

**BEAUTY, FEMININITY, AND GOTHIC MONSTROSITY IN
SELECT FICTION BY JOYCE CAROL OATES, RAMONA
LOFTON, AND LOIS-ANN YAMANAKA**

by

Nilanjana Ghosal



भारतीय प्रौद्योगिकी संस्थान हैदराबाद
Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad

**DEPARTMENT OF LIBERAL ARTS
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY HYDERABAD
APRIL 2014**

**BEAUTY, FEMININITY, AND GOTHIC MONSTROSITY IN
SELECT FICTION BY JOYCE CAROL OATES, RAMONA
LOFTON, AND LOIS-ANN YAMANAKA**

*A Thesis submitted
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of*
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Nilanjana Ghosal

to the

**DEPARTMENT OF LIBERAL ARTS
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY HYDERABAD**

APRIL 2014

to

the most powerful and inspirational women in my life

**Ma,
Tanima Ghosal**

**my aunts,
Nilima Ganguly and Pratima Mukherjee**

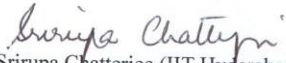
**my teacher,
Anjana Chakraborty Gulrajani**

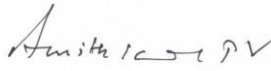
and


**my thesis advisor,
Srirupa Chatterjee**


Approval Sheet

This thesis entitled *Beauty, Femininity, and Gothic Monstrosity in Select Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates, Ramona Lofton, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka* by Ms. Nilanjana Ghosal (Roll number: LA12M1004) is approved for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English from the Department of Liberal Arts at IIT Hyderabad.


Dr. Srirupa Chatterjee (IIT Hyderabad)
Thesis Guide (Chairperson)


Dr. Amith Kumar P. V.
(The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad)
External Examiner


Dr. Nandini Ramesh Sankar (IIT Hyderabad)
Committee Member (LA IITH Faculty)


Dr. Thenmalarchelvi Rathinavelan (IIT Hyderabad)
Committee Member (Non-LA IITH Faculty)

Date: 9/7/2014

Place: HYDERABAD

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my own ideas and words and where others ideas or words have been included; I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented, fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will result in disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources that have not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

NILANJANA GHOSAL

Signature of candidate

NILANJANA GHOSAL

Name of candidate

LA12M1004

Roll number

CERTIFICATE

It is certified that the work contained in the thesis entitled **Beauty, Femininity, and Gothic Monstrosity in Select Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates, Ramona Lofton, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka** submitted by Ms. Nilanjana Ghosal (LA12M1004) in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Philosophy to the Department of Liberal Arts, Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, is a record of bonafide research work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance. The results embodied in the thesis have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

Dr. Srirupa Chatterjee

Department of Liberal Arts
IIT Hyderabad

April 2014

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Ms. Nilanjana Ghosal (LA12M1004) has satisfactorily completed all the course requirements for the M.Phil. Program in English. Ms. Nilanjana Ghosal was admitted to the candidacy of the M.Phil. degree in August 2012.

Dr. Badri Narayan Rath

(Head)

Dept. of Liberal Arts

IIT Hyderabad

Dr. Srirupa Chatterjee

(Convener)

DPGC

IIT Hyderabad

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have materialized without the constant support and inspiration of the people mentioned here.

At the outset, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Srirupa Chatterjee, whose constant guidance and support throughout this project gave shape to my ideas and made this thesis possible. I thank her for her patience and for engaging closely and continuously with my work. Her numerous revisions of my 'monstrous' drafts gave me clarity and taught me about the art of literary research. Thank you ma'am, for your wisdom and your belief in me. You have been a huge source of inspiration.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Nandini Ramesh Sankar, member of my doctoral committee, for her extremely valuable suggestions during my progress review presentations. Thank you ma'am for all your valuable feedback. I would also like to thank Dr. Saswata Bhattacharya, member of my evaluation committee, for his thought-provoking questions and comments.

I am grateful to my department and to all the professors for their help and support through the courses that I have credited during my M.Phil. program. In thanking the department, I would specially like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Badri Narayan Rath, the head of the Department of Liberal Arts at IIT Hyderabad for being very kind and supportive in all matters, academic or otherwise.

My note of gratitude would be incomplete without mention of the library staff. I would particularly like to thank Mr. Mallikarjuna C, the Assistant Librarian and the IITH Library staff for their assistance regarding access to books and journals, resources that have been immensely helpful to me for this thesis.

I would not have sailed through this difficult journey without the love and care of my friends. Thank you Aarti and Remya; although you've lived in different cities, you've never been away since school. Thank you Lydia, Pragya, and Indu, for keeping me in your prayers and being with me during tough phases. Thank you Monu, Hamsaveni, Mahaprajna, Muhammed, and Akhil for loving me in spite of my innumerable failed promises of visiting Begumpet and EFLU during my M.Phil. days. Thank you Samik, although contact with you has been minimal, it has always been a pleasure listening to you. A special thank you to my dearest friend Umasankar, for always being there, no matter what.

My friends at IIT Hyderabad have also been immensely caring and supportive at bearing my erratic mood swings, especially during submissions. A big thank you to Neethi and Anindita; you've been pillars of strength to me during difficult times. A special thank you to my roommate Saswati, despite your dislike for 'thank-yous', for your love, care and understanding. Life at IIT Hyderabad is unimaginable without the three of you. I am also grateful to Anindita Mandal, Rini and Jyoti for making life at IITH fun and easy. Thank you all.

Finally, I would like to add that emotional support is essential when one is away from home. I would like to thank my mother for being a constant source of inspiration, support and love. Thank you Ma; without your encouragement I would never have come back to academics. Thank you for giving me such a wonderful life. I also owe my gratitude to all elders back home for their love and care. Thank you.

Name: Nilanjana Ghosal

Roll No. : LA12M1004, M.Phil. Scholar in English

Department: Liberal Arts, Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, India

Thesis title: *Beauty, Femininity, and Gothic Monstrosity in Select Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates, Ramona Lofton, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka*

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Srirupa Chatterjee

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the normative and repressive cultural discourses on beauty and femininity and their effects on women's psyche with the help of select works of contemporary American fiction. It seeks to establish that the violence and oppression resulting from hegemonic discourses on feminine beauty attain Gothic characteristics, in that they produce horrific effects on the minds and bodies of women. In order to establish how Gothic horror is a ubiquitous presence in the lives of women who are in thrall to the beauty myth, this study takes into consideration select works of fiction by contemporary American women writers which narrate the experiences of women across various classes and ethnicities.

Accordingly, it begins with an analysis of the violence inherent in the beauty myth, as espoused by third wave feminists like Naomi Wolf, Susan Bordo, and Susan Faludi; and with the help of contemporary Gothic theories seeks to demonstrate how the myth gives rise to the self-loathing, obsession, and violence that often borders on the uncanny. The study examines these postulations through the works of American women writers such as Joyce Carol Oates's *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008) that portrays white American women's enslavement to the beauty myth. It then explores the writings of African American women novelists and offers a close reading of Ramona Lofton aka Sapphire's *Push* (1996) to establish how the beauty myth acts as a double-bind in the lives of black women who very often suffer psychic and physical violence and are socially ostracized due to the natural physical characteristics of their race. The study finally examines the trappings of the beauty myth and the violence of assimilation in the lives of American women belonging to other ethnicities such as Japanese, Indian, and Mexican and presents a detailed analysis of Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996) which depicts how colored women struggle to live up to America's dominant cultural discourses on beauty and femininity. In conclusion, the study, through an analysis of American women's repression under the nation's capitalistic and patriarchal discourses on ideals of womanhood and beauty, seeks to establish how the lives of such women are subject to Gothic violence and horror.

SYNOPSIS

Name of the Student: Nilanjana Ghosal

Roll No: LA12M1004

Degree for which Submitted: Master of Philosophy

Department: Department of Liberal Arts

Thesis Title: *Beauty, Femininity, and Gothic Monstrosity in Select Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates, Ramona Lofton, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka*

Name of the Thesis Adviser: Dr. Srirupa Chatterjee

Month and Year of Submission: April 2014

This thesis examines the repression and violence perpetrated by the dominant ideologies governing the social construction of beauty and femininity in contemporary America. By illustrating how the dominant discourses on feminine beauty captivates women driving them toward an obsessive quest for perfect physicality, and enslaves them to the dictates of the beauty and the cosmetic industry, this thesis argues that the beauty myth functions as a diabolic force in the lives of American women in the twenty first century. Accordingly, with help of select works of contemporary American fiction, it reads the beauty myth as a Gothic phenomenon that engenders tremendous psychic and physical violence on subjects who are entrapped within the ideology of an ideal body image. Notably, while fear and horror in traditional Gothic is symbolized by the presence of a terrifying and malformed monster figure that largely inhabits isolated spaces and tortures its victims, in contemporary Gothic, horror and monstrosity are deconstructed and exist in the form of normative yet extremely oppressive ideological constructs which in turn are ubiquitously present.

Given this supposition, it may be asserted that the beauty myth, appropriately described by scholars as a postfeminist Gothic phenomenon, works as a violent and repressive force in the lives of contemporary American women who internalize and appropriate its dictates even as they are victimized by it. To elucidate how the beauty myth functions as a horrific and monstrous influence in the lives of contemporary American women, the present study discusses a number of literary narratives produced in post-war America by women writers of various ethnic origins.

Arguably, under the overarching influence of the beauty myth, the contemporary American women questing for an ideal body turn maniacal and obsessive and their pursuits very often border on the uncanny. In fact, the beauty myth appropriates its subjects by propagating discourses on femininity and womanhood that appear both conventional and commonplace but in actuality manipulate women's sense of self-worth, forcing them to adopt intrusive and often violent means to alter their natural physical attributes. Hence the contemporary Gothic order, as discussed in this study, does not represent misshapen and horrifying monsters but immaculately groomed and elegantly styled women who are both victims and perpetrators of the beauty myth. More important, the monstrosity that characterizes the beauty ideology in contemporary America is marked by its normality and its capacity to construct an ideal and homogenized category of womanhood and femininity. In fact, as this study seeks to prove, contemporary monstrosity lies within the image of the ultra-feminine form that is celebrated by the media and the beauty industry and hence deeply cherished and desired by American women. Notably, women's endeavors at attaining this form often appear analogous with grotesque spectacles that typify the Gothic order. Naturally, under the persuasive politics of body image women find themselves working compulsively toward sculpting perfect bodies to obtain a persona that may be

termed beautiful and desirable. Undoubtedly, such endeavors are not only repressive and exhausting but also violent and fatal. Women, nevertheless, engage in the never-ending task of beautification simply because it enhances their self-esteem by conferring to them social acceptability. In contrast, a negation of these ideals often evokes rejection and ridicule from various quarters of society for women who are seemingly 'unattractive' and 'unfeminine'. Therefore, the myth of feminine beauty in contemporary America, supported and advocated by the forces of capitalism and patriarchy, wields enormous control over the lives and psyches of women.

Accordingly, this thesis examines how the unrealistic and inhuman norms of beauty and femininity relegate American women into a postfeminist Gothic realm where they suffer tremendous psychic and physical violence and much like the hapless protagonists of horrific narratives of the eighteenth century are transformed into victims. The thesis illustrates these issues with the help of fictional works by contemporary American women writers who have depicted the problematic of the beauty myth and interprets them as narratives of postmodern violence and Gothic enslavement.

Keeping in mind the exploits of the beauty business in the twenty first century and its similarities with contemporary Gothic, this study attempts to analyze the lives of American women who are trapped within this repressive ideology. To illustrate how such socio-cultural forces define and control the lives of women in contemporary America, this study takes into consideration three representative novels written in the wake of the twentieth century, namely, Joyce Carol Oates's *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008), Ramona Lofton aka Sapphire's *Push* (1996), and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996). The three novels mentioned here explore the fates of women, white American, African American, and

Japanese American respectively, and may be read as descriptions of Gothic entrapment which in turn bears a discernable resemblance with the contemporary beauty myth.

To examine how the beauty ideology in contemporary America functions as a Gothic trope in the lives of women, the present study examines a number of fictional works that depict the experiences of women representing various classes and ethnicities and reads them in the light of contemporary feminist and Gothic theories. Accordingly, this thesis juxtaposes the theories advocated by third wave feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo, Susan Faludi, Naomi Wolf, and Gloria Steinem to illustrate how the beauty myth functions as an oppressive force with concepts put forward by contemporary Gothic scholars such as Fred Botting, Stephanie Genz, Catherine Spooner, and Steven Bruhm who claim that horror and monstrosity in the present century function largely as omnipresent and repressive ideological constructs. Discussing the confluence of feminist and Gothic theories, the first chapter titled **Monstrous Discourses: Body Image, Femininity and the Contemporary Gothic**, seeks to establish how the contemporary tech-savvy culture in America attains dystopic characteristics where the re-creation and re-shaping of the natural world appears to be a commonplace phenomenon. Accordingly, it argues that the contemporary beauty myth, by urging women to obtain unrealistic physical characteristics, forces them to take recourse in the violent and intrusive technical measures propounded by the media and the beauty industry. By drawing on the history and development of the beauty industry and enlisting the existing scholarly interventions on this socio-cultural problematic, this chapter finally argues that the beauty myth functions as a monstrous ideology that likens contemporary American women to victims of eighteenth century Gothic narratives.

Chapter two titled **Feminine Beauty and the Vicious Politics of Self-esteem: White American Women's Experience**, through a detailed analysis of Joyce Carol Oates's novel *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008), explores the white woman's enslavement to the dictates of the beauty myth and depicts capitalistic America as a monstrous world reverberating with Gothic echoes. The chapter reads the two central Oatesian characters, Betsy Rampike and her daughter six year old Bliss, as Gothic protagonists who are trapped under the repressive norms of beauty and femininity advocated by the upper class white American society. Subsequently, it argues that the mother-daughter duo undergoes horrific emotional and physical violence, suffers psychic splits, leads zombie-like lives, and finally faces extremely gruesome and pathetic deaths owing to its subjection to the myth of beauty and femininity. In addition to the Oates's text, this chapter also briefly discusses other literary narratives delineating the travails of the white American women in the face of the hegemonic dictates of the beauty myth, namely, Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs* (1984), Ann Tyler's *A Slipping Down Life* (1969) and Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Madison at Guigno!" from the collection *The Female of the Species* (2007). By employing the theories propounded by contemporary Gothic scholars in tandem with those offered by feminist theorists of the nineties', this chapter discusses how madness, horror and violence very often befalls white American women who are entrapped by the beauty myth.

The third chapter titled **Body Image, Violence and Victimhood: The Struggles of African American Women** discusses the African American woman's experience under the dictates of the beauty myth which is perhaps ghastlier when compared with her white American counterparts. Given that the African American woman not only faces the challenges set forth by western hegemonic discourses on

beauty and femininity but also the stigma against the natural physical characteristics of her race, her experiences are extremely poignant, to say the least. Accordingly, this chapter discusses how the African American woman's subjectivity is very often a product of a combination of oppressive forces such as economic deprivation, sexual exploitation, and racial segregation, which function in tandem with the western normative discourses on beauty and femininity that systematically reject the black woman as the abominable 'other'. Through a detailed discussion of Sapphire's *Push* (1996), which narrates the tragic tale of Claireece Precious Jones, a sixteen year old girl living in Harlem, New York in the 1980s, who is violated and impregnated by her father and ostracized by society for having an obese black body, this chapter demonstrates the bizarre spectacle of the abjectness that typifies the life of the poor African American woman. Likewise, this chapter also presents a brief overview of the representative works on black women's subservience to the white discourses on beauty and femininity through narratives such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker's "Her Sweet Jerome" from the collection *In Love and Trouble* (1973) and *The Color Purple* (1982), and Joyce Carol Oates's *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006). Finally, by demonstrating how the African American woman is judged harshly for her skin color, bodily proportions and other physical attributes in comparison with her white American counterparts, this chapter asserts that the African American woman's position in society has, over centuries, been one of inferiority and abasement that makes her vulnerable to horror and violence and which very often recalls a Gothic world order.

The fourth chapter entitled **Beauty Myth and the Violence of Assimilation: Ethnic American Women's Experience** claims that like their white American and African American counterparts, women of other ethnicities in the United States are

also subject to the predominant white discourses of the beauty myth. By exploring the travails of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Mexican women, this chapter argues that the imperative to assimilate into the cultural mainstream is a palpable reality in contemporary America and this ideological construct becomes violently coercive for ethnic women who must conform not only outwardly to socio-cultural codes but also alter their appearance significantly in order to be accommodated by dominant white discourses on beauty and femininity. Accordingly, this chapter offers a close reading of Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996) which discusses the experiences of Lovey Nariyoshi, a Japanese American teenager residing in Hawaii in the 1970s. Yamanaka's novel demonstrates how women of various ethnicities in America struggle with the pressures and violence of assimilation, both within their own community as well as from the American society at large while attempting to forge an identity that is both conventional and normative. The chapter also briefly discusses literary narratives such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1977), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1992), Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Beauty Lessons" from the collection titled *An Island Like You* (1995), and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Name Me Nobody* (1999) to examine the poignant experiences of ethnic women inhabiting contemporary America whose subservience to the beauty myth makes their condition akin to that of the Gothic victim.

The **Conclusion**, with help of a discussion of the novels by contemporary American women writers belonging to mainstream white as well as other ethnic backgrounds, seeks to establish that the ubiquitous presence of the established norms of beauty and femininity enslave women across cultures in America. It is worth reiterating that in the contemporary world the myth of feminine beauty, challenged by

the nineties' feminists, has assumed Gothic dimensions giving rise to a host of monstrous ideologies that afflict women's minds and bodies by subjugating them to capitalistic and patriarchal discourses on femininity. Ubiquitously present and uncannily persistent, this myth demands women not only to conform in matters of appearance but also to change their behavioral patterns that in most instances lead to psychic aberrations. The repressive norms of beauty and femininity, therefore, typically lead to Gothic victimhood and by exposing this monstrosity through the fiction of contemporary American women writers this study addresses the fantasies and the fears that entrap many contemporary women.

Introduction

The myth of perfectible female beauty and the ensuing obsession with beautification, according to a large number of gender and body studies experts, has become one of the largest preoccupations of contemporary America and subsequently idealized conceptions of female body image have taken a huge toll on women. Notably, the media and the beauty industry, backed by both capitalistic and patriarchal forces, have produced a celebratory rhetoric to define the beauty myth, championing it as an endeavor toward empowered femininity that brings women success and makes them desirable. In actuality, however, the beauty myth inflicts tremendous psychic and even physical violence on women as they are, more often than not, seduced by its promises to forcibly alter their natural physical attributes. The image of a perfect female body, specifically over the last two decades, has powerfully captured the imagination of millions of women across the world, especially in countries like America. This is because the media and the internet revolution since the nineties' have helped in disseminating the beauty ideal equally and pervasively across all sections of the society. Accordingly, women in the twenty first century, as many contemporary feminists argue, while having access to education and financial independence, have been systematically manipulated by the persuasive ideals generated by the beauty myth. Enthralled by images of ideal feminine beauty that are disseminated widely through magazines, television, films and the internet, contemporary women adhere religiously to these beliefs and resultantly succumb to a diabolic ideological trap which exploits their anxieties and self-esteem. Subsequently, such women often suffer neurotic ailments such as Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia and even take recourse to expensive and fatal intrusive medical and cosmetic procedures in the hope of attaining an ideal body. Arguably, the obsessive need to

refashion their 'ordinary' selves, in order to enter a world of success, acceptance, never-ending youth, glamour and love, very often becomes a maniacal quest amongst contemporary American women urging them toward violent, masochistic and even uncanny practices of beautification. The present study, therefore, with the help of select works of fiction by contemporary American women writers, reads the beauty myth as a contemporary Gothic phenomenon and claims that this ideology engenders immense bodily and mental violence on the subjects who are entrapped within the dominant cultural discourse of the ideal body image. It further argues that the horrific monstrosity of traditional Gothic has in the present century metamorphosed into repressive ideological constructs and accordingly the beauty myth can be read as a tyrannical Gothic force since it is internalized and appropriated by the female subject even as it victimizes her.

The origin of the contemporary beauty myth, one that wields a powerful influence over the lives of American women, maybe traced to the beginning of the twentieth century with the arrival of Helena Rubinstein, a Polish immigrant, to America. Rubinstein, who famously proclaimed that "there are no ugly women, just lazy ones", addressed an extremely complex set of anxieties and desires that often define the feminine identity. Not surprisingly, Rubenstein, an astute businesswoman and one of the pioneers of modern beauty and cosmetic industry in America, created an empire that has captivated American women over the last century. Notably, the beauty business and the myth of perfect physicality espoused by the likes of Rubenstein has gained enormous significance, specifically in the recent decades, owing to explosive campaigns circulating images of a perfect body through print and visual media and the ubiquitously present internet. The myth of feminine beauty today has, therefore, assumed a quasi-religious status in America and fair skin, blue-eyes,

straight blond hair, and skinny bodies define the unequivocal universal standards of beauty and womanhood. Naturally, the discourse of the perfect white female form breeds insecurity in a large number of women who, despite feeling helpless and victimized, are unable to resist the dictates of the beauty myth.

Significantly, this problematic has been examined by a number of contemporary anthropological and psychological studies which claim that the prevalence of a dominant discourse on female body image is detrimental to women's psychological and physical well-being. For instance, Alexandra A. Brewis, along with her associates, in an essay titled "Body Norms and Fat Stigma in Global Perspective", discusses the impact of shame and guilt that often accompanies obesity in women. She claims that the present perceptions of body image:

. . . include the recognition of obesity as a disease, the role of individual responsibility in weight gain and loss, and the social undesirability of fat . . . [and further notes that] in the middle-income and developing-country samples . . . the [r]esults suggest a profound diffusion of negative ideas about obesity. (Brewis and et al 269)

Likewise, another significant analysis on this issue inheres in Daniel Hamermesh and Jeff Biddle's study titled "Beauty and the Labor Market" which focuses on case studies from America and Canada to examine how physical attractiveness plays a significant role in defining one's professional success. The researchers assert that good looks add to one's chances of attaining greater premium at the workplace and more important, the wages of better-looking people are often higher than that of the average looking ones.

