

# Fashion Figure Illustration and Western Beauty Standards in Indian Fashion Design Education: A Critical Analysis

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**Abstract**—The croqui, or fashion figure illustration, is the basis of teaching fashion and clothing designs. However, most fashion illustration figures are based on Eurocentric and colonial ideals of body type which differ from Indian women's bodies. This paper provides a critical analysis of the differences between the fashion figures used in design schools in India and the actual body types of Indian women. It uses de-colonialization, intersectionality and post-colonialism to argue that using Eurocentric fashion figures perpetuates existing systems of discrimination against women by their bodies and negatively affects the effectiveness of education in design. It will also present solutions to create India-specific fashion figure reference materials that represent all of the various body types of Indian women while being true to indigenous aesthetics.

**Keywords**— fashion figure illustration, croqui, Indian women's body types, western beauty standards, decolonizing fashion education, anthropometric data, body image, INDIA size

## I. INTRODUCTION

The croqui or fashion figure is a foundation in the fashion design process. It is widely regarded as an essential tool for the development of design concepts and visualization. It is also one of the first technical skills students of fashion and apparel design worldwide are taught.

As well as being used as a drawing template, the croqui is also a medium to represent and communicate a designer's interpretation of the human form, proportions of garments and the visual ideal the garments must meet. Consequently, the fashion figure carries significant cultural, political and social significance far beyond its intended use as an educational tool.

Educational programs for fashion design in India have always incorporated Western (mainly Euro- and North American) curriculum models. Fashion illustrations are based on the universally adopted ten-

head (or 1:10) proportion system, which defines a level of sophistication represented by the use of a proportionate figure that has been extended proportionately in length, at around 10 times the length from the floor to the top of the head of a woman's head. Therefore, the ten-head system was created for an elongated, thinner version of a woman, which has little resemblance to Indian women's actual anthropometric measurements. Indian women have smaller bodies than women in Western countries because their length from the waist to the ground is much shorter, their width when measured with respect to height is much broader than that of women in Western countries, and their waist and hip sizes have different ratios than those represented on standard templates of fashion figures in the Western world.

This gap has many causes other than technical measurement issues. It may come from the way that the legacy of British colonial rule marginalized indigenous aesthetics and culture and imposed Western definitions of beauty, body, and civility as universal standards of reference. Within this context, the fashion croqui serves as a subtle yet ongoing means of sustaining colonial hierarchies in education design. The "fashionable body" of this period is identified specifically as the tall, thin, young, and white—an ideal taken to be globally reproduced through textbooks and curriculum for fashion illustration.

This paper investigates three different, yet overlapping, perspectives of the issue: first, the anthropometric mismatch between the standard fashion figure and the women's bodies of India; second, the colonial and Eurocentric influence on the fashion design curriculum in India; and third, the impact this gap is producing in terms of student body image, garment fit, and pedagogical performance. In conclusion, the paper proposes strategies for

developing a fashion figure illustration that is decolonized and created specifically for India.

## II. THE FASHION FIGURE AS A PEDAGOGICAL AND POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

Fashion illustrations serve as a primary method for projecting ideas and concepts in costume and fashion design. The drawn body, through established body proportions and drawings, constitutes the first technical means of drawing that students will learn in the area of fashion design. Fashion illustration is considered a foundational source of knowledge within the industry and holds a significant place in the overall teaching of the craft of fashion design. Figure templates are utilized to establish initial silhouettes and proportions from which designers develop their concept for a garment. These templates are typically drawn using the standard nine to ten head height proportional drawing system - a system which has come to be universally accepted as aesthetically pleasing, yet does not accurately reflect the proportions of real, live human bodies.

Collected data of body scanning research project has shown that the average head to height ratio for the human body is around 7.5 heads; this is much lower than the nine or ten head ideal commonly used in fashion design. As such, fashion figure templates continue to be designed based on these idealized proportions and so therefore they do not represent the true body type; they also cannot account for acceptable variations within body proportions and silhouettes. These distorted structures are not coincidental, but rather are the result of an aesthetic ideology that has been intentionally constructed within a Western, Eurocentric context throughout cultural and historical time frames.

