

# ZERO FIGURE: DECIPHERING THE BEAUTY MYTH IN THE NOVEL *THE VEGETARIAN*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the quest of women to attain the 'Zero Figure' to possess the phantom named 'Beauty' and the perilous consequences that anticipate them and how it is reflected/portrayed in literature through the novel *The Vegetarian*.

““It is far more difficult to murder a phantom than a reality”:- Virginia Woolf” (*The Beauty Myth*). Even after a century, how true are the words of Woolf. It is much easier to destroy a real image than a phantasm which is created by the commercial media in the present epoch. The powerful weapon the media holds to create the phantom is the notion of 'Ideal Beauty' which in real never exists. But, what is beauty? According to Google, Beauty is defined as the 'combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight.' If the purpose of beauty is to please the sight, another question arises is 'whose sight'? And what does 'the sight' deem as the 'ideal beauty'? The sensible answer would be 'It is the sight of society, which is injected by the philosophy of the media and market, on the idea of beauty', which mostly preys on the modern women, who have a propensity to satisfy the notions of beauty as advertised by media.

More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers (TBM 10)

This statement of Naomi Wolf reflects the current scenario of the modern women who finds themselves dissatisfied with their own physique and complexion which fails to meet the expectation of the 'ideal beauty'. The unrealistic image of beauty created by the media among the modern women had made them stagnant in their development and keeps them obsessed with their physique. While the definition of beauty remains unaltered, the notion of beauty keep changing with the new ideologies. The design of beauty starting from colour and complexion to shape and size each had its way out in the market:

During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty. During the past five years, consumer spending doubled, .....and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal.(10)

This paper attempts to highlight the quest of women to attain the 'Zero Figure' to possess the phantom named 'Beauty' and the perilous consequences that anticipates them and how it is reflected/portrayed in literature. The concept of size zero is trending among the youths due to the intercession of media regarding the notion of beauty in the opinion of society. The above lines from *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf can be seen as an example substantiating how a woman's priority has been drastically changed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is led by the industrial revolution and the intrusion of media in the life of common man which started to market the beauty with the idealistic features and encouraged the consumers to possess such a beauty.

In the *School Girls* by Peggy Orenstein, she talks about the survey conducted in the year 1990 by the American Association of University Women among 3000 adolescent girls which revealed the shocking results. The outcome of the survey exposed the plunge of the girls' self-esteem during their teens. The girls seemed disgusted with themselves if they fail to achieve the ideal figure which had been advertised by the media. This snagged the women's appreciation towards their own physique and involvement in any other fields.

The notion of ideal beauty has been metamorphosed time and again, from face to body, colour to form, and complexion to size and structure. The philosophy of beauty has been different with respect to its time-period. With the beginning of the marketing of beauty, the commodification of woman also started. If pleasing the sight is the priority of beauty, what pleases when and why is the important query that should be asked amongst us. As this paper deals with the concept of thin beauty, it's essential to trace the phase where this perception started. It might have started in the year 1959 with the introduction of the 'Barbie Doll' in the markets by the American company Mattel. Barbie doll offered an ideal image of a perfect woman and the improbable features that targeted the young girls. Marge Piercy's poem titled *Barbie Doll*, published in the year 1971, shows the impact of Barbie doll in the lives of girl children.

This girlchild was born as usual and presented dolls that  
did pee-pee .... Then in the magic of puberty,  
a classmate said: You have a great big nose and fat legs.  
She was healthy, tested intelligent.....possessed strong arms  
and back.....Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.  
  
