



Tattoo as an Expression – Reading The Fashion of Tattooing the Body as Global Fashion

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Abstract -Body modification and fashion have been intertwined as potent mediums of self-identity and expression. Indigenous and primitive practices of body modification have been re-appropriated by the global capitalist fashion industry as tattoo art notwithstanding its earlier appropriation by disenfranchised, marginalized deviant sub-cultures.. This paper critically reviews extant literature and seeks to analyze this appropriated popular art form its embeddedness within consumerist discourse . It also explores the inherent socio-cultural and individualized motivation that enables tattoo to be a reclaimed marker of self- identity

Key Words- Tattoo , Body, Global Consumerism, Embodiment, Self, Agency

Introduction -Body is the site of intersection between the self and society. It is simultaneously a biological and a cultural entity and a potent purveyor of personal and cultural meanings. The body located in the interstices of socio-economic and political discourse emerge as a locale of negotiation with these. Human body has no immanence, immutability or essentialist character and undergoes transformation as part of its ontological bearing. Biological and psychological changes, surgeries, injuries sufferings, physical malfunction, accidental deformity transforms the body born. The body as a source of anxiety and pain with regards to ageing, illness and pain is also reclaimed as a source of narcissistic pride, possession and pleasure. Cross-culturally and throughout pre-historic times humans have engaged in permanent or transitory body modifications for various reasons. The cultural context that informed these modification (and beautification) have been varied. While some

are ceremonial and ritualized others are individual or driven by one's choice. These choices are also socio-culturally embedded and defined. The modifications which include transitory like hairstyle, garments, jewelry etc., there area range of ancient modification customs that are done in a ritualized context to establish an individual's identification with a larger group or community. Social science research reveals a plethora of such body modification practices like earlobe and penis elongation, circumcision, foot binding, neck stretching, branding, scarification and head molding. In modern times medical science has allowed for more enduring and expensive cosmetic modifications like botox injections, laser-hair removal, breast implants, liposuction, invasive and sex-changing surgeries. (Kosut, 2015, p.32 -33)

Tattoo as argued is the most widely prevalent and practiced form of body modification. Today tattoo is the most practiced body modification of all other forms with roots in pre-modern non-Western culture. The interesting journey of tattoo from its prehistoric origins to nonnormative margins to consumerist global fashion has attracted academic analyses. The body which is not a naturally given is a flexible, mutable and pliant object that can be subjected to socio-cultural and clinical intervention for reasons beyond health, viz. beautification and spectacularizing.

Tattoo is an ancient pre-historic practice found in almost every civilization. The etymological roots lie in the Tahitian word 'tatau' imported to Europe by Captain Cook in the late XXVIII after his exploration to Tahiti and Polynesia. (Oanta .et. al. 2014, p.125-6) The history of tattoos represent a variety of forms that has evolved in a complex manner over the millennia in various cultures around the world. The first tattoo as suggested by historical studies dates back to 5000 years ago during the Neolithic era and was even discovered on Mummies . It is believed that tattoos were used as a beauty care practice by ancient Egyptian women apart from being ceremonial in its function. (Chirosca 2023 p.39),

Tattoo is of great significance in several tribal societies and is part of tribal identity and insignia is now a part of fashion industry. The purpose of this paper is to explore the cosmetic and decorative reasons for tattooing. Notwithstanding the magical, fetishistic, talismanic, ritualistic, religious-symbolic functions of tattooing, tattoo has emerged as a public statement of the self. This statement besides being a matter of choice also articulates individual's social affiliation or affinities to a family, religious community, tribal community, sect etc.. Tattooing for instance can be expressive and the practice involves a personal motivation

coupled with a certain psychological investment upon one's skin. The popularity of tattoo in contemporary society is indexed through the burgeoning tattoo parlors in urban centers .

Tattoo As An Expression- Inscribed on the Body- Exploring the Meanings

Tattoo which has a long pre-civilizational history and tribal origin was appropriated by deviant sub-cultural groups like felons, punk, circus artists etc (Chiroasca, 2023, *ibid*,p.40)Today tattoos represent a a diversified form of popular art chosen by individuals for a variety of reasons including self-expression, for expression of emotions for dedicating it to special persons etc. (*ibid*)

Tattooing falling within the rubric of popular art and body modification is part of a project of expressing subjectivity. The corporal aesthetics involved in tattooing seeks to produce a new meaning for the tattooed body. The self-chosen labelling or redesigning of the skin is symbolic of a person's self-bound expression of identity. This is different from the traditional function of tattooing to express one's group affiliation. (Haq 2023) Tattooing in current time is a means of self-expression, as a symbol of inclusiveness within a global youth sub-culture, as a disclosure about one's self and as a way of inclusivity within a paradigm of fashioning one's body. (Atkinson 2003).As a form of self-chosen representation of one's body-tattooing may be seen as expressive of an interest in rendering the body as exotic with an inscribed text on the visible epidermal surface of the body. This inscription may seem to work as a link or interface between the individual and the society. (Schildkrout, 2004) Although as a discursive practice it serves to redefine or rebuild one's identity and shape a desired image, it is bound within a cultural context

