

American Beauty Empire and Inscription Metaphor: A Study of Third World Women as ‘Tabula Rasa’ in Sonia Singh’s *Goddess for Hire* and Kavita Daswani’s *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*

Shaista Malik
Mustanir Ahmad
Sobia Masood

No theory, that is to say – not even one that measures its adequacy in terms of justice to heterogeneity, locality, complexity – can place itself beyond danger. (Bordo, 223)

Abstract

Feminist beauty practices occupy an important place in the contemporary world, as it is one of the greatest source of business and profit for the leading international brands. Contrary to the general understanding that women should be at full liberty to exercise their right to beautify them, the radical feminists identified that the Western women are coerced to alter their bodies in accordance with patriarchal aesthetic notions. The present study is an effort to analyze Sonia Singh’s Goddess for Hire (2004) and Kavita Daswani’s The Village Bride of Beverly Hills (1974) to demonstrate that the Asian American writers inscribe their signature on the body of literature to cast resistance against alienation of the immigrant women living in the USA. The study revealed that both Sonia Singh and Kavita Daswani have highlighted the ‘othering’ process of these ethnic, transcultural and postcolonial women as alienated from their families and their true selves, yet the dominant culture does not embrace them, because embracing them would mean ending their quest for perfection lauded by American media which would imperil this inhuman, profit oriented mass of industry’s monetary gains.

Keywords: Western beauty norm; Radical Feminism; Postmodern Feminism; Post-feminism; Third World Women

1. Cutting the Ground

Feminist critique of Western beauty practices emerged in the last quarter of the 20th Century with lead taken by radical feminists. These radical feminist (e. g. Dworkin, 1974, Hanisch, 1969) identified that Western women are coerced to alter their bodies in accordance with patriarchal aesthetic notions. Since that critique was formulated, some feminist strands defended beauty practices as women’s own choices rather than coercion. Among these feminist brands were included postmodern feminists and post-feminists who defended beauty pursuit on various grounds. Taking the contradiction of these two opposing theoretical schools as a point of departure, we will examine these differing ‘textual versions’ of the body, exploring the experiences of third world women and how they are coerced into accepting these beauty norms. We contend that feminist (Radical), post-feminist and postmodern feminist discourses construct female body as a *tabula rasa*¹, on which gender and political texts are written, and in this

¹ Tabula rasa is a Latin phrase which means “scrapped tablet” or “blank slate” in English. It originates from the Roman tabula used for notes, which was blanked/cleaned by heating the wax and then smoothing it and thus making it ready for re-writing on it.

construction process they 'other' the Third World women, which they attempt to theorize as 'bodies' that are made more into plastic and alterable surfaces on which besides gender and political texts, behaviours and aesthetic standards erected by the First World patriarchal capitalism are inscribed. It has been hypothesized that by assuming silence over different experiences of the Third World women, the First World feminists perpetuate 'female essentialism'.

2. Situating the Study

Radical feminists (e.g. Braithwaite, 2002; Butler, 1988; Hanisch, 1969; Morris, 1992; Tamale & Oloka-Onyango, 1995), with their slogan of 'personal is political', formulated a comprehensive explanation of women's oppression by beauty norms. Dworkin (1974) and Jeffreys (2005) see beauty practices as having extensively harmful rather adverse effects on the female body and, according to them, all such practices incisively determine the proportions of a woman's physical freedom. Drafting an expansive range of beauty regimens, Dworkin recounts the psychological relation between these aesthetic standards and women's freedom. She writes that in Western culture not a single segment of a woman's body is spared the pain of improvement and beauty practices serve as marker of male, female role distinction and specialisation. Beauty becomes a necessary element of a woman's identity and in a misogynist culture such practices are imposed on women so that sexes can be discerned and separated and the dominant sex class from the subordinate one could be told apart. Another radical feminist, Bartky (1990, 23) developed her critique of feminine aesthetic norms by employing Fanonian phenomenological approach and refuted the patriarchal discourse of women being "choosing agents" rather than "coerced victims" of beauty regimens. She explicated that the Western culture in general – including art, literature, fairy tales, language, institutions and church – was a sexist one which endorsed male domination and that women, surrounded by a sexist culture, are alienated, objectified and psychologically suppressed. Consequently, they are forced to alter their bodies to get an acceptance and approval of the society. Hence, their subjugation which is a relentless feature of Western culture seems to be natural rather than cultural and, therefore, beyond any need of change. Bartky criticized Foucault's position in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1977) where he saw the rise of modern parliamentary structure as a disciplinary system. Foucault had contended that political liberation has given rise to a more deceptive kind of discipline or control which was directed against bodies of the subjects. This new discipline regulates, controls and appropriates the body of a modern man by a 'powerful disciplinary gaze' and by doing so it extracts efficiency and economy out of a human body. The subject's already disciplined, controlled and subjected body cannot resist the authoritative gaze and he becomes calculative in administering his minute body movement. This strict, disciplinary gaze assures not only subjugation of the body but also of the mind and corporal punishment becomes unneeded. This state of conscious and permanent visibility assumes the working of power in a smooth manner and 'each worker becomes his own jailor'. Bartky criticised Foucault's theorizing for ignoring women's bodies subjected to cultural regulations which produce women's bodies as 'ornamental surfaces'. She enlisted some of those disciplinary practices that produce a distinctive feminine body of a 'particular size, shape and configuration' (27). This cultured or disciplined feminine body has distinctive gestures, postures and movements. Woman encounters this disciplinary gaze in a misogynistic culture perpetually and internalizes the disciplinary gaze and monitors herself rigidly in deference to patriarchal aesthetic notions. Her self-image is distorted to such an extent that she equates all her worth with body of an appropriate size and shape. The internalized disciplinary gaze not only regulates size and shape of the female body, it rigidly regulates her facial contours too. Not only her natural

