

**Katha Haru: Autoethnographic Stories of Cultural Identity, Body  
Positivity and Self-Empowerment Told Through Kinetic Garments**

**by  
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## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I embark deeply on a personal journey, exploring how kinetic garments challenge and intersect with prevailing body image norms. Growing up in Nepal, a country where societal and gender norms are distinctly defined, I experienced first-hand the profound impact of these norms on personal identity and self-esteem. My transition to living in Western countries further deepened my understanding of these complex cultural dynamics. This thesis is an exploration of my evolution, both as an individual and in my interaction with society, through the lens of fashion and kinetic garments.

Central to my thesis are three research questions: (1) Can kinetic garments assist in questioning prevailing body image norms? (2) Can garments that change shape enhance self-confidence? (3) And in what ways do kinetic garments reshape experiences of societal standards of body image? These questions guide the exploration of my personal experiences and the broader cultural implications of kinetic garments.

This autoethnographic thesis is a blend of a personal narrative and an academic inquiry, offering insights into the transformative power of fashion as a form of personal fashion, and identity, positioning kinetic garments as innovative instruments for fostering self-confidence and challenging societal norms.

Through this thesis, I aim to illuminate the potential of kinetic garments to serve as a vehicle for personal and societal change. By intertwining my personal experiences with research creation, I seek to demonstrate how fashion, particularly kinetic garments, can be a powerful medium for self-expression and societal critique. This exploration delves into the ways in which these garments, with their ability to change shape and adapt to different sizes, can challenge, and redefine traditional notions of beauty and body image. In doing so, they offer a path towards greater self-acceptance and a reimagining of societal standards.

This research illuminates the transformative power of kinetic garments in challenging deep-seated societal norms related to body image, offering a novel pathway for personal empowerment and promoting body positivity. By weaving personal narratives through an autoethnographic methodology, it provides a nuanced exploration of how these innovative garments can serve as a medium for expressing and redefining cultural identity. These dynamic fashion pieces not only offer new ways to express individuality but also act as a unique platform to confront and reframe entrenched societal attitudes towards body image. Moreover, they emerge as significant catalysts for enhancing my self-confidence, enabling me to redefine my relationship with my body and societal expectations. The significance of this research extends beyond its academic contributions, inspiring a re-evaluation of the role of fashion in our lives and encouraging a dialogue about how clothing can transcend its functional role to become a means of challenging and transforming societal norms. By delving into the intersection of personal experience, cultural context, and the innovative realm of kinetic garments, this thesis adds a valuable perspective to the ongoing conversation about body image, self-confidence, and the transformative power of fashion, advocating for a broader, more inclusive understanding of beauty and self-expression.

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## Dedication

To  
Goro & Gaurav

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Beneath the vast expanse of the Himalayas in Kathmandu, my journey took shape—a narrative woven from dreams and determination. In a land where aspirations are often restrained by financial, social, and cultural barriers, my resolve never wavered. As a Nepali woman, my path became a beacon, not solely for personal fulfillment but as a guide for aspiring Nepali artists striving to break free from societal molds.

My story, rooted in Nepal's rich cultural tapestry and a journey spanning continents, is more than personal evolution - it is a deep dive into societal issues through fashion and technology. At this crossroads, I confront key questions: Can a kinetic garment assist me in questioning prevailing body image norms? Can garments that change shape enhance my self-confidence? In what ways do kinetic garments reshape my experience of societal standards of body image?

These inquiries form the foundation of my thesis, employing an autoethnographic approach to dissect identity, body image, and societal expectations. Here, I unpack my experiences with body image and explore kinetic garments' capacity to redefine these constructs. This thesis chronicles a tale of empowerment, innovation, and a relentless drive to dismantle societal confines.

From Kathmandu to the dynamic landscapes of Mumbai, Australia, and Canada, my exploration underscores art and technology's power to bridge cultural gaps. It is a reflection on societal norms, body shaming, and gender inequities, searching for balance in a judgmental world. Kinetic garments emerge as my canvas to articulate identity's fluidity and fashion's transformative influence.

