

# Negotiating Online Spaces through Subversive Bodies

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## Abstract

There is a departure from an overwhelming focus on ‘embodied experiences’, and the body being the primary site of sexual and social transactions, to one where virtual spaces are becoming the ‘new’ or ‘continued’ spaces of consumption, production, expression and resistance. This departure is redefining and challenging the notion of the body, its meanings and its limitations. This paper will look at ways in which women’s bodies are conceived in the post-modern context, where interactions and experiences are increasingly mediated by virtual technologies, and where notions of experience and body are being constantly renegotiated and reconfigured.

This paper will focus on women’s experiences in expressing themselves online *through their* bodies, and the backlash they face, by focusing on selected women who are using online spaces to promote body positivity in India. Through this, the paper attempts to understand alternate knowledge on women’s bodies, and how they are being ‘rewritten’ and are ‘re-writing’ online spaces.

**Keywords** - Bodies, Online Technology, Subversion, Body Positivity.

*For politics to take place, the body must appear* (Judith Butler, 2011<sup>1</sup>).

Within culture and technological studies, there is a departure from the overwhelming focus on ‘embodied experiences’, which emphasises the body as the prime site for sexual, social or/and political transactions, to one where virtual spaces are emerging as arguably the ‘new’ or

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on my ongoing PhD research titled, ‘Negotiating online space through embodied narratives: A study of online body positive campaigns in India’, under Dr. Shilpa Phadke, School of Media Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

‘continued’<sup>2</sup> spaces for consumption, production, expression and resistance. These understandings are challenging and redefining the notion of the ‘body’, its meanings and its limitations. This paper looks at ways in which women’s bodies<sup>3</sup> are conceived in the post-modern context, where interactions and experiences are increasingly mediated by virtual technologies, and where the notions of experience and the body are being constantly negotiated and reconfigured (Shilling, 2005).

Technology mediated identities have pushed for a social and political rethink about gender, sexuality and bodies, in profound ways. This paper attempts to understand the complex relationship between gendered bodies and online technologies/spaces, as continuous and connected, rather than as separate and dichotomous. Achuthan (2011) challenges the division between human-technological, mind-body, and that of technological and pre-technological cultures, which is increasingly complicated by the daily use of digital technologies, both by the individual and the State.

At the intersection of gender, online technology and bodies, bodies, particularly, women’s bodies are being renegotiated in multiple ways, thus offering scope for fresh technological imaginings and avenues for self-representation. In what ways do these spaces offer an emancipatory potential to challenge hegemonic and patriarchal narratives of ‘feminine bodies and practices’ and produce counter narratives of women’s bodies, sexuality, pleasure and experience? In what ways do they place them amidst new kinds of vulnerabilities to violence, censorship and moral policing? And in what ways do women resist and cope with these?

By focusing on online body positive campaigns by two selected activists, this paper explores their experiences in expressing themselves online *through their* bodies, thus creating awareness, affinity and community using online sharing platforms. This paper is fully cognisant of the fact that such online spaces are often located in neo-liberal contexts and the access to them is circumscribed by one’s location, even in the context of the increasing use of online spaces via mobile phones which has to some extent, democratised online space and access. It also recognises that though these spaces offer platforms for self-expression and assertion that challenge mainstream notions

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<sup>2</sup> Post-colonial understandings situate the internet as a platform for knowledge production and sharing, as prior to the western and colonial. It is seen as localised forms and networks of knowledges, rather than a homogenous western conception (Achuthan, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> I have limited this paper to persons who identify themselves bodily and emotionally as ‘women’

of beauty and bodily worth; cyber harassment, violence and sexual control still remain inscribed within gendered bodies, both online and in physical spaces.

This paper explores how despite this, activists are using these spaces to practice radical ways of (re)constructing their bodies and identities and challenging violent notions of women's bodies by focussing on the work of two Indian women who use online spaces to promote body positivity and reclaim ideas of 'healthy', 'acceptable', even 'desirable' bodies. I explored their personal struggles and experience of negotiating and reconstructing the notions of 'femininity' and 'beauty', through their bodies in interaction with online technologies. I decided to follow their work as I was influenced by their activism and their political and aesthetic positions on 'femininity', and 'beauty'. They both identify themselves bodily and emotionally as women and use their bodies and fashion to *refashion* normative beauty standards. Given that they have significant following, they are regarded as 'public' figures, thus I have used their names.

I explore the work of two body positive activists, Harnaam Kaur and Ragini Nag Rao. Harnaam Kaur is a body positive and confidence activist, plus size model, and an anti-bullying activist, and calls herself, "a fantastic bearded lady." (Channel 4 News). She is diagnosed with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, which can cause acute facial hair growth. This resulted in serious bullying and body shaming. After many years of being shamed, she decided to embrace her body hair and now sports a full beard. She is active on Instagram and Youtube and has recently appeared in fashion shoots. Ragini Nag Rao is a plus size activist and fashion blogger and writes a blog called 'A Curious Fancy'. Much of her current work is around bodily assertions through fashion and photography. She is on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest. Both these activists use self-photography and fashion to promote body positivity. I followed their work from November 2015 to March 2016, and then revisited their work again in February 2017, during which their photographic work had proliferated. The reason I chose these two women besides my personal interest in their work, was their unabashed and unapologetic self expression, which is subverting dominant norms on beauty and femininity. Their work stood out in the Indian context where conversations on body positivity are beginning to take form.

Through their work, this paper discusses obesity and hirsutism, two conditions that are deeply gendered, stigmatised and pathologised in medical and socio-cultural discourse<sup>4</sup>. These bodily phenomena are considered to lie *outside* of the normative discourse of the ‘feminine’ and ‘beautiful’. Through these subversive body activisms, these activists seek to *visibilise* themselves in online space, in the face of a culture that upholds heteronormative, patriarchal and misogynistic notions of bodies and beauty. A thematic analysis of the content, which includes photographs and writings, is conducted, to understand patterns, contradictions and contestation of emerging themes and meanings. The focus is on their work of self portrayal, through photography, writing and print and video interviews, through which an account of subversion emerges. Ragini’s blog and Harnaam’s Instagram account and YouTube videos served as the main sites for my research, while associated interviews (print and text) were used to get a more nuanced and personal understanding of these women’s creative journeys. Online research poses unique ethical and methodological challenges. I am acutely aware of my position and have tried my best to use their material safely, ethically, and in a way that enhances the objective of my paper.

