

Understanding a Myth of the Body in the Contemporary Body Discourse

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Abstract: Contemporary discourse of the body perceives the body as site for political discourse. Deification of the white western norms of the positive images of the body pervades the cultural discourse of the relatively historically isolated spaces too. The imperialist values and modes of interpretation decide the aesthetics of the body even in the tribes living in the north east of India. This article is an attempt at understanding the perception of the body in the cultural discourse of one of these tribes. It seeks to verify to what extent the dominance of the Euro-centric norms of the body persists.

Keywords: Culture, colonization, body aesthetics.

Introduction: Discourse of the body as 'embodiment' became current only in the twentieth century. It was because of a significant paradigm shift in theoretical and cultural theory accentuated by the currency of the term 'discourse' as an explanatory concept. The basic argument was that habitual symbolic representations offered meaning and value to social and cultural life. According to Michel Foucault, discourse may be perceived both as mechanism that predisposes perceptions and a social filter that enables the imposition of meanings. Pumping fresh life in to social analysis, the theoretical facility of discourse released it from the entrapment of numerous dualistic assumptions.

This theoretical facility of discourse would not have been possible without the contribution of Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault. It is more particularly so in the discourse of the body. The course of socio-cultural and theoretical perceptions of the body would have been completely different from what it is now sans the invaluable theoretical works of these two great thinkers.

Body and Image: One focal point in Goffman's theoretical foundation is that individuals continuously participate in the social discourse for the aggrandizement of their personal interests. This motive for the enhancement of personal interests exists side by side with the acts to minimize the loss of face or image. The central part of this idea of the presentation of the image of the self is the construction or sustenance of a positive and convincing self-image.

Many criteria are put in place for the construction of this positive body image in the contemporary societies. The body is commodified by the industries. They generate the supporting discourse of body-care and dieting, and the idea of fitness. Interpreting the contemporary discourse of the body, Goffman presents three principal ideas. First, the individual owns the body and it is controlled and monitored by the individual for social interaction. Second, the presentation and the management of the body are done according to a shared vocabulary of hierarchical and symbolically charged body-idiom beyond the control of the individual. Third, the relationship between self-identity and social identity is mediated by the body. So, the social interpretation of the body is immensely important for the construction of the self-identity and the feelings of inner worth for the individual.

The Myths of the Body: The Euro-centric norms of the ideal body in the centre control the discourse of the body. Fairness of skin is a godly thing. The most important of the human passions are enacted, evaluated and justified along the idea of fairness. Complementing the fairness of his friend's complexion, William Shakespeare in 'Sonnet 18' aptly sums up the skin colour craze for generations to come across continents-

And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;"

This western discourse of the body permeates even the cultural notions of the relatively isolated tribes in the north east of India. Controlling the analytical principles of the aesthetics, the white European idea of a fair body does not permit black to be confidently beautiful. Black is not beautiful at all. In fact, there is no such thing called a black beauty in the community. The nose is a nose when it is sharp, as sharp as the Brahmins', otherwise, it does not qualify to be a nose at all. The women in the house and the men in the field will talk about the skin colour and the shape of the nose of a new-born baby. If the baby happens to be born 'black', and is adorned with a flat nose, the chances are that it will be a baby that deserves to be born in the house of an enemy. The 'black' flat-nosed baby grows up to be a short man, and it grows up at its own risk. He becomes an object of hatred, and at the most, an object of pity.

The nose is an important part of the face in terms of its role in a balancing, enriching, and an artistic act. It plays the role of the divider that has the power to decide between the common and the uncommon, the ordinary and the extraordinary. For a man, it's a question of identification with a race more advanced and more powerful. For a

woman, it's the question of belonging to a rare class of people more sought after, more adored, and more discussed. The sharp nose has an elevating power- a power that everyone wishes for. If one doesn't have it, one has to make a compromise with oneself as well as with others. If one is enlightened enough, one keeps stretching the tip of the nose to get it longer and more pointed until it becomes a habit. The hard work has some definite advantages. The child with a sharp nose turns into a person with the asset of a life time. He grows up to be an adult, and he gets the attention that the flat nosed young man wishes for. He exposes his nose in front of a camera or under his sunglasses, proud and confident. The sharp-nosed young woman likewise is the woman to look at and the woman with the riches to wish for. If not a material gain, it at least guarantees an escape from the shame of a flat nose and the quiet lifelong struggle to keep the discussion of nose under check. The hundred jokes and satires, the vitriol and the lampoons on one's physical features will be relentlessly harsh on that flat nose. One needs to get a sharp nose.