This introduction heralds a journey that merges personal stories with kinetic garments' exploration as mediums for self-expression and social commentary. It beckons

readers into a realm where art synergizes with technology, design pushes boundaries, and fashion serves as a conduit for challenging norms and fortifying self-worth. This autoethnographic odyssey seeks to leave a legacy that champions creativity, sustainability, and a vision that redefines fashion's role in societal progression.

The ensuing stories reflect my pursuit of balance and harmony in a world prone to snap judgments. They resonate with the trials of growing up in a patriarchal society, contesting menstrual stigmas in the world's only Hindu kingdom, and advocating for educational and professional equality. Immigration paved the way to an environment where equality is tangible, not just an aspiration.

These narratives extend an open—hearted invitation to witness the evolution of my dreams—a blend of sustainable practices and artistic ingenuity.

Join me in this journey, where art and engineering blend, showcasing the interplay of creativity and technical prowess. This collection is a window into my passion-driven world, where dreams meld with dedication to craft a distinctive legacy that transcends borders and embodies the power of art as an expressive force.

I endeavor to weave a legacy that surpasses personal stories, one threaded with innovation, ecological consciousness, and boundless imagination—a legacy marking a unique space in artistic and environmental advocacy. While I acknowledge the privilege of pursuing art professionally, these stories also champion the pursuit of art as achievable, signaling a path for others to follow. As my journey continues, the end may be unseen, but hope and tenacity drive me forward each day.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

As I embark on my autoethnographic journey, I am grateful for the scholarly guidance of Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, whose insightful portrayal of autoethnography as a methodological canvas for personal narrative and cultural experience has significantly influenced my approach (47-49). Their work has taught me to view my upbringing in Nepal and my subsequent immigration to Canada not merely as personal anecdotes but as a means to interrogate and comprehend broader societal constructs. Their emphasis on the integrity of research and the blend of analytical rigor with evocative storytelling enriches my engagement with readers, allowing me to employ my experiences to shed light on the nuances of cultural identity and the immigrant experience. This aligns with my intention to present my narratives in a way that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant.

Reflecting on my history and its interplay with the cultural fabric of my original and adopted homes, I employ the narrative strategies espoused by these authors to weave together experiences that resonate on both personal and universal levels. Their focus on collaborative narratives and interactive dialogue informs my aim to create a space where stories interlace, offering diverse perspectives on body image, self-expression, and societal norms (Ellis et al. 47-49).

In constructing my autoethnography, I am guided by a vision that seeks to enlighten and provoke dialogue, a vision that champions storytelling as a vehicle for empathy and comprehension (Ellis et al. 47-49). This vision is a fundamental part of my methodological foundation as I progress through the nuanced act of writing my autoethnography.

While I navigate the ethical landscape of my autoethnographic work, I am keenly aware of the potential impact of my storytelling. I am dedicated to composing my stories

in a manner that is considerate of others, ensuring that the sentiments of those who might see themselves in my reflections are respected (Ellis et al. 58). The ethics of consequences and the safeguarding of privacy are of paramount concern, as I balance the need for authentic self-expression with the ethical treatment of the memories and experiences of others (Ellis et al. 58). Additionally, my commitment to autoethnography is an act of self-care, a process through which I seek to understand and articulate my personal and cultural journey (Ellis et al. 62-66). I am not only recounting past events but also engaging with the present, actively contemplating my place within the cultural continuum.

My autoethnography is not merely an introspective endeavor but a scholarly pursuit that aspires to contribute to the ongoing cultural discourse, informed by the profound reflections of Adams et al. My journey through crafting this autoethnography has been one of introspection, revelation, and, at times, trepidation. Embracing Wall's assertion that autoethnography is more of a philosophy than a well-defined method (39), I dive into my own narratives with an understanding that they are not just personal tales but sociocultural commentaries that bridge the individual and collective realms. In my storytelling, I confront the complexity of representing my experiences authentically while acknowledging that "representation is not intended to be an accurate reflection of life measurable against reality" but rather "a creative process of defining worlds" (Wall 40). My stories, like Wall's, are not mere recollections but performative acts, a "theatre of self" where memory and presentation intertwine (Wall 40).