The word ‘subversive bodies’ is seen as an analytical as well as epistemological category in this paper, to interrogate online body performances that have been ‘othered’ and excluded in multiple ways by hegemonic regimes of health and beauty. It, like other works, tries to reconstruct the body, its agency and its experiences, through the interaction of bodies and technologies, using a feminist lens. By analysing these body positive activisms, this paper attempts to complicate and interrogate this constructed dichotomy between the technological and corporeal realities on one hand, and between ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ on the other. These different kinds of subversive bodily acts and practices in online spaces, are enabling connections with each other, thus overhauling hegemonic discourses of bodies and beauty and enhancing their corporeal realities as well as the notion of agency that is inscribed in them. Additionally, given that there is very little theorisation around the nascent body positive movement in India, I hope this paper which is located in my doctoral research, will begin making an effort in this direction.

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<sup>4</sup> Malson (1997:228-229) cites Prior (1989) and Walkerdine (1986) to explain discourse, which is a social practice consisting of an assemblage of activities, events, objects, epistemological precepts, and that these have real material effects on embodied subjects.

## Body

Since the eighties, the body has attracted much academic interest and has been approached from multiple theoretical positions. However, it is the feminist understanding of the body that has contributed significantly to an understanding of female corporeality (Shilling, 2005). What has emerged is that there is nothing called a 'universal', 'whole', 'organic', 'centred' body. According to Thompson (2003), enlightenment had carved out an 'ideal body', thus pathologising any 'other'. The philosophy of classical thought, viewed the subject as an organic whole, a rational being and as someone who consciously places mind over body, and thought over pleasure. In the sixteenth century context of rationalism and enlightenment, embodied perspectives were seen as unobjective, and full of desire (Bordo, 2003). In the Indian context, the mind body duality did and still continues to reiterate the logic of division of labour, particularly within the Hindu caste system. The 'labouring bodies' are thus separated from the 'thinking' bodies. The female body was (and still is) regarded as derivative and always relational to the 'ideal' man. Butler (1990) reiterates this mind-body duality by looking at how the Cartesian and Christian perspectives conceptualised bodies as 'profane, void, sinful', while also using female metaphors to deride and devalue. A Dalit feminist reading of bodies further exposes the power relations reflected in the separation of the Dalit woman's body from that of an upper caste woman's, devoid of respectability and available as a sexualised form of property for the entitled use of upper caste men (Irudayam, et al, 2011). A racialized reading of bodies exposes a similar perception and treatment of black bodies, particularly, black women's bodies, as the 'other's'. Butler (1990) cites Kristeva's notion of 'abject', the process of excluding parts of the body (physical and metaphoric), which are considered unworthy and in the process, creating the 'other', the 'abject', thereby constructing boundaries within and between bodies. Similarly, medico-legal understandings also contribute to normative conceptualisations of the body, particularly the gendered body. Anything, whether bodies, knowledges, or experiences that fell outside of or opposed to these normative definitions and standards, were considered illegitimate.

Among various disagreements and debates regarding the body there is one that is particularly dominant; social constructivists feel that the body is discursively produced, and those leaning towards natural sciences like biologists, medical professionals and body and sex positive groups and disability theorists feel that dimensions of materiality and corporeality are being undermined. They have challenged discourses which seem to undermine the importance of the body and called for a political reclamation of the body. Similarly, Dalit scholars and feminists have spoken

about the need to visibilise the ‘Dalit body’, and the structures of oppression, violence, discrimination and sexualisation it embodies.

This paper draws from feminist and post-structuralist analysis<sup>5</sup> of bodies and technologies to engage with discursive as well as material realities (Malson, 1997), in order to make sense of how these interact and influence each other. A Foucauldian understanding of the body and its subversive potential to dismantle totalitarian and dualist understandings, has helped inform feminist thought on oppression and violence, even though he himself did not directly address body or power as gendered. Foucault, according to McNay (1991:127), says that the body is produced by power and bears on it “stigmata of past experiences upon its surface.” Extending this to a feminist understanding of the body, we could say that the ‘female’ body is a product of power relations and on it are inscribed various kinds of socio-cultural and political practices that enables particular kinds of self-making.

### **Subversive Femininities: Rewriting Gendered Bodies**

Is there something inherently ‘feminine’? Does ‘feminine’ truly and solely belong to the woman? (Butler, 1990: 167). Malson cites Dorothy Smith (1990) who describes femininity as involving “whole sets of body management practices, purchasing skills and the like which are simultaneously material and discursive; they are worked out upon the corporeal body and are integral to late capitalist modes of production and consumption” (1997: 228).

“When does a human subject become a gendered subject?” (Butler, 1990: 151). Without the marker of gender, according to Butler, a human being is considered as lying outside of being ‘human’ (ibid). She writes of Monique Wittig’s conceptualisation of biological sex as a political tool to divide and control bodies at birth to further the objectives of institutionalised heterosexuality and reproduction. She also talks of Wittig’s notion of woman, as being a socio-cultural and political construction, an identity that is legitimated by the oppositional existence of masculinity and male bodies; and a lesbian, as an identity that interrogates and challenges this binary (ibid:151)<sup>6</sup>. Extending this to our argument of ‘feminine’ bodies, it can be said that

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<sup>5</sup> A post structuralist approach towards understanding the relationship between bodies and discourse is an effective way of understanding bodies, as it looks at both power relations and the corporeal dimension of the body and also renders this to a feminist reading of the body.

<sup>6</sup> Butler (1990) critiques some of Wittig’s politics, on account of it being based on the very binaries that it attempts to dislodge. The binary of heterosexuality verses homosexuality, and the suggestion to overhaul the former in the discursive realm, does betray essentialist tendencies, and assumes that homosexuality lies

notions of femininity are given credence by the existence of masculinity, and that 'fat', 'bearded', 'hairy bodies' thus become 'othered' or are produced materially and discursively in relation to the existence of 'mainstream' and 'ideal' femininities. In this rigid discourse these 'othered' embodied subjects are rendered as 'partial' and 'relative' subjectivities, rather than sovereign individuals (ibid: 158). However, the subversive potential of these 'othered' 'fat', 'hairy', 'bearded' bodies is ever present and interrogates these constructed binaries between hegemonic and singular notions of femininity and masculinity.