appetites are controlled, her facial expressions undergo a severe regulatory authority. To have a pleasant facial appearance, she must hide any sign of experience of public office, creases and frowns of deep thought or meditation. Wrinkles are deeply detested in a female's face and are considered as the sign of women's agedness and lack of self-control, while these are appreciated in a male's face as a sign of his profound experience. Bartky posits that Foucault does not mention that Western woman is instructed time and again about the utility of application of cosmetic products to fill up inadequacies [manifest in the form of wrinkles] in her face and general appearance. To take care of her skin tone and texture, a Western woman has to follow a strict schedule of regular diets, make up, skin and hair care habits. This makes her spend considerable amount of time, energy and care and makes her direct her energies to the wrong direction. Bartky argues that apart from that, girls are conditioned from their infancy to habituate their bodies to take less space than men. Female gaze is considered a sign of laxness and immorality; hence girls are trained to avert their eyes in the face of male staring. A sovereign female gaze that perceives everything as unshackled indicates immorality. Woman's mobility also undergoes rigorous disciplinary regulation. A woman in a patriarchal culture must calculate her stride in obedience to the whims of authority. Man's stride is longer and extended than a woman's. Feminine mobility is trained to demonstrate restraint coupled with grace but eroticism guarded by reserve. She is encouraged to develop a restrained stride coalesced with an elusive but 'provocative hip-roll' (1990, p. 28). These disciplinary practices are seen by her as inscription of inferiority and subjugation status over woman's body. Her analysis is comprehensive, but exclusive. She discussed in detail power configuration involved in genders but does not consider power play involved in races and cultural differences. She writes, "Femininity as spectacle is something in which virtually every woman is required to participate" (34). However, nowhere in her exhaustive discussion does she mention the problems faced by coloured women settled in Western countries. She does not hint at variety and magnitude of disciplinary regimens which inscribe not only gender but race over the bodies of dark women. She mentions the psychic alienation of Western women living in misogynistic male culture where women are measured by patriarchal aesthetic standards; she nowhere mentions the psychic alienation of the coloured women judged by white male supremacist, racist and capitalist gaze. She excludes from her explanation the trans-cultural women living in progressive countries whose intellectual achievement is impeded in a culture that 'others' them on the base of their colour, race, ethnicity. Her analysis occludes the experiences of immigrant women who have to un-write the cultural codings, ethnicities, colonial experiences, racial scribbles from their bodies in order to be accepted in a xenophobic culture. The present study sets to explore the gaps left by Bartky's analysis. We contend that to omit the forms of subjugation that brings forth texts of inferiority on trans-cultural women's bodies is to become complicit in perpetuating oppression through body rituals and legitimating the status quo. Though, Bartky's *analysis* sounds liberatory in its critique of unbalanced power dynamics involved in genders, her analysis as a whole reproduces racism deeply ingrained in Western theoretical perspective. The project seeks to validate that by excluding experiences of third world women, Bartky has silenced the different voices and reduced feminism as a movement to the experiences of white upper middle class bourgeoisie women. By assuming silence on third world women's different experiences, Bartky has "Othered" and marginalized these women and has assumed an elitist perspective.

This radical stance of feminists like Dworken and Bartky underwent a severe lashing in 1980's by postmodern feminists. Postmodern feminists (e.g. Grosz 1994; Davis, 2003) theorize a woman's