An extensive investigative study that explored how many different races and body types were in the fashion illustration textbooks by examining thousands of photos; the beginning of this project was completed in 2013, including 3,622 people. The results showed that there was very little representation of any race and no diversity at all among fashion illustrators. In terms of specific representation, people who identify as Black are most commonly depicted with light skin tones, further contributing to the issues of racism and colorism. A second major study that examined 3,124 photographs

of women in fashion design and apparel development illustrations published after 2000 substantiated the need for increased race, body size and body position diversity in the core teaching materials of the discipline. The study specifically identified that both South Asian body shapes and skin tones are virtually non-existent in global teaching materials, highlighting a gap in the visibility of bodies of South Asian descent as they relate to fashion education in India.

Sandhu (2022) has raised this specific issue with his discussion about "auntie-fit croqui." He argues that students worldwide studying fashion learn a strict set of pre-defined rules regarding body proportions based upon the ten-heads croqui. Sandhu suggests that croqui has the connotation of colonialism and calls for a decolonization of this particular image. Ahmed (2022) builds on Sandhu's arguments by referencing Tlostanova's concept of the coloniality of design, arguing that gendered, racialized, and capitalist systems of discipline have informed the tools and equipment used in fashion classrooms. Thus, Ahmed argues, revealing the racial hierarchies established within fashion requires a consideration of the Eurocentric assumptions of dominant fashion epistemology. Ultimately, both authors will demonstrate that the fashion figure is not just a neutral tool for drawing (as croqui implies); rather, it is a political vehicle of representation that embodies and promotes specific ideas — and thus excludes — the human body.

## III. THE COLONIAL LEGACY OF WESTERN BEAUTY STANDARDS IN INDIA

In order to fully appreciate how deeply entrenched Eurocentric standards of beauty exist within Indian fashion education; it is useful to situate these standards within the broader historical context of British colonialism and its social and psychological effects on Indian culture. The British ruled over India for more than two centuries; throughout this time, they were not just landlords and resource exploiters but also propagated Western ways of knowing, Western values, Western cultures, and Western aesthetics into Indian societies, which resulted in a significant weakening of the long-established standards of beauty, culture, and values in India.

As captured in ancient Indian sculptures, poetry and literature during the Mauryan, Sunga, and Kushan dynasties, women's beauty was described according

to an idealized body type featuring large eyes, a narrow waist, broad hips, round breasts, and medium-to darker-skinned women. This beauty ideal was established volumetrically and by being saturated with a distinctive South Asian sense of beauty. The description from the Shringarashata by Bhartihari of the ideal woman describes an ideal woman as having "hollow navels and small waists" and "twins, or breasts...growing high, with the pride of youth", which describes an ideal female form based on curves rather than based on the angular and thin bodies favoured by Western fashions.

The introduction of British colonialism changed the criteria by which certain standards were evaluated; however, according to Frantz Fanon's theory of colonialism, the act of colonizing a nation is typically done not just to acquire its land or wealth but has much larger ramifications on the psyche of the people colonized. Not only does the act of colonizing a nation leave a long-lasting psychological impact on them that creates feelings of inferiority through suppressing the indigenous culture and replacing it with a belief in the superiority of western standards but also creates a belief within the colonized that western culture is superior to theirs and therefore the benchmark by which all should be judged. In India, this was reflected in their view of beauty - through colonialism, the indigenous population learned to associate beauty with whiteness, leanness and western physical characteristics - and thereby perpetuated the impression that the ideal woman was a Caucasian woman.