As Wall discusses the intricacies of ethical considerations in autoethnography, I too grapple with the ethical implications of my narrative, especially in how I present others within my story (48). The act of recounting deeply personal experiences is fraught with the possibility of reducing complex realities to mere words on a page (Wall 48). My aim is to offer an unvarnished truth, yet I am constantly aware of the potential impact on those who are part of my narrative. It is a delicate balance between storytelling and ethical



responsibility, one that Wall articulates with precision and which resonates profoundly with my process.

Furthermore, my methodological approach is underpinned by Wall's insights into data usage in autoethnography, where "memories" are not just recollections but legitimate data that inform the narrative (42). The challenge lies in defending the scholarly merit of these memories against traditional research paradigms that prioritize empirical data. This defense becomes a narrative in itself, a meta-discourse on the validity and authenticity of the autoethnographic method (42).

In essence, my autoethnography, informed by Wall's reflections, is not merely a self-indulgent exercise but a methodical inquiry into the self that seeks to contribute to a broader sociological discourse. It is an endeavor to lend voice to the silent dialogues within us, those that are shaped by and shape the cultural and social landscapes we navigate (43, 46).

## Chapter 3: Autoethnographic Stories and Literature Review

In the subsequent sections of my thesis, I embark on a multifaceted exploration through five distinct autoethnographic stories, each serving as a foundational pillar for the intertwined layers of literature review and personal reflection. These stories are not mere recollections but pivotal experiences that navigate the complex terrain of cultural identity, body positivity, and self-empowerment.

The structure I have adopted is intentional and reflective of the autoethnographic methodology that guides this research. Each story initiates a thematic exploration, where I delve into the academic literature that resonates with the narrative's core themes. This literature review is not a detached academic exercise; it is deeply interwoven with my personal narrative, providing both depth and context to my reflections.

Following the academic exploration, I transition into a personal reflection, contemplating how the themes and theories presented in the literature resonate with my experiences. This reflective process is integral, offering a critical examination of both the literature and my journey, and how they are shaped by the cultural and societal norms I navigate. Moreover, each narrative journey culminates in the creation of a garment, a tangible manifestation of the themes explored. These garments are not mere articles of clothing but are imbued with the insights and emotions derived from the interplay of story, literature, and reflection. They stand as creative expressions and critical commentaries, encapsulating the essence of each narrative.

### 3.1 Air Hostess: Navigating Gender Dynamics from Objectification to Empowerment

Growing up in a nuclear family without cousins around (an unusual circumstance among the friends I knew at the time) and attending an all-girls convent school, I had little exposure to the behavior of boys my age and older. The sole male figure in my life was my father.

I was not an exemplary student; the allure of play consistently overshadowed my interest in studying. Notably, as I delved into algebra during grades four and five, my parents, both distinguished by master's degrees and gold medals for academic excellence (an accomplishment I proudly underscore, considering the scarcity of individuals completing master's degrees, let alone securing gold medals at that time), never applied the formula  $a^2 - b^2 = (a+b)(a-b)$  in their daily routines. I mention this formula because it was the easiest to remember and I still know it off by heart. Taking cue from their example, I opted not to impose on myself the weight of mastering something that seemed unnecessary for my learning journey.

As a consequence of neglecting my studies, I faced failure in the sixth grade, compelling me to repeat the year. To avoid this repetition, my parents, leveraging their influence, secured my admission to a different school for 7th grade. This new school, being co-ed, was an entirely unfamiliar environment for me. They had students enrolled in two different sections. One was the day scholars' side where they had normal 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. school hours. The other side, which was a boarder's side, had two sets of students. Day boarders like me who came at 7 a.m. and left at 7 p.m. and the regular boarders who lived at the school hostel. Although I assured my parents of my commitment to studying, being a child without supervision due to their full-time jobs (a rarity in Nepal at that time) made it tempting for me to prioritize fun over academics.

The convent where I received my earlier education stood out as one of the premier schools in Kathmandu. English served as our second language, and adherence to English communication was obligatory. Monitors were vigilant, ready to impose fines or other penalties if caught conversing in Nepali.

I started speaking English at the new school by following the school rules like I did at the convent, and I stuck to it. On my first day, I was surprised to hear boys using many foul words. It was odd because no one at the convent spoke like that. I didn't even know what most of those words meant. I mentioned to my friend that their way of speaking resembled that of "bhariya" [porters] because, in the community where I was raised, there was a perception that porters tended to be from lower-income backgrounds, often lacking formal education. This stereotype led to assumptions of them being uncultured and less skilled in communication due to their perceived ignorance.