LeBosco (2004) attempts to historicise fat bodies. In the industrial and modern context as well as ascent of the Judeo-Christian religions, fat (and female) bodies began to be viewed as 'uneconomical', 'inefficient' and 'unproductive', as well as 'greedy' and 'sinful'. A bodily aesthetic began to emerge around the sixteenth century and alongside this, a negative perception towards corpulence began to be culturally constructed (Forth, 2013). This was reinforced during the post-world war world, where 'fat' bodies were regarded as revolting, unhealthy and unsightly (ibid). In resource poor contexts however, fat has been historically associated with wealth, prosperity and beauty, and a marker that is distinct from poor and labouring bodies<sup>7</sup>. Fat is also associated with cultural and racial norms of beauty. In the neo-liberal context, a market driven homogeneous campaign of thinness is being imposed across countries and cultures. Despite this, the current cultural discourse on bodies is emerging as highly nuanced and textural, thus defying any explanatory power of a singular narrative. Notions of 'fat' and 'thin' are embedded in social, political, economic and cultural contexts and vary in different geographies.

Randall cites Shaw (2006) who explores fatness in black bodies as forms of political resistance to the Western European and North American racialised and market driven obsession and promotion of 'thinness'. They also resist the tyranny of the medical community attacking fatness and associating it with race and poverty (2012). This was countered by Harris (2012) as a simplistic analysis which does not take into consideration the capitalistic and exclusive nature of the State. She explored the failure of the State in providing healthy and affordable food options or reasonably planned open spaces to exercise in poor neighbourhoods (many of which house poor black families). Similarly, Malson explores the western medical understanding of anorexia which often ignores the politics and agency of bodies experiencing these conditions. Malson cites

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completely outside and disconnected with the heterosexual regime. Further, Wittig ends up homogenising the straight community. This paper is aware of the binaries and homogeneity that tend to get created in such analysis, and attempts to steer away from these.

<sup>7</sup> Regionally, these notions vary, and a more detailed and nuanced reading of the history of bodies in South Asia is needed, which I will be doing in my PhD.

various authors to understand contradictions within a capitalist society, such as between norms of mass consumption and feminine norms of being thin, between the controlled worker and the indulgent consumer, and between the norms of femininity and the politics of feminism (1997: 225). These contradictions and contestations are embodied in anorexic bodies. She suggests that these bodies have subversive potential which are reflected in ways that defy socio-cultural as well as medical notions of femininity through obstruction of female bodily functions such as menstruation and conception. Some of Malson's interviews reveal the self-destructive feeling respondents experience. "Anorexia is about not being in my body, not being a woman anymore, transcending one's sexuality, destroying the female body," (ibid: 240). Thus, these subversive bodies produce counter discourses which challenge the hegemonic discourse of femininity, although sometimes, with destructive bodily consequences (ibid). Malson analyses anorexic bodies as constituted and regulated by medical and cultural discourses, which pathologises and 'others' certain bodies, regarding them as opposed to "domains of objects and rituals of truth," (Foucault, 1977:194 cited by Malson, 1997:229). These hegemonic discourses of beauty and health have real material effects on bodies reflected in embodied practices such as dieting, bingeing and self-starvation. Malson's interviews with respondents who have been diagnosed with anorexia, reveals that thinness is valued as an accomplishment, as a victory of mind over matter. By extension, fat is seen as giving into the body and its desires (ibid). Fat is thus seen as 'excess', as abject. Both the sexual and the maternal body are seen as excess within the neo-liberal and patriarchal discourse. They are regarded as too much, needing to be contained and controlled (Malson, 1997). Krestiva's notion of 'abject' can be used to explain the repulsion, exclusion, exploitation and control that society creates around certain bodies based on caste, class, race or size, and the stability and coherence it seeks to gain through these processes. This thinking is sustained both by the beauty and the health lobbies that promote a certain weight for all, irrespective of their personal histories, needs and struggles, thus making these notions mainstream- the 'truth'.

LeBesco attempts to invert mainstream notions about obesity, by bringing out the subversive potential of 'fat' bodies, in overturning these mainstream notions, and reconstructing them. She looks at the political construction and regulation of 'fat' bodies and identities in order to visualise them in the terrain of power (2004:7). She looks at micro behaviours and conversations among women and others in bringing about strategic changes in language and meanings regarding body image, which can overtime get institutionalised through innovative ways. She quotes Monique Wittig about the power of language, which through everyday use, produces



‘reality effects’, that are gradually perceived as facts. She thus dedicates her resources and energies towards understanding the language which through everyday spoken words and practices constructs and institutionalises ‘beautiful bodies’ and ‘ugly bodies’. She challenges the current thinking of justifying ‘fatness’ on account of health or hormonal dysfunctions, which pathologises fat bodies, instead of constructing a narrative of acceptance of all bodies as agential, irrespective of any reasons.

Plus size blogger and fashionista, Ragini Nag Rao uses her fatness as a political and subversive tool. She writes in her blog,

*Fat bodies are political bodies - that isn't something we can just ignore. Standing out as a fatty, just being publicly visible as a fat person is a political act. When I wear my hotpants out, I get reactions ranging from lechy and creepy, to downright unnerving. I want to disturb the people I see around me everyday, I want to shock, horrify and disgust them. The space they inhabit is also mine and I am here to reclaim it by being as visible as I can.*<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, ‘hirsute’ female bodies are also considered unattractive and unfeminine, even threatening, and women all over the world spend considerable to drastic amounts of time and money to rid their bodies of unwanted hair.