In India, today's beauty standards are – fair skin colour, slim body and tall height which clearly reflects the colonial mindset placed upon in this world of globalization . The impact of colonial legacy on beauty standards made a shift towards and acceptance of – qualities attached with western culture especially after the end of British era. In today's India, beauty is increasingly defined in terms of Western traits (tall/slim body, Caucasian dimensions, etc.) versus the more rounded, wider-hipped, and warmer-toned physical characteristics traditionally associated with Indian culture. Understanding how these historical shifts affected Indian fashion design education provides insight into the acceptance of Eurocentric forms of education in Indian design institutions; devalued by colonialism, the Indian Body was positioned to adopt Eurocentric pedagogical tools en masse.

Design education in India has been predominantly Euro-centric, reflecting a European perspective through Western silhouettes, global luxury brands, and an overly narrow definition of "good design." This was attributed not to an intentional teaching methodology but to an unexamined inheritance from a colonial educational structure that used the values and standards developed in Western society to define what was considered as superior and modern. Students today in Indian design schools have begun to question this past, calling for a broader, inclusive curriculum; raising important issues of representation; and looking to develop their practice of design based upon the realities of local Indian bodies, textiles, and cultural backgrounds.

#### IV. ANTHROPOMETRIC REALITIES: INDIAN WOMEN'S BODIES AND THE WESTERN STANDARD

The clearest example of the differences experienced by Indian fashion illustration of the human figure, as well as the current level of globalization of fashion, can be found in the definitive numerical difference between the proportions of the so-called " standard " or " classic " western fashion croqui and the actual measurements of individual Indian female bodies. The INDIAsize project, a groundbreaking national sizing study developed by NIFT, is a comprehensive effort to gather anthropometric data about the Indian population. It was executed using non-invasive 3D body scanning techniques over a period of time, collecting data from more than twenty-five thousand males and females across the Indian nation. This survey is the first systematic documentation of the changes that have occurred in the actual body sizes of the Indian population and helps to illustrate the fact that for so many decades, and in some cases for hundreds of years, the fashion design and production of India has been undertaken with little or no reference to the actual measurements of the bodies it is intended to serve.

Preliminary statistics drawn from initial studies of INDIAsize's database establish the average size of an Indian female as follows: Height 163 cm (5'4"), BUST: 98 cm (38"), WAIST: 86 cm (34"), HIP: 103 cm (41"), WEIGHT: 65 kg (143 lb). The differences between these average measurements and those depicted in the western fashion image are dramatic. In the western fashion image (standard Croqui), the

average female body is depicted as having an undesirable waist-to-hip ratio; a narrow proportionate girth with much longer (and disproportionate) extremities; with shorter torsos than western models; and a very different waist-to-hip ratio when compared to the average western model. This means that patterns created to fit the average female figure in the west (standardized by using western patterns) do not conform to the average female's body measurement in India.

Research conducted on women's upper garment sizing demonstrates stark evidence of how large the difference is between actual measurements of females and the industry's use of size charts. A study that compared the body measurements of 300 Indian females (aged 18-38 years) against size charts used by various brand apparel companies determined that the body measurement averages of females were significantly in conflict with the body measurement averages seen in the measurement charts of industry representative sizes; that the gap between the actual measured sizes of women and the measured sizes of females had been documented to be the principle contributor to the issues of fit reported by females in women's garments; and that there were no established standardized garment sizes for fit with Indian body types, causing the Indian apparel manufacturing industry to use the established sizes developed by the western clothing industry and then change the requirements and/or measurements in order to create a garment fit that would not actually provide an accurate representation of the average female's body.

Indian fashion utilizes the western standard sizing method. Many of the fitting problems in Indian clothing come from the dissonance between the consumer and the standard sizes used for women's clothing. Clothing designed using standard measurements for women worldwide does not work for most women in India because Indian body types are significantly different than assumed measurements in Western sizing systems. The reason for this misalignment of sizing is not simply a consumer inconvenience but instead is a collateral product of a design education system where generations (or multiple generations) of Indian fashion designers were trained on body types that do not represent their target market.