During my first week in seventh grade, a girl approached me. Later, I found out she was in grade nine. She shared that a boy named Tyson (his nickname) had sent me a message. The message warned me not to act too smart, or I might get a punch if I continued that way.

I was shocked and clueless about where this was coming from. I didn't know who the messenger was or who sent the message. Furthermore, I had no idea how I was being perceived as an overly smart person. Despite all this, I continued to be myself as the days went by. Back then, I didn't know how to fight because things were more civil in the girls' school. No one really had a gang fight, and I was too young to understand even if they did.

Now, I would regularly catch boys staring at me. I wasn't someone who got easily scared. Instead, I would stare right back. I hadn't done anything wrong, and I've never been the type to let others suppress me.

One day, as I entered my class, around 50 boys walked in. A senior boy, whom I recognized because he wasn't in my class, and grade 7 was the youngest year in the compound (grade 7 -10), began questioning why I was staring at him. I told him he was staring at me first, and I was just returning the gaze. I don't recall the rest of the conversation, but I do remember not backing down. He concluded, "bahini dherai nabola pheri timi la-e whole assembly ko agadi kiss khayedinchu" [sister, don't talk too much or I'll kiss you in front of the entire assembly].

Everyone, all 50 of them, laughed at me, and I was astonished and unable to respond to what he said. I was embarrassed, surprised, stunned, perplexed, and humiliated. He addressed me as a younger sister and then discussed kissing, which made no sense to me. How could someone refer to you as a younger sister and then discuss kissing? The entire thing appeared perplexing and unreasonable.

The beginning of unwanted attention, bullying, and harassment marked a distressing phase. It seemed like every boy at my school took pleasure in my discomfort. They started labeling me as "air hostess." In the past, the image of an "air hostess" or flight attendant symbolized allure and sex appeal in popular culture for many years. Traditionally, they were portrayed as elegant, glamorous figures representing hospitality and sophistication. Hence, I found it difficult to decide whether to feel flattered or offended by the comment. While it implied that I was considered attractive and had a good physique, the uncomfortable reality of being objectified by all the boys in my school was absurd. It was my first encounter with such attention from numerous boys, an experience I'd prefer not to remember, even until now.

My life day in and day out was a living hell. A few months later, the same senior proposed to me. He was in Grade 10, and I was in 7th grade. There were no feelings of attraction or love involved. Knowing that being his girlfriend didn't include dating due to

his hostel life, I simply accepted his proposal as a safety strategy. I agreed because he held the dominant position of the school's "alpha," and I believed becoming his girlfriend would protect me from being teased. It's disheartening to think that at 13 or 14 years old, I had to prioritize my safety in such a manner. Nonetheless, my life changed significantly after that. Nobody dared to even glance in my direction. I felt a sense of relief, but unfortunately, it was short-lived. As expected, he got into a fight and was expelled from school. Once he left, the bullying resumed.

There was a complaint lodged against me by the same guy, Tyson, alleging verbal abuse. The teacher scolded me based on Tyson's accusation. Given the vicious nature of these boys who sided with him, Tyson's allegations carried weight, and I found myself with no chance to defend against them.

My sole means of survival was fighting back. I picked up swearing as a means of defense; it became second nature. It boiled down to a choice between fighting or fleeing, and with it being the middle of the school year, leaving wasn't an option. I refrained from telling my parents because our relationship wasn't that close, and they showed minimal interest in my upbringing. I believe parents during that time in Nepal assumed children would navigate their own growth. They understood providing basic necessities but lacked emotional support.

As the school year drew to a close, an intriguing development occurred when a prominent boy, distinctively known among the Day Scholars as their own 'alpha' figure, began displaying interest in me. The news reached me via a message relayed by my friend, indicating his liking towards me. Surprisingly, I didn't even know who he was or what he looked like. Oddly enough, I felt a sense of happiness, believing that by accepting his proposal, I could restore happiness to my life. Thinking that accepting his proposal only entailed saying yes, I conveyed my interest through the messenger.

