

PENCIL-LIKE THIN ICONS OF FEMINITY IN THE INDIAN MEDIA

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Abstract: *The mass media puts to work the potential of female body as a powerful marketing tool and bombard us with idealized and perfected versions of female bodies. The lady who appears in the silver screen or the cover of glossy fashion magazines is fair, tall and willowy, often slightly androgynous; her body flawless due to medical procedures, and most of all thin, well below the recommended weight for her height. It used to be that women were occasionally bombarded with images of rail- thin models exemplified by the 60's American fashion icons like Twiggy (the then byword for a waif-like figure) but their body type was considered the exception rather than the norm. However, during the turn of the century, thin suddenly became sensational, and almost every woman started to covet the 'twiggy' look. The recent epidemic has ladies in the Indian media dropping their weight to get abnormally svelte and slender frames.*

All the gossip magazines today carry stories about actresses who have won the 'weight loss battle'. Thinness also becomes a symbol of one's social status and position. Taken to extremes, an obsession with weight and body image can lead to dangerous eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and compulsive overeating. The number of cosmetic surgeries, liposuctions and silicon implants have increased substantially in India. The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells ordinary women that they are always in need of constant adjustment—and that the female body is an object to be perfected. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits.

Key words: *culture of thinness, size zero, beauty industry, body image, insecurity, depression, women redefining themselves*

Women are around to be gazed at. The mass media puts to work the potential of female body as a powerful marketing tool and bombard us with idealized and perfected versions of female bodies. Women—young and attractive women, and their body parts, sell every other commodity in the market from tooth paste to luxury cars. A recent UNESCO report released in 2009 describes the litany of common images of women in the media: “the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hard faced corporate and political climber.” Whichever of these images are being applied to, the female bodies that the media presents before us are all strikingly similar in that they are all invariably young, supposedly attractive, and dressed as per the latest fashion trends.

The lady who appears in the silver screen or the cover of glossy fashion magazines is fair, tall and willowy, often slightly androgynous; her body flawless due to medical procedures, and most of all thin, well below the recommended weight for her height. This idealized female, in fact, is aesthetically trimmed to have the body proportions of a teenager rather than those of a fully grown woman. The feminist critic Naomi Wolf posits the idea of an "iron-maiden," an intrinsically unattainable standard that used by the male dominated culture to punish women physically and psychologically for their failure to achieve and conform to beauty ideals.

East or west, women both young and old engage themselves in laboriously sculpting and remodelling their own bodies in an effort to pursue this emerging 'culture of thinness'. Woe to the girl who lacks slim hips, waspish waist and wasted thighs- she simply cannot fit into today's designer robes. "An average 5'9" model's weight is somewhere around 110-115 lbs." (Rowland). We tend to consider the sickly anorexic as glamorous, as an identity for fashion models, pop stars and actresses. The few women who do not conform to this symmetry are very often on the line of fire for being 'plus size', or in layman's terms, fat.

The androgynous ideal of female body originally surfaced in the western culture during the 1960s as women sought to distance themselves from the domesticating roles of wife and mother. It used to be that women were occasionally bombarded with images of rail-thin models exemplified by the 60's American fashion icons like Twiggy (the then byword for a waif-like figure) but their body type was considered the exception rather than the norm. However, during the turn of the century, thin suddenly became sensational, and almost every woman started to covet the 'twiggy' look. The recent epidemic has ladies in film industry dropping their weight to get abnormally svelte and slender frames. Indian actresses and models, following their western counterparts, now prefer tenuity and slenderness over fullness and voluptuousness which were the yesteryear ideals.

How far has this emerging culture of thinness invaded the Indian media? The popular film actresses and models who are becoming paler, taller and gaunter warp the body images of thousands of women, young and impressionable. "Important changes in Indian society have occurred; for example, a media image of the ideal Indian woman as slim and assertive has been conveyed to the rapidly expanding television audience." (Malhotra & Rogers, 2000). Women grow up watching television shows and movies that reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of woman's worth. Indian TV shows and soap serials showcase female characters who are underweight, and only a small proportion of Indian tele actresses are above average in size.

