Modern Looks: The ‘Fashionable’ Indian Female Body

Keywords: body ideals / Indian fashion / modern Indian woman

Abstract

As Western shapes of clothing become commonplace within the Indian sartorial landscape so too do Westernised notions of fashion and fashionability. With the adoption of global fashion and its indigenisation to suit the Indian consumer the ways in which the fashionable body is represented, perceived and finally performed has seen a significant shift in recent decades. This in turn further heightens the simultaneous and often contradictory discourse of tradition and modernity experienced by urban women in India.

In an attempt to explore contemporary fashion’s impact on setting ideals for the female body, this paper examines the representations of the fashionable body in Indian print media. It highlights the contradictions, contrasts and parallels that exist between ‘Western’ body, the ‘traditional’ body and ultimately the ‘modern’ body in Indian fashion and lifestyle magazines. The aim is not only to give an account of how fashion and clothing is portrayed on the body, but also how meaning is made through the consumption of this imagery. The paper also examines the authenticity of such representations in shaping and defining the everyday experiences of modern Indian women.

Introduction

‘The fashion magazine and the fashion photograph tend to be regarded by many historians and critics as ephemeral and exiguous forms of cultural production’ (Jobling 1999, p.1). Yet, despite the short-term nature of the fashion image, its ability to capture and through its medium represent a collective, socially prescribed ideal of both clothing and the body cannot be ignored. Shaped by the collective imaginations of numerous collaborative forces the image of fashion is as much real as it is fictional. The body plays a central role in the fictional image of fashion, as it is both shaped and exhibited through clothing that is displayed on it, and this in turn shapes other bodies that consume it through the act of viewing.

As the centres of fashion production and consumption become globalised to include those that were previously viewed as being outside of its realm, we begin to see numerous localised constructions of global-local fashion, where it is not only clothing that is influenced, the fashionable body and its representations are also continually evolving to suit. Here lies

the scope for finding parallel, contrasting or even contradicting modes of viewing the various facets of the fashion system that can only help widen our appreciation of the subject.

This paper explores the impact of global fashion ideals combined with localised production of fashion on the Indian female body, as demonstrated in Indian print media. It aims to highlight the representation of the ideal fashionable body in Indian fashion and lifestyle magazines as one fraught with multiple constructions, oscillating between the tropes of 'modernity' and 'tradition'. By exploring notions of the 'traditional' body in comparison to the 'Western' body, my aim to find somewhere within these two opposite poles the construction of the Indian 'fashionable' body, which is ultimately the 'modern' body. As a conclusion, this paper will offer some discussion on the authenticity of such representations and what impact their consumption may have in shaping and defining the everyday experiences of modern Indian women.

The 'Modern' Indian Woman

Woman as a symbol of 'Indianess' has been standard figure of national visual art and literature from the late ninetieth century (Mazzarella 2003, p.141). One such example of her portrayal, offered by Sinha (2000), illustrates how the discourse of Indian nationalism 'offered new subject positions to women as signifiers of essentialised 'Indianess' '(Sinha 2000, p.625). This nationalist construct distinguished the 'modern' Indian woman from both the orthodox Indian stereotype as well as her Western counterpart. Her symbolic status was thus constructed to confront the dilemma of being 'different but modern' in relation to the West' (ibid, p.624), which, as I will discuss in this paper, still holds true for contemporary portrayal of the modern Indian woman. This resulted in the fashioning of an inner identity, the core of which was authentically Indian, marking the difference and autonomy of the nation. In this way the 'modern' Indian woman's body was, and still is, a highly contested 'site' as it stands to represent the society within which it is situated.

Media representations of the contemporary Indian woman continue to place her firmly between the two contradictory poles of 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Since economic liberalisation in India in the 1990s and the subsequent opening of the Indian market to new consumer products and international luxury brands, the profile of the modern urban Indian woman has changed profoundly. Claiming that 'the hedonistic woman has at last come of age' (Munshi 2000, p.78), market research shows that this 'new' Indian woman is part of a group that is considered to be a huge potential market for consumer products especially in fashion, cosmetics and jewellery (ibid, p. 78). Conscious of her changing role, media constructions and representations of this woman have broadened to include her various

subjectivities as a modern Indian woman. The Indian female consumer, for all her roles as the selfless bearer of tradition and/or preserver of Indian family values, is encouraged by the visual media to [finally] indulge herself, through commodity consumption. While she may be articulated or constructed by the codes and conventions of global media flows, her representation is constantly localised to suit her hybrid Indian identity (Munshi 2000i, p.12). She remains 'an ambivalent entity, shaped by the social and public domain which simultaneously portrays her as glamorous, independent, conscious of her embodiment and of the many forms of adornment and self-presentation available to her, and yet enshrined in the world of tradition through her adherence to family and national values (Thapan 2004, p.415-416).'