Body hair is also rooted in religion, caste, culture and politics and like fat bodies, needs to be seen in its cultural and political context (Agarwal, 2015). Sherrow in her famous book, *Encyclopaedia of Hair: A Cultural History* explores the symbolic and cultural roots of hair (2006). In many African countries, hair was seen as a spiritual connector between the human body and spirits. Various styles denoted different stages of one’s life like age, puberty, marriage, and mourning. In India, in many regions, men shave their hair during a death in the family, while widows in the eastern state of West Bengal, were expected to shave their heads and remain bald for the rest of their lives. In many regions, hair is also seen as attracting spirits among women, and tonsuring (among other violent measures) is a popular remedy or punishment that is meted out to women who are regarded as ‘deviant’ and branding them as witches (Silva, 2012). Hair also has a strong racial and religious connotation and is used to discriminate across the world. The tolerance for hairy bodies has been decreasing steadily. In India, practices of hair removal range from bleaching, waxing, shaving, threading, plucking and now laser treatments, which are

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<sup>8</sup> Quote taken from <http://www.xojane.com/issues/do-this-dont-fatty-in-hotpants> Accessed on 15 December 2015.

recommended and offered readily by dermatologists. The neoliberal regime has no space for ‘messy bodies’, whether hairy or fat.

Apart from socio-cultural, as well as neoliberal context of hair shaming, hairy and fat bodies are also being increasingly medicalised and attributed to imbalances in hormones. Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is one such endocrine condition that seemingly affects a significant proportion of women and is attributed to ‘excess’ hair growth; irregular, absent or disrupted periods; and infertility. When analysed within a feminist perspective, PCOS emerges as a “deeply pathologised” and stigmatised condition that robs women of their ‘femininity’, owing to its ‘masculinising symptoms’ (Kitzinger and Willmott, 2002:349-350). There are unkind and untrue perceptions of PCOS such as ‘lazy girl’s disease’, ‘woman’s journey towards manhood’, and ‘unfeminine’. All these push women and girls into following private practices of hair removal as well as invasive treatments for body transformation. Harnaam Kaur, who is diagnosed with PCOS, reported the extent she went to rid her body and face of the excessive hair. “*I waxed her, bleached her, shaved her*” (Channel4 News). She even tried waxing and shaving her beard twice a week. Studies reveal that a significant proportion of respondents felt like ‘freaks’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘unfeminine’. Studies also show that women and girls with PCOS reportedly experience emotional stress due to their inability to conform to standard norms of femininity. Given this, there is still not much feminist research on PCOS bodies in general and the Indian and South Asian context in particular (ibid).

Though, conversations around these are increasing, the understanding of fat and hairy bodies needs to be culturally and regionally contextualised. A South Asian perspective is glaringly missing in academic, medical as well as a cultural understanding of bodies. Most literature is around health problems or aesthetics related to fat and hairy bodies. Even within movements and campaigns on YouTube, Instagram and Tumblr towards embracing body fat and hair such as ‘effyourbeautystandards’, ‘torridfashion’, ‘alternativecurves’, ‘plusmodelmag’ (mostly western), Plump Magazine Facebook Page (Philippines)<sup>9</sup>, etc, there seems to be a lack of an understanding of the cultural and political roots of embodiment and there is a general lack of representation of women of colour (Haidari, 2015). “The body positivity movement in Asia has simply not taken off” (Wear Your Voice).

A feminist reading of bodies implies a pluralistic and grounded approach to understanding embodiment, while rejecting essentialist and dichotomous notions that exist in the mainstream

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<sup>9</sup> Refer to <https://www.facebook.com/plump.ph/>

discourse on health, bodies and beauty. This reading challenges and questions the patriarchal, heteronormative reading of the body, which produces the 'normal' and 'beautiful' along with the 'abnormal' and 'ugly'. It also questions a homogeneous and monolithic conception of the body, while recognising situated and embodied knowledges. This has caused a dent, if not a crisis<sup>10</sup> in mainstream knowledge of gendered bodies and practices, one that is brought about by the consistent and pluralistic resistance from various locations.

### **Gender, Bodies and Online Space**

Dominant patriarchal and heteronormative notions are deeply embedded, reiterated and perpetuated in online spaces and technologies, thus enabling and perpetuating certain hegemonic perceptions of gender and bodies. However, these are also being used as sites to contest and challenge these, thus allowing the construction of alternate and multiple notions of 'self' through a range of subversive acts and expressions. This section attempts to understand the dynamics of online spaces and how these are designed to relate with users and how these varied users in turn, negotiate and reshape online spaces and interactions therein. In other words, it proposes to explore the (re)constructions and contestations of various bodies in online space, and the manner in which this process rewrites hegemonic gender, bodies and technologies (Achuthan, 2011).

Bartky (1988) says that women's spatialised experiences are far more restricted and disciplined than men. Does this apply to cyber space? What are these notions of boundaries in online space? These questions shed light on the connection between corporeal and technological realities. In the 1993 case of LambdaMOO, a text-based MUD programme, one of the users designed a programme through which he/she could control other characters and made them rape and mutilate another character. The flesh users felt deeply violated and suffered emotional damage, even though the violence was inscribed on their online characters which were text based. This incident sparked a debate regarding the need for social control, regulation and accountability in online space and problematised the relation between the online and the flesh user (Huff et al, 2003). Suchman (2007) speaks of the interactions and negotiations between the user and

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<sup>10</sup> Crisis in Kuhnian terms perhaps cannot be used here as it would assume that the existence of a paradigm and a shift in it (Achuthan, 2012). It also assumes that the existing narrative under threat is monolithic, which I am not suggesting. The mainstream notions of gendered bodies and practices is itself fragmented and disaggregated and so are the attempts to subvert it.

technology and the overlapping of the online and offline worlds in creating meanings. One cannot separate these realms (cited in Lundmark and Normark, n.d: 237).

Spatial signifiers that emerge in physical space are used to describe cyber space as well as computer programmes. Just like physical space and its associated disciplines such as geography and architecture, the designers and programmers of cyber space too have been guilty of not affording strategic spaces or roles to various gendered and embodied subjects. Kearney analyses design elements that facilitate various forms of self-representation in interactive online forums, in which regulated and disciplined productions of femininity and self emerge, which prescribe to gender, sexual and bodily norms (2015). Interactive online spaces and online spaces of interactive sociality are thus structured to make visible and uphold certain normative and disciplinary narratives of femininity.