She was advised to play coy...exercise, diet, smile and  
  
wheedle...So she cut off her nose and her legs  
  
In the casket..she lay cosmetics painted on, a turned-up putty nose,  
  
Doesn't she look pretty?Consummation at last  
  
To every woman a happy ending. (*Barbie Doll*)

The poem *Barbie Doll* narrates the life of a girl with the gender stereotypes that is exclusively specified for women. The girl in the narration, who is hale and healthy, is subjected to meet the idealistic/unrealistic expectations of the society she belongs. A girl chasing to possess the 'ideal beauty' results in her loss of her own self and ultimately her life. The girl in the poem represents every modern woman who looks up to the 'perfect beauty' portrayed by the media which in fact does not exist in reality. In the life journey of the girl she is pushed to satisfy the needs of the social surroundings and advised to maintain diet and do exercises to reach the 'zero figure' and meet the expectations of the commercial world which presents her the doll, with the ideal features too much for a reality, which she is expected to emulate.

In the pursuit of the possession of the perfect figure or zero figure people are likely to carry on various experiments like crash diets, excess exercises, avoiding meats, etc. This might result in the anorexia nervosa in the women. Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder where people skip food in the process of losing weight. The people with anorexia nervosa are conscious about their weights. In the last decade there was a risk of 5% death due to this disorder. In the year 2015 alone the death count was 600 because of anorexia.

In the short story *circus* by AnushkaJasraj, the author presents Sita the protagonist who eats protein tablets instead of food to maintain her body and prevent weight gain "Every morning I eat five multi-vitamins" (*Circus 1*). In this short story the author satirizes the ways adapted by women to meet the ideal structure. In *circus*, Sita's need to lose weight in order to get fame in circus is the parody of women's desire to get attention and appreciation by attaining thinness.

The Japanese man writes about a skeletal old woman who does not eat. At each performance, she walks around the ring, and the audience watches as the circus master offers her a glass of water. It sounds mundane, but it is one of the most dramatic moments in the show, because any day now the woman is expected to collapse. (6)

The objectification of women in the marketing world is presented through the old woman who is exhibited before the audience as an entertainment. Surviving on water given by the ringmaster is the satire on women who depends on the unhealthy diets advertised by media to reach their desired weight for the perfect figure. Calling it as a ‘Dramatic Moment’ shows the societies’ vindictiveness towards each other in the materialistic world and treating one another as a commodity and as the means of amusement.

On Wednesdays I fast. The doctor says it is unhealthy, but I tell him I cannot take any medicine on Wednesday. I take a double dose on Thursday. This is nonsense behavior, the doctor says. When my mother falls ill, I fast for an entire week, and consider joining the circus. I understand the skeletal woman’s strength. My doctor tells me anorexia is addictive because the body releases hormones that stimulate hunger and simultaneously energise the mind.(8)

Sita in the *Circus* is the representation of the modern women, who, in the delusion of reaching the phantom figure of splendor, follows a detrimental diet by skipping food and becomes anorexic. The people with anorexia will tend to feel that they plump even though they are actually not.

In the attempts to reach the ideal stature, people experiment with diverse ways in following a diet. One of them is becoming a vegetarian. “I was convinced that there was more going on here than a simple case of vegetarianism” (*The Vegetarian* 22)

The novel *The Vegetarian*, written by the Korean writer Han Kang, deal with the protagonist who suddenly becomes vegetarian because she “had a dream”(TV11). The dream of Yeong-hye can be considered as the dream of every woman who fancy conquering the ideal fitness as promoted by the commercial planet.

This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented.(174)

This novel stands as a fascinating example of a woman who dwells in the dream-like illusion and fails to retreat to the reality. This chimera makes her incapable of living the normal life and drives to insanity. ““I’m not an animal anymore, sister”, she said, first scanning the empty ward as if about to disclose a momentous secret. “I don’t need to eat, not now. I can live without it.”(175).

This modern myth of beauty i.e ‘Zero Figure’ is fascinatingly dangerous which can consume the woman’s dream; sanity and life in one go. It is the choice of woman to decide how her body should be and what beauty according to her is, but giving oneself in to the illusions of media and the expectations of the society which is dependent on marketing is like an assassination of our owl self. Everyone is beautiful in their own way with his/her unique traits, so running behind the never existing ideal/perfect image as the idyllic image of a human being lies in his/her inimitable imperfections.

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