The semiotics of tattoo as a tool for building self-identity or an inscription are read as interpretive and communicative as much as clothes, gestures, movements etc The individualized act of tattoo despite its individuated expressive finds meanings within a social context that reads and interprets it. The nuanced multimodal communication of tattoo are in, invested with meanings as markers of culture and personhood. (Martin, 2018 24-5. 36-7, 41)In addition to the more primordial ascriptive signs inscribed on the body by gender, race, looks the body as a site is replete with other signs. These signs are temporary adornments like garments or make-up or these sign vehicles may be potently permanent like tattooing.

The prevalence of this form of body modification continues to be stigmatized as deviant (Sanders, et.al 2008). Contrary to this view it is said that tattoo as an art form has been professionalized as an aesthetic custom by tattoo artists and parlors (Martin, ibid 14) Traditionally a non-sanctioned modification associated to bizarre sexual practices, psychological disorders, body mutilation , tattoo was often coded as ‘grotesque’ or ‘carnavalesque’ steeped in a discourse of deviant behavior. In Western societies it was historically linked to criminals, service men, outlaw subcultures of bikers and drug addicts They were viewed as stigmatized badges acquired as sub cultural affiliation employed to maintain distinctiveness vis-à-vis the mainstream. In recent times it has been mediated through a commodity culture and what was earlier relegated to the peripheral fringe constituencies are being sported by sports stars super-models who pose as powerful, independent and desirable. Notwithstanding its increasing visibility tattoo as permanent body-modification continues to violate dominant appearance. It is still seen as scary, aberrant and outrageous to middle-class sensibility -its ideals and norms The expansion of tattoo art and its overlap with popular culture through popular icons (film stars, athletes, rock stars) tattooed bodies continue to be held in the status of the Other. (Kosut, 2000, p.80-1, 85, 89)

The reappraisal of tattoo on contemporary culture scape is mostly due to its mediation through popular stars and celebrities. From censure and rejection as outward signs of deviance, tattoos are being proudly displayed by popular stars as ‘sensation seeking’ or ‘risk taking’ abilities. Instead of being shown as signs of defiance or outward aggression popular icons reclaim them as unique and distinctive markers about themselves that are to be displayed in the public domain. As markers of individualist populism tattoo in celebrity discourse emerge as statements about self -reflecting personal biographies and taste. Extensively photographed and popularized public persons sporting tattoos on their body parts have attributed the value of a consumable fetish and a symbolic visuality about one’s selfhood. (Lee, 2017, 27-30, 32-34) Transporting tattoo onto the popular mainstream cultural domain has allowed tattoo to emerge in a revised vocabulary of mass consumption-as a component of mass consumer culture. It is reclaimed as a personalized representation of the self and the motivation derives much from popularization by stars and their bodies steeped in inscribed semantics. The normalization and social acceptance of body modification mostly popularized by star-bodies that acted as purveyors of this choice.

Capitalism has unleashed the desire to possess and signs of consumption are the desired lexicon of building one's identity and selfhood is contingent upon acquisition of tangible goods to possess, consume and savor. Unlike the adornments and accessories tattoo is different within this ensemble of identity markers. The visceral quality of the epidermal embellishment is more brazen, more permanent, more etched and intimate to the body unlike all other consumable symbols or accoutrements. The boundaries of late capitalism enables the post-modern self to be detached from the bonds of collective physical rituals. Tattoo may be seen as an individualizing consumption focused on bodily surface and its sensory opening in response to consumerism. (Shilling , 2005, p.2)

Is a narcissistic flamboyance peddled by popular icons. Drawn into the vortex of global homogenous fashion, the art of tattoo is a reinvented aesthetic technique wherein the appearance of embellished flesh is a vehicle of consumerist identity of the self. Tattoo appropriated from its primal and sub-cultural moorings is now a part of the global fashion industry. Body as the textual site is rendered amenable to the discursive dynamic assemblage of global fashion. Fashion as a dynamic system of styles acts out an assemblage of competing discourse on image and the dominant system governing fashion in the West is closely related to political and economic power operations of the West. The body as a textual site inscribed by discursive domain of trans of global fashion capital nationally circulating global fashion of the West seeks to render the body compliant to the dominant codes of fashion originating in the center of global fashion capital (Entwistle,2003 p.146-147)