body simply as a 'text' which can be written on. Postmodernists assert that piercing, staining, tattooing, cutting, liposuction, labioplasty, rhinoplasty, eye-lid correction surgery and various other forms of cosmetic surgery are just interesting modes of coding agency on a woman's body. Davis legitimizes breast augmentation surgery in Netherlands on the ground that the concept of a natural, pre given body has been rendered obsolete in a technological age and in future the bodies will assume only an outward costume worn, discarded and changed by people according to their will. In such a post-body culture bodies will be insignificant. Davis, however, fails to account for a substantial numerical difference between men consumers of aesthetic surgery as compared to women consumers. She interviews a selected group of women in Netherland who have been discarded by their male counterparts for having unfeminine appearance. She lauds these women's choice for augmentation surgery as their agency and states that her interviewees are not 'cultural dopes' or victims who are appropriating their bodies in accordance with cultural norms. She says that this surgery is a medical intervention in their identity formation which can allow a woman to 'open up the possibility to renegotiate her relation to her body. Cosmetic surgery according to Davis affords these women an opportunity to become an 'embodied subject' rather than an 'objectified body' (2003, p. 113). Such a surgery in her opinion is scribbling statement of one's agency over blank slate of one's body. She however fails to account why men's agency does not assert itself in being 'embodied subjects'. In her enthusiasm to defend aesthetic surgery Davis pleads all feminists to acknowledge and respect woman's agency. Davis rejects any notion or involvement of suppression and oppression. Davis does not question Capitalism's vested interest in propagating cosmetic surgery by disseminating inferiority in women who come short of a standardized appearance lauded by mass media. She does not question advertisement industry, fast burgeoning cosmetic surgical industry and cosmetic surgeon's economic interest in upholding cosmetic surgery. Particularly Davis is silent over the issue of coloured women and their transformation by cosmetic surgical industry. It is this gap left by her that ignites this research. Our contention is that by renouncing the concepts of agents and interests Davis renounces ideological constellations and ignores the power politics. By assuming women consumers (consuming beauty practices and services) as knowledgeable, discriminating and empowered with choice and agency, able to select and reject from motley of offerings in their own interests she disregards the cultural pressures on women to undergo insalubrious procedures. Davis's rationale for legitimating cosmetic surgery can be discarded by applying a simple test proposed by Thompson (2001, p. 25), who opines that in order to analyze anything for ideological configurations despite its deceptive language is to see critically the relations of power. Any practice, propounds Thompson, which reinforces relations of ruling is ideological and political in nature. The test she proposed proves helpful in denuding loopholes in Davis' theory vis-à-vis ignoring the vested interest of a number of industries disseminating and capitalizing over women's inferiority complexes.

Chapkis (1986) provided an insight into political, ideological and economic configurations involved in beauty standards lauded by American based mass media. She was of the view that trans-cultural and coloured women are wheedled by the Western beauty estate to trim their appearances in accordance with western beauty norms. She comments, "Women of the former colonies are directed to assess their assets and liabilities and to play the beauty market accordingly" (p. 93). 'American Beauty Empire' sends an overt message to these women that Caucasian appearance brings economic security, position, status which becomes the dream of coloured women in a culture where they are relegated to the lowest rungs of professional and

economic achievement because of their race. She posits that Western capitalism capitalises on these insecurities of women of colour. She furthers her argument by probing into the ideological and economic working of cosmetic industry, "The content of the global image is determined by the mechanics of the sell: who creates the images for what products to be marketed through which media controlled by whom" (p. 38). The beauty merchandise (cosmetics, toiletries, fragrance and fashion, photography, advertisement) is expanding its market worldwide. The same cosmetic products are advertised through the same commercials across the world. Chapkis says that the fast burgeoning US beauty industry is committed to penetrate to the farthest parts of the world to get huge world clients. The competition among the advertising giants for the large corporate is intense but it is won by American advertising agencies. The products they advertise are also preponderantly American. Stiles (2005) figures out that US advertisement industry is flourishing in accordance with America's manufacturing industries. America has become capitalist Mogul by owning the largest portion of the world 'Culture Industry'. Although American media has relied always heavily on advertising but now the relationship is so intimate that some of American corporations own both the magazine advertising a product and the company producing it. Giant corporations and major media have always been close allies but now they have become single entities in America. US based multinational corporations producing beauty and glamour products, US dominated international advertising and US entertainment and media industry form a collective global fantasy of success and beauty defined by white skin, Western life style and imported fashion objects. In these ads, national and cultural differences are completely unheeded by global advertising runs in marketing of the products and image making for their sales. These industries standardize and internationalize American beauty standard throughout the world by presenting a slender, tall, skinny, hairless, poreless fair skin colour model as a norm. This western model of perfect appearance is accorded fame, money, prestige and status. This glamorous model captures the imagination of much of the world and represents an authority for a life style for women throughout the world irrespective of ethnic possibilities, economic accessibility and cultural diversities. This internationalization of beauty norm determines coloured woman's sexual inclination, her achievements and all her ventures in life. This Americanization of beauty norm is done through ads disseminated through the American media of magazines, television and motion pictures. In other words, all American programmes including information, entertainment and news are advertisement for its burgeoning capitalism. Many technically underdeveloped countries like Chile, Ecuador, Malaysia, and the countries of Middle and Far East run a substantial portion of television programmes framed by American agencies. One of the popular American beauty and skin-care cosmetic company, Revlon, revealed the 'miraculous' nature of its 'wondrous' beauty products through a single ad which was once seen in 60 countries of the world with an approximate audience of 250 million people. The ubiquity of American TV does not owe entirely to its quality sitcoms and other programs offered by the TV. Many of the private TV companies are funded lavishly by American capitalist government to create the first television stations in countries like Ecuador, Colombia and Peru. They also provide technical aid for the development of many other television stations. This reliance on American television in underdeveloped countries commands political obeisance from these countries by choosing the peak viewing hours for its advertisement of made-in-America products.

