

Name of Research Scholar: Chand Mahal Ruby

Name of Supervisor: Prof. Archana Dassi

Name of the Department: Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences

Title of Ph.D. Thesis: Performing Gender and Body Images: A Study of Muslim Women

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Findings

The qualitative study finds that a complex web of caste, gender, religion, and body discourse shapes the daily life of OBC Muslim women in India. The study offers insight into how deeply ingrained social norms are embodied, reproduced, and negotiated in their everyday practices pertaining to modesty, gender-based labour, mobility, appearance, and body self-perception by using habitus and intersectionality as theoretical tools. Although caste is frequently seen as structural, it is actually profoundly embedded in daily life through embodied habits that normalise hierarchies, and social behaviours. Caste interacts with gender and religion to influence OBC Muslim women's experiences in complex ways.

The study finds that for the participants, beauty is frequently viewed as both visual, as characterised by culturally cherished characteristics like fairness, slimness, and long, glossy hair, and internal, as associated with piety, character, and modest behaviour. Women's perceptions and rankings of their own beauty in comparison to peer and cultural standards frequently impact their self-esteem and self-concept. In order to conform to prevailing expectations about the physical body and sartorial body, women make use of cosmetic regimens including varied types of dieting, natural skin-glow cures, and even coloured lenses and fashions across their different environments.

Women's self-esteem in relation to body image is linked to both exterior (physical, aesthetic) and internal (moral, religious) ideas of beauty. While body shaming over physical features, weight, or skin tone lowers self-worth and encourages a desire for physical change, compliments increase confidence. The pursuit of the socially created ideal of the tall, slim, fair women is seen in a variety of beauty treatments, whether done at home or in a beauty salon. These behaviours show social navigation between class-religious norms, Indian beauty

standards, and international beauty standards rather than just focus on plain abstract idea of vanity. Body positivity is influenced by increased self-concept towards the body and high levels of piety which associates body as creation of Allah, which should remain untouched of change, apart from cleanliness and basic beautification. Wearing the hijab or purdah represents symbolic fashion choices that strategically shifts between space where women's body regulation differs in terms of social geography.

Modesty, beauty, religion, and caste location are all interconnected related to one another. Between being modest Muslim women, culturally ideal Indian women, and globalised representations of the slender, fair, modern woman, they negotiate their different identities through their bodies. The body is a crucial location for negotiating between tradition and aspiration, compliance and rebellion, as they influence how OBC Muslim women view themselves and are perceived by others and practise their bodies. They negotiate multi-layered social systems that both define and limit their social environments through daily behaviours and decisions.