The skin colour is of equal importance. The colour of the skin is in fact intimately bound up with the discourse of labour. The light brown skin is earmarked for non-physical professions. The light brown man is fit to live in a city and do clerical, administrative or such intellectual jobs. He is fit to be a member of the parliament or the state assembly. In fact, pre-poll discussions of the physical attraction in terms of trustworthiness and honesty reflect an obvious bias towards light brown skins. Many candidates have been seen to edit their pictures to appear light brown to enhance their chances in the polls.

For the woman folks, the light brown skin is the dream they cherish. Weekly village markets are filled with cosmetic products of all kinds. Along with hair oil products, the cosmetics that promise fair skin are sold the most. The sales of hair oil products are on the decline for the reason that the fascination for long dark hair is no longer as it used to be a decade ago. Women working in the house, women working in the fields, and women working in the office- everybody wants to be fair because fair skin sells in the marriage market. Fair skin is eulogized, appreciated, and openly glorified.

But the biggest asset, if we talk about a man, is the height. If a man is flat-nosed and dark-skinned, and yet he is tall, doors of life are open to him. Height is a symbol of manliness, perfection and strength. The tall man is more deserving, more attractive, and more qualified. He is someone to be proud of. He is intimidating, and he is fit to defend the family in times of horror. His broad shoulders are more accommodative. Grab a tall man and the woman folks can rest in peace for a life time. A tall man is viewed

as a born leader. Everyone looks up to him, both literally and metaphorically. A tall height is the dream of a teenager and the pride of a family.

Folk songs and oral narratives: Folk songs are their medium of poetic expressions. They are the songs of the pains and sorrows of their private lives: the pains of separation and the wish for reunion with the beloved. Sometime they sing about their dream of the beautiful lady and the handsome man. In most of these songs, the image that invariably dominates is the image of a fair skinned woman. In contrast, none of the folk songs attested till date has been seen to be associated with the praise of a 'black' or a dark skin. Women's face is compared with the moon and its refreshing beam. At times, the singer is surprised by the fact that the brightness of his beloved's face eclipses the light of the moon. When the male singer is lost in the woods and he wanders around in utter darkness, he is shown the way out of the darkness by the light that emanates from his beloved's face.

Oral narratives of the Misings are fraught with villains that are dark. Short and flat-nosed people are comic characters. The dark step mother and the step father, the dark monster that lives in the forest are all causing trouble to the life of the fair-skinned, honest, and meek orphans. But the fair skinned virtuous people are able to get out of the clutch of those cruel creatures. They may not share the brutal physical force of the dark-skinned villains, but they have the intelligence to beat them in the long run. The good forces of nature, the dead ancestors, and the creators of the world are all in favour of these fair-skinned heroes. They are victorious at the end. They will command the respect of the evil creatures finally. The dark and black-skinned monster that thrives on the blood of the poor and the helpless is punished to be leeches, mosquitoes, and snakes.

On the other hand, the short and flat-nosed person is little less than a human. He is imperfect but he is not evil as such. He is a matter of laughter and jokes. He is loveable in the sense that he makes people laugh. His little hands and short legs, his flat nose with the nostrils wide open are all ingredients of comedy. People look at them not with contempt but with intently naughty eyes. They are not thought to be somebody capable of holding a serious political position. They are not leaders as such, but creatures of fun- creatures to dump their intelligently funny comments at times and soak in a shower of laughter.

Conclusion: This entrapment of the body in the European encapsulation is prolonged by the continuation of the beauty myth through big business interests. The currency of the framework is the glorification of the Euro-centric norms. The continuous dependence on

western Euro-centric straightjacket to fit culturally divergent items to it is one of the major signs of surrender to persistent imperialist habits of thought. The most unfortunate part of it is that even the writing back acts are not too far from the extension and academic interpellation of similar frameworks designed and sold by the west.

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