

# Beauty as a Social Fact: An Ethnomethodological Study of Kashmiri Society

\*Nurgiss Nazir: Ph. D Scholar, (Sociology), Centre of Central Asian Studies,(CCAS), University of Kashmir.

\*\*Nazia Fayaz: Ph. D Scholar, (Sociology), Centre of Central Asian Studies,(CCAS), University of Kashmir.

**Abstract:** In present day society, beauty has become a compulsion, because of various parameters through which beauty has been measured. This paper is an effort to consider the impact of this compulsive measure, and same is justified through various case studies. Beauty has emerged as social fact- and is influencing people from every strata of society. In this paper Kashmiri society has been taken into consideration.

## Research Methodology:

Researcher has used participant observation as a tool for data collection. Durkheim's thought of social fact has been utilized in order to analyse the said theme and make sociological inferences. All the case studies have been analysed ethnomethodologically in order to reach the conclusion.

## Social Fact by Emile Durkheim

"Sociology" is a science which like biology studies the phenomena of the natural world and like psychology studies human actions, thoughts, and feelings. Emile Durkheim conceived of sociology as the scientific study of a reality sui generis, a clearly defined group of phenomena different from those studied by all other sciences including biology and psychology. It was for these phenomena that Durkheim reserved the term social facts, i.e., "a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to an individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him."<sup>1</sup>

Since these facts consisted of actions, thoughts, and feelings, they could not be confused with biological phenomena; but neither were they the province of psychology, for they existed outside the individual conscience. It was to define the proper method for their study that Durkheim wrote *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895).

It might still be argued, of course, that the external, coercive power of social facts is derived from their being held in common by most of the individual members of a society; and that, in this sense, the characteristics of the whole are the product of the characteristics of the parts. But there was no proposition to which Durkheim was more opposed. The obligatory, coercive nature of social facts, he argued, is repeatedly manifested in individuals because it is imposed upon them, particularly through education; the parts are thus derived from the whole rather than the whole from the parts.

But how is the presence of a social fact to be recognized? Durkheim gave two answers, one pointing backward to *The Division of Labor*, the other forward to *Suicide*. Because the essential trait of social facts is

<sup>1</sup> Emile, D. (1895). *The division of labor in Society*.

their external coercive power, Durkheim first suggested that they could be recognized by the existence of some predetermined legal sanction or, in the case of moral and religious beliefs, by their reaction to those forms of individual belief and action which they perceived as threatening. But where the exercise of social constraint is less direct, as in those forms of economic organization which give rise to anomie, their presence is more easily ascertained by their "generality combined with objectivity" -- i.e., by how widespread they are within the group, while also existing independently of any particular forms they might assume. But whether direct or indirect, the essential defining characteristic of social facts remains their external, coercive power, as manifested through the constraint they exercise on the individual.

### **Media and Set Standards of Beauty**

Our society cherishes certain futile things, which have dominated it with full force. We need to get free from these chains which are enslaving us. We cannot neglect the importance of beauty in present society. It has entrenched its roots so deep that it is difficult to overcome this menace. It has not only become the wish but is now need of the hour. People are following the existing norms so blindly that it has affected their capability of reason. Different societies have different parameters of beauty. If we talk about Kashmiri society, it is a more or less conservative society, having its own parameters of judging people, for measuring beauty people here give preference mostly to complexion. People with fair complexion are considered beautiful in comparison to dusky or dark. The more fair the lady the more beautiful she is considered. Previously the weight was not an issue, but now with the advent of media, women have become more conscious of their weight, they also want a figure zero.

Every form of media from magazines to the internet displays a standard of beauty it believes everyone should look like. They have pictures of young, beautiful women with long legs, thigh gaps, tall, flat stomach and they look like a size zero then, they include articles on how to look like these women by drinking certain drinks, doing cleanses and doing the same exercises that celebrities do. Photoshop can make someone have larger eye lashes and also make something look smaller. Its ok for you not to fit into this standard of beauty because no one actually fits this standard everyone comes in different shapes and sizes, as said by Marylyn Munroe "To all the girls who think you are fat because you are not size zero. You are the beautiful one, its society who is ugly". We should not always believe what we see. While looking at an advertisement we may view beautiful women with pour less skin and a perfect white smile but that may not be the truth. Women are deceived in thinking what we see is true because even after makeup is applied to models they still Photoshop the image afterwards. This is not real beauty, this is manmade beauty and this kind of beauty is what harms our self-image through all the negative media that there is surrounding beauty image thought there is a great campaign to bring back natural beauty and inner acceptance through the feminist movement. Media has to change not just for this current century but also for the future, that having a good personality, treating people with kindness and being smart is more important than outer beauty. We want to see women in media of all different races, dresses, sizes and looks.

By creating advertisements with unrealistic images of beauty, it has resulted in anxiety, low self-esteem, and low self-confidence in many women. .Summy Jan, (25 years of age, name changed) requested her brother for Roop Amrit, a product she saw on TV to glow her skin and make her fair, besides the price of the product was so high still she insisted her brother to get her that product. The urge to look fair was so intense that she fought with her brother for the product. She applied the product, but could not get the results as per her expectations.

The need at times snatches a person of his capability to think rationally. People in order to fulfil the need follow the deception blindly. TV ads in this regard play an important role. They show the products as if they are miraculous, beautiful actresses applying beauty creams, soaps, shampoos etc. and that works wonderfully. Public is betrayed so harshly that they fail to differentiate between reality and deception.