Earlier considered as a deviant practice, tattoo has recently acquired a wider acceptance and recognition as a quasi-legitimate art form. What was extraneous is now a conventional consumer and popular practice with an aesthetic value. The popularization of tattoo by celebrities and its professionalization has allowed it to be institutionalized, Tattoo associations, tattoo trained artists, tattoo aesthetic, tattoo associations and communities, tattoo narratives and its popularization via media outlets has institutionalized tattoo albeit marginally. The reception of tattoo is subjected to a more mellowed elite gaze. The institutionalizing has extended to its dis embodiment and reframing of the art form as wall graphite. (Kosut, ibid) It is also interesting to see the retrieval of the primal rhetoric being figuratively recast as an aesthetic and consumable form of body modification. The creed of this is termed as 'modern primitivism' or as 'neo-tribals' (Lodder, 2011 , 100) wherein the non tribals develop primal urges (ibid. 104)

Tattoo may be also seen as a reflexive practice, as discursivity of an individual to embody one's self symbolically. It may stem from the existential struggle and interiorized territories that seeks a more surfaced expression on the skin. It also allows for an individual to render visibility towards one's ideology in more permanent ways. It may also function to reaffirm one's relationship and intimacy to one's familial, religious, affiliations. As bearers or markers of self-identity they also speak a socially coded language. A self-identification and relatedness inbuilt into this practice, tattoo is ontologically connected to one's being and one's possession of one's lived body embedded in everyday interaction. As a form of visual and textual narrative tattoo is enmeshed in complex ways with individuals' relation to self and society. It is a graphic narrative of relatedness and embodied negotiation with micro and macro realities. Reflexively reclaimed tattooed bodies are ways to readapt and change. Aestheticized tattooed body seeks to redefine one's control over one's body and reinvent an adaptive dialogue with the society. The body invested with agency reframes the body and attributes a language to speak. (Kosut ibid 99)

Under the aegis of a proliferating consumerist culture under the influence of the global tattoo can be traced as an appropriated art form with primitive roots being adopted by deviant sub-cultures and finally being adopted by fashion industry. The journey of this art and the trajectory of its appropriation and adaptation remains interesting for any research. As a surface phenomenon, as a malleable marker on the body seeking self-identity and as an inscribed symbol tattoo it allows for a convergence of collective symbolism and embodied experience of the individual. The body is a location and the inscriptions of tattooed identity despite the body's structuring within power structures of governmentality of the society allow for cognitive reflexivity. (Shilling 2005, 18-19)

The body as a seat of experiences, is a social and discursive constructs and there are no immanence or essentialized attributes associated with it. Social structures are actively absorbed and reproduced by the embodied subjects in their everyday lived experience wherein the body is a location of social disciplining. Body is structurally positioned as a vehicle of society through which society is constructed and the body is ordered. Notwithstanding the objectification of the body there are instances to show how bodies are

sites of subjectivity and has a conscious corporal engagement within its situatedness. The intentionality of the body, its active agency as a reproducer of society is well illustrative in the instance of the practice of body modification.

Tattoo may be seen as a social field as per Bourdieu (1984) . A social field refer to a set of dynamic organizing principles of identity, maintained by social groups which help organize certain categories of practices occurring within a given social space (education, art, sport, etc.) These social fields develop out of prolonged automatization and represent specialized sector structured by their own specific logic and principles and departs from the previously held understanding of patterned undifferentiated community. Each social field enjoying relative autonomy from other fields bestows values on its social practices as per its principles of recognition and internal organization.

Characterizing society in terms of multiple social field Bourdieu observed that contemporary social life is not governed and regulated by a single overarching culture, system or logic of capital, instead it is constituted by structured space wherein each possess their own regulative principles. The influence of social fields is not like regulative regimes or determining structures. Social fields locate themselves upon the bodies of those entering these fields by a measure of contingency instead of being constraining and thus allow room for individual variation.

The rules which govern a social field can always be negotiated and reflected upon. This frame allows for relative space for maneuvering within a social life which remains regular, patterned and stable. The influence of social fields while not oppressive are embraced as choice by self-affirmation of the individual. In this understanding one may locate the practice of tattoo , plurally appropriated from its primal beginnings, as part of a veritable social field of body modification. Tattoo as a practice interpreted within cultural paradigm emphasizes upon the reflexive use of culture's shared resources premised and contingent upon one's authentic lived experience. (Couldry, 2000, p.51) The agentic bodies produce and reproduce society through individual action of body modifications. The expression of the individual as conscious agency is seen how individuals seek to reconstitute themselves within certain codes of culture. This is how individuals discursively produce themselves, redefine their identities within the duality of the structure which is both constraining and enabling as understood by Giddens (1991) . The social order is constructed in and through everyday activities of the individual contingent upon individual competencies and the social

resources drawn , which of all are unevenly distributed between actors. (Barker 2002, 90-91)