Modern Fashion for the Indian Body: A brief overview

Fashion in India 'as a word and as a concept, denotes a deviation from the [domestic] norms of dress' (Joshi 1992, cited in Nagrath 2003, p.365). Marked by the emergence of an evolving Indian design identity, as well as the presence of international clothing brands, the 'coming of age of Indian fashion' has been widely celebrated in the last few decades by the Indian fashion industry and local media. Applied specifically to women, this typically refers to the adoption of 'alien dress' (Nagrath 2003, p.365) which is usually in the form of Westernised styles. Social class, status and education, among other factors, are significant markers in the construction of embodied identity of a modern woman and over the past fifty years, the appearance of this woman (with which the middle classes identify themselves) has shifted from someone who preserved traditional values to someone who wears 'high heels, dark glasses…printed saris, georgettes and chiffons' (Lakshmi 1988, p. 275) to, once again, one who wears 'any dress other than a sari' (ibid, p.275).

While the sari is still widely worn in India, its suitability in urban settings is often challenged by Western styles of clothing or the trendier *Salwar Kameez* (Banerjee & Miller 2003, p.241) due to their functionality as well as being more 'modern'. With the increased visibility of women in the work force, especially in the cosmopolitan centres like Delhi and Mumbai, the preference towards tailored blouses and trousers is highly noticeable. According to one report, 'women account for nearly 30% of the work force in India's information-technology industry and related services, and that figure is expected to rise to 45% by 2010' (Cohen, 2007). Western clothing is also viewed as being 'more sexy and more fun' (Dwyer 2002, cited in Nagrath 2003, p.365) and hence makes for a more modern experience. This shift from a draped or loosely fitted traditional garment, though gradual and not entirely universal, has as a consequence changed the way women experience their bodies to fit their modern roles [read clothes].

It would be wrong at this point to assume that what is currently worn in India by the urban middle classes is a 'copied' form of Western clothing. While 'things Western still embody the fashionable' (Kondo 1997, cited in Nagrath 2003, p.364), no matter how much global fashion displaces national identity, clothes still need to be worn in a specific 'fashion' in order to function within certain localised constructs for their meanings to be transmitted convincingly. Stylistically this localisation is evident in the fusion of Indian and Western aesthetics through a number of different permutations and combinations. The *Indo-Western* look, or its trendier derivative *Desi-Chic,* is one example of a seamless match of global trends and Indian aesthetics the local market. 'This move towards…Indo-western wear can be read as a deep-rooted desire to move away from the limiting world of tradition to a more liberating world of global fashion' (Nagrath 2003, p. 366). Aesthetically this look is a conscious auto-exoticisation by Indian designers, and the way the Indian consumers consciously, or subconsciously, indigenise (Indianise) their appearance through clothing and/or accessories as a result of their social conditioning. However when it comes to the sizing of Indian and Western fashion labels, the standards are still in favour of the thin body. In order to be able to partake in the 'modern' activity of fashion the Indian woman is compelled to follow the required body ideal. The classical Indian appreciation for the wide-hipped, voluptuous female no longer fits the mould of modern Indian needs:

> In a country where full figures have long represented the ideal for feminine beauty, thin is increasingly in (Cohen 2007, p.B1).

