

Male gaze, their female guardians and sports-wear

By Varisha Tariq

In Helen Cixous' essay, 'The Laugh of Medusa', she urges women to redefine what their body means to them, not just physically but also socially, emotionally and politically. This could happen by re-writing about your body in a way you deem fit, the expression you identify with and separating it from how men have written about your body. The expression could be how you view your body separate from the patriarchal lens.

It is no secret that a woman's body is subject to critique. While clothing for men is just a tool to cover themselves as per the surrounding environment, clothing for women is a social and political narrative that dictates their life or as we affectionately call it 'culturally appropriate'.

The clothing style could vary. It could be a woman covered head to toe in a Burqa, it could be a woman who decides to wear sportswear in a park or it could be jeans and a top. Everything is critically evaluated by men and by women who work towards protecting the male gaze.

The male gaze is a heterosexual way of looking at female bodies that sexualises these bodies into an object. It is a gaze that runs on the self-affirmative notion that the bodies of women, and what they do with it, are directly linked to how they appear in front of a man.

In a recent incident in Bangalore, India, popular Indian actress Samyuktha Hegde was abused and threatened by a senior political leader of the Congress party, Kavitha Reddy, for wearing sportswear, in Bangalore's Agara Lake Park. She was exercising with her friend.

Kavitha Reddy initially claimed she was in indecent attire and went on moral police and then later abused the actress and her friend. A supposedly progressive political leader gets uncomfortable with what women are wearing. It breaks into an argument and a fight where the politician is supported by five to six men. Later on, the police appear to be appeasing the politician instead of the women who

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were harassed. Although she did apologise, her apology came after her video went viral, and as a protection for her political reputation.

To look at Samyuktha Hegde's clothing as a threat is to view her clothing as an act of obscenity therefore bullying her identity and sense of agency and reducing her to a sexual object, who, by putting her in public, apparently gives the men present a right to look at her? Never mind that she was there to work out like everyone else, her actions were confused as to how men looked at her. In the video posted by the actress, the politician is surrounded by men who are championing her—the politician chooses to side with the patriarchal figures in shaming these women. Asking to protect from the male gaze is a far stretch but punishing women for the male gaze is where we should draw a line.

What roles does Kavitha Reddy play? She is the guardian of the male gaze. We find her in our mothers, in our grandmothers, in aunties and sometimes our friends. She understands a woman's body as an object that is there to be looked at by men. She gets angry at women for wearing certain kinds of clothing but she is not angry at men for looking. The agency in this case always belongs to men.

When Cixous asks women to redefine their identity, she urges us to strangle the moral police that come alive in such instances. It is the moral police that shames women for wearing clothes that don't flatter their bodies or clothes that do flatter them. She urges us to reflect upon the source of such vigilance. Do we shame other women because we believe in what we are saying or our identity is partially (or wholly) shaped by the male gaze?

Whether we choose to wear a burqa, a dress, or variations of the new type of clothing produced every day, the crux of the matter is that it should not worry anyone apart from the one wearing it. The identity of a woman, sexual or otherwise, has to be redefined to be separated from the men and their

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gaze. We have to draw a line otherwise people in power will continue to abuse their power and preserve patriarchy and the male gaze.