Apart from American TV and its film industry (Hollywood) many of American most successful magazine corporations draft advertisements for global market. America's top fashion magazine *Cosmopolitan* is popular across the world and is published in seventeen languages around the

world. This only version of feminine beauty can be seen on the imported American television which corresponds with the woman in *Cosmopolitan* advertisement and which is imitated by the wife of a Third World country's Prime Minister or a corporate magnate's wife apparelled in the latest fashion religiously covered by the magazine. This pairing of success, achievement, fame, popularity, acceptance and economic security with western appearance pressures women of colour to commit a great deal of economic investment towards this pursuit. Chapkis (1986) writes that the content of these transnational women's magazines is found glaringly similar in all the developing countries. The majority of the articles in these magazines focus on beauty pursuits and fashion products. This western beauty norm distorts the self-image of the people of colour generally and coloured women particularly. Chapkis figures out that these accounts for the growing number of Blacks feel a need to straighten their hair to come closer to the Caucasian standard, and 'eye lid correction surgery' is getting popular among Vietnamese girls in post war era. The under-representation of women of colour in mass media positions white race at centre stage and economically strong west still dominates world's perception. This beauty standard serves to reassure white woman her central position in cultural hierarchy and keeps woman of colour busy in a meaningless pursuit. She buys inferiorities, self-distortions packaged in illusion of acceptability and inclusion. To be a part of that centre stage trans-cultural woman focuses all her attention and resources to become more whiter, more American and more upper class. Hence she allows transcripts of racial inferiority scrawled on her body.

By the mid-1980s, the postcolonial and transcultural feminists emerged in Anglo American academy which, instead of reiterating old feminist discourse of 'sexism', focussed on women of colour, poor, uneducated and immigrant women 'othered' by Upper Middle Class Anglo American feminist discourses. It complained that the mainstream gender-focused feminism which held sway in academy was not feminism for all. Postcolonial and Trans-cultural feminism celebrate women's differences which have been ignored by First World Feminism. Third world feminists also relinquish 'female chauvinism'. These trans-cultural and postcolonial feminists argue that just because some upper middle class educated women think that their sexuality and reproductive functions are source of their oppression does not mean that all women of the world share the same feeling. For some women reproduction is empowerment rather than oppression. Or if some women feel that they are concentrated in private sphere by sexist institutions does not mean that all women would herd unthinkingly to pursue public sphere. For some poor women engaged in back breaking labour in mills and mines, staying in underpaid work is the source of oppression. For mainstream upper class white bourgeoisies feminists 'sexism' might be the root cause of their exploitation and marginalization, while most of the women are oppressed by a constellation of racism, ethnocentrism, classism and heterosexism.

According to Lorde (1997, p. 539) the non-White women in America are 'othered' by defining them as 'deviant, inferior, or just wrong'. She contends that by plucking some aspect of one self and presenting it as a whole cannot overcome 'othering', rather, integrating all parts of one's personality, making whole different selves of a person can liberate her from 'othering'. She thinks fighting against "oppressor within oneself" is more important to win true liberation. She claims a society where everyone is veritably equal and inferiority is not associated with differences. Fostering Lorde's thought, Collin (1990) wrote that in the USA black women's oppression is systematized and structured along three interdependent dimensions. Firstly, they are oppressed economically by "ghettoization in lowest paid jobs". Secondly, Black women are oppressed

politically by denying basic human rights like education extended to all White men and some White women. Thirdly, Black women are oppressed ideologically by imposing a set of stereotypical images. Black women are labelled as nannies, breeder women of slavery and Black prostitutes. Such stereotypical images are fundamental to justify white men and women's treatment of the Black women. In Collin's opinion ideological oppression is harder to eradicate and the cause of continuity of racial, class and gender victimization. For this very reason, Collins urged Black Feminists to release themselves from demeaning and degrading white stereotypical images about themselves. However, a divorce between other relevant critical theories, such as ecofeminism, etc. effects the overall strength of feminism. The Third-wave feminisms "contained explicit and implicit critiques of mind-sets that put women in a single category" (Thompson, 2006, p. 507). This only attached importance to certain petty issues (e.g. to what extent reproductive and caring labour is dependent upon the privileged class of men and women; and the way the coloured men and women were exposed to 'enforced work' or personal and sexual inequalities on their workplaces), instead of celebrating the creative and caring unity of women as a whole and later caused a debate on critical/theoretical grounds (Hawkesworth, 2010; Sa'ar, 2005). This paradox within the rather conservative branches of feminism have been a hurdle to reach the core of the feminist movement.