While the homogenized discourses on what constitutes the ideal body image, which in turn give primacy to the Caucasian physical form, are largely oppressive to white Americans, this ideology becomes particularly antipathetic toward subjects with ethnic and non-white physicality. Accordingly, a number of scholars have addressed the repercussions of this cultural imperative in the lives of ethnic subjects in America. Tracey Owens Patton, for instance, in her article “Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair” claims that “[s]ome historically popular yet recurring negative manifestations of African American beauty include the oversexed jezebel, the tragic mulatto, and the mammy figure” (Owens 26) thereby demonstrating how female physical forms other than those befitting the American beauty myth have been associated with ‘undesirable’ and ‘unfeminine’ attributes and hence consistently marginalized. Critiquing the celebration of Euro-centric physicality that induces self-hatred in women of other ethnicities, Owen further adds that “women were [mostly] subjected to hegemonically defined standards of beauty . . . [and] our knowledge of history and women, in general, privileges and largely traces Euro-American body image issues . . . [and] women currently continue to be held to hegemonically defined standards of beauty” (Owens 31). She also examines how such dominant discourses on feminine beauty force women to very often adopt violent and harmful practices to gain acceptance in the American society. Owen notes:

tattoos, piercing (belly button, chin, ear, eyebrow, labia, nipples, nose, tongue), high-heeled shoes, tight jeans, curlers, perms, straighteners, diet aids, liposuction, plastic surgery, botox injections, skin lightening, and gastric bypass. All of the above are costly, but the physical costs of altering the body to attain hegemonic standards of beauty can range

from breast cancer . . . to anorexia, bulimia, and emotional stress.

(Owens 31)

Similarly, Cheryl Thompson in her essay “Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being” illustrates how African American women need to re-fashion their natural selves in order to gain social acceptance. Focusing on the African American woman’s obsession with changing the natural texture of their hair to make it smooth and straight, Thompson claims that the larger American ideal of beautiful hair influences “courtship, self-esteem, and identity” (Thompson 832) in the lives of colored women who inevitably choose to alter the natural physical traits characteristic to their race in order to gain social acceptance. Obviously, ethnic American women are doubly victimized by the contemporary discourses on feminine beauty since they not only need to live up to white ideals but also alter their genetically determined physical traits.

Significantly, the materialistic culture of contemporary America is rife with artefacts that reinforce the dominant discourses on female body image. While these artefacts powerfully impact acculturation for most Americans, they also abet the nation’s capitalistic enterprises. The Barbie doll, for instance, has very often been examined as an artefact that strongly impacts the conception of beauty and femininity in young American girls and in turn enslaves them to the dictates of the beauty industry from a very early age. More important, over the years the Barbie has undergone several remodellings to appeal to the aesthetics popularized by the media. Accordingly, its changing image appears to advertise the products and services sold by the beauty as well as the fitness industry. For instance, the Barbie of the nineties’ has an athletic body as opposed to that of the fifties’ when the doll represented a more voluptuous feminine form. Obviously, this transformation is a response to the new

image of the female body being celebrated in the wake of the twentieth century.

Commenting upon the change in the body shape of the Barbie, Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo in their article “The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World” state that,

Even our toys are undergoing ‘the knife’ in the name of beauty. In 1997, Mattel’s most famous toy, the Barbie doll, emerged from the factory operating room with a “wider waist, slimmer hips, and . . . a reduction of her legendary bustline . . . This reconfiguration of the West’s premier icon of femininity after nearly forty years suggests that the image of femininity embodied by the original Barbie of the late 1950s has undergone a radical transformation of its own. (298)

Accordingly, what the contemporary beauty myth celebrates is an ultra-slim and athletic Caucasian female body represented through cultural artefacts such as the Barbie doll. It is worth noting that such cultural imperatives very often take subtle but complete control over women’s lives and psyches reducing them to mere automatons functioning in accordance with the dictates of such ideals. One of the most significant outcomes of this ideology is the fact that women very often give in to self-surveillance and self-inflicted pain to live upto the ideals of the beauty myth. Noting this, Tice Karen in her essay “Queens of Academe: Campus Pageantry and Student Life” claims that the beauty ideals affect women very early and occasions like local beauty pageants, explored in her thesis, perhaps reinforce the same myths that the figure of Barbie does. Karen examines how beauty pageants in a college setting “[confer] social prestige on women students for how they discipline their bodies and selves to accommodate hegemonic constructions” (Karen 277) and thereby demonstrates the repressive effects of the beauty ideology on women.

In the light of the present discussion it may be asserted that the beauty myth in contemporary America acts as a demonic presence affecting the lives of millions of women. Accordingly, this study, with the help of postulations by twentieth century Gothic theorists, seeks to argue that the hegemonic discourses on beauty and femininity in America repress and victimize women and hence may be likened to contemporary Gothic monstrosity. The validity of such an interpretation is bolstered by the arguments presented by a number of modern Gothic scholars who agree that the misshapen monster of the traditional Gothic has today been replaced by repressive and omnipresent ideological forces that are not visibly horrific and grotesque; nevertheless, they retain the elements of violence, entrapment and terror. Perhaps the earliest and the most persuasive scholarship on the contemporary Gothic is obtained in Ellen Moers's thesis on the "Female Gothic" in 1976. Moers claims that Gothic "has to do with fear . . . with one definite auctorial intent: to scare" (*Literary Women* 90) thereby demonstrating how writers, specifically women writers, recurrently use Gothic tropes to explore the dark and horrific social constructs such as oppression and victimization. The category of the 'female Gothic' has also been examined by critics such as Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace in their book *Female Gothic* (2009) wherein they claim that this genre is specifically suited for representing women's voices and experiences since they accommodate discourses on violence as well as subversion.

Notably, the Gothic as a genre is known for its capacity to expose the perversions of a blindly progressive technologized world. In an interesting analysis of the Gothic, Erin Hollis in her essay "Revisiting the Gothic: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel as Contemporary Gothic" examines Joss Whedon's television shows *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* and compares them with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Hollis claims that the monsters in both traditional and contemporary Gothic narratives are “creature[s], [that represent] . . . the manipulation of science and technology, [and reflect] the cultural anxieties of the specific time period during which each adaptation is created” (Hollis 244) and further adds that “both depictions of the creature demonstrate the [G]othic genre’s ability to forecast cultural anxieties about progress in the fields of science and technology and the sorts of evil acts that might be spawned by such fields” (Hollis 244). Notably, the association of the contemporary Gothic with technological excesses, that manipulate the natural order and produce horrific results, has been examined by a number of scholars including Steven Bruhm, Fred Botting and Stephanie Genz, to name a few. In fact, Genz appropriates this argument to discuss the problematic of contemporary women and the beauty myth given that the myth is largely influenced by technical advancements. Discussing women’s experiences under the shadow of the beauty ideal, Genz presents a powerful expose in her essay titled “Remaking the Body Beautiful: Postfeminist Cinderellas and Gothic Tales of Transformation” where she demonstrates how beauty in contemporary times is sold as an ideal that calls for spending money and working hard with the promise of a ‘perfect’ body and life for anyone who adheres to certain prescriptive norms. Genz argues that the beauty industry has worked systematically toward creating a new ideology; making women believe religiously in the “immaculately groomed and ultra-feminine” (Genz 69) form that she claims is an embodiment of both the postfeminist victim and the monster. Genz’s thesis becomes particularly interesting in that it argues that the contemporary beauty myth bears strong echoes of Gothic violence and accordingly supports the central argument propounded by this thesis. A similar discourse is found in Steven Bruhm’s *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (1994) where he expounds on the concept of pain as a “culturally

mediated experience through which authors and characters come to ‘know’, in some sense, their own bodies” (xx). Accordingly, Bruhm’s argument helps in drawing a comparison between Gothic victims and victims of the beauty myth since the latter willingly undergo pain in order to attain an identity that may be accepted and termed ‘desirable’ and thereby obtain a sense of empowerment. The existing research on contemporary Gothic, therefore, helps in asserting that the contemporary beauty myth, in more ways than one, functions as a monstrous ideology and hence maybe likened with Gothic tyranny.

Interestingly, while fear and horror in traditional Gothic is symbolized by the presence of the monster figure, in contemporary postfeminist Gothic horrific monstrosity has taken the form of an ideological construct, an all pervasive force that is internalized and appropriated by the subject even as it victimizes her. Accordingly, the contemporary Gothic order, as discussed in this study, does not represent misshapen and horrifying monsters but immaculately groomed and elegantly styled women who are both victims and perpetrators of the beauty myth. In a postfeminist Gothic world, it may, therefore, be asserted that normative and prescriptive dictates of beauty and femininity circulated through an abundance of images and practices attains a terrifying character as it traps and enslaves women forcing them to adopt established definitions of womanhood. Unfortunately, such aspirations, even though they appear as innocuous and commonplace definitions of beauty and femininity, in actuality are extremely repressive. Under these norms women find themselves working compulsively toward sculpting perfect bodies to obtain a persona that may be termed desirable. While, prima facie, the creation of this perfect body appears to be an antithesis of Victor’s Frankenstein’s ‘monster’, in reality it bears a strong resemblance with the grotesqueness of the classic science project in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

The only difference in contemporary Gothic inheres perhaps in the fact that horror and monstrosity now function at the psychological level both subjugating and liberating the victim/subject at the same time. Repression occurs since a failure to achieve perfect physical and behavioral attributes often translates into disregard from several quarters of society, and accordingly women willingly and obsessively chase these elusive standards. Likewise, a negation of these ideals often evokes rejection and ridicule from various quarters of society for women who are seemingly ‘unattractive’ and ‘unfeminine’ and hence treated as social outcasts. Hence, it may be argued that the unrealistic norms of beauty and femininity relegate women into a postfeminist Gothic realm where they suffer excessive psychic violence and it is only when they succeed in living upto these standards are they lauded by society at large. Therefore, the myth of feminine beauty in contemporary America, supported and advocated by the forces of capitalism and patriarchy, wields enormous control over the lives and psyches of women. The present thesis illustrates these issues with the help of fictional works by contemporary American women writers who have depicted the problematic of the beauty myth, and interprets them as narratives of postmodern violence and Gothic enslavement.

Keeping in mind the exploits of the beauty business in the twenty first century and its similarities with contemporary Gothic this study attempts to analyze the lives of American women who are trapped within this repressive ideology. To illustrate how such socio-cultural forces define and control the lives of women in contemporary America, this study takes into consideration three representative novels written in the wake of the twentieth century, namely, Joyce Carol Oates’s *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008), Ramona Lofton aka Sapphire’s *Push* (1996), and Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996). The three novels

mentioned here explore the fates of women, white American, African American, and Japanese American, respectively, and may be read as descriptions of Gothic entrapment which in turn bears a discernable resemblance with the contemporary beauty myth.

Accordingly, this thesis juxtaposes the theories advocated by third wave feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo, Susan Faludi, Naomi Wolf, and Gloria Steinem to illustrate how the beauty myth functions as an oppressive force with concepts put forward by contemporary Gothic scholars such as Fred Botting, Stephanie Genz, Catherine Spooner, and Steven Bruhm who claim that horror and monstrosity in the present century function largely as omnipresent and repressive ideological constructs. Discussing the confluence of feminist and Gothic theories, the first chapter titled **Monstrous Discourses: Body Image, Femininity and the Contemporary Gothic** seeks to establish how the contemporary tech-savvy culture in America attains the characteristics of a dystopia where the re-creation and re-shaping of the natural world appears to be a commonplace phenomenon. Accordingly, it argues that the contemporary beauty myth, by urging women to obtain unrealistic physical characteristics, forces them to take recourse in the violent and intrusive technical measures propounded by the media and the beauty industry. By drawing on the history and development of the beauty industry and enlisting the existing scholarly interventions on this socio-cultural problematic, this chapter finally argues that the beauty myth functions as monstrous ideology that likens contemporary American women to female victims of eighteenth century Gothic narratives.

Chapter two titled **Feminine Beauty and the Vicious Politics of Self-esteem: White American Women's Experience**, through a detailed analysis of Joyce Carol Oates's novel *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008),

explores the white woman's enslavement to the dictates of the beauty myth and depicts capitalistic America as a monstrous world reverberating with Gothic echoes. The chapter reads the two central Oatesian characters, Betsy Rampike and her daughter six year old Bliss, as Gothic protagonists who are trapped under the repressive norms of beauty and femininity advocated by the upper class white American society. Subsequently, it argues that the mother-daughter duo undergoes horrific emotional and physical violence, suffers psychic splits, leads zombie-like lives, and finally faces extremely gruesome and pathetic deaths owing to its subjection to the myth of beauty and femininity. In addition to Oates's text, this chapter also briefly discusses other literary narratives delineating the travails of the white American women in the face of the hegemonic dictates of the beauty myth, namely, Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs* (1984), Ann Tyler's *A Slipping Down Life* (1969) and Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Madison at Guignol" from the collection *The Female of the Species* (2007). Using theories propounded by the contemporary Gothic scholars in tandem with those offered by feminist theorists of the nineties', this chapter discusses how madness, horror and violence very often befalls white American women who are entrapped by the beauty myth.

The third chapter titled **Body Image, Violence and Victimhood: The Struggles of African American Women** discusses the African American woman's experience under the dictates of the beauty myth which is perhaps ghastlier when compared with her white American counterparts. Given that the African American woman not only faces the challenges set forth by western hegemonic discourses on beauty and femininity but also the stigma against the natural physical characteristics of her race, her experiences are extremely poignant, to say the least. Accordingly, this chapter discusses how the African American woman's subjectivity is very often a

product of a combination of oppressive forces such as economic deprivation, sexual exploitation, and racial segregation, which function in tandem with the western normative discourses on beauty and femininity that systematically reject the black woman as the abominable ‘other’. Through a detailed discussion of Sapphire’s *Push* (1996), which narrates the tragic tale of Claireece Precious Jones, a sixteen year old girl living in Harlem, New York in the 1980s who is violated and impregnated by her father and ostracized by society for having an obese black body, this chapter demonstrates the bizarre spectacle of the abjectness that typifies the life of the poor African American woman. Likewise, this chapter also presents a brief overview of the representative works on black women’s subservience under the white discourses on beauty and femininity through narratives such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker’s “Her Sweet Jerome” from the collection *In Love and Trouble* (1973) and *The Color Purple* (1982), and Joyce Carol Oates’s *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006). Finally, by demonstrating how the African American woman is judged mostly on the basis of skin color, bodily proportions and other physical attributes in comparison with her white American counterparts, this chapter asserts that the African American woman’s position in society has, over centuries, been one of inferiority and abasement that makes her vulnerable to horror and violence and which very often recalls a Gothic world order.

The fourth chapter entitled **Beauty Myth and the Violence of Assimilation: Ethnic American Women’s Experience** claims that like their white American and African American counterparts, women of other ethnicities in the United States are also subject to the hegemonic dictates of the beauty myth. By exploring the travails of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Mexican women, this chapter argues that the imperative to assimilate into the cultural mainstream is a palpable reality in

contemporary America and this ideological construct becomes violently coercive for ethnic women who must conform not only outwardly to socio-cultural codes but also alter their appearance significantly in order to be accommodated by dominant white discourses on beauty and femininity. Accordingly, the chapter offers a close reading of Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996) which discusses the experiences of Lovey Nariyoshi, a Japanese American teenager residing in Hawaii in the 1970s. Yamanaka's novel demonstrates how women of various ethnicities in America struggle with the pressures and violence of assimilation, both within their own community as well as from the American society at large to forge an identity that is both conventional and normative. The chapter also briefly discusses texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1977), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1992), Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Beauty Lessons" from the collection titled *An Island Like You* (1995), and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Name Me Nobody* (1999) to examine the poignant experiences of ethnic women inhabiting contemporary America whose subservience to the beauty myth makes their condition akin to that of the Gothic victim.

This thesis, therefore, with the help of a discussion of literary narratives by contemporary American women writers belonging to mainstream white as well as marginalized ethnicities, seeks to establish that the ubiquitous presence of the established norms of beauty and femininity enslave women across cultures in America. The repressive discourses on beauty and femininity, thus, typically lead to Gothic victimhood and by exposing this monstrosity the present study argues that the myth of feminine beauty acts as a diabolic force in the lives of contemporary American women.

Chapter I

Monstrous Discourses: Body Image, Femininity, and Contemporary Gothic

This study is premised on the argument that the violence perpetrated by the myth of feminine beauty on the lives of contemporary American women converts them into repressed subjects whose helplessness and abjection, in many instances, is comparable with that of the archetypal Gothic victims. Focusing specifically on the lives of contemporary American women depicted in select works of fiction, who are subject to the overwhelming discourses generated by the beauty myth that in turn are espoused by the media and the beauty industry, the present study argues that the dominant ideological constructions of an ideal female body in America functions as a monstrous force in the lives of many women. Arguably, the analogy between the myth of feminine beauty and the contemporary Gothic inheres in the fact that both can be read as ideological constructs that entrap and torture subjects. Notably, the horrifying monster figure of the traditional Gothic that inhabited and ruled isolated and haunted spaces has been deconstructed in the present century to give rise to a diabolism that is manifested in repressive cultural ideologies and hence has a powerful and ubiquitous presence in the lives of ordinary human beings. For instance, fictional works such as Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), Anne Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1795), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), among others, illustrate how the Gothic setting engenders countless trappings, horrific violence and helpless victimhood. In contrast, Gothic horror, as the contemporary scholars of this genre suggest, no longer stands out through its grotesqueness. Instead, it functions by enslaving its victims through a discourse that appears both conventional and normative. The beauty myth, owing to its tremendous influence over the lives and

minds of contemporary women, therefore, assumes the status of a contemporary Gothic monster that holds its victims in thrall by propagating culturally celebrated homogenized perceptions of the female body.

The chaos, bewilderment, and pathos that often characterize the lives of women enslaved by the beauty myth have been powerfully challenged by a number of third wave feminists in America. For instance, insights by philosopher and feminist theorist, Susan Bordo, demonstrate the effect of the contemporary beauty myth on American women whose lives are governed by images of beauty disseminated by the media and the internet. Likewise, Naomi Wolf, the most celebrated advocate of women's liberation from the clutches of the beauty myth, and Susan Faludi, the champion of nineties' feminism as a fight against the backlash on women's movements, claim that the contemporary beauty myth is a discourse generated by capitalistic and patriarchal societies to enslave the modern liberated women by manipulating their self-esteem through the creation and propagation of unrealistic body images. Notably, the contemporary methods of beautification, publicized by the media and the beauty industry with the promise of a successful and desirable life for women, are in reality procedures that demand an unthinking submission to starvation and even physical mutilation. Unfortunately, the beauty myth, more often than not succeeds in seducing women to its dictates because it plays on anxieties and aspirations very intrinsically woven into the feminine psyche. Accordingly, women willingly undergo painful and potentially harmful procedures such as corrective surgeries, implants, reconstructions, face lifts and enhancements, and liposuctions while ignoring the fatal consequences of such measures of beautification. In addition, the desire for the perfect feminine form also often leads to psychic imbalances and women succumb to potentially hazardous psychosomatic ailments such as Anorexia

Nervosa and Bulimia. This maniacal obsession with physical perfection, controlled by dominant socio-cultural forces, is today a largely acceptable and normative discourse on women's bodily aesthetics. Despite the torture, violence and gore, women willingly surrender to the dictates of the beauty myth and suffer self-inflicted pain with the hope to attain glamorous and desirable personas. While societal norms on gender and femininity remain largely desensitized toward such atrocities, the myth attains the status of an ideological monster that entraps and enslaves contemporary women whose lives in turn attain a great similarity with Gothic protagonists.

In the light of the present discussion, it is important to note that a number of contemporary Gothic scholars have addressed how ideological constructs in the present century have attained connotations of horror and diabolism. Fred Botting, for instance, claims that technological reconstruction of reality is the source of horror that pervades our existence in the present century. Women resorting to intrusive technical procedures to enhance their body image appear to surrender to such horrific mechanisms and hence maybe relegated to the domain of the Gothic. Likewise, scholars such as Steven Bruhm, David Punter, Stephanie Genz, and Catherine Spooner have associated contemporary Gothic with maniacal obsession, vampiristic consumption, cosmetically mutilated figures, and visibly transformed selves; all of which is akin to the dark and deathlike traps tantalizingly showcased by the media and the beauty industry to propagate the ideals of the western beauty myth. Accordingly, the physical and psychic violence suffered by contemporary women under the dictates of the beauty myth links them to the Gothic heroines of the eighteenth century.

I

Since the present study offers a critique of the contemporary myth of feminine beauty, it is perhaps crucial to present a historical account of this problematic because women's preoccupation with beauty, which is a result of cultural as well as biological forces according to various theorists, is arguably as old as civilization itself.

Obviously, women's engagement with appearance is not a new phenomenon but has its roots in the oldest cultures across the world. While on the one hand, the celebration of youth and beauty are said to be propelled by biological forces such as the selection of the best mate, on the other hand, it also marks the human preoccupation with aesthetics of the physical form. Accordingly, the beauty practices have remained central to women's lives and played a very important role in defining their identity and social status. Notably, even as the enhancement of physical beauty has always been a significant preoccupation in women's lives, it has largely been a practice in self-regulation and often self-sacrifice. Historical accounts demonstrate how a number of practices that recurrently featured in women's beauty aesthetics involved violence and pain.