The feminist sense of self and space then face similar kinds of challenges and exclusions in cyber space, just like physical space. Geographies of exclusion, colonisation and closures are thus very real in the virtual world (Lundmark and Normark, n.d). Similarly, these technologies affect social and cultural norms. Grindt and Gill (1995) talk about social shaping of various kinds of technological products along interests of gender, class, and nationality. Karpf (1987) says that technology is not only constituted by the existing culture and social relations, but also helps constitute this culture and these social relations, along with notions of masculinity, femininity and class (cited in Grindt and Gill, 1995:10).

### **Emerging Themes from the Study**

I followed the work of these activists, mostly their photographs on Instagram and Ragini's writings on her blog titled 'A Curious Fancy'<sup>11</sup>. Their work on body positivity seeks to reshape online space along lines of body plurality, inclusion and self-love. Through a feminist reading and analysis of the work of these two body positive activists, five themes emerged.

#### *1. Gender and Body Performativity*

*I feel more feminine with my beard.*

- Harnaam Kaur in an interview with Mark Duell for the Guardian (2014).

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<sup>11</sup> Refer to <http://curiousfancy.com/>

A body positive and confidence activist, plus size model, an anti-bullying activist, Harnaam Kaur calls herself, “a fantastic bearded lady.” She has more than 1200 images on Instagram and regularly works on body positive campaigns, mostly through fashion. In most of the images on Instagram, Harnaam projects traditional femininity. Her bodily stance is feminine, she pouts, she smiles demurely, she dons latest fashion styles, all this while sporting a full beard. In some pictures she decorates her beard with flowers, and in most of her images, the hair on her chest can be seen. She has sported bridal attires, including for ‘Urban Bridesmaids’ in London (Cliff, 2015). She is seen wearing *mehndi* on her arms and legs in one picture and wearing *chura* (bangles worn by North Indian brides) in another one. She wears heels and stockings in many pictures. In many photos she is dressed like an Indian bride with jewellery. Recently, she walked in her first fashion show for Marianna Harutunian, a famous jeweller and also entered the Guinness World Records, as the youngest woman with a full beard (Khaleeli, 2016).

Ragini Nag Rao is a plus size activist, fashion blogger and writer of a blog called ‘A Curious Fancy’. She asserts herself bodily through fashion, while sporting latest brands of clothing, shoes, bags and makeup such as MAC, Maybelline, Eyeko, Sephora collections, Joules, Twenty Fingers, Tabio and Madcloth. She is on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest. In all her pictures she embraces her femininity, by wearing fashionable clothing, makeup and accessories, while sporting unshaved/unwaxed legs. She wears shorts, dresses and hot pants, attire that does not easily welcome fat bodies. She thus negotiates fashionable attire on her own terms. Recently she wrote in her blog that she quit wearing bras. She said,

*...Societal norms that are devised to control women’s’ bodies, to render them homogenous and acceptable. I didn’t want to be controlled any longer. I didn’t want to give in to those dictates that police women’s bodies and ultimately, women’s lives. If my boobs are saggy, I wanted to let them sag to their heart’s content -- if they shocked a few people, good. If they disgusted some others, even better. I had been engaging in this public performance of shock, horror and disgust for the last 3 years by blatantly showing off my shapewear-less fat body in hotpants and minis without a care, and now my footloose and fancy-free boobs would be a part of that performance<sup>12</sup>.*

Butler’s analytical lens of performativity is utilised to analyse these activists’ gender and bodily performance through text and image. What these activists are doing, produces a series of ‘effects’, which challenge the established norms and practices of femininity, and establishes

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<sup>12</sup> Refer to Ragini’s blog <http://www.xojane.com/issues/why-i-stopped-wearing-a-bra> Accessed on 24 March 2017.

‘newer’, ‘alternate’ standards of femininity. For Butler, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that gender is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1990: 34). Butler’s term ‘performativity’, that is a set of effects produced by the performance of gender identities in a deeply heterosexual context, sheds light on the socio-political construction of ‘gendered identity’, which challenges the prevalent assumption of the ‘sex-gender’ discourse. It refers to a ‘forced reiteration of norms’, over a period of time, to assure the maintenance of gender identity (Butler in McNay, 2000:33). This constant and repetitive performance reveals the deep instability and lack of permanence of heterosexual gender identity and practice (ibid:33). Thus, these online bodily assertions are deeply performative, resulting in *normalising* bodies that are usually ‘othered’, by negotiating with established gender norms, *within* the terrain of ‘femininity’ and fashion, thus creating a ‘new normal’. The attempt is to refashion these bodies through fashion itself.

## 2. *Negotiations*

Harnaam Kaur was asked in an interview with the Guardian, “Wouldn’t it be better to reject the beauty and fashion industries completely?” This, she thinks, is impossible and so she is, instead, “collaborating with as many magazines and doing as many TV appearances as I can, to show women that you don’t have to look a certain way to be happy” (Khaleeli, 2016).

It might be argued that these bodily performances are constructed alongside what is regarded as beautiful and runs the risk of legitimising mainstream notions of beauty. Expressing oneself through their bodies mediated by online technologies is indeed a subversive act, but to what extent are these performances actually subverting hegemonic, patriarchal, and heteronormative norms of ‘feminine’ beauty? The construction of the ‘other’, the so called ‘fat’ women, ‘hairy’ women, ‘masculine’ women, is a process rendered possible *within* the existing regime of beauty and femininity, which exists and thrives, even in the face of these subversive acts. According to Butler (1993), discourse becomes oppressive when the only way that an oppressed subject can express herself, is by engaging with that very discourse of oppression. Thus ‘othered’ bodies that do not fit within the culturally constructed regime of beauty, find themselves negotiating and battling within and by the rules that have ‘othered’ them in the first place. According to her, subversion should question the very terms of a hegemonic system, through which a situation emerges where in the very rules ‘turns against itself’, undergoing various mutations. “The culturally constructed body, will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, neither to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (1990:127).