Tattoos are marks that are embodied and engrained are almost epiphanous in the lives of the individual seeking to be tattooed. Such a body modification involving a change in personal appearance and attendant identities accords a sense of control, command and authority over one's corporality. As a symbol seeking individuated identity it is an attempt to reclaim body as self or to embed in within the locus of a gendered body type (Atkinson, 2003) The motivation to self-affirmation and autonomy often prevails over awareness about health risks involved in the process of being tattooed. Individual motivations for possessing a tattooed body may be extraordinarily varied or diverse-social class, race, gender, sexuality, age, occupation, geographical location condition tattoo choices and experiences. The present cross-cultural practices affirm the malleability, fluidity and changeability of the body within contemporary globally mediated consumer -commodity culture. It is thus presumed that those enabled with economic resources will engage in consumption and allow the body/self to attain a capital-supported modification under the name of body aesthetics, maintenance, improvement, beauty, health and in pursuit of youthfulness. These privileged bodies are locus of potential transformation and beautification. (Kosut, 2015, 32)

The tattooed body may signal an inner crisis that seeks a narcissistic expression of the self which also overlaps the desire to eroticize and spectacularize one's body in public gaze. Tattoo takes the space of language to articulate the embodied presence of self. The display of the tattooed skin is analogous to a performative anxiety of the body to eroticize, exoticize and commodify one's body. The exhibitionist urge solicits gaze and attention towards only tattoo that 'speaks'. Furthermore, tattoo as a part of body modifying ensemble are reclaimed as an empowering technique to provide a sense of confidence and security to individuals and this resonates in their rebuilt and transformed selves

Tattoo as a self-chosen inscription reveals a creative, expressive and emancipatory potential of the individual. Not to mention its interface with concerns of public health and personal hygiene issues, this discursive popular practice opens the doors of a complex labyrinth of contemporary sensibilities informed by self-reflexivity and discursive subjectivities. The subjectification involved in this adornment seeking practice are led to forge innovative and attractive differentials to remain unique and competitive. The essentially urban corporality marked by youth culture of tattoo art provide a window to observe a complex network of

belongingness, symbolic productions, to exhibit what is understood as the perfectly exhibitionist body. The practice of tattoo besides being self-expressive enable the body to contemplate what it signifies to its other. The experiential, reflexive, subjective, body modification is not entirely autonomous. The practice located within a discourse or a field also opens a fluid social space of imagining oneself as transformed in relation to others. (Cazeta, 2023 : 335, 340-3 344)The body of youth across the world lend itself to this global rhizomatic form of producing hybridized fetishistic multiculturally inscribed bodies whose design and graphite are free floating symbolism dis embedded from their original roots of spatial locations.

The medical community with intense alacrity have globally alerted to the health risks involved in tattoo in view of the toxic reactions it may cause which may range from mild to severe. Tattoo in authorized unhygienic facilities without use of sterile equipment has reported complications of transmission of infectious and fatal diseases like Hepatitis or immunodeficiency virus .Studies reveal low awareness among substantial section and little knowledge about involved health risks. (Rahimi, 2018 , 30, 35)

The empowering and enabling capacity of tattooed body in addition to its health -defined restrictions and medically bound mandated protocol is is also circumscribed by legal canons that proscribe etching of tattoo on private parts for public display under the Indian Penal Code 1860. Various States in the USA have specific laws and regulations mandated for tattoo artists. These laws provide for minimum training standards, practice license, health and safety standards, prohibition of unsafe equipment and chemicals and even penalty and criminal prosecution in case of violations of these regulatory laws. A gamut of Indian laws also regulates the body art business in addition to the restrictive laws on the question of public decency. (Chakraborty, 2020) While body modifications are gaining slow acceptance there continues to be conservative responses against body modifications. Workplaces and social environments discriminate, foreclose and limit career opportunities for individuals with visible modifications.

Conclusions -The art of tattoo inscription as a popular contemporary body modification practice reveals an interesting intersectionality of human agency, consumer culture, social and normative regime, in addition to the vigil imposed upon this practice by health and legal concerns. An art form with essentially collectivized purpose experiences a disguised collectivization in the interest of a hegemonic market driven consumerist culture and poses

as an empowering and enabling aesthetic tool for the individual. The individual seeking self-expression is paradoxically influenced by propagating images as part of larger designs of a socio-economic arrangement. Tattoo provides an enmeshed negotiation of the micro and the macro, the self and the individual.

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