For instance, the Chinese ritual of foot-binding performed on young girls between ages five and seven as discussed by Sidney D. Gamble in his essay "The Disappearance of Foot-Binding in Tingsien", was an extremely painful procedure of restructuring a woman's feet to make them appear lotus-like, a feature that represented both erotic male fantasy as well as immense self-discipline on the part of the female. Although the exact origin of this practice is unknown, Gamble states that it is mentioned in history as early as A.D. 937-75 during the reign of the T'ang dynasty at Nanking. The practice continued to prosper in spite of official orders of its banishment, one by the Manchus in 1638, followed by Shun Chih in 1645 and by

K'ang Hsi in 1662, after which there was a gradual decline until it was completely abolished in 1919. The painful ritual of foot-binding has also been studied by scholars such as C. Fred Blake who, in his article "Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China", argues that women's bodies are often the site for the playing out of patriarchal authority and accordingly "it is reasonable that a girl's way of signifying her womanhood should be conceptualized in bending the organs that control space, spatial extension and motion" (Blake 681). In addition he states that beauty practices such as foot-binding help control not only the body but also the mind of the female subject since "[t]hrough the bending, twisting, and compressing of the feet, a girl's sense of managing space [is] radically modified and a mother deliver[s] her daughter into a world where 'becoming one's body' [leads] to moral and spiritual self-improvement" (Blake 681). Describing the violent and painful process of the ritual, Blake adds that it

. . . [c]reated months, even years of oozing sores, bandages stiff with dried pus and blood, and sloughed off gobs of flesh. These accounts tell of girls losing appetites and sleep, running away, hiding, surreptitiously attempting to loosen their bandages, and enduring beatings while trying to comply(682)

Women's beauty aesthetics, therefore, have mostly subjugated and controlled the female body and mind as is evident from ancient practices such as foot-binding in China. In Europe and America too, the practice of feminine beauty aesthetics has been accompanied by much violence and pain. For instance, the widespread use of corsets by western women in the nineteenth century demonstrates how they had to regulate their minds and manners and the corset became a symbol of bondage in their lives. The corsets helped women attain a desirable body shape by forcefully constricting the waist and enhancing the upper as well as lower parts of a woman's torso. Throughout

the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, women's engagement with corsets underwent much change since this contraption often hindered them from activities such as sports and dancing. Outlining this period of unrest within the commercial world of corset manufacturers, Jill Fields in his article "Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930", notes how the importance of the corset was time and again reaffirmed by its manufacturers. He observes:

Corset manufacturers' coordinated response to women's new widespread defiance of older fashion standards, which enlisted corset saleswomen to deploy their merchandising campaign against the "corsetless evil," emphasized youthful standards of beauty, developed scientific discourse that viewed the female body as inherently flawed, and connected ideologies of racial purity, national security, and heterosexual privilege to corset use. (Fields 357)

The different kinds of corsets that the author describes included sports corsets, dancing corsets and even sanitary corsets and medical corsets whose importance was stressed not only by the manufacturing houses but also by doctors and institutions such as the International School of Scientific Corsetry. Obviously, as depicted in most recorded history, women's engagement with physical aesthetics is, therefore, not merely a matter of vanity but is rooted in a much deeper cultural politics that in turn produces gender codes and power divisions in society.

No doubt physical attractiveness has enormous social and genetic benefits and consequently the desire to appear beautiful has always interested women in most cultures. In fact, treatises such as Nancy Etcoff's *Survival of the Prettiest* (1999) and Kathy Peiss's *Hope in a Jar* (1998) argue that the rituals of beautification in women's lives

are endeavors that empower them by bringing social and biological acceptability.

Etcoff, for instance, employs the Darwinian argument of natural selection to claim that beauty is a basic part of a woman's biological adaptation. She states:

. . . beauty is a universal part of human experience, and that it provokes pleasure, rivets attention, and impels actions that help ensure the survival of our genes. Our extreme sensitivity to beauty is hard-wired, that is, governed by circuits in the brain shaped by natural selection. We love to look at smooth skin, thick shiny hair, curved waists, and symmetrical bodies because in the course of evolution the people who noticed these signals and desired their possessors had more reproductive success. We are their descendants. (Etcoff 24)

Etcoff, therefore, describes the pursuit of beauty as an instinctive enterprise in the lives of women and even justifies the adoption of artificial means used for beautification. She claims: "People are spending billions of dollars on cosmetics and plastic surgery for a reason: these industries cater to a world where looking good has survival value" (Etcoff 25). Etcoff's thesis is echoed in Kathy Peiss's work where the latter describes the historical development of the beauty industry from home-made recipes to capitalistic ventures and stresses how women have contributed to the rise of this industry. Peiss, by reading women's use of cosmetics as an act of empowerment and a means of survival, asserts: "For some women, cosmetics use was less a deception, a false face, than a dramatic performance of the self in a culture increasingly oriented to display, spectatorship, and consumption" (Peiss 39). In addition, Peiss adds how women have been instrumental in setting up the billion dollar cosmetic industry in the United States. Discussing the development of this industry since its earliest stages she claims:

. . . the beauty industry may be the only business, at least until recent decades, in which American women achieved the highest levels of success, wealth, and authority. Such well-known figures as Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden, the remarkable African American entrepreneurs Madam C.J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone, and post-World War II businesswomen Estee Lauder and Mary Kay Ash mark an ongoing tradition of female leadership. (Peiss 61-62)

Undoubtedly, the beauty business has had a very powerful effect on women's lives in America given that it addresses perhaps the most vulnerable part of a women's psyche: one that is associated with her sexual desirability and social acceptability.

The present thesis, however, by focusing on the exploitation of women's psyches under homogenized western definitions of the female body image propagated by the prescriptions of the beauty myth and the cosmetic industry, critiques the arguments posited by theorists such as Etoff and Peiss. It claims that while issues like health, fitness and hygiene, also addressed by the beauty myth, are integral to women's well-being, the oppressive discourses on beauty and physical perfectibility, based largely on western definitions of womanhood, are both harmful and detrimental to women's lives and psyches. Accordingly, this study asserts that while feminine grooming has conferred social privileges upon women who have had the means and opportunity to attain it, this ideology is nevertheless a repressive and misleading one since it prescribes homogenized parameters for an ideal feminine body which not only violates women's innate sense of self but also forces them to adopt thought and behavior which relegates them to a subservient position in society.

As discussed earlier in this section, most historical evidence proves that the beauty practices undertaken by women, while playing a very important role in their lives both socially and biologically, nevertheless subjugates them by urging them to alter their natural physical attributes. This cultural imperative, over the last century has, more than ever before, attained a stronger hold on women's lives and minds given that it is today ubiquitously present in the form of images and messages disseminated by the media and the internet. In addition, whereas the ancient discourses on physical aesthetics celebrated cultural specificities, which though oppressive did not entirely negate a woman's natural physical attributes, the contemporary beauty myth is largely dictated by the beauty ideals espoused by developed nations such as America and the European countries. Analogous to its political and cultural supremacy, the dominance of the western discourses is also palpable when it comes to issues of feminine aesthetics and subsequently it is the tall, blonde, blue-eyed Caucasian feminine form that has been globally celebrated as the touchstone for female beauty, specifically since the end of World War II. Notably, this celebration has gained momentum with the boom in the media and the revolution in the IT industry which in turn are largely products of western technological progress. Accordingly, in the present times the concept of the ideal white feminine body is one that holds women across the world in its thrall.

In the present study the violent and diabolic effects of the contemporary beauty myth is studied largely in relation to women inhabiting America in the twenty first century. Accordingly, this study demonstrates how such women very often give in to self-surveillance in order to fit into the image of a desirable woman. Addressing this problematic, Susan Bordo claims that the traumatic experiences wrecked on

women's bodies over centuries finds another expression in the contemporary beauty myth that inverts the "old metaphor of the Body Politic" (Bordo 21). She states:

Now, feminism imagined the human body as *itself* a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control—from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy, and (in the case of African American slave woman) explicit commodification. (Bordo 21-22)

Notably, women very often willingly undergo violent and grotesque procedures to beautify themselves. Naomi Wolf, for instance, discusses the gory historical beauty rituals such as bathing in human blood for the purpose of attaining eternal beauty. Wolf's thesis on feminine practices in *The Beauty Myth* can be likened to contemporary Gothic concepts that espouse overindulgence and excessive consumption as vampiristic traits. Wolf mentions how in "seventeenth-century Romania, a countess slaughtered peasant virgins so that she could bathe in their blood and stay youthful [and adds that the] vampire never ages" (Wolf 120). Obviously, women over centuries have been hypnotized by the glorious promises that the beauty myth brings them. In actuality, however, they have been largely enslaved by this ideology with a false sense of power since the myth forces them to obliterate their organic physical selves for one that is prescribed by the socio-cultural codes.

As demonstrated in this section, while the beauty practices of ancient times had very often been painful and grotesque, they did not subjugate the women across cultures and ethnicities in the manner that the contemporary beauty myth does since the latter generates an extremely repressive normative and prescriptive definition of a

homogenized concept of femininity and womanhood. Since the contemporary beauty myth is largely advocated and celebrated by the capitalistic beauty industry of America, it is important to note how the beauty ideology has been strategically sold by the media and the market to make women both willing customers and gullible victims of the beauty business. Geoffrey Jones in his book *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (2010) notes that what began as manufacturing of creams in the kitchens for personal or pharmaceutical use has over time developed into an industry expanding from New York and Paris to the rest of the world, and calls it “one of America’s most profitable industries, just behind pharmaceuticals and software . . .” (Jones 1). Notably, the beauty industry reduces the female body into merely an ornamental object of desire whose final goal lies in the propagation of species. Though this regressive ideology is largely camouflaged by the glamor of the beauty business, critics like Malin Pareira have challenged it persuasively. Pareira in her book titled *Embodying Beauty: Twentieth-Century American Women Writers’ Aesthetics* (2000) asserts:

. . . one might argue that exploring only fashion as the intersection of the female body and ideology actually evades a more insidious and powerful Western Ideological project: the female body itself, in twentieth-century America, has become the final frontier of patriarchal and capitalistic ideological inscription. (xii)

Accordingly, it may be argued that the myth of feminine beauty, especially in the twenty first century, functions as a diabolic force to reinstate women’s subjugation and maintain the status quo enforced by the laws of capitalism and patriarchy. This study, therefore, works on the assumption that the vicious politics of body image and social acceptability that in turn is propagated by the beauty myth works as a Gothic

force in the lives of contemporary American women turning them into hapless fettered subjects.

II

Having discussed and critiqued the history and development of the beauty practices across cultures and over centuries, it would now be appropriate to focus on the contemporary debates surrounding the beauty myth, especially in twenty first century America, since this forms the spatiotemporal location for purposes of the present study. Accordingly, this section focuses on the theories propounded by American third wave feminist theorists such as Susan Bordo, Susan Faludi, Naomi Wolf, and Gloria Steinem that powerfully challenge the constructions of beauty, femininity and gender codes in the twenty first century. Notably, the third wave of feminism gained momentum in the 1990s which also happens to be the age of revolution in industries such as the media and information technology in the United States. Obviously, one of the most important issues addressed by the third wave feminists is the beauty myth which, in the wake of the technical revolutions, gained unprecedented power and access over the lives and minds of millions of women. This was also the period in which many projects initiated during the second wave of feminism came to fruition and women attained access to education and professional success like never before. Given this, most third wave feminists claim that the beauty myth had a fresh resurgence through the nineties' as it was strategically devised to act as a backlash against the financially liberated modern women. Accordingly, Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash* (1991) argues how the women's movement was itself blamed for women's miseries at the turn of the 20th century and how popular culture subtly but distinctly duped women to abdicate their positions of power urging them to

return to subservient feminized roles by investing in the project of beautifying their bodies. Protesting against the media's initial pronouncement of women's emancipation and its criticism of the feminist movement, Faludi states:

From “the man shortage” to “the infertility epidemic” to “female burnout” to “toxic day care,” these so-called female crises have had their origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising—an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood. (7)

Like Faludi's take on the issue, Naomi Wolf's persuasive polemics against the problematic of female body image also demonstrate how the oppressive forces of capitalism and patriarchy have joined hands to propagate the beauty myth in twenty first century America. In her landmark treatise titled *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Wolf challenges the seductive rhetoric of the beauty myth that celebrates a younger and revitalized self for endowing women with success and making them desirable. She further argues that since women in the contemporary times no longer suffer from what Betty Friedan termed as ‘the Feminine Mystique’, they have gained a considerable amount of freedom from the expectations, regulations and confinements of the domestic space. Accordingly, the beauty myth, claims Wolf, functions as the new mode of control in the lives of the modern women. A similar critique of the contemporary beauty myth, but through the lens of the digital media, is found in Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1993) in which she asserts how a new and hyperreal culture of images used by media and the internet in the form of videos and pictures has created a world order where the feminine physical form lies at the receiving end. She notes how this new culture:

. . . speak[s] to young people not just about how to be beautiful but about how to become what dominant culture admires, how to be cool, how to ‘get it together’. To girls who have been abused they may speak of transcendence or armouring of too-vulnerable female flesh. For racial and ethnic groups whose bodies have been marked as foreign, earthy, and primitive, or considered unattractive by Anglo-Saxon norms, they may cast the lure of assimilation, of becoming (metaphorically speaking) ‘white’. (Bordo xxi-xxii)

This new reign of the digitally enhanced images, exercising control through television, films, magazines, and the internet, according to Bordo, affect women’s psyche such that they become both perpetrators as well as victims of this ideology. Noting the obvious Foucauldian elements in this discourse, Bordo speaks of ‘the empire of images’ as a world:

[w]here power works ‘from below’, prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion (although social relations may certainly contain such elements), but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms. (Bordo 27)

Understandably, this ideal female body image circulated and championed by the media and the beauty industry powerfully controls the lives of many American women. Liberal feminist and editor of the famous *Ms. Magazine*, Gloria Steinem, in her book *Revolution From Within* (1992) discusses the experiences of women who are thrall to the beauty myth through a number of real-life incidents. Significantly, Steinem is not shy of interpreting concepts of health and fitness as positive discourses

espoused by the beauty myth. She affirms “[t]he images of power, grace, and competence that . . . people convey have a life-giving impact--- just as trivialized, stereotyped, degrading, subservient, and pornographic images of bodies that look like ours do the opposite, as though we absorb that denigration or respect through our nerve endings” (Steinem 204). Steinem, however, is also keenly aware of the negative and often disastrous consequences of the beauty ideology on women since she links their lack of self-esteem to a culture that restricts them constantly through their bodies. Taking cudgels on behalf of women, Steinem asserts: “. . . women’s marks of beauty involve restrictions of freedom, and often pain and health deprivation as well” (Steinem 219). Like her contemporary feminist thinkers, Steinem too critiques the beauty myth for its debilitating influence on the minds and bodies of women, especially when this myth functions as a maniacal and obsessive force in their lives.

It is worth noting that the contemporary beauty myth on the one hand strikes at the roots of women’s identity and self-esteem to render a negative body image and on the other beguiles them with hopes and promises of obtaining the perfect body. It appeals to women’s sensibilities by offering them protection and care through means ranging from creams to surgeries and by doing so converts them into obsessive pursuers of an unattainable dream. Discussing the hypnotic allure of the beauty myth in the lives of contemporary women, Naomi Wolf claims:

Many [women], though publicly confident, are secretly feeling vulnerable, exhausted, overwhelmed, and besieged. In the new scenario, unseen dangers assault an unprotected female victim:

‘Counteract the stresses and strains of today’s lifestyle.’

(*Almay*) . . . ‘Assaulted by age and ultra-violet exposure . . . A

protective barrier against the chemical and physical assaults of the environment . . . your body's natural defences . . . Just in time. Discover your best defense' (*Clientele*).

Each word strikes a nerve of legitimate female fear that has nothing to do with aging or with the qualities of the product . . .

Women respond to fantasies about protection from assault because we *are* being assaulted. (114-115, emphasis in original)

As Wolf's thesis illustrates, the beauty myth forces women to live a double life plagued by both fear and fantasy, which in turn likens them to the traditional figure of the female victim. The contemporary beauty myth can, therefore, be read as a Gothic presence in the lives of American women as it reduces them to wretched figures entrapped and exploited by its dictates. Like the traditional Gothic elements that bring to light the dark underside of a society, the contemporary myth of female beauty facilitates a critique of contemporary America as a violent and harsh world. Appropriately, such a reading helps to expose the fierce capitalistic and patriarchal undercurrent that enslaves and captivates millions of American women.

III

Since this thesis seeks to demonstrate how the vicious politics of female body image functions like a Gothic tyrant in the lives of contemporary American women, it would be worthwhile at this juncture to discuss the development of the Gothic as a literary genre that traditionally represented horrific monsters and isolated spaces but has over time come to emblemize ideological constructs that oppress and enslave and hence are no less horrific. Notably, traditional Gothic literature emerged chiefly

in the eighteenth century as a part of the British literary canon. According to Gothic scholars David Punter and Glennis Byron, who trace the origins of this genre in *The Gothic* (2004), this form, at its inception, was largely engaged with the representation of a barbaric, medieval, and supernatural past that returned to haunt the discourses of progress, rationality, and maturity upheld by the age of Enlightenment. Likewise, Andrew Smith in his book *Gothic Literature* (2007) points out that the recurrent features in traditional Gothic fiction included “[r]epresentations of ruins, castles, monasteries, and forms of monstrosity, and images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural, and excess, all [of which] typically characterise the form” (Smith 4) and which in turn can be read as literary responses to the national and cultural politics of eighteenth century England and Europe. Arguably, then, the Gothic has time and again represented a critique of the dark and menacing aspects of the culture in which it is produced.

It is worth noting that Gothic as a literary genre has in the past been discredited for dealing with the lurid and the sensational; for using violence and horror to thrill and titillate. Eminent Gothic scholar, Fred Botting, for instance, points out that in “Gothic productions . . . [p]assions, excitement and sensation transgress social properties and moral laws” (*Gothic* 3). Obviously, with its stock figures and fantastical settings, Gothic fiction has at times been condemned as a genre catering to vulgar and mindless tastes. Scholars of Gothic, however, firmly refute this criticism and claim that through its darkness and violence what the genre essentially evokes and exposes are cultural anxieties and social perversions of a particular age that otherwise remain camouflaged in the guise of reason and civility. In fact, Botting, by examining the development of the Gothic from the eighteenth to the twenty first century claims that the genre has “continued to shadow the progress of modernity

with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values” (*Gothic 2*). Contemporary Gothic, notably, has retained the elements of horror, violence, and oppression but instead of using the traditional tropes depicts monstrosity as ideological constructions. Significantly, Steven Bruhm, another eminent scholar of Gothic and body studies, discusses the twentieth century Gothic as a measure of anxieties and claims that “the contemporary Gothic subject is the psychoanalytic subject . . . [and] becomes a/the field on which national, racial, and gender anxieties *configured like Freudian drives* get played out and symbolized over and over again” (“The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It” 262). He concludes that contemporary Gothic remains relevant for having acquired poststructuralist characteristics of power, in that it reminds one of victimhood and violence even as it simultaneously helps one remain complacent in a confirmation that she is not the victim. Likewise, a persuasive interpretation of the contemporary Gothic is found in Catherine Spooner’s thesis in *Contemporary Gothic* wherein she relates it to the consumerist culture of capitalistic nations. Spooner asserts that “new levels of mass production, distribution and audience awareness” in the “post-Freud, Marx and feminis[t] [era]” have led to “a sexual and political self-consciousness unavailable to the earliest Gothic novelists” (*Contemporary Gothic* 23) and accordingly, Gothic horror can now be read as a product of postmodern consumerism which in turn hugely influences gender roles.

Since the postulations by theorists such as Botting, Bruhm and Spooner demonstrate that the contemporary Gothic functions like an oppressive and dominant ideological force, it is appropriate to associate it with the stringent gender codes of twentieth century America. This argument is perhaps most powerfully bolstered with the help of Catherine Spooner’s essay titled “Cosmo-Gothic: The Double and the

Single Woman” that critiques fashion magazines for creating simulated images of ideal femininity which in turn force women to create and live double lives along with their doppelgangers in a manner similar to the traditional Gothic victim. Spooner argues: “In contemporary Gothic texts the *Doppelganger* trope can be interpreted through the prescriptive femininity and the politics of individual fulfilment that are expressed in women’s fashion magazines . . . that have offered a profoundly ambivalent model of femininity” (Spooner 294). In addition, she criticizes the celebration of this false image of empowerment amongst women as misrecognition that leads to Gothic victimhood. She states:

. . . the ethic of choice often spills over into the myth of the ‘superwoman’, the woman able to ‘have it all’ to whose lifestyle the ordinary reader is implicitly supposed to aspire. Thus the imperative to ‘be oneself’ is both circumscribed by consumer choices and necessarily tied into the notion of attempting to be like someone else: a superior model of the self. (Spooner 295)

Undoubtedly, Spooner’s polemics are directed against the capitalistic discourses that define gender norms and accordingly help in upholding the central argument of the present study. More specifically, her claim that the centrality of bodies is a defining characteristic of the Gothic, and more so of the contemporary Gothic, helps in linking it with the beauty myth and accordingly advances the claims this thesis. Notably, Spooner states: “Contemporary Gothic is more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases: bodies become spectacle, provoking disgust, modified, reconstructed and artificially augmented” (*Contemporary Gothic* 63). In fact, many other scholars have also noted the centrality of the body in contemporary Gothic works. Jerold E. Hogle, for instance, in his essay “The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Process

of Abjection” which appeared in *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012) declares that “. . . the modern ‘Gothic’ as we know it has been grounded in fakery” (Hogle 496) thereby comparing this genre to an ideology that accommodates simulations and counterfeits. Hogle’s thesis is particularly useful for the purposes of this study since it helps to examine how the Gothicism inherent in the beauty myth lies in the fact that it works by simulating an ideal concept of beauty and femininity which in turn enslaves and traumatizes women.