3. The Third World Women as 'tabula rasa' in *Goddess For Hire* and *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*

Sonia Singh and Kavita Daswani locate the oppression of women of colour in their colour and ethnicities and show that after formal decolonization, the women of colour are still being colonized by white colour. They recognized that the 'American beauty complex' makes Caucasian woman a point of reference against which all women are judged and are made to judge themselves. For an Asian woman living in America there is no escape from the White culture; she has to participate in it. The dominant white culture sets the basic parameters for their survival as one of its minority members. It is the 'other' woman who has to live according to the rules of American society. This woman of colour become complicit in her 'othering' by constructing American model as "self" and herself "other" whereby she is alienated from herself and her family. The dominant culture elides all their differences of different ethnicities and inscribes homogeneity on their bodies by imposing a similar appearance.

This section will analyze the relationship, practices and vogues nurtured and regulated by 'American Beauty Empire' in *Goddess for Hire* (Singh, 1994) and *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (Deswani, 2004). The narratives of the novels reveal the lives of female characters held captive by mediated images of 'American beauty Empire'. In pursuit of American identity, they have copied western life style by consuming western brands in clothing and beauty regimens. The analysis of the novels shows that third world women's own choices are stifled by an over exposure to American mass media.

In Singh's *Goddess for Hire*, the dark complexioned protagonist, Maya Mehra, is conspicuous as an ethnic figure and is known as 'Gandhi girl' in her school and surroundings. From her childhood, all her efforts have been targeted to hide her ethnicity. The novel explores in a light mode Maya's serious commitments to copy American appearance by accumulating American branded products. Sonia Singh, however, shows that Mehra's efforts to be assimilated in America through copying American models do not meet success. She is continually rejected by Americans

because of her brown colour, gipsy dresses and exotic appearance. Singh shows that this rejection of Miss Mehra accounts for her oscillation between an Indian appearance demanded by her family and an American appearance imposed by culture around. The cultural combat never resolves between her and her family because renouncing dominant culture's beauty standard is suffused with risk of extinction and invisibility for her which she never undertakes. Mehra, an Indian caste, are settled in America. They reside in Newport Beach area which is an elite locality in America evident through wider roads, big mansions and the latest cars. Maya Mehra is the only female child of Mehra who is restless and who perches from one shopping mall to another to seek consolation for her rejection. She crazily uses American products to adjust well. Still, she is unable to turn into a complete and identical member of American elite. To fit in America Maya shops profusely. Singh highlights Maya's desire to be assimilated to American culture by showing her jobless status and her shopping on her twenty ninth birthday at the outset of the novel. In the very first scene Maya enters the car with nine shopping bags (nine is her lucky number). In her shopping list are only trendy items. Her dresses are not only prominently expensive; they are at the same time voguish. Being a member of the free time class, she prefers wearing the modern style and discards anything Indian from her wardrobe. Besides wearing voguish American dresses, accessorising is the essence of her life. Her accessories make a statement of her American assimilation. She uses only the most trendy and most 'conspicuously American brands' to state her affiliation with American norms. Her shopping comprises, 'MAC lipstick', 'MAC Concealer' 'Kate Spade Bags' (32) and "seven jeans" (p. 33). Her family is a traditional one and it strictly disapproves of her American allegiance. Her parents demand her to be an Indian in her manners and gestures by adopting proper Indian traditional outfits like Sari at family events. All her cousins are proper Indians, married to Indian boys. Maya's relatives are not only rich, they are highly committed people in their professional settings. The narrator informs us that out of ninety nine Mehra, ninety eight are leading doctors in America. Maya's mother is a paediatrician; her father is a neurologist and her brother Samir is in Stanford Medical School. Maya is the only elision who devotes all her energy to be accepted in by the Beverly Hills elite class.

Her craze to be accepted as American complicates her position within the family. Highly mimicking American life style, Maya evades the question of marriage. Her aunt Dimple manages to trap an Indian boy named Tahir Sahni for her. Tahir is invited to America to have an introduction and a party is thrown in his honour. Defying her family's desire to wear proper Indian traditional dress, she prefers to wear a 'black GAP signature T Shirt which exposes a lot of flesh'. Tahir is repelled by her blatant rejection of her culture. However, with aunt Dimple's untiring effort to arrange matches between young people, an engagement ceremony is fixed between Maya and Tahir. Tahir's mother brings a red silk embroidered Sari for the ceremony along with accessories. Maya looks at yards and yards of silk in desperation and throws it away. On the day of the ceremony, she buys an American outfit from a renowned American outlet and goes for a Western make over. She has a western haircut and dyed her hair ash blonde for her engagement ceremony. On that occasion, she is received with an 'onslaught of familial wrath, and maternal silent treatment' (p. 95). Her mother casts her dirty looks and passes comments. Tahir, a conservative Indian, sees something abnormal in her eyes which have been turned blue with blue contact lenses. Tahir discerns that her un-Indian appearance is the cause of her single status.