However, countering and negotiating hegemonic discourses and knowledges and visibalsing 'othered' perspectives are also a crucial component of subversion. Complex and variegated forms of resistance involving everyday resistance, accommodations, and negotiations with dominant norms and institutions are also integral to subversion and result in multiple possibilities and understandings. The work of these body positive activists does all of these. Harnaam, while employing traditional fashion styles, is still dealing with the fashion industry, that steers hegemonic discourses on femininity, but as a fashion icon, she is setting *her* terms of 'femininity'. Ragini is also constructing alternate standards of body size, by photographing herself wearing mainstream fashion brands. These activisms have ushered a feminist reimagination of fashion, thus denting normative beauty standards, and forcing the industry to sit up, take notice and cater to non-normative female bodies.

*I've spent the past six years griping about the utter desolation of plus size fashion in India, and I'm finally seeing changes in the way brands perceive us fat women as a demographic, especially in the past year or so. Maybe, there'll soon be a time when I'll just be able to walk into a store with the expectation of finding a whole bunch of cute clothes in my size. I look forward to that.*

- Ragini Nag Rao<sup>13</sup>

### 3. *Visibalsing Experience*

*My beard has 100% become a part of my body. It is the source of my strength and confidence. I keep my hair to show the world a different, confident, diverse and strong image of a woman...I look at it and is it a sign to me that we are all different and none of us are born the same.*

- Harnaam Kaur<sup>14</sup>

Fat and hairy bodies, bodies that lie outside the realm of normative femininity, are largely invisibalsed. Feminist historians and sociologists challenge male centric knowledges as the dominant source of knowledge, thus bringing women's experience back and giving them agency. The feminist construction of knowledge according to Thompson (2003) locates it historically, geographically and corporeally. Haraway insists on a post-modernist understanding based on the realisation that all differences need not be resolved and that there exists multiplicity of local and

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<sup>13</sup> Quote taken from <http://curiousfancy.com/post/153345000411/little-black-dress> Accessed 20 March 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Quote taken from <http://cuntmufffin.tumblr.com/post/124620567481/rejectedprincesses-yagazieemezi-harnaam-kaur> Accessed 20 March 2017

located knowledges. She talks about feminist objectivity (and rationality) as being situated knowledges and that only partial perspectives promise objectivity. This makes us answerable and accountable, which dissolves the boundaries between the observer and the observed (1988:583). Haraway insists not just on epistemological rigour, but a deep understanding of political and ethical positions as well. Thus ‘fat’, ‘hairy’ and ‘bearded bodies’ in online space represent embodied knowledges and partial, located perspectives, which are otherwise undermined and invisibilised, and seek to challenge hegemonic discourses.

Though the importance of visibilising bodies and experiences through written form (and in this paper, visual form) is agreed upon, there are challenges. Scott (1991:776) reflects on the challenges of writing about and rendering visible, the experience of the ‘other’, the ‘marginalised’, invisible, even, ‘stigmatised’. Experiences<sup>15</sup> are often taken as a given, ahistorical, apolitical and stable, rather than as something through which formation of subjectivities are produced within socio-economic and political relations. What happens in the process, says Scott, is that it renders a range of experiences as homogeneous, thus invisibilising other aspects of one’s identity or other subjectivities such as race, gender and sexuality, and how contradictory and contesting processes of subject formation occur. This results in a sinister process of legitimising certain experiences over others, what she calls, “a particular way of doing history” (ibid: 785-787). Mohanty (1988) and Scott (1991) reiterate the heterogeneity of oppression and subversion, while warning against an ahistorical understanding of the oppressed subject as well as the oppressors in the context of the politics and histories that structure them. While analysing the subversive works of body positive activists online, as a researcher, I myself am mindful of the heterogeneity and nuances of their experiences, as well as the challenges in representing these.

Given the above, reconstructing the notion of ‘fat’ bodies and ‘hairy and bearded’ bodies that body positive activists are trying to achieve is fraught with challenges. Although their efforts are mostly based on personal experiences and political standpoints, they run the risk of representing others and their experiences as homogeneous. Locating oneself as an online activist, vis a vis their audience and power structures that operate is crucial. How these relate to different women of varying class and caste contexts needs to be explored. Here lie hints, as to why the body positive movement in India is still at its infancy, and not able to make a substantial case for itself. Here lies the urgent need to build a feminist and intersectional approach to this movement, so as

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<sup>15</sup> Scott challenges this overwhelming dependence on ‘experience’ to describe histories of difference which are juxtaposed with the referential point of existing histories. When one depends on experience as being the ‘origin of knowledge’, one ignores the processes and institutions behind the construction and maintenance of difference and politics of exclusion. This ends up naturalising and ahistoricising differences and binaries.



to enable a powerful, nuanced, heterogeneous and inclusive movement to promote body positivity.

*I would never tell a woman who has got a beard to keep it, I would never say if I can do it so can you, I would never say that to someone, For me, I am still growing as a person I am learning to live like a bearded lady 9 years on...*

- Harnaam Kaur in an interview for Channel 4<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Uneven and Gendered Architecture of Online Space

Is the internet a safe space? Is it an unbiased space?

Looking at Facebook's 'Community Standards', one can make a quick assessment of what it regards as 'credible threats to physical safety'. While terrorist organisations and organised criminal activity are not tolerated by Facebook, the presence of misogynist spaces which promote and condone violence against women continue to exist. Hateful speech and threats of physical harm against persons or groups are not tolerated, yet we see misogynist and violent threats being made to women activists who speak out. Kavita Krishnan, Secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association faced violent online vitriol for voicing her opinion about the Prime Minister of India on Twitter. The threats remained there for several days (Krishnan, 2015). It is clear that despite these safety standards, gendered threats and shaming remains in online space.