Reading the Modern Indian Woman's [Constructed] Body

The body plays a central role in performing 'fashion' by providing a context for the clothing in the image of fashion. In the case of fashion photographs in the print media, the shape of the ideal body at any given point is a result of the joint vision of designers, the clothing industry, photographers, advertisers etc, each of whom have vested interest in the shape of the fashionable body. It is through the collaboration of this ideal body and clothing that the fantasy of fashion can be fully realised. Fashion photographs not only satisfy the intention of the designer or client but also form a link with the desires of the spectator that become invested in the image (Jobling 1999, p.107). Through the construction of scenes and scenarios the readers are provided with multiples frames of viewing *themselves* via the medium of fashioned bodies on the pages of fashion magazines. This consumption of bodies and clothing is both powerful and pleasurable, as it offers the reader the opportunity to be part of the illusion through voyeuristic consumption of the image.

Much of the fashion imagery in contemporary Indian print media uses multiple contextualisations of the female body to differentiate between the numerous guises of the modern Indian woman. The female body, through it representation as a sexual object is, more often than not, the medium for viewing Westernised Indian fashion in these magazines. The body is framed for the 'active' male gaze structuring the signified female as a symbolized, 'paradigmatic object' (Rabine 1994, p. 65). Recent years have seen an increase in imagery that fetishise the female body and presents her as a sexual object, dressed in 'sexy' clothes. These are complimented by textual references of freedom and empowerment, celebrating the 'new' Indian woman as a liberated, independent woman who knows how to use her assets [mind and body] to succeed in life, work, fun, pleasure etc. The archetype of female beauty cast in these images appears to be heavily influenced by norms emanating from the West and so not too dissimilar to its Western counterpart. Once known for favouring voluptuous women's bodies dressed and illustrated in local styles, the influence of Western media assemblages and a shifting sartorial landscape has meant that the preferred body type in popular Indian visual media is now clearly the thin, and more often than not, fair body.

The subsequent observations and illustrations I present on the changing face of the female fashionable body in this paper are broadly based off and on the pages from contemporary Indian fashion and lifestyle magazines. Like the market for fashion and other related consumer goods, the choice and variety of fashion magazines that target the urban Indian female consumer have grown considerably over the past decade (the most recent entrant being Vogue India, which launched its first issue in October 2007). For this paper I have focussed mainly on three magazines, namely the Indian Elle (launched 1996, monthly at Rupees 75), Femina (launched 1959, fortnightly at Rupees 30) and the [new] Indian Vogue Elle (launched 2007, monthly at Rupees 100). My selection was based on their individual history, their immersion in the Indian market as a result of this history and the different modalities of local/global media each represent. While all three are English language publications, they tend to target different segments of the elite to middle class market, with obvious crossover of course and are universal in representing a common ideal to the Indian reader.

With global fashion, cosmetic and other luxury brands entering the Indian market, the 'face' of Indian fashion magazines has undergone numerous visual and editorial changes over the past few years. The most obvious and striking of these lie in the opening pages of each magazine, where one is presented with page after page of advertisements – of mainly Western (global) brands (Estee Lauder, Maybelline, Salvatore Ferragammo, Bulgari,

Burberry, LMV, Versace, D&G, Etro etc.) alongside Indian brands that too portray an 'international look' in their advertising. In the attempt to offer a more homogenous and international look Vogue and Elle feature a large number fashion spreads and advertisements of Western labels, often shot on Western models. While it is not my intention to focus on the Western fashion spreads or the use of the Western models, these images can be [mis]read as giving preference to the Western body over the Indian body, especially while portraying high fashion. Rarely are these types of shoots styled to include Indian *and* Western models, even though the garments featured are a mix of Indian and Western labels. This combined with the magazines' general preference for the Western beauty ideal has a 'recolonising' effect on the Indian female body. Thapan (2004) describes such processes of recolonisation as combination of the 'specific modernity of the postcolonial…[and] global alignments and fluidly of capital…which seeks to position women in particular ways that are not dissimilar to their positioning in colonial contexts' (Thapan 2004, p.411-414). The key element here is that, like fashion, the notion of recolonisation involves conforming to a prescribed ideal, while being under the pretext of making free choices.

Readers of fashion magazines and other such visual media attach meanings to the commodities and body ideals portrayed in them. Featuring numerous localised and Indianised constructs of 'fashion' and 'modern' lifestyles, the new Indian woman is shown as one who is upwardly mobile and in 'print' lives a life far beyond the actual scope of the reader. These social imaginations of 'modernity' elicit the reader's the desire for self-identity, which is ultimately seen as being achievable through body modifications and commodity consumption (the latter of which is the intention of the fashion image itself). Aligning themselves with conventions of the image and attempting to embody them through the process of consumption helps readers buy into a collective, socially prescribed identity; thereby allowing them to 'fit in'.