Maya's situation is complicated by another cousin Nadia who gets the attention of Tahir for wearing an embroidered silk sari with shining black hair which had never been cut or dyed blonde

in deference to American standard. Tahir affiliates himself with Nadia rather than Maya. After Tahir leaves, the family's hopes of getting a perfect match for Maya come to a tragic end. They gather at aunt Dimple's place and demand Maya to explain her conduct at the party. Her father murmuring "lack of potential rhetoric" (p. 155) leaves the room. Aunt Dimple meets with a stiffened demeanour instead of her usual ebullient style.

Goddess for Hire also foregrounds the role of mass media in upholding American norms of physical appearance and moulding postcolonial identity. Singh depicts the insidious effects of cultural artefacts in shaping Maya's preferences and thereby alienating her from herself and her family. The novelist gives a bleak picture of Asian Americans residing in America who have no other role models to inspire but 'media stars' and craft their identities on them. For women like Maya the fanciful world of mediated images stands for real life and they try rigorously to conform to a homogenized identity extolled by American media stars: hence heading to the demise of individual self. The novelist discloses restraints applied by American rogue capitalism on Maya's moral, rational and intellectual evolution and subsequent stagnancy. She also disregards the moral implications of this pursuit. Captive and subjugated by white complexion, she lands up a sexual entity to the exclusion of the rest of her traits. Maya lives in the world of television, Hollywood and fashion magazines. Her habituation to Western media can be traced back to her childhood when she was only three years old. Her favourite program has been *McLaughlin Newshour* and she arrogantly professes to be an American by the virtue of her birth. Her addiction to fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Elle* since her childhood obscured reality and illusions for her. Soaked in mediated life, she never took interest in studies which ultimately is cause of discomfort for her family. Her subsequent failure to get admission into any professional school is a visible manifestation of intellectual stagnancy and lack of commitment on her part. Even in childhood when her intimate friend Asha Patel shows literary accomplishments, Maya becomes a source of disgrace for her parents. She manages to get admission in anthropology school but is dropped out because of her lack of commitment.

During the course of the novel Maya gets to know that she is the goddess Kali, but she does not know how to dress up. She is faced with a problem "what does a goddess wear? *Style* magazine has yet to cover the issue" (p. 146), says she. She follows strictly what *Style* magazine suggests as the suitable garments to be worn on special occasions such as a date, ceremonies of marriage and mourning, and casual parties. Brush (1998) examines the role of a norm in normalizing a practice which is otherwise weird or outrageous.

The norm is effective and it disciplines the subjects by creating desire to conform to the prescribed norm. This power which works at the level of desire produces rhetoric of choice. The norm allows difference only as a degree of difference from it". (p. 26)

American based mass media uses these celebrities like Madonna and Julia Roberts to create desire in women's consciousness across the globe to sell its wares. These celebrities are the mainstay of American capitalism. Trimmed and standardized appearance along with captivating American brands attired by these fashion queens are used to construct desire in the hearts of millions of women across the world. American beauty and fashion industry earns its dollars by displaying these trend queens and treats a handful of these fashion icons as the privileged group just to manipulate 'other women'. These fashion and beauty icons are presented as epitome of women's

achievement. The dresses they wear, the houses they live into, the products they use become the dream of all the women. The glamorized appearances of these icons are packaged for global consumption. Their Western appearance is shown as the cause of their success.

This appearance of a flawless American beauty generates a feeling of schizophrenia in Maya. American fantasy causes torment in her subject-hood. The message Maya gets from the pretty images on visual as well as print media is that she must tailor her appearance in accordance with American beauty dictates. Since her childhood Maya has been investing considerable energy on Americanizing her appearance, as no other role model was available to her in American culture industry. She says, "I don't blast sitar music in my car, and I prefer Madonna which raises my spirits" (p. 4). Apart from *Harry Potter*, she watches *Exorcist*, *The Duchess of Oblivion* and *the Duchess of Mood*. A passionate devotee of Hollywood, she loves watching *Pretty Woman* and extracts lessons from the movie. Apart from Hollywood, she is addicted to chick literature *Sex and the City* which is notorious for derailing the American feminist struggle. Simulating perfect feminine beauty adorned by fashion and beauty icons assures approval to her. Maya notices that individuals adopting Indian identity are dumped so she intentionally decides to mimic the American beauty queen. Such a life style presents her passport to inclusion. The bleak reality is that Maya is unaware of her bondage to 'American Beauty Empire' and does not struggle to set her free from this tyranny which corrodes all her energies and economy. The depiction manifests that a trans-cultural woman's self has gone off track in an image obsessed world. An identity bound for an outer manifestation leaves an empty space in place of the inner self. The self of Maya is misplaced among a plethora of images linked with self.