The most significant contribution to the present debate inheres perhaps in the postulations by contemporary gender and Gothic studies scholar, Stephanie Genz. Genz’s works have recurrently addressed the problematic of gender norms in the light of twentieth century Gothic theories. In particular, her essay titled “(Re)Making the Body Beautiful: Postfeminist Cinderellas and Gothic Tales of Transformation” examines how normative images of womanhood perpetuated by capitalistic and patriarchal discourses overwhelm women such that they may be simultaneously compared to Gothic victims and monsters. Discussing the problematic of women struggling under the grip of the modern beauty myth, she asserts that beauty in contemporary times is sold as an ideal since the “immaculately groomed and ultra-feminine” (Genz 69) form is cherished and celebrated by the dominant discourses surrounding femininity and womanhood. In other words, Genz establishes that contemporary femininity is very often marketed as a popular ideology and in turn transforms women into obsessive consumers who willingly accept an ensuing torture on their bodies and minds. Genz’s thesis becomes particularly interesting given that it argues that the contemporary beauty myth bears strong echoes of the Gothic order that is internalized and appropriated by the female subject even as it victimizes her. Notably, Genz’s theories can be likened with Fred Botting’s who in his essay “Future

Horror” relates the contemporary Gothic to the misuse of technology and consequently to the simulation of reality that manifests itself in the “capacity to reformat reality . . . [through] passive consumption . . . [by one who is lost in the] realism of images generated by special effects” (Botting 149). Strikingly, this is precisely how Gothicism inherent in capitalism and the beauty industry functions; it disseminates a vast culture of images which hold women in thrall. If the beauty myth can be read as a monstrous ideology then it can perhaps be appropriately summed up through Botting’s thesis in *Gothic Romanced: Consumption, Gender and Technology in Contemporary Fictions* (2008) where he states that in the present times there is no “individuated monstrous other but discourses, practices and systems that make monsters through exclusion and suppression” (15). Appropriately, women challenged by the beauty myth turn into monsters who are, ironically, also extremely insecure victims.

Given the postmodern definition of the contemporary Gothic by a multitude of scholarly voices, the beauty ideal in the present century, as this study argues, can be read as a repressive Gothic force that creates victims as well as monsters out of women who continuously struggle to negotiate an ideal feminine identity amidst prescriptive cultural and gender codes. It can, therefore, be asserted that the arguments raised by third wave feminists and contemporary Gothic theorists converge at the point where women’s subjectivity is concerned and they demonstrate how the beauty myth has come to embody the violence and monstrosity that is elemental to Gothic narratives.

IV

Significantly, much of recent scholarship devoted to contemporary Gothic fiction, while it has focused on overt descriptions of physical violence and gore, has surprisingly left issues such as feminine beauty and gender construction, which also attain Gothic traits, considerably unexplored. Accordingly, this section presents a brief overview of the most recent research on contemporary Gothic literature beginning with Jennifer Leigh Rodriguez's thesis on Gothic titled *Morphing the Gothic: The New Voice of Gothic Literature Among Contemporary Women Writers* (2008) that analyses the works of contemporary women writers, namely, Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates. Rodriguez attempts to read monsters and horror as literary metaphors for women's victimization in the works of Morrison and Oates to expose the dark undercurrents of American culture in the twentieth century. In another notable interpretation of this genre, Maisha Lakaye Wester's dissertation titled *Blackness Writes Back: Contemporary African-American Revisions of Gothic Racial Ideologies* (2006) discusses the re-appropriation of the Gothic by African American writers in order to critique the racist elements inherent within the genre. The concept of the female Gothic is explored in Melissa Paruolo's dissertation *Anything dead coming back to life hurts": Beloved, Bastard out of Carolina, and gods in Alabama as Contemporary Female Gothic* (2012) in which the scholar discusses the subversive potential of the contemporary female Gothic subject as opposed to the traditional Gothic where protagonists largely suffered as victims. Foregrounding the importance of analyzing Gothic tropes in a text instead of declaring a text Gothic by merely identifying its stock features, Patrick Thomas McAleer's thesis *From Gothic to Gothicism: A Theory of Reading Gothic Rhetoric* (2013), posits 'Gothicism' or a new method of reading the genre wherein trauma becomes its basic measure. Another

significant reading of the contemporary Gothic is obtained in Fernanda Sousa Carvalho's dissertation "Sexuality and Gender in Contemporary Woman's Gothic Fiction: Angela Carter's and Anne Rice's Vampires" (2012) which explores the fiction of Angela Carter and Anne Rice to analyze the figure of the vampire and establish how this figure reworks the constructions of gender and sexuality. Finally, Lawrence Andrew Cooper Jr.'s dissertation titled *Gothic Realities: The Emergence of Cultural Forms through Representations of the Unreal* (2013) argues against criticism of the Gothic as a genre promoting horror and chaos and asserts that with its inherent subversive potentials, the genre is capable of presenting socio-cultural critiques that can engender revolutions. Given the recent scholarly interventions into contemporary Gothic fiction, it appears that there exists a gap in scholarship in works that conflate discourses of horror and victimhood in relation to the female body image. Accordingly, this study attempts to bring together the discourses of contemporary Gothic and feminine beauty aesthetics with the help of select fiction by contemporary American women writers.

V

In sum: The historical development of the Gothic as a literary genre highlights how this form has, time and again, responded to the socio-cultural dynamics of every era in which it has been produced. While the genre employs a number of stock features including horror, violence, death, incarceration, monsters and madness among others, the primary motive behind the use of such tropes is to expose all that is aberrant and dysfunctional in a given age. Appropriately, contemporary Gothic responds to the postmodern ideological constructs that very often victimize subjects even as they present a false sense of choice and liberty. Accordingly, this thesis

subscribes to the notion that the contemporary Gothic functions as an ideological force and uses it to read the oppressive and violent outcomes of the myth of feminine beauty in the lives of American women in the present century. The chapters that follow present a reading of select fiction by contemporary American women writers who, as this thesis claims, address the horrific influence of the monstrous discourse of the beauty myth on the lives and minds of American women.

Chapter II

Feminine Beauty and the Vicious Politics of Self-esteem: White American Women's Experience

Postulations by Steven Bruhm, eminent scholar of contemporary Gothic and body studies, provide a fitting interface between the beauty myth and Gothic theories by demonstrating how the latter functions as an oppressive and all pervasive ideological force, much like the horrific psychic and physical violence ensuing from the socio-cultural constructs on feminine beauty in contemporary America. Bruhm claims that twenty first century Gothic may be termed as “a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history” (“The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It” 260). Notably, his supposition bears a clear parallel with the myth of feminine beauty since the latter has assumed a quasi-religious status in the lives of contemporary white American women, and as Naomi Wolf observes, “the skepticism of the modern age evaporates [before] the subject [of] woman’s beauty” (Wolf 87). Consequently, the myth of feminine beauty has produced a culture of obsessive fears and anxieties and women subjected to it very often emblemize the defenselessness of Gothic victims. In discussing the frightening reality of American women emulating “computer-generated torsos,” feminist philosopher and body studies’ expert, Susan Bordo, bemoans the fact that the “expectations . . . desires . . . and judgments about bodies [in the present world are] becoming dictated by the digital” (*Unbearable Weight* xvii-xviii). Drawing from these theoretical positions, it may be argued that the chase itself, for an ever elusive perfect physicality, is an obsessive and monstrous one and may give rise to madness and violence that in turn typifies the Gothic world-view.

Like Bruhm, other exponents of contemporary Gothic studies such as Fred Botting, Catherine Spooner, and Stephanie Genz have also focused on the shift that marks the change in traditional Gothic narratives. They claim that the major difference between contemporary and traditional Gothic lies in the source from where horror and violence originate. Botting, for instance, situates the contemporary Gothic in technological excesses of the postmodern world and claims that what was “[o]nce the dark underside of modernity, [is now] Gothic horror [and] outlines the darkness of the postmodern condition” (Botting 281). Botting’s thesis appears to be bolstered by Catherine Spooner, who, in her book *Contemporary Gothic* (2006) emphasizes that Gothic horror has obtained a ubiquitous presence in the twenty-first century and lies within the dominant ideologies disseminated widely by consumerist societies. Likewise, Stephanie Genz, while discussing Gothic and the beauty myth as complimentary ideologies of the present century, qualifies postmodern monstrosity and Gothic horror as cultural norms that have “achieved a quasi-normal status that [fail] to shock or even stand out” (“(Re)Making the Body Beautiful” 69) but which nevertheless retains their essential trappings. The recurrent concern voiced by Gothic scholars in the present century is, therefore, how madness, horror and violence are today no longer confined to ruined castles and monstrous tyrants but have taken the shape of cultural ideologies and consequently are omnipresent.

In keeping with the definitions of the contemporary Gothic, this chapter explores how normative and prescriptive dictates of beauty and femininity attain a Gothic character as they trap and enslave contemporary white American women forcing them to adopt culturally celebrated definitions of an ideal body-image. Accordingly, it reads women’s victimization in tandem with issues raised by third wave feminists and contemporary Gothic theorists as the two converge at the point

where women's subjectivity is concerned and demonstrate how the beauty myth has come to embody the violence and monstrosity that is elemental to Gothic narratives. More specifically, the present chapter seeks to explore literary representations of the white American woman's experiences with regard to the myth of female beauty as it assumes a ghastly character. Accordingly, the first section of this chapter presents a broad overview of select works by contemporary American women writers exploring the challenges that white women face under prescriptive beauty norms. The second section engages in a similar but more focused discussion of Joyce Carol Oates's novel *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008) since the novel presents a powerful portrayal of how the beauty myth functions not only as a repressive ideology but also as a socio-cultural construct that gives rise to madness, uncanny obsessions, violence and horror that are typically Gothic tropes. The chapter concludes in the third section which reiterates that the repressive beauty ideology very often transforms contemporary white American women into Gothic victims.

I

The task of reading the beauty myth as a Gothic phenomenon becomes important for two reasons: first, because it offers a nuanced understanding of a number of contemporary literary narratives focusing on women's enslavement to the ideals of this myth, and second, because such a reading obviously has a larger socio-cultural significance. Beauty myth theorists like Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi, and Susan Bordo, in their accounts, have recurrently highlighted the challenges faced by real women who are at the mercy of the beauty myth, dreaming and seeking a 'perfect' body, broadly defined as slender, tall, blonde and blue eyed, which is more

often than not a devastating and even a fatal endeavor. Undoubtedly, matters of appearance and feminine beauty have always formed a significant part of women's lives in most cultures. This issue in the present century in America has, however, obtained sinister proportions given that it has acquired prescriptive parameters dictated by the beauty industry and the market forces that obliterate alternative definitions of feminine beauty. Naturally, women when subjected to this beauty ideal, which Susan Bordo appropriately calls "the empire of images" (xvi) rife with "computer-generated torsos" (xvii), suffer a deep sense of inferiority while comparing themselves with 'perfect' Caucasian female bodies celebrated continually by the print and electronic media. White American women's preoccupation with appearance, has therefore, assumed an uncanny and obsessive character in the present times. More important, the construction of this ideology, as Susan Faludi points out, is a conscious attempt by the patriarchal and capitalistic forces in society to thwart women's achievements following the success of the feminist movement of the sixties. Significantly, Faludi's postulations find an echo in Naomi Wolf's theories in which the latter likens the workings of the beauty myth to the medieval iron maiden thereby employing the literary metaphor of entrapment. Unmistakably, the eighteenth century Gothic heroine entrapped by monstrous tyrants finds her replica in the 'near-perfect' mannequin like female subject celebrated by the media and the beauty industry in twentieth century America. It is worth noting that the sense of empowerment that white American women attain by living upto the dictates of the beauty myth, is more often than not a misrecognition since they continuously struggle to retain the perfect physicality championed by the myth. Even in the wake of the fourth wave of feminism, that celebrates women's bodies in its various forms and guises, the beauty myth continues to hold many American women in its thrall.

A number of literary narratives produced in and around the present millennia have focused on this problematic and when read in the light of contemporary Gothic and feminist theories present a persuasive critique on white women's subjectivity in the face of the violence and monstrosity perpetuated by the beauty ideals. For instance, Alison Lurie's novel *Foreign Affairs* (1984) narrates the tale of two female protagonists, Vinnie Miner and Rosemary Radley, who suffer tremendous psychic violence stemming out of insecurity owing to their aging bodies and loss of feminine desirability. Vinnie Miner, a professor in her fifties, and Rosemary Radley, an English aristocratic actress, impress the reader as Gothic protagonists as they fall prey to the prescriptions of the beauty industry. While Vinnie's sufferings are purely psychological as she continually wallows in self-pity for being plain looking and menopausal; Rosemary, an English aristocratic actress, despite her wealth, success and upbringing, cannot overcome the anxieties of aging which is accompanied by the loss of her beauty and sexual allure and subsequently develops a split personality. Notably, Vinnie, who has had several relationships and is professionally successful, is simply incapable of transcending her feelings of inferiority. Her abject loneliness and self-pity are symbolized in the novel by an imaginary dog named Fido who is Vinnie's only true companion and follows her around throughout the narrative. As Vinnie's sense of inferiority increases, her imagination turns uncanny and she begins to discern an eerie growth in the dog which "swell[s] from breath and height of a beagle to that of a retriever—a sheepdog—a Saint Bernard" (Lurie 171). The dog, therefore, becomes a symbol of both repression and self-pity which escalate in Vinnie's life with the passage of time. The atrocities of the beauty ideal become explicit as Vinnie laments over the cultural trappings of her world "where energy and egotism are rewarded in the young and good-looking [and] plain aging women are

supposed to be self-effacing, uncomplaining — to take up as little space and breathe as little air as possible” (Lurie 5). Vinnie’s character in *Foreign Affairs*, therefore, underscores the intolerance and apathy of the contemporary world against women who do not conform to the norms propagated by the beauty myth and her psychic aberrations in the narrative recall the madness suffered by Gothic protagonists. Likewise, the beautiful and aging Rosemary, in order to escape her fears, assumes the persona of her imaginary servant-maid, Mrs Harris, who becomes her doppelganger. Unable to withstand the demands of her aristocratic class and her professional identity, Rosemary develops a split personality and begins dressing up like her maid and even develops a new accent. Obviously, she feels entrapped by the ideal of femininity that, as her friend rightly points out, “[is] no joke, really . . . always having to be a lady” (Lurie 284). Perhaps her only defense against the beauty norms that bind her, Rosemary’s madness in *Foreign Affairs* reads much like that of a Gothic victim’s. As the present reading suggests, both women in Alison Lurie’s novel are, therefore, entrapped by the dictates of feminine behavior and appearance and come across as contemporary Gothic victims suffering tremendous psychic violence.

Yet another powerful example of a woman’s maniacal quest for physical perfection is presented in Ann Tyler’s novel *A Slipping Down Life* (1969), where Evie, the novel’s protagonist, is a “plump [and] drab” (Tyler 1) teenager who is ‘unattractive’ according to societal beauty norms. Her affections toward the local musician Casey drive her to insanity and she etches out his name on her forehead with a piece of glass. Evie’s uncanny obsessions stem from her sense of inadequacy and find a manifestation in her masochistic tendencies, a trait common to literary Gothic victims in works such as *Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Dracula*, and *Rebecca*. Reading Evie’s acts of desperation in the novel, critic Charlotte M. Wright points out “Tyler

makes a statement about the lengths to which an ugly woman must go to achieve that for which a pretty woman does not have to make the least effort” (Wright 56). Throughout the novel Evie comes across as someone ready to go to any lengths to please Casey, to the extent of posing as a fanatic at the nightclub where Casey performs. She is finally accepted by the male protagonist but this happens only because she bears his name on her forehead. Accordingly, she allows Casey to literally own her in a master-slave relationship that in turn echoes the traditional Gothic world order. Though written in the wake of the feminist movement of the sixties, Tyler’s novel, nevertheless, represents the unnatural trappings of beauty and femininity that captivate women even in the present millennium, controlling their psyche and enslaving them to their insecurities.

Another striking narrative depicting white American women’s victimhood in the face of the beauty myth is Joyce Carol Oates’s short-story titled “Madison at Guignol” which appeared in a 2007 collection called *The Female of the Species*. The narrative delineates the misfortunes of an unnamed protagonist, Mrs. G, who suffers deep insecurities in spite of spending “[t]housands of dollars yearly on the most fashionable clothes, shoes, accessories, beauty care, and yet [she is told that] she [has] *no instinct for fashion*” (Oates 78, emphasis in original). Mrs. G, through her insecurities, comes to typify the helplessness of a contemporary Gothic victim. She is described as “a very attractive woman [whose] face is a flawless cosmetic mask” (Oates 90), of undiscernible age, and who moves around Madison Avenue enthralled by the capitalistic glamor of “Dior, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Rikki” (Oates 77) outlets. The narrative highlights the pathos in the life of a contemporary uber-rich white American woman who gets described as “a happy woman . . . an eager woman [and] a woman-with-a-mission” (Oates 85) only because she devotes herself to the

quest of perfect feminine beauty and subsequently attains it. The narrative ends on a grotesque note with violence and bloodshed characteristic to Gothic tales as Mrs. G. is gruesomely raped and murdered in one of the swanky fashion showrooms on Madison Avenue. Mrs. G's mutilation and death becomes a metaphor for the violence that is unleashed on women by the fashion and cosmetic industry that systematically obliterates a woman's natural self and forces her to adopt the body and spirit of an automated being which in turn is formulated by the dictates of the market forces.

All the three literary narratives discussed in this section demonstrate how the contemporary beauty myth, with its inherent violence and entrapments, bears a close resemblance with the working of a Gothic world order. Notably, the violence that befalls white American women who are captivated by the doctrines of beauty and desirability, even in the age of postfeminist liberation, calls for a careful re-visioning of socio-cultural codes that largely govern gender roles and norms.

II

To further examine the monstrous trappings of the beauty myth in the lives of white American women, this section presents an extensive analysis of Joyce Carol Oates's recent novel, *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2008). Inspired by the gruesome and controversial nineties' murder case of JonBenet Ramsay, the narrative in *My Sister, My Love* revolves around the meteoric rise and mysterious death of the six year old figure skating champion, Bliss Rampike. Recounted through journal entries by her older brother, Skyler, the descriptions of Bliss's life and times brilliantly unravel capitalist America's hegemonic control over twenty first century women especially with regard to issues of appearance and bodily

perfection. According to reviewer Donna Seaman, Oates's novel presents an incisive critique of the American society depicting it as a "neurotic [world]" afflicted by the "Tabloid Hell" and the "cybercesspoolspace" (Seaman 5). Notably, almost a decade before she wrote the novel, Oates had presented a scathing criticism of American high life along with her personal outrage at the dysfunctional American legal system with relation to the Ramsey murder trial. In her 1999 essay for the *New York Review of Books* titled "The Mystery of JonBenet Ramsey", Oates discusses the murder, the media's involvement in it and the various fictional and true-crime narratives that emerged out of this unfortunate incident. Discussing the representation of JonBenet Ramsey in the media that "[i]mposed upon her childish innocence . . . a lurid mask . . . a look of sexual precocity [so that] . . . [e]xcept for her prepubescent figure she resemble[ed] a midget woman" ("The Mystery of JonBenet Ramsey" 6), Oates attacks it for its involvement in first sexualizing the child and then selling her death as a journalistic scoop. The novelist adds that the "power of JonBenet Ramsey [will remain] as a symbolic presence in contemporary American consciousness" ("The Mystery of JonBenet Ramsey" 7). Given Oates's sympathetic take on the murder of the child star and her criticism of the brouhaha created by the media, it may be asserted that in recreating this epic tale the novelist wanted to expose the dark underbelly of the sophisticated American upper classes and to present a novel of true-crime which according to her "cuts through the obfuscations of law in pursuit of a higher truth" ("The Mystery of JonBenet Ramsey" 15). Through *My Sister, My Love*, Oates, therefore, addresses issues of violence and repression inherent in the norms defining feminine beauty, and the media's role in the objectification and victimization of American women.

Given this background, *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* can be read as Oates's attempt to expose the evils that plague many white women in contemporary America. The glamorous upper class setting of New York City with its innumerable repressive social codes is a fitting site for Oates to unfold a tale of horrific Gothic violence. Prima facie, the Rampikes, residing in the posh Fair Hills community, symbolize the glorious promises of the American Dream. Soon, however, murky details are unearthed as Betsy, the mother of Skyler and Bliss, displays an obsessive need to be accepted amongst the Fair Hills women "who [appear] to be uniformly blond, uniformly size four, uniformly very wealthy and of no discernible age except *not-elderly*" (Oates 48, emphasis in original). As Betsy consistently fails to obtain mannequin like physical perfection and check the effects of aging on her own body, she turns to Bliss's rising career in figure skating as her means to enter into the world of glamor. Left heart-broken by her philandering husband, Betsy turns maniacally obsessive trying to glamorize herself and her little daughter which eventually leads to a pathetic end for both.

Notably, Oates's *My Sister, My Love* has been described, very often, as a Gothic tale of violence and victimization in contemporary capitalistic America. For instance, in her review of the novel, Sarah Churchwell appropriately describes it as a "lurid tale" of "the American grotesque" depicting the "rapacity and venality of the American upper middle class" (Churchwell 1) and claims that the novel launches the reader directly into the Gothic neighborhood of violence and pain. Likewise, Srirupa Chatterjee in her article "Tyranny of the Beauty Myth in Joyce Carol Oates's MY SISTER, MY LOVE" focuses on repressive capitalistic ideologies depicted in the novel and interprets it as "[a] narrative of women's victimization under the repressive mores of the contemporary beauty myth" examining how in the novel "market

forces... [blighting] the private aesthetics of feminine beauty, render women helpless under a cultural fixation for ‘perfect’ bodies manufactured by the media and beauty industry” (Chatterjee 24-25). Accordingly, it may be argued that *My Sister, My Love*, through an exposition on the violence inherent in American patriarchy and capitalism, gives shape to the character of two Gothic protagonists, Betsy and Bliss Rampike, both suffering under tremendous psychic and physical violence. Justifiably, Oates produces a haunted atmosphere in the Rampike mansion which is described as an airless, claustrophobic “eighteenth century colonial” house (Oates 391) bringing in associations with the traditional Gothic mansions and castles that often served as sites for incarcerating the victim. Betsy, left alone in her grand mansion, gradually yields to madness and ends up murdering her daughter hoping that this final act would win back the love and sympathy of her apathetic husband. The site of Bliss’s murder, the “shadowy corner of the furnace room... windowless [and] dimly lighted . . . throbbing with heat like the interior of a lung” (Oates 347), emanates chilling horror and has strong Gothic echoes and, more important, it is here that the beautiful Betsy Rampike is transformed into a monstrous killer. The Rampike mansion, with its opulence and its darkened spaces, with its obsessions, madness and murder, comes to symbolize the lurid substratum hidden behind the glamor of American capitalism and the American Dream.