Modern [Western] *yet* Traditional

Currently all fashion magazines in India, including those selected for this paper are deliberate in aligning Western fashion to the 'modern' woman. Fashion editorials and advertisements emphasise on the 'fun' and 'freedom' that Western clothing brings in the way the models are styled, choreographed and contextualised in photographs. Majority of these fashion spreads, such as 'Funky Town' (Elle, August 2006) show the young Indian woman wearing bright, colourful, 'eye catching' clothes - shorts, skirts and 'tees' (T-shirts) complete with a range of equally bright accessories enjoying herself through her clothes and her fit and energetic body. Another similar construction of fun through fashion in an advertisement for Lakme's new cosmetic colours labelled 'freespirit' (Femina, October 24, 2007); a result of

their collaboration with Indian designer Manish Malhotra) shows the Indian woman 'painting the season with brazen untamed reds'. The model wears a number of layered blouses and knitwear, a long silk jacket, a pair of short shorts and Prada heels that accentuate her height and slim body while she is holding a paintbrush in her manicured hands. The message here being that the combination of Western styles and the body to suit is crucial for the lived experience of modernity [read fun].

Fairness is not a new preoccupation for the Indian woman. A result of a colonial hangover lodged in the postcolonial psyche or simply a response to global media assemblages, advertisements for skin lightening products have been around in Indian magazines for decades. Rituals of body beautification, preservation and adornment also have a deep-rooted history in the Indian woman's toilette. However, the obsession towards achieving thin bodies is a more recent phenomenon. The Wall Street journal in a recent report claims that 'India's slimming and fitness industry now amounts to $750 million in terms of revenue and is expected to grow 25% to 30% annually…[and]…fashion appears to be the biggest factor driving the newly weight conscious' (Cohen 2007, p.B1). With slimming studios (gyms) mushrooming in even the smaller urban centres, today's media driven, consumer culture mirrors Western ideals of the perfect body – perfectly shaped, toned and exercised. The commodification of this body ideal and its sexualisation in the print media subsequently means that 'the discipline of the body and the pleasure of the flesh are no longer in opposition to one another. Instead, discipline of the body through dieting and exercise has become one of the keys to achieve a sexy, desirable body which in turn gives *you* [emphasis mine] pleasure' (Entwistle 2000, p.20).

Achieving the ideal body is heavily encouraged through numerous articles, self-help columns and advertorials in magazines like Femina, which are often stronger in rhetoric and connotation than the more expensive magazines such as Elle and Vogue. As a magazine that targets the middle to lower segment of the middle class market, the general belief is that such a reader needs to be taught or explained, firstly, why a given product is essential and secondly, how through selective buying and body adjustments they can achieve a given look. Despite the magazine's inclusion of Indian traditional fashion (much more in comparison to Elle and Vogue), as well as its celebration of the Indian woman in her genuine form as an authentic Indian entity; when it comes to beauty and fitness advice Femina continues to follow the Western ideal. It portrays beauty both 'as an ideal and as a goal' (Thapan 2004, p 420). In doing so, the body is fragmented into various parts (the face, skin, hair, legs etc) in the attempt to provide a complete, seasonal beauty guide for the Indian reader. Beauty pageant winners like Ashwariya Rai and Sushmita Sen play a central role as

global ambassadors of Indian beauty and are supported in their endeavours by Femina's editorial material. Regular articles on the hard work and determination these women put into maintaining their bodies alongside being exemplary Indian women bears testimony to the fact that beauty can be a full time occupation.