One day, he scaled the wall separating the day scholars' area and confronted me in the girls' washroom, attempting to forcefully kiss me. The experience left me in a state of shock, fear, and a myriad of indescribable emotions. Thankfully, his attempt didn't prevail, but it led me to refrain from using the girls' washroom thereafter. The overwhelming blend of problems at that time was distressing. Additionally, my academic performance wasn't stellar, and my dislike for attending school grew.

I remember my uncle had taken over a school and that opened an opportunity for me to switch schools. To date I have never spoken about this incident. I just had to buck up and live with the life I had. Either I could be sad about it or happy about it. I guess I chose to be happy about it, also because I am a positive person.

I think I chose to take the positive things out of my experience in that particular school. I was portrayed as a sex symbol because of my physique, but I took it in a positive way and till date I find myself to be the prettiest woman in the world (irrespective of the shape or size I am in). It toughened me up so much, I was prepared not to be bullied in any other school or by any boy ever. My interest in studies still didn't grow and I could not retain myself in one school for more than a year. I changed many schools after, there were few where I was bullied but was also feared. It was a constant fluctuation between being bullied and feared.



Fig. 1 &2: My time in grades 6 and 7, the period of my shift from an all-girls' school to a coeducational setting, which occurred in grade 7.



### 3.1.1 Narratives Interwoven with Scholarly Discourse: A Literary Exploration

Reflecting on my time at an all-girls convent school, I connect with the themes explored in the study by Adams et al., "Gender conformity, self-objectification, and body image for sorority and no sorority women." This research investigates the influence of traditional feminine roles on the self-perception and body image of young women. This academic narrative articulates how such conformity can lead to an increased level of self-scrutiny and discontent with one's body, echoing my own encounters with implicit expectations of femininity—an unspoken rule that shaped our self-conceptions and physical self-awareness.

Transitioning to a co-educational environment heralded not merely a cultural shock but a confrontation with a world from which I had been insulated. The insights of Mulderig and Carriere on the interplay between self-perception, culture, and depression (181-186) have provided me with a framework to understand how these experiences began to mold my self-image. In this new milieu, the stark cultural contrasts and the blunt, sometimes harsh, interactions began to sculpt my self-view. It was not just a change of scenery but a profound transformation, where the language and attitudes I encountered inscribed a distinct shift in my self-perception.

Adams et al. focus on how sticking to these feminine norms can lead to more self-criticism and unhappiness with one's body, not just among sorority members but all young women (139-147). This mirrors my own experiences at the convent, where looking and acting in a certain "feminine" way was an unspoken rule, influencing how we all thought about ourselves and our appearances.

Initially, being labeled an "air hostess" felt like a quirky compliment, but it soon dawned on me that it was a subtle act of objectification—a reduction of my identity to mere appearance. This realization is supported by the work of Adams et al., who argue

that "conformity to feminine gender role norms was found to significantly contribute to increased body consciousness, negative body image, and feedback on physical appearance" (144). Their research provides a lens through which I understand that self-objectification is a pattern, not an isolated incident, shaped by the gender norms woven into our social fabric.

Adolescence brought an intensification of societal scrutiny, and with the insight provided by Adams et al., I recognize this as part of a broader pattern of gender conformity leading to self-objectification. They explain that adherence to feminine norms "is predictive of body dissatisfaction" (145), highlighting how young women are influenced by the internalization of these standards, which are often unattainable and narrow. High school brought its own set of challenges. The pressure to conform was relentless. In hindsight, guided by Mulderig and Carriere's insights, I see how this battle between identity and societal expectations played a significant role in shaping my self-understanding and coping mechanisms (181-186). It was not just about fitting in; it was about navigating and reconciling the conflicting images of who I was and who I was expected to be.

During my senior year, a pivotal experience laced with mockery and objectification came to shape my view of self in ways that academic research has since helped me understand. In the study by Adams et al., it is elucidated how traditional feminine roles and the societal emphasis on physical appearance contribute to self-objectification and body image issues in young women. These findings resonate with that encounter from my past, illustrating how societal pressures and expectations can distort self-esteem and body perception, a concept that I only fully grasped after engaging with this body of research (139-147).

