiful women. In the process they are forced to regard themselves as a commodity whose value is based on appearance and presentation. Thus beauty contests are helping to formulate and nurture homogenized, universalized and iconized monoculture of beauty that is being defined as feminine according to market needs for profit motives. In the process female body is objectified and commodified just for selling consumer goods. It gets splitted from mind, alienated from her original self and exists outside her independently.

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