However, as mentioned earlier, the construction of the 'new' Indian woman is very much a combination of the 'past' and 'present', 'local' and global' and 'modern' and traditional', making her body a hybrid entity that can shift seamlessly from one mould to another. Aesthetically she is a combination of the Western body-beautiful and Indian traditional inner-self. Her hybridity, which is celebrated in these magazines, also allows her to *simultaneously* embody the aforementioned contrasting ideals. The Western body is the fun, young body, but the same body when clad in a stylised sari designed by Gaurav Gupta or Tarun Tahiliani becomes 'modern' Indian through its fusion of traditional and Western elements. When wearing Western styles, the Indian woman is uninhibited, but in Indian clothing she dons a more graceful and timeless beauty. She retains her Western form, but embodies the centuries of tradition that make her uniquely Indian. In comparison to the Western body, which is portrayed as an individual body the traditional body is often shown in the realm of collective [national] identity. This traditional body is also aligned with marital status or a woman's the suitability towards this status, hence her body becomes a primary site for the display of material excess and family [self or husband's] earnings through the consumption of jewellery and Indian couture clothing.

Global recognition of Indian models like Ujjwala Raut has meant that darker skinned bodies have gained greater visibility in Indian magazines, though their representation is often typecast in exotic stylisations. This is yet another example of re-colonisation and re-orientalisation of the Indian female body. The jewellery spread titled 'Objects of Desire' in the first issue of Vogue (October 2007) is one such example where the dark female body represented in a highly sexualised and exoticised manner. Dressed only in jewellery, the two dark female model bodies replicate erotic Indian visual and sculptural art through their posture and choreography. Ritu Kumar's recent photomontages also feature darker skinned male and female models wearing her couture range of Indian traditional [wedding] wear that are styled to mimic Indian miniature paintings. 'Such narratives borrow from older, historically specific meanings that present a fusion between national tradition and global capitalism' (Fernandes 2000, p.615) as well as auto-exoticise the Indian body for local and global consumption.

Real Bodies

The ageing or over weight body has no place in the construction of fashion imagery in Indian magazines. Once associated with prosperity, the over weight Indian body is deemed unfit for 'modern' fashion. Despite an 82% vote from Femina's readers saying 'curves are in' in its monthly SMS (text message) poll for the October issue, the magazine featured only one advertisement for a plus sized clothing. While this not necessarily the fault of the magazine (supply responds to the market demand), it paints a grim picture for those women who would like to experience fashion but remain outside its size limitations. Once associated with wisdom, the ageing body is also largely excluded from fashionable imagery unless is conforms to some aspect of the fashioned form. When such bodies are included it is usually for the portrayal of tradition and longevity – especially with regards to promoting products that are either for the home or those that are aligned with Indian rituals, festivals or traditions. The portrayal of Maharani Gayatri Devi, Sharmila Tagore and Hema Mallini in advertisements illustrates the commodification of the history and tradition vested in their bodies. Rarely are such bodies associated with fashion.

The contradiction between the real and the representation becomes highly obvious in the non-fashion related material in Indian fashion and lifestyle magazines, that often feature the stories and lives of inspirational, publicly active, philanthropic, artistic women; who are portrayed as the real representatives of Indian 'modernity'. Usually preferring to wear either casual Indian styles (such as the Salwaar Kameez) or a less 'fashionable' Indo-Western clothing these women demonstrate the gap experienced between the young, trendy, 'modern' ideal that these magazines portray and the 'real' woman that is featured alongside. The platform provided to these women, while empowering, is clearly demarcated from the fashionable bodies on show in the trendier editorials. The more elitist publications also tend to focus more on the body-beautiful people, (for eg Elle's 50 most stylish Indians featured in December 2006), therefore being highly selective in every aspect of the magazines' portrayal of style.

Conclusion

"If India was a woman, how would you dress her?"

The above question posed to editorial and photographic contributors in the first issue of the Indian vogue generated some mixed responses. Ranging from draping her in a sari with a more contemporary look to dressing her in a pair of old faded jeans in the day and jewellery at night; it is clear that there is no one single mode for constructing the ideal *Indian* woman, just as 'there is no one modernity, any more than there was ever a static 'tradition' (Banerjee & Miller 2003, p. 245). Similarly the construction of the fashionable female body in Indian

print media remains an ambivalent mix of Indian and Western ideals that together shape the ‘modern’ body.

The real body in print, on the street, in shops and other such real settings is vastly different from the fantasy presented on the pages of Femina, Elle and the Indian Vogue. Nevertheless, this difference does not mean such bodies are entirely fictional. Their construction through social forces and their consumption through viewer-ship bears evidence of their profound impact on the ‘imaginations’ of modern Indian women, which cannot lie wholly outside the reality that women experience in their daily lives.

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