Like the oppressive Rampike mansion, the Fair Hills community too bears the trappings of upper class foppery with its “spotless surfaces, high glisten polish, [and] “understated” expense[s] . . .” (Oates 17). Obviously, this space succeeds in reinforcing insecurities in Betsy Rampike who tries to live upto the inhuman parameters of glamor and poise the community demands of her. Naturally, Betsy, a woman slowly inching toward middle age, who dreams of being accepted into the Fair

Hills community, becomes more and more obsessed with chasing the image of a glamorous and desirable person. Trying very hard to be accepted by the Fair Hills women and left deeply wounded by their aloofness and rejection, Betsy confides in her four-year old son stating: “What torments me is why don’t women like me . . . Fair Hills is so hateful, these women are so cruel, we’ve been here almost four months, men look at me, at least some men look at me, but the women just look through me” (Oates 39). Naturally, the snobbery of the Fair Hills women, who are style icons and feature in the suburban newspapers, leaves Betsy deeply troubled and dejected. In fact, her ruminations in the novel come across as striking examples of very subtle yet powerful cultural messages that define the ambitions and insecurities of millions of white American women, messages which have been described by the third wave feminists like Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi and Susan Bordo as the beauty myth. Betsy, trying to survive in Fair Hills, does not surprise the reader when she claims that “high-heeled shoes . . . [give her not only] sudden height [but also] dignity and purpose” (Oates 53). Fair Hills, therefore, becomes a world where a woman’s identity revolves around issues of fashion and glamor and a rejection of this norm in any manner means social ostracization.

Threatened continually by such oppressive cultural dictates, Betsy’s life gradually plummets into puppet-like servitude and the angst she suffers in turn finds an expression in her masochistic acts of beautifying herself and her inhuman behavior toward her little daughter. Arguably, Betsy’s complete subservience to the beauty myth makes her comparable with the zombie figure featuring recurrently in contemporary Gothic fiction. While the zombie emerged in American cinema in and around the 1930s from native Haitian superstitions, it has over time come to represent a psychologically debilitated automaton defined by critic Peter Dendle as “shells of

human beings” (“The Zombie as a Barometer of Cultural Anxiety” 46). In his essay, Dendle adds, “[z]ombification is the logical conclusion of human reductionism . . . the displacement of one person’s right to experience life, spirit, passion, autonomy, and creativity for another person’s exploitative gain” (Dendle 48). In Oates’s novel while societal demands force Betsy to assume the traits of a zombie, she in turn converts Bliss into an inarticulate and repressed zombie like figure.

Betsy’s predicament can perhaps best be understood with the help of Stephanie Genz’s thesis on conflating contemporary glamorous women with the archetypal Gothic monsters. Genz claims that in the present century the artificially beautified woman embodies the horrors of the traditional Gothic since she is more a mannequin with unrealistically attractive physical traits than a grotesque monster. She explains that while such a woman is not physically malformed like the monster in *Frankenstein*, her uncanniness lies in her psychic obsessions and her very attempt to be “sexy, pretty, utterly confident . . . and [her] relentless . . . quest for femininity” (Genz 69) attains a maniacal and, therefore, bizarre characteristic. When read in tandem with Genz’s postulations, Betsy’s attempts at prettifying herself, either through layers of make-up or through cosmetic and medical interventions, makes her an archetypal Gothic protagonist. More important, her obsession with technical interventions for the purpose of enhancing physical aesthetics gradually spirals into madness and finally leads to her gruesome death. Betsy’s condition also recalls Fred Botting’s discourse on contemporary horror wherein he claims that horror in the present times is all pervasive since “technological processes [have] supplant[ed] . . . reality” (Botting 143) giving rise to artificiality and excesses. Obviously, Betsy appears to be completely overpowered by this fabricated reality. Specifically, Botting’s take on cosmetic surgery as an example of technical excesses and Gothic

horror appears to be an appropriate theory to examine Betsy's condition. Botting claims:

. . . when, surgically, one enhance[s] one's appearance according to cultural ideals of beauty, the surface or image becomes the only measure of self . . . [and when] substance [from under one's skin] is discarded, one becomes one's skin . . . to discard substance is to enter a virtual world . . . that requires only the passive consumption of the spectator, intoxicated by the realism of images generated by special effects. (Botting 148-149)

Horror, as Botting discusses in the context of cosmetic surgery, arises from a contemporary ideological construct, one in which women like Betsy begin to identify with their virtually projected unreal selves. What perhaps is achieved through this artificiality is a Gothic double of one's organic self and as it is in Betsy's case, this doppelganger gives rise to madness that in turn is characteristic to Gothic narratives.

Given her maniacal quest for desirability, Betsy, throughout her life, is held captive by the dictates of the beauty myth and her psychic repression is evident in her frantic and numerous attempts to look perfect at Fair Hills gatherings, on screen, and even in interviews in which she appears after Bliss's death. Ironically, after Bliss's mysterious death, Betsy's grief and 'bravery' are extensively covered by the media and for some time Betsy revels in this attention living up to the image of a glamorous mother in mourning. She invests in "miracle injections" to smooth away "wrinkles . . . [on her] forehead" (Oates 244) and gets "eyelid tucks . . . [and a] face lift" (Oates 531). What appears bizarre at this juncture is not the decked up Betsy but the power of the beauty myth that shapes her mind and actions even in times of great personal

loss and anguish. After Bliss's death, Skyler records that Betsy, as she appears on TV, looks younger and younger and feels astounded at the vast change that takes place in his mother's appearance reaching uncanny proportions by the time she dies. As Skyler looks into his mother's coffin, he notes:

[Her] hair did not appear to be real hair, synthetic-glossy maroon-red like a perky Heaven Scent Glamour Wig (\$359.95) . . . [y]ou would not have believed that the face was that of a woman of forty-four!—unlined forehead, full roughed cheeks, nothing fleshy visible below the chin, [s]erene-shut eyes expertly made up in several shades of eye shadow (taupe, silvery-green, silvery-blue) and ink-black mascara, Cleopatra style. (Oates 516)

Betsy's attempts to alter her appearance after Bliss's death may perhaps be read as her only available means at obliterating her natural self through artificial interventions, for finding momentary relief, given that she lives with the guilt of murdering her own daughter. She, therefore, comes across as both a victim and a monster created by the beauty myth and in that typifies the contemporary Gothic protagonist.

After this section in the narrative, Oates deliberately presents a grotesque description of Betsy's death that assumes tremendous symbolic significance. In her deathbed, Betsy's body and her life gets consumed by liposuction, a potentially fatal and intrusive procedure that she willingly undergoes. Betsy spirals down into virulent self-destruction and dies on a surgeon's table while undergoing liposuction as "[p]arts of [her] stomach [get] sucked into the vacuum [along with] some intestines" (Oates 532). While this incident on the one hand demonstrates the flipside of technical advancements in the beauty industry, on the other hand, it also symbolizes

capitalism's backlash against contemporary women who are literally sucked into the vortex of desires and fantasies and ultimately destroyed by it.

As discussed earlier, Betsy's life, like her death, is a dark and painful journey in which she struggles with insecurities and, bereft of love, suffers a neurotic split. She comes across simultaneously a victim of the beauty myth and a villain who forces the same beauty ideals that oppress her, onto her little daughter. Notably, the paradoxical victim-villain persona represented by Betsy in *My Sister, My Love* finds an expression in the book *The Gothic* (2004) by David Punter and Glennis Byron who trace the changing figure of the monster from eighteenth century Gothic to the twentieth century. According to Punter and Byron, the twentieth century monster is no longer the "demonic other to mainstream society [but is] identified as . . . society's logical and inevitable product: society rather than the individual, becomes a primary site of horror" (Punter and Byron 266). Interestingly, even as Punter and Byron discuss the contemporary monster or the dominant ideologies guiding a culture largely in relation with serial killers, this hypothesis may be employed to examine Betsy's character who embodies society's normative rules on beauty and femininity and murders her biological child. Obviously, Betsy remains pathetic both in life and in death and this self-induced misery inheres in her subservience to the beauty myth. The tragedy of the Rampikes in *My Sister, My Love*, therefore, testifies to the fact that contemporary body images circulated and championed by capitalistic and market forces victimize and enslave women such that a subject's consciousness gets completely controlled and she turns a blind eye to the perils of submitting to this mechanism. Interestingly, this repression is often misinterpreted as empowerment by women reveling in a false sense of liberty as in the case of Betsy Rampike. Trapped in the vicious politics of female self-esteem where every time she succeeds in acquiring

the label of a beautiful and desirable woman, Betsy's sense of self catapults and the reverse happens each time she feels out of shape and unattractive. Obviously, the empowerment, if any, that Betsy feels is nothing but misrecognition or a construct that Louis Althusser has famously termed 'meconnaissance'.

While Betsy's attempts at glamorizing herself appear vain and even pathetic, her exploitation of little Bliss is both cruel and criminal. In a bid to gain popularity in the Fair Hills circles, Betsy begins to publicize Bliss's ice skating skills. Notably, Betsy herself had been an ice-skating aspirant but was humiliated and rejected by the judges who she claims were "... prejudiced against 'plump' girls" (Oates 40) and further explains that "... by plump it's meant a just-normal weight, [because] in a skating costume tight as a swimsuit every bulge and fat-roll *shows*" (Oates 40). Accordingly, through her daughter Betsy chooses to relive her dreams and aspirations. Once into the business of selling Bliss's talent, she renames her little daughter thereby erasing her former identity as Edna Louise and symbolically murders the child's innocence, gesturing toward the impending doom that finally befalls little Bliss. Arguably, Bliss's rechristening entails much more than a mere name change on paper as it results in a complete transformation. She changes from being "PLAIN/UGLY EDNA LOUISE" to "BEAUTIFUL/TRANSFIGURED BLISS RAMPIKE" (Oates 101, emphasis in original). The episode of name change brings in the element of the uncanny into the already existing Gothic scenario as it facilitates the existence of the Gothic double. A realization of Betsy's deepest fantasies, as Edna Louise is transformed into her desirable other, the event is described as an eerie mockery of Angel Gabriel's announcement of the birth of Christ to Virgin Mary. Betsy dreams of "*a blond angel touching [her] face with both her gentle hands saying Mummy I am not Edna Louise . . . I am your daughter BLISS bearing a vision from God that you*

are blessed as I am blessed . . . we will not be defeated” (Oates 95, emphasis in original). This episode can also be read as an instance of Freud’s explanation of the uncanny wherein he states that the uncanny is a manifestation of thoughts, desires or experiences that are familiar and have been repressed. In listing dreams, hallucinations, epileptic seizures and doubles as the manifestation of the uncanny, Freud defines it also as “something repressed which *recurs*” (Freud 944). Betsy’s repressed desires give rise to the uncanny through the symbolic rebirth of her daughter, who continues to live this newly formed identity, helping her mother succeed in the glamour and tabloid world as if she was preordained by God to do so.

Given the demands of the glamor business, it is not only Betsy who turns insane but little Bliss too crumbles under the demands of the media. As Bliss’s skating career soars, her doctors diagnose her with “A.P.M. (Acute Premature Melancholia)” (Oates 192) even as she begins to grow distant and aloof. Skyler’s narrative informs that “when [she] wasn’t laced up in her white kidskin Baby Champ skates flashing and flying across the glittery surface of the ice, or being photographed/filmed/hugged/kissed/fussed-over and lavishly praised by adults, her very spirit seemed to retreat somewhere behind her moist cobalt-blue eyes; a melancholia [was discernible in her]” (Oates 192). Skyler further notes that Bliss gradually turns into “an ingeniously lifelike animated doll, the kind that, as soon as you glance away from it, casts you a look of sheer insolence” (Oates 210), a figure that recalls once again the zombie of Gothic fiction. Notably, even as Betsy attempts to transform her, Bliss does not entirely let go of her former self. Consequently, she suffers a psychic split and adopts the persona of the beautiful and glamorous Bliss only to return to her former self when left alone. Bliss converts her rag doll into her Gothic double and speaks to it in “an eerie mimicry of [her] Mummy’s voice” (Oates

142). Bliss's uncanny alter can perhaps be understood better with help of Linda Dryden's elaborations on the figure of the doppelganger or the double in Gothic literature. In her book titled *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles* (2003), Dryden describes this figure as indicative of an "inescapable anxiety . . . as it destabilizes the cohesion of the self" (Dryden 39) and claims that this alter remains bound to the Gothic protagonist until death. Discussing the horror associated with psychic split, Dryden further adds "[t]o be haunted by another, by a specter, is uncanny enough, but to be haunted by yourself strikes at the foundations of identity" (Dryden 41). Bliss, therefore, traumatized both by her mother and by her own alter ego is doubly victimized and in her horrific end reminds the reader of the darkness that forms the underside of America's glamor business. Significantly, Bliss in *My Sister, My Love*, may also be compared with the classic case of Victor Frankenstein's 'monster' who was fabricated to fulfil to ambitions and fancies of his maker. Bliss, likewise, is refashioned by her mother to fit into an idealized image of white American beauty that in turn is celebrated by the media and the world of advertising. In Skyler's records, his sister's condition appears poignant as he narrates:

The nasty pills Dr. Muddick prescribed for her made her "head heavy" . . . [s]he hated to take Codeine 7 . . . as she hated all her other 'meds' and the nasty weekly injections in her 'bottom' and the nasty plastic-and-wire 'bite' that made her mouth hurt and having to go to the beauty salon with Mummy to have her hair lightened with harsh-smelling chemicals that made her eyes sting and her nose run . . .
.(Oates 186)

Oates's novel, therefore, powerfully depicts how the beauty myth makes both victims and monsters out of women and how even little children are not spared from its

trappings. The myth of feminine beauty can, therefore, be read as an extremely repressive cultural code that entraps and victimizes women and hence attains the characteristics of Gothic monstrosity.

The most grotesque incident in the novel, however, occurs when little Bliss is murdered by her own mother. It is interesting to note that while the tale is full of dark and uncanny resonances, Bliss's presence in the novel even after her death amplifies the bizarre and the ghostly atmosphere. She exists as a phantom, never letting her family or the readers forget the violence that was inflicted on her, both, in life and in death. Soon after the brutal murder, Oates exposes another kind of violence, this time in a public arena in the form of the 'Tabloid Hell.' What the novelist establishes is that little Bliss is forever trapped in the 'Tabloid Hell' and never able to escape the celebrated image of an 'angelic' star-performer.

Finally, it is worthwhile to examine the Betsy-Bliss relationship in the light of psychoanalytic Gothic theories. Steven Bruhm's essay titled "The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It", for instance, maybe used to achieve a better understanding of the mother-daughter duo in Oates's novel. Notably, Bruhm refers to the Gothic protagonist as the "psychoanalytic subject" (Bruhm 262) and adds that the playing out of the usual Freudian father-son dynamics, where the son emulates the father to overcome his authority, is replicated also in the case of the mother-daughter duo in Gothic fiction. Bruhm's observation gains enormous significance in studying the case of the Rampikes since Bliss constantly impersonates Betsy by talking to her doll which she calls Edna Louise. She admonishes the doll saying: "Next time we will work harder and we will pray harder, and Jesus will see to it that *'we are number one'*" (Oates 142-143, emphasis in original). Bolstering his claim to appropriate the Oedipus complex in the case of the mother and the daughter, Bruhm employs Julia

Kristeva's notion of the abject and argues that "paternal prohibition is not the only reason the child must achieve distance from the mother . . . the child must 'abject' [the mother] if she . . . is to gain any autonomous subjectivity whatsoever" (Bruhm 266). In keeping with this theoretical framework, it may be stated that Bliss both tries to reject her mother's attempts of pushing her to stardom and at the same time accepts her by impersonating her when talking to the rag doll. This makes Betsy the repressive authoritarian force in Bliss's life, and hence the mother figure is "reinvented as [the] monstrous" (Bruhm 266) in accordance with Bruhm's thesis.

In the present analysis, Joyce Carol Oates's *My Sister, My Love* is read as a tale of contemporary Gothic horror that in turn has its origins in the myth of feminine beauty propagated by the media and the beauty industry. Notably, the beauty myth today has a ubiquitous presence and holds women across cultures in its thrall making them believe that physical perfection will grant them personal and social worth and freedom. Women adhering to the dictates of this ideal very often lose their natural identities and in obsessively following it are transformed into a specter of their actual selves.

III

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that Bliss's and Betsy's predicament and tragedy in *My Sister, My Love* is a powerful representation of the beauty myth and the politics of self-esteem in the lives of white women in contemporary America. On the one hand, Betsy is a victim trapped in the glittery world of appearances, chasing an ever elusive image of the perfectible body and on the other, by subscribing to these ideals, she is a perpetrator of violence and a maniacal pursuivant of glamor who

assumes a monstrous identity trying to beautify and subsequently torturing her little daughter to death. Through Betsy Rampike the contemporary beauty myth attains Gothic proportions illustrating how it can function as a horrific and violent ideology that often destroys American women.

The myth of female beauty, therefore, assumes a Gothic character in the present times and Oates's novel, like Anne Tyler's and Alison Lurie's works discussed in the first section of this chapter, maybe read as a clarion call for women to comprehend the harm that they incur onto themselves by blindly subscribing to this myth. The present chapter, therefore, reaffirms that white American women's lives are very often subject to Gothic violence and horror when they are governed by the norms of the beauty myth.

Chapter III

Body Image, Violence and Victimhood: The Struggles of African American Women

The African American women's experience under the dictates of the beauty myth is perhaps more poignant when compared to their white counterparts since they not only face the challenges set forth by western hegemonic discourses on beauty and femininity but also the stigma against the natural physical characteristics of their race. In most recorded history, African American women's subjectivity is produced by a combination of forces such as economic deprivation, sexual exploitation, and racial segregation. In addition, most records also establish that they have been persistently examined under the repressive western norms of feminine beauty which often engenders self-hatred and scars the psyche of these women. Critic Ama Oforiwaa Aduonum in her essay "Buwumu: Redefining Black Beauty and Emancipating the *Hottentot Venus* in the Work of Oforiwaa Aduonum" rightly points out that the concept of the "black body," specifically the female body, is one that "functions primarily [as a definition of] the essential *otherness* for the dominant society and [is] the site for all that is not good or not valued" (280). Aduonum's thesis illustrates that the discourse of the black female body is a discourse of correction, rectification and modification that must be undertaken by the 'other' if she seeks access into the white cultural mainstream. Unfortunately, however, the only available means for the 'black body' to gain entry and acceptance into the dominant social groups happens to be the one that is championed by the media and the market, that is, to acquire physical characteristics akin to the hegemonic definitions of the desirable white female body. Another significant problematic that comes to light with this discourse is that, over time, the systematic othering of the African American body has successfully

engendered in the black women tremendous self-loathing and rendered them defenseless against dominant cultural messages.

In the African American community it is not surprising that due to a lack of basic necessities for human existence, which is often a product of poverty and racial discrimination, violence becomes a commonplace phenomenon and accordingly has a significant presence in almost all African American narratives, especially those depicting the female experience. It is also important to note that while slavery and racial discrimination have been long abolished; cultural othering and racist bigotry continue to have a forceful presence in western hegemonic discourses especially when it comes to issues pertaining to gender. For instance, African American women's bodily identity and the violence inherent in the cultural politics of othering continue to represent them as uncanny elements given the powerful presence of the contemporary beauty myth. Arguably, this prejudice confers on them a monstrosity coupled with victimization, a paradoxical duality, which transforms them, as this chapter argues, into contemporary Gothic subjects. Perhaps the most notorious example of racial othering based on feminine appearance is found in the discourse surrounding the Hottentot Venus, a figure that has been caricatured, mocked and condemned for centuries by the western imagination. Discussing the figure of the Hottentot Venus, Jill Matus in his essay "Blonde, Black and Hottentot Venus: Context and Critique in Angela Carter's 'Black Venus'" argues that it is a product of western discourses on feminine beauty that grossly distort the African tribal woman's body into a "type-[one that establishes] the essence of [an African] woman's low position on the evolutionary ladder and the irrefutable evidence of her bestial and degenerate associations" (Matus 469). Notably, this degradation of the black female body into a despicable and even diabolic object has been critiqued by a number of literary

representations of African American women. For instance, the African American woman in the western cultural imagination very often symbolizes the vampire, a predatory and ghastly figure marked by lust and violence. A critique of such racist concepts is powerfully depicted in novels like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* where the female protagonists, culturally rejected for being unattractive, are on the one hand brutally victimized and on the other reprimanded as symbols of deformity and lust by the society at large. Undoubtedly, such ideologies have, over centuries, engendered shame and self-hatred in the minds of African American women who continually struggle to be accepted into the hegemonic white culture and often nurture a secret desire to attain the physical perfection celebrated by the beauty myth. The fabrication of the myths of feminine beauty and its repercussions on the lives and psyche of African American women can be effectively analyzed with the help of Susan Bordo's thesis in her book titled *Unbearable Weight*. Bordo describes how the beauty myth functions in tandem with the media and the cosmetic industry to generate

. . . the rhetoric of choice and self-determination and the breezy analogies [that compare] cosmetic surgery to fashion accessorizing, and efface not only the inequalities of privilege, money and time that prohibit most people from indulging in these practices, but the desperation that characterizes the lives of those who do. (Bordo 247-248)

These illusory mechanisms, as Bordo points out, are fairly dominant in the lives of contemporary African American women who try to emulate the ideals of western discourses on beauty by taking recourse to the intrusive and expensive methods sold by the media and the beauty industry. Criticizing the concept of choice and liberation

espoused by the beauty myth, Bordo further adds that when an African American woman chooses to straighten her hair and believes that it is just for fun, she actually blots out the “cultural history of racist body-discriminations such as [the] nineteenth century comb-test, which allowed admission to churches and clubs only to those blacks who could pass through their hair without snagging a fine-tooth comb hanging outside the door” (Bordo 254). Hence, the African American woman’s attempts at beautifying herself to suit the parameters of western feminine aesthetics are not merely innocuous female whims but also markers of a larger cultural construct reinforcing racial segregation. Failing to live up to such ideals, very often makes these women social pariahs thereby scarring their psyches irreparably. The beauty myth, therefore, by fettering the minds and bodies of African American women, takes on the characteristics of Gothic violence and horror.