Today's women's magazines, be they of national or international circulation, are "full of articles urging that if they can just lose those last twenty pounds, they'll have it all—the perfect marriage, loving children, great sex, and a rewarding career" (Media Awareness Network) and they manage to have a huge sway over the Indian middle class. All the gossip magazines today carry stories about actresses who have won the 'weight loss battle' or successfully lost their post pregnancy belly, and the ones who have become suddenly unpopular due to a nominal increase in their dress sizes. Media hype profoundly influences the average urban woman and compounds her already existing fears and insecurities, and presents her with the idea that she needs to look a certain way in order to be accepted. The unrealistic ideals promoted by movies and television reach an even larger larger proportion of the masses.

Indian culture has always embraced and shapeliness and fullness in women, and before the 'thin is in' trend settled in, the leads in Indian films and TV shows were women of average height and normal weight, none of them attempting to look sickly thin or malnourished to be glamorous. However, "Influenced by international standards of beauty, the well rounded, voluptuous heroines that characterized Hindi films through the 1980s have been replaced by thin beauties." (Derne 133). Heroes in the industry, on the other hand, have got 'bigger' with substantial increase in muscle sizes. Thus, "the new standards of beauty which were introduced through cable television and foreign films and have been adopted in local media products, like Hindi films, end up contributing to male dominance by intensifying the focus on male strength and female weakness." (Derne 133).

The culture of thinness exposes an adolescent living in India to western and Indian fashion icons alike. A newspaper reports on the 'size zero' figure sported by the Indian actress and fashion icon Kareena Kapoor sported a 'size zero' figure for one of her films: "Bollywood diva Kareena Kapoor, who imported the size-zero fad in the country, says she is proud to be the "Indian size zero", which means being really slim..... Kareena hit

headlines when she lost eight kilos to acquire a bikini body for 2007 film 'Tashan'. Though the film failed to create any magic at the box office, Kareena's thin figure became the talk of the town, sparking the whole size zero trend in India." (The Indian express Nov 03 2009). Similarly, a recent newspaper report on the Indian actress Vidya Balan who had adopted a traditional well- stacked look for her role in 'Dirty picture' says: "Having put on almost 12 kilos for *The Dirty Picture*, Vidya has shed most of it, and also looks slither than she does onscreen.", bringing home the idea that voluptuousness and above average size in a celebrity is no longer something acceptable in the long run. (INDIA TODAY MARCH 5, 2012) .When celebrities who are not merely celebrities, but fashion icons and idols for some, decide to sport a tiny frame ,why wouldn't an ordinary woman on the street do the same?

Computerised photos of models and actresses are further 'perfected' to cover the 'flaws' left over even after excessive dieting, immaculate hair dos, make-up and cosmetic surgery. The images seen in fashion and fitness magazines are touched up and glossed over to such an extent that it no longer looks like the actual individual. The images of men and women in magazines are usually manipulated- photo shopped and digitally altered. Even the female athletes in sports magazines are never too muscular, and even though much healthy looking than the average actress or fashion model, are more or less noticeable for their alluring forms rather than their physical fitness or athletic prowess.

Many things contribute to how a woman perceives about her own body including peer pressure, family history, education, ethnic, cultural and social status and most importantly, the media. Studies show that exposure to images of the unattainable beauty ideal cause dissatisfaction, depression and anger, and lowers self-esteem in both women as well as men. When women are dissatisfied with their own bodies, the images of tall, fair skinned, ultra-thin women in magazines, TV and movies can reinforce those negative feelings. These images make them feel even more anguished about their own size, skin colour and other physical features.

Body image is extremely important for an individual, especially for a woman living in a patriarchal society. It can be the basis of self-identity and can affect how an individual responds to his/her own body type through emotions, behaviours, and thought processes While the media does affect both men and women, women in particular feel more pressurized than men to follow the body ideals projected by the media. Men generally are more at ease with the society they live in. Their acceptance in social circles is more or less taken for granted. On the other hand, a woman is often evaluated, in most cultures, by her beauty alone. Women who wish for increased social acceptance, admiration and recognition by her peers, thereby realize that beauty is an essential criteria for success in her social endeavours. In the case of India, beauty, flawlessness and innocence are associated not only with a woman's social acceptability but also a successful matrimony. For instance, the Hindi actress Priyanka Chopra, in a promotion a fairness cream ad campaign says: "Love makes the world go round ... Pond's White Beauty gives it a helping hand." (). All these send a powerful message that can inhibit women who feel they fail to meet society's expectation of what it means to be attractive and successful.

Even the economically independent Indian women of today tend to value beauty and appearance over intellectual prowess and academic achievements. The media images not only puts forward the idea that attractive women and men are socially rewarded more than unattractive people, but also that an unappealing appearance may mar their chances. From early childhood, girls are read fairy tales about princesses who achieve a happy and prosperous life simply because their beauty makes them special.