Online shaming is a very real and daily part of the life of online activists. Some of the comments on Harnaam's photographs and videos were along lines of hatred, misogyny, racism and body shaming. Some of the comments read, "You are ugly. Get rid of that. You are doing this to be popular. This bully thing is just a bullshit. You are so fucking fake...", "I know that cunt", "No asshole is here now to defend this Indian whore", "Shut up your god is satan bitch", "fucking beardo", "Do you have hairy chest hun?". A website called '...is a cunt.com' is a shaming website with obvious misogynistic characteristics, starting with the name itself. It is dedicated to 'naming' and 'calling' out people, mostly women whom they consider to be 'cunts', followed by virulent shaming. Harnaam Kaur is featured in this and there are 32 comments<sup>17</sup>. It has 'rules', a 'cunter's dictionary', and ironically, does not allow 'trolling'. This hateful website is at least one-year-old and somehow, continues to exist, which is reflective of the deeply gendered and

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<sup>16</sup> Refer to <https://www.channel4.com/news/interview-with-harnaam-core> Accessed on 24 March 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Refer to <http://is-a-cunt.com/2016/10/harnaam-kaur/#comments> Accessed on 24 March 2017.

misogynistic nature of online space. As I searched Harnaam's videos on YouTube, I noticed that her videos feature along with other videos titled 'Drastic bodies', 'Cosmetic surgery disasters', 'Abnormal sexual behaviours', etc.<sup>18</sup> This ordering of videos in YouTube and Google provide a glimpse of the ways that 'different' bodies are perceived in the online space, and reflect the hegemonic discourses that structure these spaces, thus enabling normative notions and discarding non-normative ones. Harnaam spoke about death threats online, ranging from beheading, being set on fire and being stoned. However, she said she needed to move beyond these as she has a lot of work to do. Harnaam in an interview with Channel 4 said, "If these bullies are allowed to live, then why can't I live?" Other cases of body shaming online, particularly where women have put photographs displaying body hair, have emerged. Suraiya Ali tweeted a photo of her torso with hair and received hateful tweets<sup>19</sup>. A young college student who clicked a picture of her unwaxed/unshaved legs went viral, inciting hundreds of hate comments.

Ragini Nag Rao faced a lot of body shaming when she put her pictures online. Tired of being body shamed online, she disabled the comments function on her blog. However, offline she continues to experience harassment. In an interview in 'Wear Your Voice', she expresses her love for fashion as well as the anxiety of harassment when she leaves her house in these clothes. She said,

*Over the years I've developed different ways to cope like cultivating a determined lack of perception while remaining hypervigilant when I'm out of the house. Even as I force myself to tune out the catcalls and comments, I have to watch out for potential assaults. Whenever I wear shorts or miniskirts, I meticulously plan out my itinerary (including how long I'll actually have to walk from the cab to my destination.) Naturally, this is stifling when it comes to wearing my voice. But still I persist. For me, wearing my voice is an act of courage, else I wouldn't be able to venture outdoors, but it's also an act of love: my love for and commitment towards fashion and my individual style.<sup>20</sup>*

Thus, as a fat woman, she has reported several if not daily experiences of body shaming, moral policing and sexual harassment, both in her online and offline worlds.

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<sup>18</sup> Refer to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgQjfcgG7XY> Accessed on 24 March 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Refer to <http://www.browngirlmagazine.com/2016/01/suraiya-ali-body-hair-and-the-clap-back-heard-around-the-world/> Accessed on 24 March 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Quote taken from [http://wearyourvoicemag.com/more/lifestyle/stylecrush/518-stylecrush-ragini-nag-rao\\_\(23\\_March\\_2017\)](http://wearyourvoicemag.com/more/lifestyle/stylecrush/518-stylecrush-ragini-nag-rao_(23_March_2017))

Fat shaming is one of the most prevalent forms of harassment online as well as offline and has the potential to hurt known people and strangers. There are numerous examples of this online, some of which are extremely serious, encouraging the person to kill herself as she is such a waste of space (D’Onfro, 2013). This kind of shaming is also deeply gendered. Despite this, there is not much conversation about this phenomenon in India. Nicole Arbour’s<sup>21</sup> highly controversial video on fat people in which she has shamed and criticised fat people on both grounds of health and beauty went viral more than a year ago. This met with numerous response videos by body positive activists<sup>22</sup> and even cost Arbour her job as a choreographer for a movie, ironically about the issue of fat shaming. Sadly, some of the videos countering her also resorted to fat shaming and slut shaming Arbour and bringing out its deeply gendered nature and the circularity and continuity that exists in the discourse of female body shaming.

Thus, the architecture and design of many of these interactive online spaces is deeply gendered and enables these kinds of violence and shaming. It promotes disciplining of femininities and bodies along normative lines. Despite this, activists use image sharing platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Tumblr to enable shared and collective contexts to those who face body shaming and harassment in their daily lives. Body positive activists have not only provided support through personal examples and struggles, they have helped reconstruct ‘body image’, reclaiming words such as ‘fat’, ‘hairy’ and ‘bearded’, which have been stigmatised in mainstream discourse. These spaces are being influenced and rewritten along lines of gender justice and inclusion; and body positivity is a powerful tool to do this. However, even here, the bodies that are being addressed are mostly white and the representation of bodies of colour is less.

##### 5. *Contradictions, Contestations and Instability of Gender Identities and Bodies*

*I don’t think I believe in gender. I want to know who said a vagina is for a woman and a penis is for a man, or pink is for a girl and blue is for a boy. I am sitting here with a vagina and boobs – and a big beautiful beard* - Harnaam Kaur in an interview for the Guardian (Khaleeli, 2016)

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<sup>21</sup> Refer to “Dear Fat People” video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXFGNhyP4-A>. Accessed 20 December 2015. It has now been removed. Refer to “My Response to Nicole Arbour’s Dear Fat People Video” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGzSk1u4-Y0>. Accessed 20 December 2015. Refer to “Dear Fat People...My Response to Nicole Arbour” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-G1lJDiB7hU> Accessed 20 December 2015

<sup>22</sup> Refer to “My Response to Nicole Arbour’s Dear Fat People Video” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGzSk1u4-Y0>. Accessed 20 December 2015. Refer to “Dear Fat People...My Response to Nicole Arbour” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-G1lJDiB7hU> Accessed 20 December 2015. Refer to “What I want to say to Fat People: Response to Nicole Arbour” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2YYZBrPwwU> Accessed 20 December 2015

When we speak of gendered bodies being constructed and contested in online space, we need to understand that they are multi-dimensional, fragmented, and exist simultaneously in various spaces and forms. Donna Haraway's curious entity the 'cyborg'<sup>23</sup> is a very useful analytical category to interrogate and problematise technologically mediated identities (1991). A cyborg is also an ironical construction as it contains both organic and inorganic elements, represents both social reality and fiction, imagination and material reality. It is a creature that belongs to a post-gender, post-body world, one which is devoid of binaries both socially defined and naturalised, and does not aspire to any kind of "organic wholeness"<sup>24</sup>. It troubles the assumptions of the organic whole, something that the post-feminist narrative pushed by market driven consumerism is trying to promote.