Keeping in mind the discourses on the black female body generated by the western and more particularly the American culture, the subsequent sections in this chapter will discuss how African American women represented in the literature of the recent past have been subject to Gothic violence. While on the one hand these women have been demonized as the racial other and as the symbol of all that is undesirable and hence repulsive, they have simultaneously been subject to gruesome physical and psychic abuse. Accordingly, the present chapter discusses various narratives on African American women’s entrapment into the beauty myth and finally presents a detailed analysis of Ramona Lofton aka Sapphire’s novel *Push* (1996) which delineates the travails of an African American teenager struggling with obesity and morbid sexual violence. Through these narratives, this chapter once again reiterates that the western definitions of feminine beauty have attained connotations of Gothic

horror and violence since they subjugate the African American women whose struggles with body image have rendered them to a life of misery.

I

Judged mostly on the basis of skin color, bodily proportions and other physical attributes in comparison with the white American women, the African American woman's position in society has, over centuries, been one of inferiority and abasement. It is worth noting at this juncture how the dominant ideology of white feminine beauty succeeds in controlling the minds and psyche of black women through various cultural institutions. For instance, fashion magazines such as *Essence*, devoted primarily to the African American community, also surprisingly reinforce the beauty myth. Critiquing the duplicity in the messages produced by the magazine, Susan Bordo claims that although on the one hand it tries to "promote diverse images of black strength, beauty, and self-acceptance . . . [on the other] [t]he magazine's advertisers . . . continually play upon and perpetuate consumer's feelings of inadequacy and insecurity over the racial characteristics of their bodies. They insist that, in order to be beautiful, hair must be straightened and eyes lighted; they almost always employ models with fair skin, Anglo-Saxon features, and hair that moves," ensuring the association of the products of their sponsors "with fantasies of becoming what the white culture most prizes and rewards" (Bordo 263-264). Naturally, the African American woman is very often a victim of the ideological constructs that challenge her natural physical attributes and in turn leaves her with a deep sense of inadequacy. In addition, given that her body is associated with monstrosity and grotesqueness, the African American woman is frequently a target of society's violent

hatred and rage. The tragic incidents of these women facing violence and sexual abuse are, therefore, in many instances an outcome of their low social status and their natural physical attributes. To further expound on these issues, the present section analyses some of the most famous literary narratives, produced since the sixties Civil Rights movement, on African American women's experiences of horrific violence and victimization which in turn may be associated with the beauty myth.

A bleak and poignant tale, Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) powerfully represents the denial and discrimination that shapes the African American woman's experience in the twentieth century. Pecola Breedlove, the novel's prepubescent protagonist whose story is narrated by her friend Claudia, suffers poverty, sexual violation and tremendous discrimination as a result of her racial identity and her physical attributes. Subsequently, she comes to believe that her only means toward social acceptance lies in obliterating her natural identity and attaining a pair of blue eyes, a desire that finally pushes her into madness. Notably, Pecola, from the beginning, is haunted by the white images of beauty and femininity and feels threatened by the messages she receives from her family, friends, and the society at large. The notion that she is 'ugly' gets deeply entrenched in her mind, given that she lives in an era that celebrates Shirley Temple dolls and the white ideals of feminine beauty, which she in turn unquestioningly accepts. Pecola becomes a victim of the dominant beauty ideology of twentieth century America which is succinctly summed up by her friend, Claudia who states: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, 14). Pecola's predicament is worsened in the face of extreme poverty characterizing lives of Midwestern blacks in depression struck America. Furthermore, she is repeatedly

raped by her alcoholic father and impregnated by him. As Pecola gives birth to her father's bastard child, she is shunned both by her family and her acquaintances. Even as she comes to realize that she cannot alter the inhuman degradation that is her lot, Pecola begins to dream of having blue eyes and miraculously turning into a girl with Caucasian features, a figure who would obviously transcend the travails she faces. Describing her, Claudia states: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes . . . were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different . . . [therefore] [e]ach night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison, 34-35). As the protagonist in Morrison's novel turns obsessive in her quest for a pair of blue eyes, she finally succumbs to madness and becomes a hapless victim to the violence inherent in the world she inhabits. Pecola's case appears particularly poignant because in addition to an internalized sense of inferiority she is continually reminded of her 'ugliness' by her entire community. The split in Pecola's psyche maybe attributed to social codes like prescriptions of beauty, economic deprivation, racial discrimination and sexual exploitation all of which assume horrific dimensions.

Arguably, Pecola's violation and helplessness can be compared to that of a contemporary Gothic victim's. Like the traditional Gothic setting comprising of dark castles, chilling pursuits and blood thirsty monsters, the contemporary Gothic also induces fear, albeit a fear that is all pervasive and very often co-opted into larger social structures. The monster in the contemporary Gothic lies within the mind of the victim and has full control over its subject. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is the archetypal victim fighting an ideological monster fabricated by her guilt-inducing society. What is alarming about the contemporary Gothic is that the monster can no longer be isolated or hunted out, rather it is a ubiquitous presence and has omnipotent powers to oppress its victims. Accordingly, *The Bluest Eye* ends with Pecola's insanity and her

dialogues with her alter ego which in turn successfully acquires a pair of blue eyes. Through Pecola's abjection and her madness, Morrison, therefore, demonstrates the effects of the physical and psychological violence that is inflicted upon African American girls by the monstrous dictates of the dominant white ideologies.

Like Morrison's novel, the effects of the white myths of beauty and femininity on African American women's psyche is explored in Alice Walker's famous short story "Her Sweet Jerome" which appeared in the collection titled *In Love and Trouble* in 1973. Once again a tale of violence, insanity, and destruction, "Her Sweet Jerome" powerfully attests to the inhuman challenges faced by African American women owing to the trappings of the beauty myth. Walker's narrative revolves around an unnamed obese female protagonist. Mrs. Washington, whose anxieties and attempts at obtaining the love and empathy of her husband drive her to insanity and death. Ironically, Walker's protagonist is an independent woman who runs a beauty shop and in that perpetuates the very ideology that oppresses her for being a "big awkward woman, with big bones and hard rubbery flesh . . . [with] ham hands . . . [and] neck [like] a squat roll of fat protrud[ing] behind her head as a big bump . . . [with] eyes [that] [glower] from under the mountain of her brow . . ." (Walker 25). While her physicality makes her dreadfully insecure, the apathy of her husband drives her to an uncanny and obsessive quest for self-acceptance. Notably, as she vacillates between hatred and love for her own body, she slowly descends into insanity. Not surprisingly, her friends and acquaintances, reiterating the ideological constructs that control the cultural dynamics of America, only add to her woes. Noting this, Charlotte M. Wright in her analysis of Walker's short story claims that:

[B]oth community and family appear to be affronted that Mrs.

Washington has achieved more than an ugly woman should; she has, in

effect forgotten her place in society by gaining the reward (the cute and smart Jerome) without having the proper prerequisites (being cute and smart herself) . . . [and] are delighted that she is suffering, because it is punishment she deserves for rising above her “ugly woman” status.

(Wright 80)

The predicaments faced by the protagonist appear more pronounced given that her husband, Jerome, is the prototype of the Gramscian organic intellectual and a Civil Rights activist, fighting against racial discrimination in America. At home, however, he lets his wife bemoan her black physicality and replaces his affections for her with the love for his books. As Jerome leaves his wife deeply hurt and anguished, she begins to function almost like a zombie, mindlessly working in her beauty salon, attempting to improve her marriage, and as Charlotte M. Wright points out, by resigning to the fact that she is considered “ugly, poorly dressed, unintelligent and embarrassingly gauche” (Wright 81) by the world around her. As she slowly turns insane, Walker’s protagonist also turns violent, questioning her clients about her husband’s possible affairs by holding a knife to their throats, an act that “terrifi[es] the town, especially since her madness [is] soon readily perceivable from her appearance [as] [s]he [takes] to grinding her teeth and tearing her hair as she walk[s] along” (Walker 29-30). In a final act of revenge and destruction, she stabs her husband’s books and sets her house on fire, symbolizing the fact that she ends her pathetic life along with Jerome’s hypocritical intellectual endeavors.

Alice Walker’s “Her Sweet Jerome” can therefore, be read as a tale of contemporary Gothic horror where entrapment, madness, and violence are an outcome of the oppressive codes prescribed by the beauty myth. Notably, the story not only critiques the white beauty ideology, but also brings forth some of the most

challenging issues addressed by America's second and third wave feminists by depicting how the unnamed protagonist, despite financial freedom, is debased into a violent and suicidal woman owing to her physical attributes. Similar issues are once again raised by Walker in her famous 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, where the protagonist Celie, is described as 'ugly' and 'undesirable' according to socio-cultural parameters of twentieth century America. Discussing the novel in which Celie is forced into an abusive marriage very early in life, Charlotte M. Wright points out that her husband-to-be, "Mr --- need[ed] a mother for his out-of-control children, and a housekeeper for his long-abandoned chores" (Wright 105) and hence marries her. While Celie finds love and solace in a homosexual relationship with her husband's mistress, Shug, she nevertheless remains a victim of terrible domestic and sexual abuse all through her life, given that she is black and 'unattractive'. Accordingly, both narratives by Walker discussed in this section demonstrate how the African American, because of their natural physical characteristics, are very often relegated to an inferior position in the American society. The repressions these women are subject to often give rise to psychological disturbances that may turn even violent and even fatal. It may, therefore, be asserted that the beauty myth acts like a monstrous ideology challenging the body image of the African American women and engendering abominable violence in their lives and minds.

A more recent take on African American women's tragic experiences, when challenged by the dictates of the beauty myth, is found in Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006). In this narrative, set in the revolutionary American seventies', the victim is an African American minister's daughter, Minette Swift, a brilliant scholar who studies at the elite Schuyler College for girls. Since Minette dies in a mysterious fire, her white college roommate, Genna Hewett Meade, decides to

write a memoir fifteen years after her death perhaps out of guilt for not having saved Minette from her tragic end. Notably, Minette suffers tremendous discrimination and ridicule for being a non-conformist as she chooses to be happy in her African American body and skin and refuses to alter it like her peers. Naturally, she comes across as a threat to her fellow students who find her “smooth eggplant-dark skin,” and hair that is “wedge-shaped, stiff and jutting like wires” and smells of “natural oils” (*Black Girl/ White Girl* 7, 10) to be excessively offensive. Gradually Minette becomes an anathema to the Schuyler College girls and begins to be attacked with racist slurs which equate her with the ‘Hottentot Venus’. Minette, hereafter, withdraws from college and plunges into depression. She finally dies in a mysterious death by fire, perhaps lighted by her in order to commit suicide. In Minette’s tragic death, the predicament of the African American woman is once again reiterated in which she is constantly judged and rejected for having the physical characteristics typical to her race. Minette too, like the traditional Gothic victim, faces psychic repression, violence and hatred and finally succumbs to the repressive ideological construct of beauty and femininity in post-war America. Given the readings of female protagonists like Toni Morrison’s Pecola, Alice Walker’s Celie, and Joyce Carol Oates’s Minette, this section demonstrates how the African American women suffer under established western notions of feminine beauty that has crippling effects on the female psyche. This problematic has been subsequently discussed by many contemporary African American writers such as Ramona Lofton, aka Sapphire. Accordingly, the following section presents a detailed examination of Sapphire’s famous novel, *Push*, that presents a striking yet tragic narrative of an adolescent black girl fighting the violence and horror emanating from the western hegemonic discourses on beauty and femininity.

II

Push (1996) by Ramona Lofton, aka, Sapphire is narrated by the protagonist, Claireece Precious Jones, a sixteen year old girl living in Harlem, New York in the 1980s. With an obese black body that has been violated and impregnated by her father, Precious represents a bizarre spectacle of the abjectness that typifies the poor African American woman. Censured as a social pariah both in school and in her neighborhood, and cast off by her parents, Precious internalizes the notion that she is abnormal and sinister bemoaning that at “five feet nine-ten . . . weigh[ing] over two hundred pounds . . . [k]ids is scared of [her]” (Sapphire 6). Young and gullible, Precious begins to believe in the monstrosity associated with the African American body and laments: “I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system’s blood, [u]gly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, find a job for” (Sapphire 31). For being both black and obese Precious is treated as an undesirable object by her parents who time and again remind her of her ‘ugliness’ and even abuse her sexually. Further, she is impregnated twice by her father, and is dismissed from school once her second pregnancy comes to light. Simply put, Precious in *Push* comes across as the archetypal Gothic victim, abused and abandoned, and her body becomes the site of confluence for repressive discourses on race, beauty, and violence.

An insightful discussion on the novel is obtained in Marq Wilson’s interview with Sapphire that was published in 2012 in *MELUS* under the title “A Push Out of Chaos: An Interview with Sapphire.” Wilson points out that in *Push*, Sapphire portrays a number of real life experiences from the lives of students she had taught claiming that “[t]hese circumstances exist and have existed around us, unheard and unaddressed, for many years” (“Push Out of Chaos” 31). Addressing the debates raised by her novel, Sapphire enumerates the influences, aspirations, and the critical

reception of *Push*, and mentions that child abuse is a palpable reality in contemporary America that is unfortunately abetted by its materialistic culture. The novelist claims: “the Lolita-ization of our culture through the eroticizing of the child and female body in legal advertising and illegal porn gives a complicit consent to child sex abuse” (“Push Out of Chaos” 37) and further adds: “[c]hild abuse also persists as . . . a ‘societal psychosis’ that is pervasive and silent even in contemporary America” (“A Push Out of Chaos” 33). Sapphire’s novel exposes the horrific nature of the crime against Precious who is sexually abused by her father from the age of two, even as her mother is aware of this dastardly act. What is more poignant, however, is the fact that instead of condemning her husband, Precious’s mother, a deeply insecure woman, begins to perceive her child as a threat to whom she has lost the affections of her husband and in turn begins to brutalize her daughter. Accordingly, while her mother suffers from tremendous sexual insecurities, Precious grows up with a sense of immense self-hatred. As her psychosexual development is marred by brutality and violence, Precious internalizes her inferiority growing up aloof and introverted and turns into a voracious eater in order to escape her travails. This eventually makes her obese, a condition, which, as it gets coupled with her race and economic status, relegates her to the lowest denominations of the American social register.

Significantly, Precious bears an uncanny similarity with her literary predecessor, Pecola Breedlove, from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. The violence perpetrated on both Pecola and Precious inheres from the fact that both girls are black, poor and seemingly ‘ugly’, and having faced the vicissitudes of life both suffer from deeply internalized self-hatred. What critic Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak’s observes in Pecola’s case in her essay “Re-membering the Body: Body Politics in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” is also true for Precious. Discussing Pecola, Mermann-

Jozwiak claims: “[b]ecause they regard her body as worthless, other people mark Pecola as a scapegoat and repeatedly abuse her body” (Mermann-Jozwiak 194). Likewise, Precious too is a punching bag to her family and her acquaintances. Comparing Morrison’s novel with Sapphire’s, it may be concluded that both protagonists, Pecola in the pre-Civil Rights era and Precious at the dawn of the twenty first century, suffer under pernicious socio-cultural codes that victimize and degrade African American women’s bodies.

It is worthwhile to examine the African American female protagonist in Sapphire’s *Push* not only as a victim of the western hegemonic definitions of female beauty, but also as a Gothic subject for having suffered the violence and agony that is her lot. For Precious, the enormity of the physical torture and the resultant psychological trauma intensifies the uncanniness of her existence since her very being is rejected by the world she inhabits. She faces scorn and mockery at every stage as her acquaintances jeer her with “‘Claireece is so ugly she laughing ugly’. His fren’ say, ‘No, that fat bitch is crying ugly.’” (Sapphire 12) or “‘Pick up your lips Claireece ’fore you trip over them” (Sapphire 38); and sometimes even refer to her as “‘black monster, Big Bertha, Blimp [and] B54” (Sapphire 62) all of which drive young Precious lower and lower into the abyss of self-loathing. While such appellations have connotations of ugliness, they also reinforce the notion of deformity, abnormality, monstrosity and madness which together reduce Precious into a pathetic Gothic victim. Precious’s condition testifies to Mermann-Jozwiak’s observation on female bodies as the “‘ideological sites . . . written on by discourses of power and domination manufactured in a white supremacist society” (Mermann-Jozwiak 189). Interestingly, Precious’s physicality and the Gothic violence it suffers can also be read with the help of Fred Botting’s theory on dominant ideological constructs becoming a monstrous

presence in the lives of ordinary human beings, which he terms as “modern forms of barbarism” (*Gothic, The New Critical Idiom* 102). Though the protagonist in *Push* strives to survive despite being thrown at the mercy of ideological monsters, in this case, the ideologies of race and feminine beauty, she eventually succumbs and meets a tragic end.

Notably, while Precious suffers inhuman degradation and is repeatedly raped, impregnated and infected with HIV, she internalizes her wretchedness to such an extent that she turns self-destructive by giving in to overeating. The protagonist’s bingeing has been analyzed by Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins in her essay “From Living to Eat to Writing to Live: Metaphors of Consumption and Production in Sapphire’s *Push*” where she describes the act as “unwholesome consumption” and claims that “*everything* that [Precious’s] body ingests, digests, or absorbs, [includes] but [is] not limited to food” (1). In fact, Precious’s overeating and her obesity can also be read as symptomatic of the excesses that plague contemporary America. This excess, in turn, has been described by scholars like Fred Botting as central to the concept of contemporary Gothic. In his essay “Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines and Black Holes,” Botting states: “[a]s production cedes to consumption, all bodies are changed from being simply the victims or the wage slaves of vampiric capitalism to its willing participants” (Botting 288). Arguably, Precious, in order to escape her harsh reality, indulges in unhealthy consumption of the excesses and in doing so becomes both a consumer as well as a Gothic subject who brings nothing but destruction onto herself.

Depicted mostly in the act of cooking or eating, Precious’s relationship with food is significant in *Push*, informs critic Sika Dagbovie-Mullins. In her article “From Living to Eat to Writing to Live,” she adds that Precious confuses her desires with her repulsions in the context of sex and food and consequently she cannot stop indulging

and her consumption attains maniacal and uncanny dimensions given that she is already obese. Notably, the food her mother forces her to cook and consume, “fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, and Wonder bread” (Sapphire 9), abounds in carbohydrates and processed meat which is both fattening and unhealthy. The imagery of rich and excessive food in the novel becomes a marker for a situation that is bleak, unhealthy and deathly. What aggravates the darkness of the situation in Precious’s life is the constant parallel of excesses in food with torture and abuse. In fact, as Dagbovie-Mullins argues, Precious’s very existence can be interpreted as a symbol of the grotesque excesses, an idea that finds its culmination in a scene where Precious wipes feces onto her face as she feels that “she is not even good enough to escape via food” and must only allow herself “waste” (Dagbovie-Mullins 439).

Ironically, even as Precious gorges on fast food, is consistently mocked by all, and faces sexual and psychic abuse, she also repeatedly undertakes flights of fantasy where she sees herself transformed into a body that can be termed desirable.

Recounting these hallucinatory musings she states:

Then I change stations, change *bodies*, I be dancing in videos! In movies! I be breaking, *fly*, jus’ a dancing! Umm hmm heating up the stage at the Apollo for Doug E. Fresh or Al B. Shure. They love me! Say I’m one of the best dancers ain’ no doubt of or about that!

(Sapphire 24)

Typifying the Gothic subject, she lives a delirious life by continually shuttling between a tormented reality and a world of fantasy. Noting this, Dagbovie-Mullins observes: “[l]ike food, fantasy provides fleeting comfort and serves to only deepen [Precious’s] emotional abyss” (Dagbovie-Mullins 441). It is rather painful to note that in her world of fantasy, Precious achieves all that the real world does not grant her for

being an obese African American teenager, namely, success, 'beauty' and love. Reminiscing the painful reality of her life, she claims that "[she is] someone different on the inside. That [she is] just fat and black and ugly to people on the OUTSIDE" (Sapphire 125, emphasis in original) and believes that if people saw her actual self they would be kinder to her and even love her. In a moving sequence in the novel, she pleads before an unseen audience: "Can't you see Precious is a beautiful chile like white chile in magazines or on toilet paper wrappers. Precious is a blue-eye skinny chile whose hair is long braids, long long braids" (Sapphire 64). Notably, her hallucinations of seeing herself as a white girl bring in the element of the uncanny Gothic double. This may be understood with the help of Linda Dryden's book *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles* (2003) where she claims that the destabilization of one's singular identity under Gothic settings "[become] linked to class and morality, to pleasure and pain, to beauty and ugliness, and to evolution and degeneracy" (Dryden 40). Accordingly, it may be asserted that Precious loses control over her natural identity by beginning to associate herself with the image of a white girl who represents to her everything that is acceptable and desirable. In fact, her deranged psyche comes to the fore as she internalizes the belief of equating whiteness with goodness and starts composing an image of herself based on white notions of desirability:

Why can't I see myself, *feel* where I end and begin. I sometimes look in the pink people in suits eyes, the men from bizness, and they look way above me, put me out of their eyes. My fahver don't see me really. If he did he would know I was like a white girl, a *real* person, inside. (Sapphire 32, emphasis in original)

Precious is, therefore, an innocent child-victim who is perceived as monstrous by the dominant discourses on what constitutes the beautiful. The contemporary beauty myth functioning against Precious becomes a manifestation of what Fred Botting in *Gothic Romanced: Consumption, Gender and Technology in Contemporary Fictions* (2008) describes as the “discourses, practices and systems that make monsters through exclusion and suppression” (15). In keeping with Botting’s thesis, it may be asserted that the contemporary beauty ideal creates victims as well as monsters out of women, more poignantly of African American women, as they fall prey to its dictates.