Third world women's work experience, their professional affiliations and work practices also make an important texture of the Asian American women writers. Women depicted in these novels have panoply of jobs ranging from a low paid menial job to a high powered career. And there are even some heroines in these women's fictions who have love-hate relationships with work that reward them in some ways and punish them in others. While Singh presents a heroine who is work-shy and collapses under her family's pressure to succeed academically to get a rewarding job, Daswani's (1974) novel *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, presents Priya as her female protagonist who strives to get professional success but her family does not support her. Her husband's family still holds on to Indian traditional practices and think that Indian women should not strive for professional success. Priya urgently wishes to become a newsperson but her family wishes her to get a simple occupation like secretarial job. Priya's husband Sanjay's is not a high paying job, that is why the family pressures Priya to get a simple job. The situation however complicates when Priya instead of getting a simple secretarial time - filling job gets a promising work as a reporter. The typical Indian family contrives their professional persuasions and prospects upon the protagonist. Priya experiences culturally torn as she wishes to gratify herself and to break away her family's expectations. For example, once Priya sets out to work as a receptionist at *Hollywood Insider*, she is offered a post as a highly paid reporter. She faces a conflict to choose her own aspirations or to oblige her in - laws. However after undergoing a mind blowing session of decision making, she finally makes her mind to resist her family and their opinions on propriety and assumes the job as a reporter. She desires to grow professionally, but the limited culture provides her very few examples to follow. The novel hints that the basic reason of her professional and familial trouble springs up from her desire to conform to American culture.

Initially, Priya decides to hide the true fact of her job from her family but later on she makes her mind to tell the truth about her work to her family.

Unlike Maya, Priya lived her early life in India. Unlike Maya, she was completely free of care about her looks in India. Surrounded by her own people, traditional culture and standard of appearance, she was herself in India. Unlike Maya who is the second generation Indian settled in America and who is yet not encumbered by matrimonial band openly adorns herself in Western dresses and champions her determination to her family, Priya is new to the U.S and she has to hide her decision of preferring Western attire over traditional Indian dress. Her desire of belongingness and assimilation cannot be openly asserted. For instance, when Priya arrives in Beverly Hills, she wears traditional Indian clothes such as a “daffodil yellow sari” (p. 18) and a “light-blue-with-black-trim salwar kameez”(p. 36). When she joins her office as a reporter, she is constantly made to look at her silk sari. At work, Priya feels ugly and different when her colleagues tell her that she looks “like a gypsy on speed” (p. 81). Priya’s colleague, Shanisee, helps her in her acculturation to the western mode of living by taking her for a Western re-do and purchases some established American brands of outfits for her. Shanisee also takes Priya for a haircut whereupon Priya feels “as attractive as Malini or even Brooke Shields” (p. 83). Priya’s embrace of a Western appearance is not her own desire, rather encrypted over her self by the culture around her, whereby she is coerced to stifle Priya’s real self. All her subsequent efforts have been to embrace American brands to be accepted in this land.

After getting job, Priya is gifted a ‘starter cosmetic kit’ to conceal her Indian-ness from her face. Shanisee introduces her to America’s top brand of cosmetic ‘MAC cosmetics’ to make her complaisant with the white culture around her. When Priya becomes accustomed to making-up for her un-American appearance, she buys for herself various beauty items like ‘Bare Minerals’. Enticed by the slogan of these products ‘be original and natural’ she sets out to hide her originality and naturalness by consuming ‘MAC Finishing Powder’, ‘MAC Concealer’, American top brand ‘Bare Minerals Mascara’ which makes her feel her eye lashes healthier, and denser than her original lashes. Before leaving for her office she expends a substantial amount of time in concealing her difference and ethnicity which becomes a script of her degradation at her work place.

Priya undergoes the next step of her transformation. Her wardrobe is renewed, with Indian dresses thrown out; she goes shopping for the latest and voguish brands of dresses. Her new wardrobe consists fashion designer ‘Tahari ASL’s dresses’, ‘Peek a Boo dresses’, ‘Lush Cross designer wears’, ‘Luptuous Emeralds’, ‘Viscose Apparels’. Her footwear are the latest American brands like ‘Munroe Heels’, ‘Mallory Layla’, ‘Charlotte Sandals’, ‘Munroe Pointed toes’, ‘Style Wedges and Flats’, and ‘Californian Dream-in foot wear’. *Hearst* prescribes the code of dressing and foot-wearing to her comfort. To update her wardrobe and accessories Priya has to spend one fourth of her earnings on voguish stuff each month. She is the frequent visitor of beauty salons. Her hair are dyed, eye brows are plucked in deference to American latest style. Her attempts of absorption by choosing American voguish apparel, her bob hair style, latest stiletto footwear, ‘Brook-Shield’ accessories and cosmetics, in short her western appearance faces her with her conventional Indian family who is shocked to see Priya at work in foreign attire. Although she solves her conflict by making herself beautiful and wearing Western dresses but her choice to correspond with U.S. customs causes yet another trouble with her family. Priya is expected to stay the same Indian spirit