Even a Mattel's Barbie doll that a ten year old girl child gets to play with has a body shape that would be unobtainable and unsustainable if scaled up to life-size. . On growing up, the images of women in magazines and movies reinforce the same idea. The body image projected by the media is somewhat similar to the figure of a Barbie doll in its tall, thin and gangly silhouette with incredibly long legs, well- developed breasts and flat abdomen. In her book, *Beauty Bound*, Rita Freedman writes, "A five-year-old confidently tells me that 'girls play at being pretty, but boys play cars...' The socialization of gender begins in infancy and involves almost every aspect of experience." (118).

Thus, a little girl learns early enough that her aesthetics are her definition. She understands that to be a woman is to be attractive, to be attractive is to be thin, and to be 'ugly' and 'fat' is therefore, to be unwomanly. Right from childhood, women are self-trained to compete with their peers to be 'the fairest of them all'. "One result of such demeaning and devaluing is that girls and women come to have lower expectations about the likelihood and the value of success in endeavours outside that of having a pleasing appearance. These messages make personal appearance all the more significant, because it is the one area where women are depicted as capable of achieving marvellous results that will consistently bring happiness and pleasure." (Encyclopedia of women and gender: sex similarities and differences, 94).

"...In the western world, upper- middle class women tend to be significantly thinner than the women of lower socio economic status".(Emaciated body images in the media, 82). Thus, thinness also becomes a symbol of one's social status and position. The upper middle class Indian, for instance, is more acutely aware and conscious about his/her physical frame and thinness than a working class individual who is less exposed to celebrated fashion idols and glossy magazines.

Taken to extremes, an obsession with weight and body image can lead to dangerous eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and compulsive overeating. Until recently these eating disorders were largely an obscure illness outside of the developed west. However, " At the same time as economic liberalisation led to the deregularisation of advertising, anorexia nervosa has also appeared in major cities in low- income Asian countries such as China, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia". Further, " Societal modernisation with its gendered opportunities and constraints as well as media influence have been claimed to be responsible for the phenomenon." (Diets and dieting: a cultural encyclopedia, 40-41).The B.B.C. reports: "Most people in India struggle to get enough to eat - one estimate is that 60% of India's women are clinically malnourished. But psychiatrists in urban areas are reporting cases of anorexia nervosa, the so-called slimming disease that can cause sufferers to starve themselves to death. Although 90 per cent of cases are female, boys are not immune. Increasing numbers of male patients who have an unhealthy relationship with food are being referred by doctors for treatment.

Excessive fasting and drop in body weight may also lead to infertility and cessation of menstruation in women. "Most of these supermodels and actresses are so unnaturally thin that they risk infertility, osteoporosis and, ultimately, kidney damage." (Hellmich). But it doesn't take an expert to see that the unnatural thinness propagated by the media is unhealthy and unnatural. Health, confidence and happiness are to be constantly sacrificed at altar of the fickle goddess of beauty. As Kim Chernin has written in *Reinventing Eve: Modern Woman in Search of Herself*, we need to reflect on the "Woman Who Is Not Yet":

These reflections on the Woman Who Is Not Yet are linked together by a fascination with food and by the general questions why food is forbidden to modern woman. Thus, the tyranny of slenderness encourages us to regard food with a sense of dread because eating leads us away from the present cultural ideal for slenderness in women and back to an older, frightening imagery of female abundance (Chernin xiv).

The number of cosmetic surgeries, liposuctions and silicon implants have increased substantially in India. The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells ordinary women that they are always in need of constant adjustment—and that the female body is an object to be perfected. Women's magazines have ten and one-half times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines do, and most of the covers of women's magazines feature at least one message about how to change a woman's bodily appearance—by starvation diets, exercise or cosmetic surgery. "We don't need Afghan-style *burqas* to disappear as women. We disappear in reverse — by revamping and revealing our bodies to meet externally imposed visions of female beauty."(Gerber, USA today)

Thus, unattainable standards of beauty are being imposed on women, the majority of whom are naturally larger and more mature than any of the media mascots. The roots of this phenomenon, are mostly economic. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of

growth and profits. Similarly, youth is increasingly promoted, along with thinness, as an essential criterion of beauty. If not all women need to lose weight, for sure they're all aging, says the Quebec Action Network for Women's Health in its 2001 report *Changements sociaux en faveur de la diversité des images corporelles*.