The exploration of self-perception and societal influence on my identity underwent a transformative phase marked by reflective contemplation. Encountering Mulderig and

Carriere's discourse on the intersection of culture with self-image illuminated the underpinnings of my feelings of inadequacy, serving as a crucial pivot in my narrative of self-rediscovery (181-186).

As my schooling era waned, the "air hostess" moniker evolved beyond a superficial label, embodying the societal penchant for categorizing individuals by apparent attributes. Delving into Adams et al.'s analysis, I grasped the extensive impact of gender expectations on self-view and body consciousness (137-147), a realization that equipped me with a critical lens to deconstruct and resist these impositions.

Transitioning from my academic environment signified not merely a change of locale but a profound personal metamorphosis. Insights from Mulderig and Carriere, alongside Adams et al., provided a scholarly backdrop to re-evaluate the stereotypes and societal norms confronted, propelling me towards heightened self-awareness and empowerment. This academic journey, underpinned by Mulderig and Carriere's insights into depression and self-perception, was arduous yet revealing, reshaping my understanding of gender identity and self-value (181-186).

In the subsequent years, my journey of self-discovery evolved. The importance of self-acceptance, a key theme in Mulderig and Carriere's study became evident and guided me towards self-realization (181-186), embracing my identity and challenging societal norms.

Today, the term "air hostess" has lost its hold over me. It is merely a word, no longer a shackle. My story, intertwined with the academic insights of gender norms, depression, and self-perception, stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of knowledge.

### 3.1.2 Challenging Patriarchal Norms: Compassion and Sensitivity Amidst Gender Disparities

In the upcoming sections, I embark on an introspective journey, shedding light on the challenges and societal norms I encountered growing up in a patriarchal Nepalese society. This reflection delves into the inherent privileges and entitlements often afforded to males, which perpetuated a culture of dominance and disrespect towards females. Through my narrative, I aim to explore the impact of such gender biases on personal identity and the broader implications of a societal structure that normalizes and excuses such behavior. This discussion seeks to underscore the importance of empathy and cultural sensitivity as pivotal tools in navigating and eventually overcoming the deeply ingrained gender disparities that shape our interactions and self-perceptions.

**Compassion and Emotional Sensitivity:** Growing up in Nepal, I was entrenched in a society where male dominance was not just prevalent but normalized. Boys were often entitled to assert themselves in ways that made them feel superior, especially towards girls. It seemed like being born male granted them the inherent privilege to behave in ways that were disrespectful, demeaning, and often outright harassing.

In this patriarchal society, boys felt entitled to exert control and dominance over girls, whether it was through bullying, objectification, or even threats. It was dishearteningly normalized for them to dictate how girls should behave or be treated. This sense of entitlement bred an environment where mistreatment of girls was excused or disregarded as "boys being boys."

Living under such circumstances, I had to fight relentlessly to carve out a normal life day in and day out. The harassment and objectification I faced weren't seen as unusual; they were almost expected, accepted as part of the societal fabric. It was an

everyday struggle to navigate through an environment where boys' entitlement to mistreat and dominate girls was considered commonplace.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** Challenging this status quo meant confronting deeply ingrained societal norms that upheld male superiority. I had to fight against the normalization of this behavior, constantly striving for dignity and respect that should have been inherent rights, not privileges to be earned.

My journey wasn't just about surviving but also about challenging the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that condoned and even encouraged such behavior. It was an uphill battle, fighting against a system that constantly sought to diminish my worth and agency as a woman.

**Understanding the Significance of Empathy and Cultural Dynamics:** The struggle for a normal life amidst a patriarchal backdrop in Nepal became a daily act of defiance against entrenched societal norms that favored male dominance. This environment often excused the mistreatment of girls as trivial or acceptable, an attitude I fought to change. The path to equality was lined with the need for empathy—a recognition of shared humanity that transcends gender divides.

This fight was not just against overt acts of dominance but also against subtler forms of cultural imprinting that shape expectations around gender roles. The need for a fundamental shift in societal values became apparent, advocating for a world where girls and women are empowered to live with dignity and equality, free from the constraints of patriarchal entitlement.