Notably, Precious’s fate in *Push* is similar to Naomi Wolf’s description of the iron-maiden, as she struggles hard to fit into the definition of an attractive girl and in the process gets stifled. Her resultant misery may perhaps be best described with the help of Ama Oforiwaa Aduonum’s postulations which claim: “The black woman’s dark skin and curly hair are directly opposed to the Western aesthetic of beauty; indeed these features are enough to deny her any feminine qualities . . . This myopic standard of beauty has not only devalued and stigmatized all black women, it has also inadvertently rendered them invisible” (“Buwumu: Redefining Black Beauty and Emancipating the *Hottentot Venus* in the Work of Oforiwaa Aduonum” 280). Bolstering this thought is Naomi Wolf’s take on women’s internalization of the concept of beauty and she argues: “because ‘beauty’ lives so deep in the psyche, where sexuality mingles with self-esteem, and since it has been usefully defined as something that is continually bestowed from the outside and can always be taken away, to tell a woman she is ugly can make her feel ugly, act ugly, and as far as her experience is concerned, *be* ugly, in the place where feeling beautiful keeps her whole” (Wolf 36). Given this understanding of feminine beauty and its intricate relation with the female psyche, Precious’s fantasies of re-creating herself as an

“advertisement girl on commercial” (Sapphire 35) or featuring in “music videos where [she is] dancing in little clothes, [and where she is] little” (Sapphire 49) appear only natural. Unfortunately, however, such flights of fantasy instead of emancipating her make Precious delusional and hence more pathetic.

As discussed earlier, through her adolescent years, Precious is unable to accept and identify with her physical self. Her body, therefore, uncannily houses two entities, a condition strongly reminiscent of the Gothic double. Given her miserable condition, Precious comes to exemplify a typical feminine malaise of the contemporary age, the ordinary woman as a phantom like figure who lives a dual life, transforming herself into a false persona in order to survive the dictates of the contemporary beauty myth. Precious, therefore, by substituting her natural self with the image of the white ‘beautiful’ girl suffocates her original identity and the two selves live within her like each other’s doppelgangers. While toward the end of the narrative, she does attempt to take control over her circumstances by learning journal writing, she never really manages to overcome the entrapments that fetter both her body and her mind.

Sapphire’s *Push* can therefore be read as an exploration into the violence that the western beauty ideals unleash on the life of Claireece Precious Jones transforming her into the archetypal Gothic victim. Although she is finally able to free herself from her house, her parents, and an abuse-hurling unfair society into the company of good friends and her teacher, Ms. Rain, who offer her love and acceptance eventually making her feel precious, all this comes too late. Sadly by this time she is diagnosed with HIV, a degenerative condition that prefigures her impending death. Through this powerful narrative of oppression, Sapphire, therefore, demonstrates how Precious’s life becomes emblematic of the trauma and violence perpetrated on the African

American women even in the present times due to cultural perversions of the American society.

III

To conclude: A discussion of literary narratives such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Her Sweet Jerome*, *The Color Purple*, *Black Girl/White Girl* and *Push*, representing African American women's experiences in post-war America, reinforces the notion that the myth of feminine beauty, espoused largely by American capitalism and patriarchy, is a monstrous ideological construct that leads to women's perpetual objectification. Dominant discourses on beauty, therefore, perpetuate Gothic violence in the lives of African American women as demonstrated by the various readings presented in this chapter. Notably, the beauty myth, as an ideology, embodies the trappings of a contemporary Gothic world view since it is rife with monstrosity, madness, violence, degeneration, zombies and doubles. Accordingly, the present chapter critiques the othering and the discrimination faced by African American women in the face of the contemporary beauty myth.

Chapter IV

Beauty Myth and the Violence of Assimilation: Ethnic American Women's Experience

Like their white American and African American counterparts women of other ethnicities in the United States are also subject to the hegemonic dictates of the beauty myth. While for different ethnicities inhabiting America, the imperative to assimilate into the cultural mainstream is a palpable reality, this ideological construct becomes particularly coercive for ethnic women who must conform not only outwardly to socio-cultural codes but also alter their appearance significantly in order to be accommodated by white hegemonic discourses on beauty and femininity. In fact, the obligation to appear 'American' and to be assimilated is sometimes so compelling that it takes the form of psychic violence on women as they struggle hard to live up to the unrealistic standards set by the dominant cultural dictates. This problematic has been powerfully addressed by women's and gender studies' expert, Judy Tsu-Chun Wu, who studies ethnic beauty pageants to reveal how idealized visions of white feminine beauty reflect the larger politics of assimilation in the United States. Discussing the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. contest, specifically as it happened in the mid-twentieth century, Tsu-Chun Wu in her empirically argued essay titled "'Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!': Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Beauty Pageant", asserts that:

“[D]espite the flowery language used to describe Chinese standards of beauty, the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. beauty pageant actually used white standards to judge Chinese American women. One community member stated her belief that the contest ‘shows that the closer you look like the Whites, the prettier you are.’ Another critic agreed that

Asian Americans internalized ‘white standards’ of beauty promoted by mass media. These images emphasized that ‘a beautiful woman has a high-bridged, narrow nose, a large bosom, and long legs.’ She pointed out that while ‘these and many other physical traits are not inherent in most Asian women,’ beauty pageants like the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. contest encouraged women to achieve that ideal. Asian women ‘can compensate by setting our hair, curling our eyelashes, or wearing false ones, applying gobs of eye make-up, and going to great lengths to be the most ‘feminine’ women in the world.’ In attempting to achieve this feminine image, Chinese American women perpetuated the stereotype of Asian women as the ‘exotic-erotic-Susie Wong-Geisha girl dream of white American males.’” (Judy Tsu-Chun 16)

Arguably, the celebration of the beauty myth in contemporary America can be traced to the nation’s violent politics of assimilation. This ideological construct, obviously, wreaks havoc in the lives of those ethnic American women who continuously struggle for social acceptance and victimizes them by engendering fear and self-loathing in their minds.

Significantly, in a number of literary narratives by ethnic American women writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1977), Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989), Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1995) and Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Name Me Nobody* (2000) women characters are often found languishing under the oppressive demands of physical perfection and face the pressure to conform to social constructs of feminine beauty. Accordingly, this chapter presents a brief overview of the literary narratives mentioned above to examine the poignant

experiences of ethnic women inhabiting contemporary America. Further, based on the assumption that the oppressive forces of assimilation urging ethnic women to physically transform themselves and fit into the white American mainstream generates tremendous psychic violence, which is in turn akin to Gothic violence and entrapment, this chapter explores in detail the experiences of Lovey Nariyoshi, the young Japanese American protagonist residing in Hawaii in the 1970s, in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996). An analysis of Yamanaka's novel demonstrates how women of various ethnicities in America struggle with the pressures and violence of assimilation, both within their own community as well as from the American society at large to forge an identity that is both conventional and normative, especially in matters of body image and femininity.

I

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1977) is famous for its reworking of the classical tales of female warriors, Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen, from Chinese folklore to address the complex position of Chinese immigrant women in twentieth century America. Kingston's memoir not only evokes a strong nostalgia for the homeland but also persuasively challenges the violent forces of assimilation oppressing Chinese Americans in post-war decades in the United States. The narrative revolves around the anxieties and skepticism of the unnamed protagonist, who feels both ashamed of her origins and oppressed by the cultural codes that ordain her to assimilate and conform to 'Americanness'. From the very beginning, the protagonist feels uncomfortable with her immigrant Chinese identity in America. Trying her best to blend into the dominant

white culture, she claims she would rather “[Walk] erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and [speak] in an inaudible voice, [so that she may] turn . . . American-feminine” (Kingston 18). While Kingston in no manner advocates the supremacy of one culture over another, she nevertheless describes how the unnamed narrator protagonist constantly negotiates between her Chinese lineage and her American citizenship in trying to forge a coherent identity for herself. Significantly, one of the most crucial issues that destabilize her sense of self is the issue of feminine appearance since she struggles to balance her ethnic training and racial characteristics with the cultural construct of beauty and femininity in contemporary America. Kingston demonstrates how gestures like acquiring a fake persona and voice very often become the only means for an immigrant girl to gain acceptance in the American society. Accordingly, the narrator protagonist declares: “Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American – Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine . . . [w]e invented an American-feminine speaking personality . . .” (Kingston 155). The immense pressure for the ethnic American woman to assimilate obtains perhaps the most gruesome manifestation in Kingston’s memoir in which the narrator protagonist’s mother cuts her fraenum to tame her and transform her into an ideal Chinese American. In a shocking disclosure, the mother states: “You turned out so unusual. I fixed your tongue so you could say charming things” (Kingston 181). While the narrative ends on a more optimistic note, *The Woman Warrior* is, nevertheless, a powerful narrative critiquing the forces of assimilation that subjugate and repress ethnic women in contemporary America and is representative of the violence that young ethnic girls must face in order to participate in the American cultural mainstream.

The violence of cultural assimilation finds yet another representation in the novel *Jasmine* (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee who explores the travails of an Indian immigrant woman in the United States. Jasmine, the eponymous protagonist of Mukherjee's novel, demonstrates a strong urge to identify with the American spirit of individuality and accordingly adopts multiple identities, each with a distinct name until she attains an adventurous and intrepid persona. Discussing the process of Americanization in *Jasmine* Suchismita Banerjee, in her article "Interrogating the Ambivalence of Self-Fashioning and Redefining the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*", claims that the protagonist functions from a position of shame and denial about her ethnic origin. Banerjee argues: "It is . . . often seen that immigrants from colonized nations are complicit in the hegemonic culture to 'free' themselves from the inherent shame of being the colonial 'Other' and re-establish their identity in the foreign soil" (Banerjee 20). Accordingly, the protagonist transforms herself from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase and finally to Jane obliterating the meek image of an Indian woman and embracing the liberated persona of an American one. Notably, while Jasmine is the "reliable caregiver", Jane "[goes] to movies and live[s] for today [and in her] closet [hangs] satin blouses with vampish necklines" (Mukherjee 176) and the protagonist claims that she opts to transform herself because "[she] want[s] to become the person they saw . . ." (Mukherjee 171). Observing Jasmine's altered identities, Suchismita Banerjee argues that "the change in names suggest a psychic violence in her as she symbolically murders her previous identity again and again to recreate a new one" (Banerjee 20). The protagonist in Mukherjee's work is, therefore, trapped within the societal expectations of contemporary America and her rapid personality changes hint at the immense psychic upheavals she suffers in the process of assimilation.

The problematic of ethnic women's coercion under the violent norms of assimilation, specifically with regard to beauty and femininity in contemporary America, obtains a persuasive critique in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1992) which explores the Mexican American female experience. In Cisneros' novel, Esperanza, the central protagonist, along with a host of female characters are rendered invisible by the dominant cultural discourses in America. Esperanza's narrative is largely an account of the various episodes of her growing up years and documents her attempts at negotiating an identity as a Mexican in the United States. Whether it is her ethnic female body or her broken and decrepit house, Esperanza feels ashamed of both. Discussing her fractured identity, critic Maria Elena de Valdes in her article titled "In Search of Identity in Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*" claims that "house [Esperanza] seeks is, in reality, her own person" (Valdes 83). Notably, physical appearance forms a crucial part of Esperanza's negotiations for an autonomous identity in multicultural America. Her initial disillusionment with the Chicana life coupled with her desire to transcend it is fuelled largely by the mockery she faces from her own community and the American cultural codes of beauty and femininity. She feels utterly demeaned for being ridiculed with pejoratives such as "fat face" (Cisneros 36) and "ugly face" (Cisneros 37). Esperanza slowly internalizes the derision that she is subjected to and refers to herself as "an ugly daughter . . . [one who] nobody comes for" (Cisneros 88). Esperanza's experiences are representative of the conditions of many ethnic American women who desire to overcome the characteristics of their race in order to be accepted by America's white cultural discourses.

A significant moment in the novella inheres in the description of Esperanza and her childhood as it demonstrates how the idea of being beautiful and desirable is

tied closely to material possessions like fashionable shoes, an artefact that in turn is a product of the beauty and fashion industry. In the narrative, when Esperanza acquires a pair of “magic high heels” (Cisneros 40) and walks about in them, she feels “men can’t take their eyes off [her] . . .” (Cisneros 40). However, by the end of this section which is titled “The Family of Little Feet”, Esperanza’s exhaustion at attempting to fit into the codes of American femininity is apparent when she states: “We were tired of being beautiful” (Cisneros 42). As she grows up, Esperanza feels a strong need to dissociate herself from her own community and leave her house on Mango Street since this space reminds her of her ‘otherness’ in the United States and so strong is her discomfort that she declares: “One day I’ll jump out of my skin” (Cisneros 60). Though in the end Esperanza largely succeeds in overcoming her insecurities and striking a balance between her Mexican and American identities, much of her life can be read as an the ethnic woman’s struggle to be accepted into mainstream America. More important, beauty in her life becomes a tedious business, an endeavor at projecting a false personality. Left at the mercy of the violent forces of assimilation that require her to forcibly alter her natural physical and emotional disposition and appear ‘white’, Esperanza feels belittled and traumatized. Unless she conforms, she is mocked and feels completely entrapped by the hegemonic dictates of America’s gender codes. Arguably, the oppressive force of cultural assimilation functions as a contemporary Gothic tyrant and victimizes women like Cisneros’ protagonist by subjecting them to the inhuman demands of beauty and femininity.

Another literary narrative that investigates how a longing for physical beauty becomes the only crutch available to women ‘maimed’ either by loss of youth or beauty or both is the short story titled “Beauty Lessons” by Judith Ortiz Cofer which appeared in a collection titled *An Island Like You* (1995). In Cofer’s tale, the two

female protagonists, Sandra and her ageing aunt Modesta, are engaged in a relentless pursuit of beauty and consequently a pursuit of love and acceptance in contemporary America. Sandra, a young girl, living in a Puerto Rican barrio feels insecure owing to her “ordinary” appearance as she compares herself to girls at school who have “bleached-blond hair and [wear] about three layers of makeup” and who according to her project “a happy-face mask on, with hot-pink lips and false eyelashes . . . [and accordingly have] *the look* that boys like” (Cofer 60). Sandra bemoans the fact that she can never enjoy the social privileges that is the lot of her ‘Barbie doll girlfriends’ who have the love and acceptance of the American society at large. Racial othering perceived by Sandra becomes extremely poignant as she suffers for being a Puerto Rican girl who does not befit the white hegemonic conceptions of feminine beauty.

Notably, in Cofer’s narrative, it is not only the young Sandra who is enthralled by the beauty myth but also her elderly aunt, ironically named, Modesta who succumbs to the power of this ideological construct. Modesta, in the narrative, is depicted “wearing a tight red dress that shows off her hips and breasts, which [according to Sandra, her] American friends would say makes her look fat, but to Puerto Rican men is just right” (Cofer 72). Obviously, the white American discourse on feminine beauty does not accommodate the variations in physicality characteristic to women of other ethnicities. Modesta’s situation appears particularly distressing given that she attempts to hide her real age and persona behind layers of make-up and dates younger men. In a passage where Modesta takes off her embellishments and almost uncannily changes from an attractive young woman into an old hag, echoes of horrific Gothic transformations are palpable. Watching her aunt in the process of undressing one evening, Sandra notes:

I watch her take out her contact lenses . . . and then she peels off her false eyelashes . . . I see her rub some white cream all over her face, and suddenly she starts to change. Her cheeks have been painted on, and the big red lips too. It's like her expression is gone and she looks like a blank TV screen . . . I watch it all in the dresser mirror as she squints, trying to see herself while she takes out a set of false teeth! Her face just sort of caves in when she does this. It's like watching a horror movie. (Cofer 76)

Cofer's short story, therefore, establishes how women of other ethnicities need to live a double life in order to be accepted into white hegemonic discourses on beauty and femininity. While this duality on the one hand deeply torments the psyche of such women, on the other hand it maintains the doctrine of white cultural supremacy. Hence, in "Beauty Lessons", the myth of beauty and femininity once again acts as a contemporary Gothic force that subjugates women, forcing them to a repression and enslavement that is typical to the Gothic world order.

A striking critique of the violent forces of assimilation in contemporary America is once again obtained in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel, *Name Me Nobody* (1999). Emi-lou, the protagonist in Yamanaka's novel is an adolescent girl residing in Hilo in Hawaii, USA, who must continually negotiate between the choices of being a fat nobody and a thin somebody. In this coming of age narrative, Yamanaka demonstrates how the ethnic identity of a young girl is challenged when she fails to benefit the norms of beauty and femininity established by the larger American community. Emi-lou's journey is one of reconciliation with her body image and the various chaotic circumstances around her. In the process, she traverses from being an

invisible persona, 'a nobody' as she defines herself, to being a 'tolerable somebody' as she recreates her fat body by losing weight.

Notably, the unacceptability of the fat body is powerfully entrenched into Emi-lou's psyche. Beginning with the admonition from her grandmother who claims she would be a "laughing stock" (Yamanaka 37) if she does not lose weight, to declarations about the latter that she is "just about ready to do anything to make [Emi-lou] lose weight—bribe, beg, scold, pray, anything" (Yamanaka 37); to the cultural messages bombarded onto her by the Japanese American community in Hilo, thinness becomes the benchmark of acceptability in the life of Yamanaka's young protagonist. Subsequently, Emi-lou, by taking recourse in "time-release appetite suppressants, turquoise-colored diuretics, mint, chocolate, and fruit-flavored laxatives" (Yamanaka 42) that her friend Yvonne brings her, obtains a body acceptable to the American discourse on female beauty. While this helps her attain social benefits like becoming part of the softball team and getting the attention of boys, it nevertheless obliterates her innate identity. She laments:

This body Von creates for me through starvation, pep talks, fistfuls of pills, sweat, mind-over-matter, and exercise is not mine. All of a sudden there is nothing between me and the world . . . I'm nobody. I'm fat. The end. Now what? I'm not fat . . . But who am I, if not Emi-oink? (Yamanaka 49)

The price Emi-lou pays for attaining a thin body is not only an obliteration of her natural identity but also suffering the side effects of intrusive medication that lead to insomnia, making her "jittery" (Yamanaka 49) and having her "heart [race] and [skip] beats" (Yamanaka 49). Like the archetypal Gothic victim, she develops a

double as she fails to reconcile with the duality now characterizing her identity. She muses: “I look at myself in the mirror. I still feel like me. I still see the same me. How come everybody’s seeing somebody else? I was nobody fat. Am I somebody skinny?” (Yamanaka 52). More important, even as Emi-lou wishes to focus on her achievements beyond the attainment of the ‘perfect’ body, she is time and again reminded of the centrality of physical appearance in the life of an ethnic American girl. Her predicament can perhaps be best understood with the help of Beth Younger’s essay titled “Pleasure, Pain and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Fiction” where she critiques Young Adult fiction as emblematic of cultural artefacts that reinforce repressive discourses and gender stereotypes. Younger claims that this genre often “encourages young women’s self-surveillance of their bodies” (Younger 47) and adds that “associations of weight with sexuality serve a dual purpose in Young Adult texts; they reinforce negative ideas about body image and signal the reader to *read* a fat character as sexually suspect . . . passive, and powerless . . .” (Younger 47). Discussing Yamanaka’s text, Younger points out that Emi-lou “takes on the role of [a] social monitor, reminding herself of her status as a fat, unattractive Other” (Younger 52). Notably, Emi-lou’s doppelganger, her own self-image, torments her every time she attempts to reconcile the duality of being both ethnic and American:

The skinny part of me wants to like Sterling. The fat part of me inside keeps reminding me: Who you kidding chubs? He doesn’t like you, fatso. He’s only your friend, dork. You’re making a fool of yourself, Fat Albert. It’s all in your mind, you white whale. Better if you keep on dreaming about Kyle. That’s safer, stupid. You want them to all laugh at you when you fall on your face over Sterling . . . *He doesn’t*

like you, fat Emi-lou reminds me, as I pull myself out of the trance.

(Yamanaka 103, emphasis in original)

Emi-lou in *Name Me Nobody*, therefore, represents the quintessential ‘other’ in America’s cultural imagination who, in order to be accepted, must forge for herself a new body and mind that in turn must befit the established codes of femininity. In doing so, she suffers tremendous psychic violence and faces a constant emotional strife that leaves her a nervous wreck. The travails of Yamanaka’s protagonist become emblematic of the sufferings of many ethnic women in contemporary America. Enslaved by the beauty myth and challenged by the norms of racial othering, such women appear as contemporary Gothic victims, facing the violent forces of assimilation that deeply wound their lives and minds.

II

Continuing with the debate of racial othering and the violence of assimilation in the lives of ethnic American women, the present section offers a close reading of Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s novel *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996) to demonstrate how the myth of female beauty functions as a contemporary Gothic trope. The narrative in *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* is composed like a series of interlinked episodes presenting a coming of age story of its Japanese American female protagonist, Lovey Nariyoshi. Growing up under the hegemonic ideological doctrines of America, Lovey is unable to defend herself against the images of flawless white physicality generated and championed by the world which she inhabits. The novel depicts how the discourse of white femininity and beauty succeeds in breeding insecurities and apprehensions in young Lovey’s mind as she pines for but can never

possess the “perfect blond ringlets and pink cheeks and pout lips, bright eyes” (Yamanaka 3) all of which typify the quintessential white American girl. Foreshadowing the fears and fantasies of the young protagonist, the novel opens with Lovey entranced by Shirley Temple films as the star happens to be her idol. She narrates: “[these] movies made me cry on Sunday mornings” (Yamanaka 3) thereby suggesting her deep association with white American culture and her desire to be assimilated into all that is idolized by it. It is worth noting that the name Shirley Temple wielded enormous influence in the lives of American girls through the twentieth century since the star embodied the chief tenets of America’s beauty myth. Interestingly, like another famous colored protagonist of American literature, Pecola Breedlove from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, who crumbled under the violent dictates of the beauty myth, Lovey too harbors an extremely powerful urge to be likened with Shirley Temple. Much like Pecola, Lovey struggles hard trying to be appreciated and loved, and sustains psychological disturbances often bordering on the uncanny. Arguably, while the name Shirley Temple stands for all that is beautiful and desirable, both narratives by Morrison and Yamanaka illustrate how this figure instead is transformed into a monstrous myth that wreaks nothing but repression on the minds of young girls in twentieth century America such that they eventually succumb to psychic disorders.