Women naturally fall victims to the profit craze of beauty industry. Those who are insecure about their bodies are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, and diet aids. Drugstore owners are minting money by playing on this weakness on the part of women and flooding the market with diet pills with some disastrous implications. TV channels broadcast numerous ads of herbal teas, slimming oils, ab belts and fancy gym equipments that are supposed to aid in quick weight loss. For instance, a paid advertisement for an 'ab belt' says: "After using the Belt, your metabolism will be enhanced and the pounds will just melt away." There is an abundance of television shows that focus exclusively on celebrities' weight loss, diets and fitness regimes, as the scale of their success.

Books and journals about weight loss and thinness are now at the top of the pile in the non-fiction category in bookstores across the country. For instance, The Hindu reports, "Rujuta Diwekar, known for giving Kareena Kapoor her size zero look, shot to fame with her first book "Don't Lose Your Mind, Lose Your Weight", and her second book, "Women & the Weight Loss Tamasha", launched recently, is fast reaching the top of the list of must-reads. Payal Gidwani Tiwari, a celebrity yoga trainer who wrote "From XL to XS", has also turned out to be another success. Namita Jain's "Figure It Out", one of the most recent books unveiled by Deepkika Padukone, is focussed on the teens and creating ripples. Then there's Lisa Delaney's "Secrets of a Former Fat Girl"... the list goes on."

"The overwhelming presence of media images of painfully thin women means that real women's bodies have become invisible in the mass media." (Media Awareness Network). When women internalize these stereotypes, and judge themselves by the beauty industry's standards, they learn to compare themselves to other women, and to compete with them for male attention. This focus on beauty and desirability "effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change that climate." (Media Awareness Network).

The current beauty ideal denies the evolutionary instinct of higher fat percentage found in female animals than in males, giving them a more rounded appearance. "Accumulation of lower body fat is a human female characteristic that developed because of a need to carry an infant while foraging to meet the energy demands of lactation." (Clinical obesity in Adults and children, 11). It is not that men choose malnourished body ideal over a normal sized one, or that they want their partners to be pin thin. In fact, any man would prefer a female partner who is comfortable with her own body and happy with it, over a woman who is insecure and vulnerable. No man would wish to acquire a beautiful woman, with her "beauty" as his sole target.

However, none of these are taken into consideration by the media which equates the mono image of being sleek and delicate as attractive and acceptable. This mono ideal has been vehemently opposed by feminists all over the globe, as it obviously hampers women's progress as individuals. It has also been rejected by men who accept their fellow beings as they are. "Women who love themselves are threatening; but men who love real women, more so." (Wolf 44)

American feminist and ad-critic Jean Kilbourne says that, "Women's bodies and products are completely interchangeable in the world of ads." In a consumer market, an idealized female body is interchangeable with the commodity itself. It not only attracts consumer attention, but sells itself through the sale of the product it stands for. Women are stereotyped as one image and that image is of perfection. "Consumer advertising negatively objectifies women, conforming to a misogynist perception of women as commodifiable sex objects. (The Debate Book: A Must-Have Guide for Successful Debate, 19) By International Debate Education Association, Robert Trapp That image does not allow women to be viewed as diverse, individual women. However, this problem dates back to centuries of male aesthetics.

Woman, who had earlier been reduced to an object to be gazed upon, has now become a mannequin to fit prescribed dress sizes. People are now labelled as a 'size 2 or 4. What matters most is that the body should fit the dress maker's comfort. The desired size is to be achieved at any cost, be it through starvation, medical procedures or cosmetic surgery. A body labelled 'U.S. size zero' for instance, a look that became immensely popular in India in the last few years, would have the body measurements of a 31 inch bust, 23 inch waist and 32 inch hips, which would earlier have been considered the body proportions of a prepubescent female.

Increased insecurity and fear of their bodies in women inevitably leads to an estrangement from it. Women are no longer at ease with their own selves and this in turn, restricts her sexuality and curbs her sexual potential. Naomi wolf writes:

Sadly, the signals that allow men and women to find the partners who most please them are scrambled by the sexual insecurity initiated by beauty thinking. A woman who is self-conscious can't relax to let her sensuality come into play. If she is hungry she will be tense. If she is "done up" she will be on the alert for her reflection in his eyes. If she is ashamed of her body, its movement will be stilled. If she does not feel entitled to claim attention, she will not demand that airspace to shine in. If his field of vision has been boxed in by "beauty"--a box continually shrinking--he simply will not see her, his real love, standing right before him."