**Navigating Body Image and the Quest for Inclusivity:** The complexities of gender norms extended into the realm of body image. Growing up fitting societal standards of attractiveness led to objectification, where my physical appearance often invited unwarranted attention, overshadowing my intellect and character. The frustration

of being judged for looks rather than substance highlighted the necessity for a broader cultural shift.

In response, I strive for inclusivity and understanding beyond traditional gender roles, creating a space where individuals are valued for their character and contributions. My experiences underscore the importance of dismantling stereotypes related to gender or physical attributes, fostering a culture of respect and equality.

By confronting these challenges, my journey reflects a deeper call to action—a re-evaluation of societal norms and a collective effort to champion empathy and inclusivity for all.

**Impact of Body Image and Objectification:** Moreover, the struggle wasn't limited to societal expectations regarding gender roles and behavior. It extended to perceptions of physical appearance. Growing up with a physique that aligned with societal standards of attractiveness led to being objectified and reduced to mere physical attributes. While it might seem incongruent, being in good physical shape exposed me to objectification and unwarranted attention, amplifying the challenges I faced.

The emphasis on physical appearance reinforced the stereotype that attractiveness equated to lesser intellect or depth. It was frustrating to be judged solely on my appearance, feeling as though my thoughts, feelings, and character were overshadowed by the superficial standards set by society.

Navigating through the complexities of gender norms and physical appearance standards further highlighted the necessity for a broader cultural shift. It wasn't just about challenging gender-based mistreatment but also confronting societal expectations that pigeonholed individuals based on their looks, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undermining personal worth.

**Striving for Inclusivity and Understanding:** My experiences underscore the importance of inclusivity and understanding beyond traditional gender roles. It's imperative to create a society where individuals are valued for their character, abilities, and contributions rather than being boxed into limiting stereotypes based on gender or appearance.

Ultimately, the struggle against objectification due to physical appearance intertwined with the fight against gender-based mistreatment. Both necessitated a re-evaluation of societal norms and a collective effort to foster a culture of respect, empathy, and equality for everyone, irrespective of their gender or physical attribute.

### **3.2 “Choree timi ta motaunu thalyo” [Daughter you are starting to get fat] Marked by Words - The Cultural Weight of Body Image**

Growing up, I believed that my physical condition was healthy. However, in my father's view, what he considered healthy leaned towards being slightly overweight. I, however, perceived a healthy physique to be more average. I wasn't overweight, but I wasn't exceptionally slender either. Due to my active lifestyle as a child, I never struggled with weight issues.

Since my father immigrated back to Nepal from Dehradun, India, a region that was once part of Nepal before British colonization, I grew up without many cousins. The rest of his family remained in Dehradun. Once a year, all the relatives we knew in Nepal would come together during Dashain, the prominent Hindu/Nepalese festival. We received blessings from our elders as they applied tika (a mixture of rice, banana, and red powder) to our foreheads, and the most enjoyable part was receiving money (in cash) alongside their blessings. In my opinion, no child eagerly awaited Dashain to receive blessings. For me and many of my age group mates, it was all about the once-a-year new clothes that our parents purchased for us because you wear new clothes during Dashain, relishing the delectable food, especially mutton {the same goat that had resided in our house for a month but was sacrificed on the big day as a symbol of Ram-God beheading Rawan - Evil (Good overcoming the bad)}, and amassing money to play cards with or to visit the nearest “kirana pasal” [small store] to buy and indulge in all possible junk food. We often had large family gatherings at our relatives' homes.

At one such gathering, I must have been in tenth grade because I distinctly recall beginning to gain weight around that time. There was a particular reason for this. As a growing teenager, I found it challenging to get along with my parents and sisters, and I yearned to stay in a hostel. Eventually, I succeeded in persuading my parents to allow me to do so. However, during my time at the hostel, I became incredibly self-conscious



about eating in the presence of boys, often skipping meals altogether. I missed the junk food I could freely enjoy at home. After a year in the hostel, where I was deprived of my beloved snacks, I resumed consuming more than I could burn off, resulting in weight gain. To be clear, I still wasn't classified as overweight; I had merely edged closer to it.

One incident left a lasting negative impact on me. I remember it vividly—where and when it happened. One of my favorite aunts made a direct comment to my face, saying, "Choree timi ta motaunu thalyo" ["Daughter you are starting to get fat"]. I had never encountered such a comment before. In response, I mustered a smile and chose not to reply. I was taken aback, filled with anger, and deeply ashamed of myself. I was unsure of how to respond to a comment like that.

