



Whole or incomplete: the myth of body perfection

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Abstract

The media's and society's prejudice in favor of 'ablesim' propagates the myth of body perfection. As a result we pursue perfection – the concept of ableism invades our minds as well as our culture and we all succumb to its lure. Disability is socially constructed; it is ableism that compels people to believe that perfection is normal. This belief is nothing less than social oppression. Even the rehabilitation therapies send out strong signals that persons with disabilities are 'deficient' and 'abnormal', and that to become a "valued" person they would have to overcome their disabilities. Since the physical component of self-concept is important in maintenance of health and in identity formation, such pressures can lead to a distortion of self-concept. The desire for human perfection can lead to medical conditions such as obsessive compulsive disorder, anorexia nervosa, or depression. It can also impact our understanding of what it means to be human and what signifies a perfect or happy life. This article expounds on why we must achieve, value, and polish psychological maturity through awareness, self-regulation, and honesty.

Keywords: Ableism; Body imperfection; Depression; Physical disability

Media exposure and the 'ideal body'

The myth of body perfection has permeated our culture since the 20th century and the media compounds it by promoting the pursuit of perfect health and beauty. Unfortunately,

we all tend to succumb to the myth when it is injected through media messages into our consciousness. These messages perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical images and limit our perceptions.[1] From TV advertisements, magazines and newspapers, to reality shows and even the movies - there is idealization

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and objectification of bodies by the commercially driven media.

When we sense that we aren't 'that good looking' physically, we feel the need to diet, do aerobics, wax and pluck, and get 'tucked' so as to acquire the 'perfect' look. Men are portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful and aggressive, and women as sexy seductresses - the objects of desire of every man. We correlate a perfect butt with a perfect life; symmetrical faces conform to standards of beauty; an "impeccable body" is what women crave and men cherish.

Let me draw your attention to the advertisement of a beauty product - a face lightener and spot remover - that features a famous Bollywood actress. While endorsing the product, the actress says, "Wish to be spot free? Try the Garnier Light daily moisturizer for a flawless glow in 7 days". Then she picks up her Dalmatian and says, "His spots I love, but my spots had to go!" Spotted skin, which is found "absolutely lovable" on a Dalmatian puppy, is disliked on a woman's body.

There is a congenital disorder known as Sturge-Weber syndrome, which results in a light pink to deep purple birthmark on the face called a port wine stain. There are others who suffer from skin cancer and have spots on their skin. How would those people feel after watching such commercials?

Another commercial has a girl applying a fairness cream on her face - the advertisement shows her gaining more and more confidence with every shade that her skin gets lighter. She gazes at her fair face in the mirror and says to herself, "kahan chupi thi ab tak?" (Where were you hiding all this time?) In the background there is a song playing - 'khayalon me khili nayi roshini' (my thoughts are now enlightened) symbolising that unless one has fair and unblemished skin one can neither be assertive nor be confident. Enlightenment can come to only those who have fair skin or those who have beauty according to 'norms'.

It is ironical that while tattooing and extreme tanning are considered fashionable, a birth

mark or blemishes on the skin due to a skin disorder are considered abnormal. Likewise, body piercing is "in" but an amputated part is viewed with revulsion.

In such a socio-cultural scenario, persons with disabilities are likely to harbor negative body image and to be relegated to the background. A woman with physical disability becomes a symbol of awkwardness and is seen as unfeminine - as one who does not deserve to be admired whatever her accomplishments.[1,2]

Ableism and the myth of 'normalcy'

Ableism is the belief that people with disabilities "need to be fixed or cannot function as full members of society" and that having a disability is "a defect rather than a dimension of difference".[1,3]

Physical disability is often associated with atypical bodies. Disability makes people a part of an identifiable group that is socially constructed. They are compelled to notice society's need for perfection and normalcy which is nothing less than social oppression. In our society and culture there is a commitment to "normalcy" which is a prerequisite for "perfection".

Physical disability in common perception is registered as a body that is wounded or non-functional; cognitive disability is seen as the presence of irrationality.[2,4] Any kind of disability, when viewed by others, automatically makes an individual seem ugly, childlike, helpless or unhealthy. The manifestation of disability makes it antithetical to the concepts of harmony, integrity, and beauty which are the sole determinants of aesthetics. Because of their deformities, scars, stitch marks and disfigurement, persons with disabilities remain outside of the range and scope of being human. Judgmental comments, intrusive stares, and questions about their bodies completely destroy their self esteem and confidence.