Many countries—Italy, Germany, France, South Korea, the Netherlands, Japan, The United States, and China—have developed their own national sizing

scale by executing large-scale body-scanning surveys of their populations to capture the anthropometric characteristics of their people. India's late start at developing a national sizing standard through the INDIAsize initiative is a major step forward; however, the findings for this survey have not yet been integrated into the curricula for fashion figure illustration in design schools throughout India.

#### V. BODY IMAGE CONSEQUENCES FOR INDIAN FASHION DESIGN STUDENTS

Studying fashion design exposes students repeatedly and exclusively to Western-sized models, which can impact students' body image and self-esteem, as well as affect their ability to develop skills as a fashion designer. There is ample research indicating that fashion design students have been exposed to idealized models throughout their educational career, and that this exposure, positively and negatively, will have an impact on how designers design. There is a report that all fashion design students in Turkey said they design using the idealized female figure, and that the body types used in emerging designer work have an impact on designer's motivation to create designs for different body types .

The problem does not only apply to Indian women who are studying to be fashion designers, but is also influenced by the Cultural context in which the western body ideal is considered as the standard of beauty through the media, advertising and bollywood. Research has shown that Indian women have access to western beauty concepts as a result of the widespread availability of western media within a rapidly globalizing country and are therefore particularly susceptible to body dissatisfaction as a result of comparing themselves to an ideal that is unattainable due to their being of different classes. Additionally, there are studies that support that young adult Indian women are impacted by the acute amount of thin images presented to them via the media and these thin images have a direct and considerable impact on their body image. There is a large amount of feminist research that has established that while the Indian media draws heavily on western beauty images, they continue to show that small is a norm and that there is an increasing amount of body dissatisfaction in Indian Women as a result from the thin norm that is portrayed in the media.

Fashion design students (majority being young women) are being taught with figure templates that are basically irrelevant to the shapes of their bodies and the shapes of other Indian women. So the pedagogical space doesn't just train young women as designers but in fact marginalizes them based on their body shapes. Through the pedagogy within Indian institutions of design, the fashion figure clearly communicates that the ideal body to design for is not an Indian body, not a brown-skinned body, and not one that has curves like the vast majority of Indian women. Consequently, young women designers who receive this daily training during their formative years can often develop a misaligned understanding of the design process due to the fact that the Western body is the "norm" and the Indian body will only be perceived as different or deviant.

In Western fashion contexts, the aspirational body gap has been well established. There are more body scanners coming on the market which can provide accurate measurements; however, there is very little literature that provides guidance on how to proportion larger and more diverse bodies. Design is where the bulk of the garment construction will occur (and will set the proportion of the garment); therefore, if a designer uses an unrealistic sized body template, the remainder of the process is compromised and the potential to have fit issues and customers who are unhappy will exist, causing damage to body image. Unfortunately, those effects are compounded for customers from the Indian perspective by an additional layer of racial and colonial non-representation hindering their experiences.

#### VI. DECOLONIZING FASHION FIGURE ILLUSTRATION: TOWARD AN INDIAN CROQUI

The issue of Eurocentric fashion figure representation in the training of designers in India is not only about the lack of technical ability, that could be resolved by incorporating up-to-date sizing data. Instead it is a structural and ideological issue, which will require a decolonial approach to fashion education. Decolonizing fashion studies should not be treated as a goal, instead it should be treated as a nonlinear process that is continually being changed, evaluated, revisited and experienced, as it accepts the unresolved contradictions and paradoxes that have existed in the relationship between fashion and

colonial history. This means that there must be an inquiry into some of the basic assumptions of the fashion design curriculum: Who is the body with which they are working on? Who determines what is considered "good" proportion? Which figure is considered a valid fashion figure?