### **Social Influence and Beauty**

The feminine beauty ideal is “the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of the women’s most important assets and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain.”<sup>2</sup> Feminine beauty ideals are rooted in heteronormative beliefs and heavily influenced women of all sexual orientations. The feminine beauty ideal which also includes female body shape varies from culture to culture.<sup>3</sup> Pressure to conform to a certain definition of “beautiful” can have drastic psychological effects. These ideals have been co-related with depression, eating disorders and low self-esteem starting from an adolescent age continuing into adulthood.

Shahana farooq (33 years, name changed) is a well-educated, woman pursuing Ph. D. in social science. Besides all the attributes she is being rejected for marriage from past two years. The reason behind is her complexion she has a dusky complexion. Recently, she said that a guy, teacher by profession is coming to see me. Researcher enquired, is she ok with the profession of the guy, as teacher seems mismatch for the woman, who is pursuing Doctorate. She replied, “Yes, I can compromise on that very front”, a woman is ready to compromise with the status but a man cannot compromise with the complexion of woman, this is the society we have evolved into. And finally the result was rejection from boys’ side as usual. All these rejections have affected her so negatively that her self-esteem is shattered. It is visible through her actions that she has lost that confidence and she has engaged her mind more into her looks.

In our society arranged marriages have a custom, where a man comes to the house of woman to see her and then he decides whether to marry that girl or not. What will be the couple able to see in one or two meetings, and on that very situation they decide, should they marry or not. Researchers are not getting critical of the

<sup>2</sup> Spade, J. Z., & Valentine, C. G. (Eds.). (2008). *The kaleidoscope of gender: Prisms, patterns, and possibilities*. Pine Forge Press.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw, Susan M. & Lee, Janet. (2012). *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (5th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill. P 189.

ritual, but our focus here is the importance of the “appearance”, which plays an important role in getting a better match. The woman with good looks has a greater chance of getting a better match than the woman with average looks. Because this is the only thing a person will be able to see in one or two meetings.

Ishrat Jan (30 years, name changed), her parents were looking for a suitable match; people come to see and reject her. Ishrat's sister has to hide when somebody comes to see her sister because she is more beautiful than her sister. And it has happened a lot of times that people come to see Ishrat and instead they choose her sister for marriage. .

With an interview with Rashid (35 years) a bank employee, researcher asked him, how many girls have you rejected till now? He answered 15 to 20. People come to see girls, look at their attributes and then decide whether to marry or not. More beautiful the girl higher is the chances of her to get a better match. It is mostly the discretion of men to select or reject the women. There are cases women also rejecting men but only a few. For groom should be well settled, either with a handsome salary or well established business, in short he should be financially good and for women mostly it is the beauty that too outer beauty which plays the important role.

Beauty and the self-esteem have a direct bearing, if you are beautiful most probably you will be more confident and the chance of compromising on any front will be less.

### **Social Construction of Beauty**

St. Augustine said of beauty “Beauty is indeed a good gift of God but that the good may not think it a great good, God dispenses it even to the wicked”<sup>4</sup> Why are we striving to be so aesthetically pleasing to the public? Where we getting nipped and tucked and loosing or gaining weight? Because it makes you feel better about yourself? But the real question, Of course, is why it makes you feel better about yourself because even when you think it's just for you, it's actually because of the ideal of a default human being that you have in your mind, and you are not just quite fitting the quota. If you truly think you don't care how people perceive you then you should consider yourself to be perfect. If everyone's nose was as big as you thought yours was, would you still hate your nose? Just because you don't fit society's standard of Beauty doesn't mean you aren't beautiful. As aptly said by Karl Lagerfeld “I don't like standard beauty there is no beauty without strangeness”.

The factor of beauty has dominated the senses of people so much that the other important factors are being neglected. Ifshana hyder, (34 years, name changed) assistant professor, besides being highly intelligent is having a trouble in finding a suitable match, because she is not following the on-going trend of set beauty. She is living on her own, wearing what she wants, not caring about her weight; all this does not fit the set norms of beauty of this society. Society wants people to follow what is already set for them. It has become mandatory for women to look beautiful; otherwise they will not get a suitable match. And the one who will be against these norms has to bear the brunt.

<sup>4</sup> City Of God, Book 15, Chapter 22

Beauty is a social construction, Beauty ideals and their consequences are not immutable, natural or unavoidable. They are socially constructed. This means that what people take to be normal and fixed facts about the world are actually determined by social norms, culture and social interaction. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have established this theory, showing how individuals, knowledge and perception about social reality are shaped by their social position within a given society, otherwise known as their social status.<sup>5</sup> While there are positive and negative social outcomes that flow on from beauty hierarchies, these are not the logical result of natural selection and biological drive. Renditions of beauty found in art and pop culture reflect the way in which broader narratives about beauty are socially constructed.

## Conclusion

As per Durkheim social fact are so much embodied into the society, that it will be hard to wish them away. The two main features of social fact as external and coercive make them constraining on the individual and the society as a whole. The force is so vital that it is difficult to exit the grip. Durkheim's thought has provided an insight to relate the beauty with social fact. Beauty has both the attribute of external and coercive nature; it is so force full that a person into the said culture has to follow them. How does this social fact emerge? Berger and Luckmann has discussed about the social construction of reality, the reality is nothing but socially constructed. Anything becomes reality only when society approves it, when collectivity shows consensus on it. Every society has set parameters of beauty, the Kashmiri society has its own parameters and women are expected to fit those parameters. And if she failed she is destined to suffer. Your appearance matters even at the highest realm of education (University)! People live up to the expectations of others, what will others think? How will others feel? And in all this sometimes in order to make others comfortable we make ourselves uncomfortable. The concept of beauty has been limited to the said norms, and beyond that aura you are not beautiful. And this notion has led our generation to follow the blind chase, really an unproductive one.

---

<sup>5</sup> Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1991). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (No. 10). Penguin UK.