Often, even the process of rehabilitation that consists of physiotherapy, occupational

therapy and speech therapy, gets inextricably linked with oppression as a result of our social and cultural dimension to link perfection to normalcy. The implicit message that is received during rehabilitation is that we are deficient and abnormal - in order to be valued we would have to overcome our disability. We will be excluded if we do not comply with the norms of ability, appearance, and behaviour. If we don't measure up we are inferior. Purity of the species and aspirations of perfection have proved to be the scalpel that forcibly sterilizes disabled people. Believers in eugenics continue to support the idea that disabled lives are not worth living.[5] If we do not fit into the mould of perfection and are not productive we must be wiped out.

Nothing else is given importance. Neither our knowledge nor our wisdom; neither our intellectual nor emotional intelligence. Triggered by ableism the most desired thing is to 'fix' outward appearances - and that becomes a never ending challenge for persons with disabilities.

Consequences

Social oppression gradually leads to distortion of the concept of self.[3,4] When persons feel bad about themselves, and wish to be like someone else, it is very common for them to also feel bad about the group they belong to, and to try to merge into the group which is perceived as superior in the hope that the differences will become invisible. This is the phenomena of internalization of oppression. As a result of this, people get divided and sub-divided into smaller and smaller groups.

Representations of beauty not only influence what society at large believes in about the body, but also how individuals value and identify with their own bodies. The individual with disability becomes susceptible to a crisis of identity which takes a toll on his psychology and personality. Another damage done is to the expression of sexuality of persons with disabilities. The desire for bodily perfection can impact our own understanding of what it means to be human and what signifies a perfect or happy life.

Subsequently there is a feeling of loneliness, isolation and the danger of slipping into depression. [6]

The way out

How do we balance others' expectations with the reality of our humanity in this ableist world? Shunning misplaced fantasies one must always remember three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.[7] We all need to understand and appreciate emptiness and imperfection. The first step to enlightenment is the acknowledgement of our own condition. We need a world view centred on acceptance of transience. Let us educate others that aesthetics is sometimes described as beauty that is "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete".

Psychological maturity is a must if we are to develop self-esteem that is robust and flexible. For that to happen, we need greater awareness, self-regulation, and honesty.[8] To see ourselves as persons with disability and the acceptance of disability is a conceptual leap; nevertheless, it is our responsibility - we must develop a consciousness of disability issues and endeavour to reverse the hegemony of 'normal'. Thinking about so called 'abnormal bodies' in alternative ways is the need of the hour.

We need to fight a war against social oppression and prejudice. Every individual has to make an effort to uncover their exclusive version of outer beauty, and embrace their own unique style even in the presence of flaws. One may not be classically beautiful, but one must try to be comfortable in one's own skin. The relentless pursuit of perfection often results in hasty judgments by everyone, whether it be civil society or governments. Instead, there must be a commitment to finding beauty in the most unexpected of places. This would change our whole perception. Love not only virtues, but also scars; value not only strengths, but also vulnerabilities.

The ancient Greek sculpture, Venus de Milo, is immediately recognizable by her missing

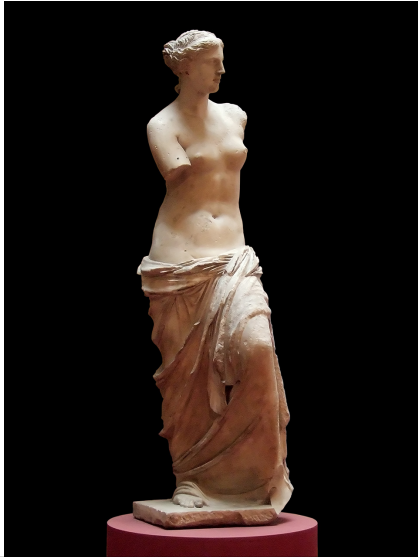


Figure 1: Venus de Milo
Source:
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Aphrodite_of_Milos.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aphrodite_of_Milos.jpg)

arms, and is popularly believed to represent Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty (figure 1). Would the Venus de Milo still be considered one of the great examples of both aesthetic and human beauty if she had both her arms?

The ultimate goal of the struggle against an ableist society is to engage in dialogue that centres on the creative potential of disabled bodies in order to bring about social transformation. It is important to construct a new vocabulary and methodology around disability and accessibility in challenging and stimulating ways. Society must be sensitized to find a language to design a framework around how disability must fit into the discourse since perfection of the body is a myth.

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