Thus, the society has come to equate weak and sickly with sexy and feminine. When being underweight, malnourished becomes a symbol of success and elevated social status, the metamorphosed model of the female body is decidedly feeble r than men and sexually inactive. Controlling and regulating a woman's body image is a shrewd means of controlling her sexuality as well.

In fact, the commodified female body is an asexual object like the goods that they sell and the media broadcasts they promote. Women have evolved into mere plastic models to fit one dress size or another, the smaller the better. She is to be dressed up according to the whims and fancies of a designer. As 'one size fits all', it becomes unnecessary to consider women as individuals with unique personalities and preferences.

Patriarchy has continuously imposed limiting stereotypes and beauty ideals that have aided in objectification women and the curtailment of their sexualities. Japanese foot binding that aimed at fitting adult female feet into tiny children's shoes and the Victorian corsets that trained women's waists to be reduced to unrealistic proportions have all been patriarchal schemes aimed at drastic metamorphosis of the female body . The discomfort and sickness on the part of the female had never been taken into consideration, as she had always been the 'second sex', a secondary human being.

The twentieth century culture of thinness is no different. It demands the curbing the proportions of a mature woman's body to that of a prepubescent, an ordeal that cannot be achieved naturally. . In order for patriarchy to continue to thrive, women's mobility must be limited and there is hardly a better way to limit a person than to starve them. As Kilbourne states, women are shamed for eating, and Kilbourne does not believe that women's increasing empowerment coincidentally occurred as media bombarded women with thin images, especially the "little-girl look An unwrinkled face, thighs without cellulite, and large, shapely breasts became the metaphor for female success because attaining these symbols of female achievement requires a great deal of sacrifice, hard work, and control on part of the woman.."Douglas captured the true essence of this focus on women's body's as contained and flawless with one sentence, "Narcissism as liberation is liberation repackaged, deferred, and denied" (266).

The asexual image of female body that began at the start of the century as a protest against domestication and a tool for women's liberation, has now developed an anti feminist nature. The ideals of beauty promote enmity and competition among women rather than uniting them. Women become increasingly masochistic as they develop a self-harming mentality, devising schemes to curb their appetites, tolerate hunger pangs and consume potentially dangerous diet pills. It urges normal and healthy individuals to go under the knife for restructuring

themselves. The women affected by the culture of thinness are constantly on diet, excessively exercising, or abusing drugs.

Female bodies are never naturally perfect- they have to be constantly perfected by artificial means. The unattainable 'ideal figure' turns women into masochists who severely punish themselves through excessive exercise, tolerating hunger, consuming potentially dangerous diet pills, depressing herself over unattainable beauty ideals. The physical destruction and the psychological depletion that woman suffer by following media induced ideals of beauty are often ignored. "It is summoned out of political fear on the part of male-dominated institutions threatened by women's freedom, and it exploits female guilt and apprehension about our own liberation -- latent fears that we might be going too far." (Wolf)

The pressure to conform to externally imposed ideals stunt the intellectual advancement of a woman. Moreover, she is dwarfed by the petty considerations of weight, size and physical attractiveness than a male of her age and situation. She constantly fears being unattractive, and thereby, unsuccessful. The urge to be perfected and remoulded has trapped modern woman in a much worse situation than the bounds of an isolated multiapplianced home and her chances of escape are narrow. As for the Indian woman who has to fight a thousand demons to be on the same plane level as men, and are still dependent on the men in their families for her sustenance, adoption non inclusive beauty and body ideals would further limit their possibilities.

Media stereotyping serves as a disciplinary force in the lives of women today. Media induced images dictate cultural trends indicative of our time. In the current disruption of gender roles in the Indian context, there seems to be a cultural uprising against women's increasing power, as the mass media lags down their intellectual and spiritual progress, reducing them to the status of objects to be gazed upon and commodities to be bought and sold. In a country like India where female emancipation and empowerment are still in the infant stage, and most women have not fully managed to acquire social and economic independence, this would mean a further distortion of gender roles.

Rather than blindly accepting patriarchal definitions of themselves and their bodies, be it the soft and social body image of the last century or the lean and ultra- thin image in vogue today, Indian women should be ready to redefine themselves in their attempt to fight gender oppression. Women in India are to reinvent their bodies in a way that does not limit them.

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