Post-feminist theorisation of self would have us believe that the construction of identity and the production of self is whole, complete, free and choice based, while it is in fact fragmented, incomplete, regulated, controlled and disciplined, based on adherence to normative ideals of femininity. Much work has been done on the production of the feminine self in online spaces. The branded post-feminist self as well as the 'contemporary interactive subject' is simultaneously produced, consumed and reproduced in an interactive space structured by constant surveillance and spectatorship. Kearney (2015) argues that this reading of women both in online spaces, as whole, independent, and agential beings does not take into consideration the implicit power relations that operate in these spaces regulating actions of people. It is hopelessly one dimensional as it does not take into consideration the complexities and politics that structure feminine identity and online space (ibid). Here I will bring in the point on 'precarity' of identity by Baer (2016) to suggest a rethink, and an expression of new subjectivities and politics. Butler (1990) speaks of the 'incompleteness' of a woman's identity, which renders the woman's identity, as a site to contest and challenge dominant understandings. This can be linked to what Baer says about the precarity and insecurity that is attributed to the female body, which renders it as a site

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<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway refers to 'cyborg' as a post second World War hybrid entity composed of organic and machine-like components and function as "odd boundary creatures" mentioned along with women and simians, and all of which have the potential to challenge the conventional discourse in science, identity and politics, and are in turn highly contested (2001:2). The cyborg presents a simultaneous social reality and fiction and redefines women's experience in the late twentieth century (149). It is ambiguity, at once it is both a product of imagination and material reality (150).

<sup>24</sup> However, Landström (2007 citing Currier, 2003:16) suggests that it is not always used in the complex way that it is meant to, in fact in feminist constructivist technology studies, it can be said that the cyborg has been used simplistically as part human, part machine, rather than looking at it in terms of relations in terms of assemblage and the relations between different elements, meanings, signs and practices, which keep changing. This view enables going beyond the deterministic understandings of identity constructions.

of empowerment as well as a site for control and surveillance, revealing it as an embodied contradiction, and thus a political site for protest.

Harnaam and Ragini's bodily assertions through fashion and photography thus have subversive potential, and it is the incompleteness and contradictions that are embodied in their work, that allow space for subversions and contestations. Their body politics does not allow them to be categorised, located or labeled easily. These performances reveal a spectrum of subversions, displaying radical characteristics, as well as innovative negotiations within the system.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Rewriting Bodies and Technologies through 'Othered' Bodies**

The bodies and technology, particularly the cyber technology debate, is usually polarised along two dominant narratives, one that focuses on the primacy of the body and the human agency, that is body as source of technology; and one that regards body as 'location', as a site on which technology is written and imposed (Shilling, 2005: 187). However, it is the interaction of the two that this paper explores. Internet technologies, gender and bodies are intersecting, and it is at this intersection, that opportunities for counter discourses and alternate understandings are seen to emerge.

These 'othered' bodies thus trouble the socially and culturally constructed boundaries between embodied femininities and masculinities, as well as bodies and technologies, thus enabling interactive and transformative spaces to emerge. Although, these subversive bodies and expressions operate within the power structures that they are fighting against, they have made a place for themselves within this mainstream discourse. They continue to produce counter knowledges in the face of violent backlash, and initiate and influence minds, bodies and technologies.

For Wittig language is the tool through which the signification of sexed bodies occurs, and she proposes to (re)appropriate language so as to resignify and remake meanings, through a plurality and multiplicity of sex (1990:240). Although Butler has problematised this, it does show some strength. This paper extends this to suggest that through a multiplicity of embodied difference (Shildrick, 2002:3), that is, through a plurality of embodied, subversive 'femininities' that body positive activists have employed in the online space, they challenge the linguistic and cultural construction of beauty and femininity. In this process, the 'body' is brought back, visibilised, or reclaimed. Haraway (1988) speaks about the engaging body, and 'activation' of objects of knowledge such as the body, that were previously regarded as passive and a mere resource. "The

various contending bodies emerge at the intersection of biological research and writing, medical and other business practices, and technology” (ibid: 595).

The interactions between bodies and technologies are thus facilitating the creation of a new political language of beauty and bodies, one that challenges mainstream notions, and also at the same time, exposes the dominant sexual politics of the technologically mediated body. It attempts to articulate experiences of marginalised and suppressed bodies, thus allowing opportunities for new possibilities of embodiment. Technologies are being used for self-formation and these in turn are influencing the way these technologies are designed, perceived and used. Online technologies, which have been usually used to promote hegemonic bodies, are increasingly being reshaped to share knowledges about ‘other’ bodies. Body positive movements in online spaces have visibilised various kinds of bodies, thus shattering singular notions of ‘normal’ and ‘beautiful’.

These counter knowledges and discourses have emerged in spite of or in the face of power hierarchies, harassment and abuse that structure these online spaces. These shared contexts enable connections between different people with different lived realities and have the potential to tear down divides that have been constructed between people across class, caste, gender, sexuality, religion, bodies and beliefs. Amidst the persistent right wing, patriarchal and homophobic backlash, these are not small victories.

Finally, this paper sheds light on the urgent need for a post-colonial feminist understanding of gender and bodies, and in particular, the need to build South Asian, Indian as well as regional narratives on femininities, bodies and beauty. There is also a need to understand the reasons why body positive campaigns in India are still a new phenomenon, and the role of structural constraints like caste, patriarchy and religion in shaping the Indian and South Asian body positive movement. A nuanced, pluralistic, heterogeneous and intersectional understanding on embodied femininities is an urgent academic task to take on and this paper hopes to have made some openings in this direction.

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