that she was in India but this is not possible for her. Her American experience alters her everlastingly. American civilizing coding has been embellished even on her body which are undoable now. Priya yields to American culture without showing any opposition. She does not bother to hold her Indian civilization tight and fights against U.S. beliefs. Nevertheless, she can't share common traditions with other Americans. Her transformation aggravates her into crumbling relation with Sanjay. When she conducts interview of Arabella Thomas, she realises that Arabella is in a disturbed relationship. Priya gets self-examined and figures faults in her conjugal relationship; she surprises herself when she maintains that at times she feels oppressed by her marriage to an Indian whom at times she wants to leave (p. 173). After working with Americans like Arabella, Priya realizes that she no longer possesses a pure Indian identity. Priya's complete shift in identity comes when she decides to break up with Sanjay. No longer able to maintain two distinct identities together she shifts to her new flat and seeks new opportunities in life. Sanjay's family tries to reconcile her with Sanjay, but she effects a complete alienation with her family, her native traditions and cultural values. Her metamorphosis is yet not complete, as she dreams of undergoing a radical revision of her facial contours. No longer at comfort with her facial lines advertising her ethnicity, Maya obsesses with visiting a cosmetic surgeon who is known for wiping ethnic coding from the faces of 'other' women.

4. Reaching a Destination

Through their fictional representation, the selected novelists show that beauty practices are not apolitical. These practices are oppressive for all the women, but they are more brutal and more severe for the women of colour who have to wipe signification of ethnicities in order to encrypt a foreign code over their bodies. 'American Beauty Empire' commands complete allegiance from them to subject their money, time, thought and bodies to the Beauty industry, for it depends for its profit on their insecurities and inferiorities which it keeps harbouring through its 'Culture Industry'. Both Sonia Singh and Kavita Daswani have highlighted the 'othering' process of these ethnic, trans-cultural and postcolonial women as alienated from their families and their true selves, yet the dominant culture does not embrace them, because embracing them would mean ending their quest for perfection lauded by American media which would imperil this inhuman, profit oriented mass of industry's monetary gains.

References

- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture and the body*. Berkly, CA: California University Press.
- Braithwaite, A. (2002). The personal, the political, third-wave and postfeminisms. *Feminist Theory*, 3(3), 335-344.
- Brush, P. (1998). Metaphors of inscription: Discipline, plasticity and the rhetoric of choice. *Feminist Review*, 58(1), 22-43.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531.
- Chapkis, W. (1986). *Beauty secrets: Women and the politics of appearance*. Brooklyn: South End Press.

- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Davis, K. (2003). *Dubious equalities and embodied differences: Cultural studies on cosmetic surgery*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Daswani, K. (1974). *The village bride of Beverly Hills*. New York: Penguin.
- Dworkin, A. (1974). *Woman hating*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Etcoff, N. (2000). *The survival of the prettiest: The science of the beauty*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage.
- Genz, S., & Brabon, B. A. (2009). *Postfeminism: Cultural texts and theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Grosz, E. A. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hanisch, C. (1969). The personal is political. *Radical feminism: A documentary reader*, 113-16.
- Hawkesworth, M. (2004). The semiotics of premature burial: Feminism in a postfeminist age. *Signs*, 29(4), 961-985.
- Hawkesworth, M. (2010). From constitutive outside to the politics of extinction: Critical race theory, feminist theory, and political theory. *Political Research Quarterly*, 63(3), 686-696.
- Hooks, B. (1992). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press.
- Jeffreys, S. (2005). *Beauty and misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West*. London: Routledge.
- Lehrman, K. (1997). *The lipstick proviso*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Lorde, A. (1997). Age, race, class, and sex: Women redefining difference. *Cultural Politics*, 11, 374-380.
- Morris, J. (1992). Personal and political: a feminist perspective on researching physical disability. *Disability, Handicap & Society*, 7(2), 157-166.
- Sa'ar, A. (2005). Postcolonial feminism, the politics of identification, and the liberal bargain. *Gender and Society*, 19(5), 680-700.
- Singh, S. (2004). *Goddess for hire*. New York: Harper.
- Stiles, P. (2005). *Is the American dream killing you? : How the market rules our lives*. Canada: Collins Business.
- Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2012). Choosing to conform: The discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(1), 98-121.
- Tamale, S., & Oloka-Onyango, J. (1995). "The Personal is Political," or Why Women's Rights are Indeed Human Rights: An African Perspective on International Feminism. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 17(4), 691-731.
- Thompson, C. (2006). Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave. *ISIS*, 97(3), 505-512.
- Thompson, D. (2001). *Radical feminism today*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.