

# THE FEMALE BODY, BEAUTY PAGEANTS AND COSMETIC ADVERTISEMENTS: A READING

ANILA ANANDAN

Freelance research scholar,

Kannur, Kerala.

**Abstract:** This paper has been undertaken to investigate the role of cosmetic advertisements and beauty pageants as patriarchal tools to maintain their control over women bodies. The study goes through a few advertisements and understands how brilliantly these cultural texts create ideals of female bodies in front of the normal women folk to model upon. They become tools through which women bodies are forced to undergo transformation to satisfy the male gaze.

**Keywords:** Beauty, Female body, Gaze, Patriarchy,

Does beauty really lie in the eyes of the beholder? The statement that Plato made long back is interesting as well as problematic. If that was the case there wouldn't be this much beauty clinics, salons and spas around us. To be loud, the very beauty system is controlled and monitored and thereby beholders perception of beauty too. We take much curiosity in the way our body look in front of others, even the seemingly unseen sunburns, scars, pimples bothers us. We are ready to starve for days to size our bodies to the 'ideal' size zero. To this we are ready to undergo any extremity of pain. This paper is divided into two parts. First it looks at the politics behind cosmetic surgeries in women where the second part scrutinizes the agency of advertisements in reinforcing the beauty 'standards' in the society.

What do cosmetic surgery actually is? Any dictionary reference will provide the answer that it is the surgery that is aimed or intended at improving the bodily appearance. What is that 'thing' which necessitates the improvement? It is the 'defect' that the dominant and other is unsatisfied of. Kathy Davis sees cosmetic surgeries as a liberalizing tool for woman. She takes example of her friend Orlan where she chose cosmetic surgeries to speak against the stereotypes that say how a woman body should be. For her cosmetic surgery is 'Utopian' art (456) where woman is liberated to decide their ends. But the question is how many Orlan's do we have? There are hardly a few women in the society who wishes to alter the stereotypes, but in the social making they always become subjected to a coerced voluntariness. There cases like Orlan's become few in numbers where they can demand how their body should be transformed, and is therefore never the representative of a larger group of women who is 'forced' to do cosmetic surgeries to satisfy the dominant gaze. Kathryn Pauly Morgan discusses about this consent- making process in detail which creates the coerced voluntariness in women to submit themselves to the politics of cosmetic surgeries. She lists out three paradoxes disguised in the form of choices which ultimately creates a 'docile' body as Foucault argues. In the first paradox she says about the choice of conformity where choices are made coercively and to reiterate beauty in the dominant 'racist and anti- Semitic context.'(36)

"The women who undergo cosmetic surgery in order to compete in various beauty pageants are clearly choosing to conform. So is the woman who wanted to undergo a facelift, tummy tuck, and liposuction all in one week, in order to win heterosexual approval from a man she had not seen in twenty-eight years and whose individual preferences she could not possibly know. In some ways, it does not matter who the particular judges are." (Davis, 36)

Often the bodily part that gets transformed through cosmetic surgeries is demands from the male gaze. Hence it becomes part of 'heterosexual approval.' (Davis, 36) Kathy Davis points out the aesthetic imaginations of the male minds to behold in the woman the ideal beauty standards they expect. Within the marginal end where woman body stands, appearance is given large importance. If 'her' dentals are a little up or the presence of pimples or the flat noses will decrease her demands in the marriage market. This doesn't mean that beauty conflicts are something that applies only with the young unmarried women. Surgeons attest that they had many clients who suffer with their 'average' or 'below average' looks in marital life both physically and emotionally. The first paradox is 'reflective' and 'self- determinative'

where it points to the conformity to heterosexuality and ideal beauty. In the second paradox Morgan finds a 'colonizing culture' where women body is nothing but 'raw material' to alter and modify in terms of appearance, reproduction etc. Kathryn Pauly Morgan here recognizes power holders as male world where there is the advisory board of cosmetic surgeons to cure out defects and deformities in female body. There the Other is the decision maker, the other who is a 'male-supremacist, racist, ageist, heterosexist, anti-Semitic, ableist and class-biased.' (Morgan, 38) In the third paradox she speaks about the modern tool of coerciveness that puts the women in tension to perfect those using technologies.