Lovey’s search for an identity in the novel stems from a tussle between her Japanese ethnic roots and her associations with mainstream American culture. While on the one hand she grows up witnessing her father’s nostalgic musings of his Japanese childhood, on other hand she is constantly reminded of her otherness by the white American norms of which the beauty myth forms a significant part. Understandably, even as Lovey enjoys listening to her father’s stories, she also longs

to be like a Hawaiian 'haole' so that she may gain the acceptance of the whites. Given Lovey's exposure to the media, her lessons at school, and the mockery she faces from her classmates, all of which reinstate the notion of white supremacy, it is but natural that she feels overwhelmed and internalizes her racial inferiority hoping to someday transform into a white American or a haole. An important example obtains in the character of Mr. Harvey, her English teacher at school, who repeatedly reminds his class that in order to be like haoles one needs to stop speaking pidgin and converse like the whites. Naturally, young Lovey feels ashamed and tries to deny her Japanese origins. She laments: "I don't tell anyone, not even Jerry, how ashamed I am of pidgin English. Ashamed of my mother and father, the food we eat, chicken luau with can spinach and tripe stew" (Yamanaka 10). Obviously, Lovey suffers from complete lack of self-esteem and cherishes a powerful desire to be a part of the mainstream white community that even as it undermines her, it charms her nevertheless. She bemoans: "Sometimes I secretly wish to be haole. That my name could be Betty Smith or Annie Anderson or Debbie Cole who lives at 2222 Maple Street with a white station wagon" (Yamanaka 12). Lovey, therefore, wishes to completely metamorphose into a white American girl and don a persona that maybe both acceptable and attractive to the world around her.

Like Precious from Sapphire's *Push*, discussed earlier in this study, Lovey is jeered at and bullied in school especially because of her appearance. Her peers hurl insults at her and mock her Japanese physical features: "You real stooped for one fricken Jap . . . you Rice Eye, good-for-nuttin' Pearl Harba bomba" (Yamanaka 15). While such moments establish not only America's rigid cultural codes about female appearance, they also serve as a reminder of the nation's collective fear of losing its dominance in international culture and politics in the post-war world. White

America's dominance over other ethnicities is further established in the novel as Lovey is ridiculed and belittled every day and gradually begins to descend into a strong sense of self-hatred and almost obsessively begins to desire a white identity. From comic books to television to films, as Lovey watches the celebration of the blonde white American woman, she comes to believe that dark hair and non-Caucasian features are undesirable, even evil. Accordingly, her young impressionable mind appropriates the hegemonic definitions of female beauty which is evident in her musings:

Blond hair. Good. Betty Cooper and Marcia Brady, Barbie and Twiggy. Peggy Lipton and Elizabeth Montgomery. Debbie Reynolds, Doris Day . . .

Black hair. Evil. Veronica Lodge. Alexandra Cabot. Serena, Samantha Stevens' cousin, Big Ethel, Nancy Kwan, and all the evil stepmothers in Walt Disney movies. Miss Mims from *Thoroughly Modern Millie* . . .

Just better to be haole. Live in Riverdale. Be Vicky or Jenny . . .

Better to have straight blond hair and long Miss America legs and lots of boobs like Ginger Geiger, 'cause to me no sense in sending Miss Hawai'i to Atlantic City unless she's haole 'cause she never makes the finals, only Miss Congeniality . . .

I want a great name . . . Have a father with a great nickname like Richard—Dick. Robert—Bob . . . (Yamanaka 33-34)

The violence of the cultural messages urging Lovey to assimilate inheres in the fact that these forcefully restructure her identity pushing her to transform herself into an

altogether new person. Notably, Fred Botting's definition of the contemporary Gothic as an ideological construct or "[the] discourses, practices and systems that make monsters through exclusion and suppression" (15) helps read Lovey's narrative as one of entrapment in which she is subjugated by the white beauty myth and subsequently confers hatred and monstrosity on to her own Japanese lineage.

Through the course of her narrative Lovey's desire to obtain a white body and an American identity is intensified to such an extent that it obtains eerie proportions. She continually dreams and aspires to be transformed into a white girl and claims: "If I was haole, twenty, skinny and blond, I might be the perfect girl" (Yamanaka 104). Yamanaka, in the course of the narrative, points to another interesting cultural construct: the imperative to look attractive and desirable which oppresses women far more than it affects men. This is illustrated through one of the protagonist's friends, Jerry, a young boy, who claims: "if [I] were a *girl*, haole, twenty, and blond that [I'd] be perfect" (Yamanaka 104, italics mine). Significantly, twenty-first century feminist critics of the Gothic like Stephanie Genz have claimed that the contemporary Gothic protagonist is more a recipient of the culturally oppressive forces that transform her into "patriarchal billboard" instead of the "grotesque spectacle" of the traditional Gothic ("(Re)Making the Body Beautiful" 69). Accordingly, it may be asserted that Lovey, in her obsessive desire to look and feel like an American white girl, symbolizes the contemporary Gothic protagonist. While there are no castles that imprison her or horrific villains who assail Lovey in twentieth century Hawaii, what fetters her is an extremely powerful ideological construct that attains a demonic stature by completely obliterating her sense of self-worth and forcing her to internalize her own inferiority to the extent that it ruptures a healthy functioning of her psyche.

Notably, the harrowing effects of the white beauty myth on Lovey's psyche are evident in her daily interactions with friends and acquaintances. For instance, in an episode where she plays with dolls, Barbie and Ken, along with her friend Jerry, the deep seated cultural anxieties of a Japanese American girl come to the fore. Yamanaka, through this episode, portrays how cultural artefacts like dolls powerfully reinforce notions of white cultural superiority. Barbie, the iconic representation of white American womanhood and glamor, becomes for Lovey the symbol of all her dreams and aspirations. Refusing to experiment with the doll's hair, young Lovey claims that she cannot let Barbie have 'ugly' and frizzy hair and such experiments should instead be performed on her dark haired sisters Midge and Skipper who are the 'ugly' relatives of the 'beautiful' Barbie. She announces: "All matted and frizzy . . . the two most ugliest dolls alive. Not silky blond smooth like Barbie . . . they look damn ugly, like two Puerto Rican sisters from down the street with absolutely no relation to Malibu Barbie and Ken" (Yamanaka 115). Importantly, Lovey is not merely entranced by Barbie, but also protective of the perfection that is symbolized by the doll. Obviously, she is unable to see the repression generated by the figure of Barbie as she embraces the doll as an epitome of beauty. Unfortunately, however, by identifying with Barbie, Lovey chooses to erase her own racial uniqueness, an act that is not only irrational but also extremely violent and destabilizes the psyche of the young girl. Barbie, therefore, can be read as the symbol of Gothic oppression in Lovey's life, an uncanny double haunting and tantalizing the young protagonist who in turn begins to obsessively chase the myth of beauty and physical perfection represented by it. Accordingly, the doll in Yamanaka's novel becomes what Fred Botting describes as the industrially produced overwhelmingly perfect artefact that engenders a split in the psyche of the Gothic subject. Botting's claim that, "the

industrial production of a personality split [lies in] an instantaneous cloning of living man, the technological recreation of one of our most ancient myth of the *double*, of an electro-ergonomic double whose presence is spectral” (“Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines and Black Holes” 280), becomes particularly significant in the case of Yamanaka’s young protagonist.

Another instance that presents Lovey as a typical Gothic protagonist, suffering a psychic split, is the uncanny presence of a ghost she sees continually in the Nariyoshi household. She claims to be aware of the presence of a “lady with long white hair, a flowing dress, and no lower body . . . with white face and red, red lips” (Yamanaka 85-86), an image strongly reminiscent of the figure of a geisha. While her sister Calhoon, who also dreams of this ghost, accepts the story as a commonplace incident, Lovey is terrified. The ghost, that infests her home, can perhaps be interpreted as a manifestation of the protagonist’s anxieties stemming from her continual struggle with her appearance and identity and her desire to flee into a “[p]erfect [h]aole [h]ouse” (Yamanaka 23). Notably, the figure of the geisha, as Kimiko Akita notes in her essay titled “Bloopers of a Geisha: Male Orientalism and Colonization of Women’s Language”, is representative of ideal femininity in Japan. Akita observes that while in Japan: “[geishas] are respected professionals . . . admire[d] for—in addition to their multifaceted and excellent artistry—their feminine demeanor, sophistication, and well-mannered behaviors” (Akita 13), in the Western imagination, the geisha are conceived as entertainers and prostitutes who are “exotic, erotic, submissive, and a beautiful creature/object” (Akita 15). The image of the ghost/geisha that terrifies Lovey in her dreams, therefore, testifies to her anxieties toward trying to befit the image of a beautiful and feminine being that may transcend its ethnic traits and get assimilated into the white American society. Another

significant discussion of the geisha's presence in western discourses is obtained in Traise Yamamoto's book *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (1999) where she where she argues that according to western understanding the Japanese women are overtly feminine. She further adds that although the geishas thrived during the late nineteenth century, "the Japanese woman as an ideological construction of the West in general, and of the United States in particular, has consistently depended on variations, but not displacement, of the geisha stereotype" (Yamamoto 23-24). Naturally, the figure of the geisha has a strong presence in young Lovey's understanding of Japanese femininity and it haunts her as she attempts to overcome her racial identity in order to be accepted in school and the American society at large.

Notably, since Lovey struggles perpetually to become someone else, her sister Calhoon rightly chastises her saying: "[f]irst you like be like Daddy. And then you like be haole. And then you like be like Jerry. And Katy . . . Why you no can just be you, hah? Why you like be something you ain't?" (Yamanaka 83). Finally, in her disturbed state of mind, as Lovey ends up killing a bird trying to emulate her father, Calhoon further advises her to accept and embrace her natural self: "You shouldn't have kill the Japanese blue, Lovey. I told you. I told you not to. You shoulda just been you, not somebody you ain't." (Yamanaka 89). Yamanaka, therefore, presents Lovey as a troubled adolescent who strives very hard to attain a persona that may win her the acceptance and love of the people around her. In her attempts at shaping her identity in the face of hegemonic white American ideologies, Lovey, therefore, comes across as a Gothic subject, tormented by the cultural messages that beleaguer her sanity.

In *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* Lovey's narrative, presented in vignettes, of growing up in twentieth century America becomes a powerful critique of the

western notions of femininity and beauty that often influence the psychosexual development of ethnic American children. Although by the end of the novel, Yamanaka's protagonist largely succeeds in transcending her insecurities and begins to accept her Japanese American identity, her narrative can be read primarily as an expose on the horrors of the American beauty norms and identity politics that assail the psyche of young girls like Lovey Nariyoshi, enslaving them to negative emotions such as shame and self-hatred.

III

To conclude: A discussion of the novels by contemporary American women writers belonging to various ethnicities proves that the ubiquitous presence of the established norms of beauty and femininity enslave women across cultures in America. It is worth reiterating that in contemporary America the myth of feminine beauty, challenged by the nineties' feminists, has assumed Gothic dimensions giving rise to a host of monstrous ideologies that afflict women's minds subjugating them to capitalistic and patriarchal discourses on femininity. This reality is even harsher for women of other ethnicities in America because they are doubly marginalized owing to their own racial characteristics and the dictates of white beauty myth that relegates them to the position of the cultural other. Ubiquitously present and uncannily persistent, this myth demands women not only to conform in matters of appearance but also to change their behavioral patterns that in most instances lead to psychic aberrations. Evidently, this cultural construct is a very powerful presence in the lives and minds of innumerable American women and one cannot deny the violence that it is capable of unleashing on their bodies and their minds. The repressive white norms of beauty and femininity,

therefore, typically give rise to a Gothic world order that entraps many ethnic American women even to this day.

Conclusion

Through a discussion of the novels by contemporary American women writers belonging to mainstream white as well as other ethnicities, this study concludes that the myth of feminine beauty inflicts massive psychic and physical violence on contemporary women and transforms them into subjects whose abjection is comparable to that of eighteenth century Gothic victims. This study, therefore, by analyzing the lives and experiences of select American fictional protagonists, establishes that the beauty myth functions like a monstrous ideological force that establishes its stronghold on women and entraps and tortures them. More important, it asserts that while contemporary Gothic narratives retain the traditional features of horror, entrapment and victimhood, they nevertheless present monstrosity as normative and repressive ideological constructs that ubiquitously govern the human world. Accordingly, this study reads select works of fiction by contemporary American women writers to establish that the beauty myth, by controlling and oppressing the lives of women, functions like a tyrannical ideology and hence embodies modern Gothicism.

To bolster its central argument, this thesis brings together two sets of theories, one by the third wave feminists, and the other, by contemporary Gothic scholars. Accordingly, it weaves together the postulations of third wave feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo, Susan Faludi, Gloria Steinem and Naomi Wolf who have consistently presented a powerful polemic against the enslavement of contemporary women by the beauty myth, with the theoretical assumptions of contemporary Gothic scholars, namely, Fred Botting, Steven Bruhm, David Punter, Stephanie Genz, and Catherine Spooner who have defined this genre as an all pervasive and repressive ideological

construct that is associated with maniacal obsession, vampiristic consumption, cosmetically mutilated figures, and the horrific misuse of technical advancement. Accordingly, this thesis reads the physical and psychic violence suffered by contemporary women under the dictates of the beauty myth as emblematic of Gothic victimhood by arguing that the myth engenders oppression and madness that very often borders on the uncanny.

The study begins by outlining the origin of beauty practices across cultures and argues that such exercises have largely fettered women's freedom causing them bodily pain and mental torture. For instance, it examines practices like foot binding in ancient China and the use of corsets in eighteenth century Europe to expose how beauty regimens have largely oppressed women. While the study critiques the repercussions of the centrality of physical beauty in women's lives, it also takes into account some of the theories forwarded by contemporary thinkers who defend societies' preoccupation with the aesthetics of the physical form. Accordingly, it notes how Harvard psychologist, Nancy Etcoff, in her book *Survival of the Prettiest* asserts that beauty practices are undertaken by women in a bid to appear desirable so as to obtain the best mate for biological reproduction and accordingly beauty appeals to women at the level of their natural instincts. Likewise, it observes how Kathy Peiss in her book *Hope in a Jar* discusses the rituals of beautification in women's lives as endeavors that empower them and even argues how the beauty industry, lead often by women, has brought them enormous benefits. No doubt women's attempts at beautification are as old as civilization itself and that women very often willingly engage in such preoccupations, it is, however, worth noting that the beauty ideal, specifically in the present century, has attained extremely oppressive characteristics and accordingly victimizes women even as it promises them a life of glamor and

fulfilment. Given that the contemporary beauty myth celebrates a universal discourse on beauty, one that champions the thin, tall, blue-eyed, and blond Caucasian female form, it has homogenized the perception of beauty keeping in mind the mainstream Euro American physical traits. Accordingly, this study claims that by obliterating the presence of diversity when it comes to images of feminine beauty, the contemporary discourses on ideal female body image have attained violently repressive characteristics and may, therefore, be compared with contemporary Gothicism. The study, therefore, takes into consideration theories by America's third wave feminists who have powerfully challenged the beauty myth and its enormous success with the advent of the media and the internet revolution. These theorists, as this study suggests, have rightly argued that the myth functions as backlash against the success of sixties' feminist movements. Keeping this background in mind, the present thesis argues that the contemporary beauty myth, by urging women to obtain unrealistic physical characteristics, forces them to take recourse in the violent and intrusive technical measures that in turn demand excessive self-regulation from women. It, therefore, demonstrates that the arguments raised by third wave feminists and contemporary Gothic theorists converge at the point where women's subjectivity is concerned and that the beauty myth today embodies the violence and monstrosity that is elemental to Gothic narratives.

This thesis elucidates its theoretical framework with the help of select representative fiction by contemporary American women writers. It, therefore, begins with a discussion of white American women's experiences under the dictates of the beauty myth. Accordingly, it examines literary narratives such as Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs* (1984), Ann Tyler's *A Slipping Down Life* (1969), and Joyce Carol Oates's "Madison at Guignol" from the collection *The Female of the Species* (2007)

to highlight the challenges faced by white women under prescriptive beauty norms in America. Notably, these narratives present poignant tales of psychic violence resulting from the female protagonists' insecurities for not living up to the beauty ideals cherished by the American culture. In addition, they demonstrate how women fear aging and loss of youth, beauty and sexual desirability and very often succumb to horrific psychic malaises. Most of these narratives depict madness, uncanny obsessions, mutilations, violence and bloodshed which in turn recall Gothic violence, and accordingly illustrate how abjection and victimhood is often the lot of white American women who are captivated by the doctrines of the beauty myth. Additionally, this study presents a detailed discussion of Joyce Carol Oates's novel *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike* (2009) which effectuates a strident critique of the beauty myth through its protagonists Betsy and Bliss Rampike. Oates's novel depicts how the discourse of beauty and glamor in white upper class America makes both victims and monsters out of women who struggle under the vicious politics of self-esteem and body image. Accordingly, with the help of Oates's modern day tragedy, this study confirms that white American women are very often enslaved by the contemporary beauty myth that relegates them to the status of a Gothic protagonist.

The present study furthers the linkage between the beauty myth and Gothicism by taking into account the experiences of African American women in contemporary America. It illustrates how racial othering and marginalization of African American women has very often been actualized by judging them on the basis of physical attributes characteristic to their ethnicity. Understandably, owing to their appearance, which is strikingly different from the celebrated white images of beauty, such women have been largely defined as demonic and monstrous and as symbols of

undesirability. Accordingly, this thesis examines the violence and sufferings faced by African American women with the help of female protagonists such as Toni Morrison's Pecola, Alice Walker's Celie, and Joyce Carol Oates's Minette who appear in the novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *The Color Purple* (1983) and *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006), respectively as their narratives depict how the African American women suffer under established western notions of feminine beauty. This argument is strengthened by a reading of Ramona Lofton aka Sapphire's *Push* (1996) that demonstrates how trauma and violence are the lot of African American women who function under white hegemonic ideals such as the beauty myth. In *Push*, Precious, a sixteen year old girl living in Harlem, New York in the 1980s, suffers extreme psychic degeneration and physical abuse for being both black and obese. Precious is denigrated not only by the American society at large but also by her own parents who abuse and torture her such that she is forced to take recourse in hallucinatory fantasies. Trapped under the hegemonic norms of beauty and femininity, Precious symbolizes the archetypal Gothic protagonist who, despite her will to live on, finally succumbs to death and degeneration. This study, therefore, asserts that African American women not only face the challenges set forth by the dominant western discourses on beauty and femininity, but also the stigma against the genetically determined characteristics of their race. Accordingly, it claims that the African American women's subjectivity is very often a product of a combination of oppressive forces such as economic deprivation, sexual exploitation, and racial segregation, which function in tandem with the western normative discourses on beauty and femininity that systematically reject black women as the abominable 'other'. Therefore, by demonstrating how African American women are judged harshly for their skin color, bodily proportions and other physical attributes, the

present study concludes that their position in society has, over centuries, been one of inferiority and abasement and accordingly recalls Gothic victimhood.

The present argument is also appropriated to examine the experiences of colored women of other ethnicities inhabiting contemporary America. Accordingly, this thesis considers the travails of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Mexican women, to argue that the imperative to assimilate into the cultural mainstream is a palpable reality in contemporary America and this ideological construct becomes violently coercive for ethnic women who must conform not only outwardly to socio-cultural codes but also significantly alter their natural physical selves in order to be accommodated by dominant white discourses on beauty and femininity. This thesis, therefore, offers a brief analyses of literary narratives such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1977), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1990), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1991), Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Beauty Lessons" from the collection titled *An Island Like You* (1995), and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Name Me Nobody* (1999), all of which reaffirm the subservience of the ethnic American women to the beauty myth thus making their condition akin to that of Gothic victims. In addition, it presents a close reading of Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996) which discusses the experiences of Lovey Nariyoshi, a Japanese American teenager residing in Hawaii in the 1970s. Like the other novels by ethnic American writers, Yamanaka's novel too demonstrates how women of various ethnicities in contemporary America struggle with the pressures and violence of assimilation, specifically with regard to issues of female body image, both within their own community as well as from the American society at large and how such forces often transform these women into hapless Gothic victims.

In sum: This thesis is an attempt to read the coercive beauty ideal of contemporary America as an oppressive discourse that appropriates the violence and darkness elemental to Gothicism. Accordingly, with help of a discussion of select novels by contemporary American women writers belonging to mainstream white as well as marginalized ethnicities, this thesis seeks to establish that the ubiquitous presence of the established norms of beauty and femininity enslave women across cultures in America. It is worth reiterating that in the contemporary world the myth of feminine beauty, challenged by the nineties' feminists, has assumed Gothic dimensions giving rise to a host of monstrous ideologies that afflict women's minds and bodies by subjugating them to capitalistic and patriarchal discourses on femininity. Perpetually afflicting women's minds and lives, this myth forces women not only to conform in matters of appearance but also to embrace submissive behavioral codes and accordingly pushes them toward psychic aberration. This thesis, by discussing select representative fiction by contemporary American women writers, therefore, asserts that the repressive norms of beauty and femininity very often give rise to Gothic horror and victimhood in the lives of many American women.

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