A decolonized and anti-racist lens through which to teach design in relation to fashion will draw from Black Feminist theory and Postcolonial theory to help students examine the intersections and disjunctions (or lack of) between different cultural experiences of a dress's history on a type of body. For example, this approach would result in developing an Indian version of croquis (fashion figure template) that is based on the anthropometric diversity of Indian women rather than simply changing one set of rigid proportions for another. By providing culturally appropriate croquis that reflect the different body types of Indian women based on geography, age/ethnicity, and other social classifications, we would be able to decolonize this design tool, as envisioned by Sandhu's innovative approach to the concept of auntie fitting.

The INDIAsize project is the empirical foundation behind a decolonial pedagogical project. To create a body measurement database that accurately represents the Indian population, the study has collected anthropometric data from over 25k people through 3D body scanning technologies — resulting in body size charts. Once integrated into fashion design curricula, these body size charts can serve as a valid Indian fashion figure based on the real proportions of Indian women — and provide design students with a relevant/representative template for their work. Ethnicity-specific anthropometric data from the USA has also demonstrated how much variability there is in body shape; e.g. only 8.4% of American women are classified as "hourglass" shaped, whereas rectangular and spoon-shaped women comprise the majority of American women. High levels of diversity would likely exist in Indian anthropometric research given the country's enormous regional, genetic, and cultural diversity compared to the US.

Revisiting how we draw the human shape by looking into proportion techniques will allow teachers from Gill and Sanderson (2013) to develop better templates for drawing people. By using data from body scans that show how wide or long we are

compared to our heads; this information can help us to develop ways of teaching students how to create better proportion-based templates that they can use when designing and conceptualising garments on more accurate human shapes.

## VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION IN INDIA

This article has specific relevances to the development of fashion design education in India. First, the curricula for fashion illustration should be reviewed and changed so that they include India-specific information about the shape of bodies and use the INDIAsize size charts in the foundational courses at every college with a design program. Second, fashion illustration text-books used in Indian colleges should either be replaced with new ones that show diversity in size and race or supplemented with additional books so that students are taught how to draw South Asian bodies, colours, and shapes.

Finally, Indian fashion design teachers must understand the critical theoretical frameworks -- decolonization, postcolonial aesthetics, and intersectionality -- to frame and teach their students the ideological elements of the fashion design figure. The aim is not narrowly to create technically competent designers but also to cultivate practitioners who have critical consciousness about how the tools of their discipline reproduce, or possess the potential to challenge, the ways in which body based and racially based systems of inequality exist in our world today. Design institutions should develop or commission fashion figure templates that reflect INDIAsize data and are informed by traditional Indian aesthetic references to create a culturally appropriate alternative to the Western croqui. These figures need not abandon the concept of stylization but must be grounded in an Indian anthropometric reality.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The larger Fashion and Apparel Industry in India must understand that it has a vested interest in this educational change. Apparel makers are facing many challenges such as increased levels of product returns, customers leaving stores without making purchases and revenue losses as a result of not having the right size garments or being unhappy with their purchased garments.

The above failures experienced in the commercial realm are directly linked to designing clothing for the Indian consumer based upon a typical western standard.


Aligning design education with the true physical characteristics (i.e. anthropometric data) of Indian women is not just about providing cultural equality; it is also about being an energy sustainable business and adding to the competitiveness of the apparel industry as a whole.

The introduction of the INDIAsize national sizing research represents a key moment in Indian fashion because, for the first time, it has an extensive, scientifically based anthropometric data set to be used as the basis of a truly Indian fashion form. With increasing academic and student-directed momentum behind the decolonization of fashion design education in India, this gives rise to a unique and unprecedented opportunity to create a curriculum for the illustration of a fashion figure that embodies, represents and designs for Indian women, as they truly are, as opposed to how they would have been viewed by the colonial ideal of beauty.

To achieve this transformation, it will require a concerted effort from fashion design educators, curriculum developers, textbook publishers, industry stakeholders and national design policy bodies. Theoretical justification, empirical evidence, and pedagogical reasoning is abundantly clear - Indian fashion design education requires an Indian croqui, based on Indian bodies, influenced by Indian design aesthetics, and free from the colonial measures of the western fashion figure.

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