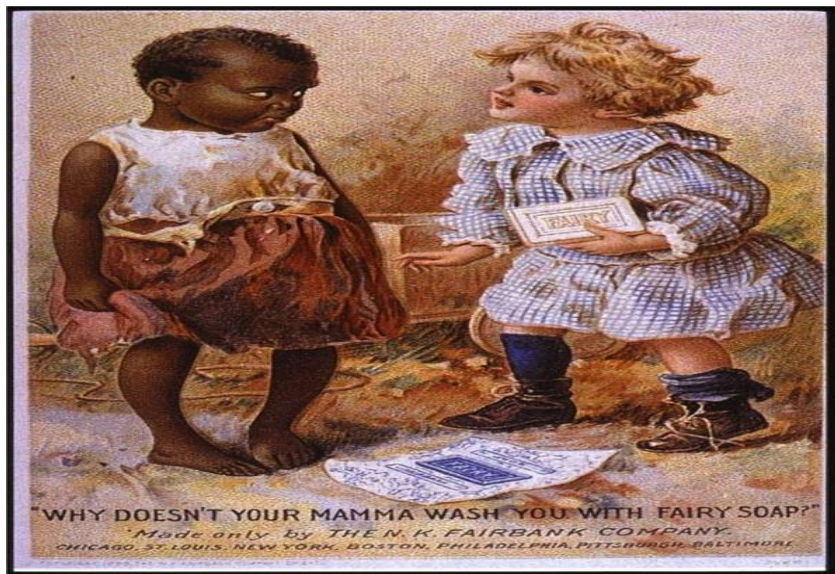
These three paradoxes list out the patriarchal pressure that wins over women body. To take the case of celebrities, they have a pressure on themselves to satisfy the large audience by portraying themselves at the peak of femininity. Davis' argument knowingly or unknowingly depicts liberation and resistance of woman body through cosmetic surgeries but at the same time the point to be noted is that there too woman body is suffered. Even Orlan fails to give an answer when she was asked about the pain she suffered during the surgeries she faced. There too woman body is tortured, is under severe pain to win over patriarchal subjugation. When Orlan is making newer metamorphoses in her body in order to resist the status quos what her body experience is nothing but pain only. Thus in both the cases suffering is unified in the woman body. Woman body which is always under surveillance, in a panoptical society, is becoming part of mechanization. Giving Barbie dolls from childhood and manufacturing the feminine aesthetic sense woman are taught to take care of their peeled of foundations and spread mascaras in the public. The attributes to masculinity and femininity itself are very much different; men should be brave and handsome where woman should be coy and beautiful. The construction of beauty in relation with womanhood itself is to portray beauty as the hall mark of woman. Considering the increasing reports of acid attacks in the nation shows the attack is to destroy something 'precious' of the victim. We hear of very few survivors of acid attacks, where victims live their remaining life in the great trauma of been 'ugly.' There like the 'angel' of god cosmetic surgeons or their magic makes the entry. There the girl who is victimized is not even getting a chance to re-read her past or to foresee her future. As Morgan said earlier she is becoming the material, a material to revenge and as a material to construct.



Source: Wikipedia

This particular advertisement by one of the popular cosmetic surgery group from Britain speaks to their woman folk to rebuild themselves to enhance their confidence. The ad equates woman beauty with her confidence. The model that stands there in the ad is with fire in her eyes. But her body down there in the picture is capable of making any woman jealous thereby bringing in the beholder an aspiration to be like the model. The model is portrayed picture perfect and flawless which not only make women to re think of their bodies deficiencies but will reiterate in the man the agency to transform their woman.

Advertisements are an important agency through which patriarchy constructs the voluntariness in woman to transform them. The important point here is that these agencies will never acknowledge of stereotyping and homogenizing woman appearance. The first thing the paper locates is the definition of woman beauty through advertisements.



Source: wikipedia

The above advertisement which presumably ran in the 1940's shows a white girl asking a black girl "why doesn't your mamma wash with Fairy soap?" The portrayal of both little girls in the print ad is done at two different extremes. Every single aspect of the ad says white is beauty, also it indirectly says black is dirty. The dominant beauty culture where white is seen as 'beauty' is not at all allowing an alternative beauty culture to emerge. The little black girl is portrayed looking enviously at the white girl. At the same time this print ad also relates beauty with social status, wealth and geography. The picture ultimately says west is beauty; white is beauty. What can be the impact this ad can create in the reader? A little girl who sees this ad, if she is black will relate herself with the black girl in the advertisement and will think about her 'deficiencies' as a white girl. These kinds of advertisements block the ability to introspect and reinforce the dominant idea of beauty. According to John Allan Cohan advertisements reinforces repeats and is pervasive enough. With all of the attendant research sophistications they can influence the audience's behavior. To him the flawlessness that the products offer through their products are illusions there by to bring or develop the coercive voluntariness in the woman to modify themselves. These types of advertisements diffuse the possibility of woman as rational being where the fact is that women rationality is never given a chance to work. They are taught to speak about beauty over books. The most important thing about this beauty culture is that the dominant is the one who determines and defines the female beauty and they are patriarchal Pygmalions. There men become the Pygmalions. Since the birth of the humanity there are happening continuous efforts to make woman body malleable there by to occupy a dominant space for the man.

"All of this tends to erode women's self-esteem. A Psychology Today study indicates that it's "no longer possible to deny the fact that images of models in the media have a terrible effect on the way women see themselves." The values promoted by advertising - take "thinness," for instance - impact jobs where women predominate, like flight attendants, waitresses, receptionists, and secretaries. A premium is placed on being attractive- meaning thin. Women faces more pressure to be thin than men and are more stringently punished by society when they fail."(Cohan, 328)

Cohan directly attacks on the social pressure on the female body to be ideal to meet the standards of the society created by man. The language and pictorial representation make sit the ultimate responsibility of the woman audience to rebuild and transform themselves. As many anthropologists argue these types of advertisements open vistas to possibilities to acquire whiteness but at the same time keeps realty at the margin. These types' advertisements 'invents' the happiness that the product can offer to the customer. Thus beauty is the thing that can offer you happiness as well as satisfaction in life.

It was during the late twentieth century the shocking rate of people affected by eating disorder was released. This made a huge controversy where woman models and other young woman due to self induced starvation or excessive dieting becomes terribly unhealthy. Making us aspire something which the dominant portray as 'ideal' and inflicting dominant ideologies in the other. Thus beauty from time immemorial becomes part of a static culture, perhaps beauty culture is the only one which is not dynamic in the sense we may feel the change, but that happens in the superficial level only. The standards remain always stagnant. Thus white is the ideal color and zero is the ideal size.

"Women who are very dissatisfied with their physiques particularly vulnerable to advertising that features endorsers or models who exemplify thinness as feminine beauty. To paint a clearer picture of how

dissatisfaction might strengthen the persuasiveness of such on the link between endorser attractiveness and advertising attractiveness must first be examined. Then it will be possible where body dissatisfaction may come into play.”(Stephens et al, 145)

Bodily dissatisfaction is culturally created where it becomes the base for establishing cultural institutions like cosmetic clinics. Like the third paradox of Kathryn Pauly Morgan suggests advertisements become an agency through which reinforcements of beauty system takes place. Media, both print and visual becomes powerful reinforcing agencies. It is the same paradox that lies behind large columns exposure to female beauty pageants and where for men it becomes sports achievements. There the media is setting to absolute models for masculinity and femininity.

Thus advertisements play a key role in creating the coerced voluntariness in woman to submit themselves to the technology to modify them. The ideology hidden behind the transformation of woman body is to satisfy the dominant gaze; the patriarchal. Thus these types of consent creations not only place women at the margin but there is clear cut reinforcement of gender roles as well. At the same time compulsory heterosexuality becomes one of the hidden agenda behind the growing development of cosmetic clinics. Thus cosmetic surgeries are the modern day patriarchal manifestation through which cultural attributes to gender are underlined. Along with that advertisements and such type of media brochures are becoming modern cultural texts that patriarchy use to maintain their control over the women bodies.

### References

1. Blair, Lorrie, and Maya Shalmon. “Cosmetic Surgery and the Cultural Construction of Beauty.” *National Art Education Association*, Vol.58, No.3, 2005, pp. 14-18 JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/27696071](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27696071).
2. Blum, Virginia. “Becoming the Other Woman: The Psychic Drama of Cosmetic Surgery.” *A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol.26, No.2, 2005, pp.104- 131 JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4137401](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137401).
3. Cohan, John Alan. “Towards a New Paradigm in the Ethics of Women’s Advertising” *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol.33, No.4, 2001, pp. 323- 337 JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/25074613](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25074613).
4. Davis, Kathy. “‘My Body is My Art’: Cosmetic Surgeries as Feminist Utopia?” *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives in the Body*. Sage Publishers.1997
5. Morgan, Kathryn Pauly. “Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women’s Bodies” *Wiley*, Vol.6, No.3, 1991, pp. 25- 53 JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/3809838](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809838).
6. Wijsbeck, Henry. “The Pursuit of Beauty: The Enforcement of Aesthetics or a Freely Adopted Lifestyle?” *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol.26, No.6, 2000, pp. 454- 458 JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/27718599](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27718599).