Subsequently, many incidents of a similar nature occurred and continue to do so. In Nepal, it seems almost customary for people to casually comment on someone's appearance. Since that first instance, the initial thought that crossed my mind was, "Yes, I have gained weight, mero bau ko paisa ko ta kha ko ho nee [but it's from the food I bought with the money provided by my father], not you—so who are you to judge?". This version is blunter than how I express it in English. However, because I held a genuine liking for that aunt and respected her, I could never convey my true feelings. I often assume that they may never truly understand.

Last year, my 75-year-old father came to visit, and it became evident that his memory was starting to deteriorate. We found ourselves embroiled in an ongoing struggle. I repeatedly had to remind him that it's impolite to make comments about someone's appearance. Yet, he would persist, saying things like, "Aashu, you look healthy!" This led to a recurring conflict between us. Eventually, he asked if he could make such comments about his own daughter, and reluctantly, I agreed.

As his six-month visit neared its end, he made a comment about my best friend's daughter, remarking that she seemed a bit on the healthier side for her age. It was disheartening to see that despite our numerous conversations about how such remarks could hurt someone, some individuals remain unchanged.

I have clear memories of feeling uneasy about how people commented on my weight. Back when I lived in Nepal, there was this acquaintance who had recently come from the US, and my sister told me that she was deeply hurt when people commented and told her that she was overweight. I found this quite surprising because, by that point, I had grown used to such comments in my own life. I couldn't quite fathom how she could react with anger or defensiveness, as I personally lacked the courage to do so, and my respect for elders prevented me from standing up for myself.

Upon moving to the Western world, I have come to realize that this kind of behavior is considered inappropriate and is termed body shaming. However, I can't help but wonder whether I would ever be fortunate enough to avoid experiencing body shaming during my lifetime.



Fig. 3-5: Transformation from sixth to tenth grade, highlighted by receiving a tika during Nepal’s Dashain festival in Fig. 3 and progressing through adolescence in Figs. 4 and 5.

### 3.2.1 Narratives Interwoven with Scholarly Discourse: A Literary Exploration

In the dialogue with my aunt about fitness expectations, broader societal pressures become palpable, a theme meticulously explored in Brady et al.'s study on Asian American women's body image experiences. Brady's research delves into the intersection of gender and race, shedding light on the significant contribution these factors make to body dissatisfaction among Asian American women, a phenomenon that closely mirrors the expectations my aunt placed upon me (485). The study's focus on navigating cultural beauty norms and the lived experiences of sexism and racism aligns with the expectations imposed on me, highlighting how societal standards profoundly shape self-perception and body image. Through this academic lens, my aunt's comments are not merely personal critiques but reflections of wider societal pressures that dictate physical appearance, emphasizing the complex interplay between individual experiences and cultural beauty norms.

The study reveals that all participants spent considerable time exploring cultural messages that dictated standards of attractiveness, including navigating cultural differences in defining attraction, White beauty ideals, and biological limitations in attaining Eurocentric features (Brady 485). This resonates with my personal journey, where the expectations to conform to certain beauty standards were not just familial but also deeply rooted in broader cultural and societal norms.

Furthermore, the study discusses the process of upward body image comparisons, where individuals evaluate their own bodies in reference to others perceived as more desirable, attractive, or confident. This phenomenon is illustrated through the narrative of a participant who felt self-conscious around a friend embodying the 'ideal woman' with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a slender yet curvaceous physique, leading to increased body dissatisfaction and complex emotions such as envy, awe, and appreciation for others' beauty (Brady 489). These insights provide a scholarly backdrop to my narrative, offering

a deeper understanding of the societal and cultural dynamics at play in shaping individual body image perceptions. The research not only contextualizes my personal experiences within the broader discourse on body image and cultural beauty norms but also highlights the importance of considering the multifaceted influences of gender, race, and cultural expectations in discussions on body image and self-perception.

My inability to voice a response to my aunt's critical remarks on my physical appearance can be insightfully examined through the lens of "Cultural Variations in Shame's Responses: A Dynamic Perspective" (Sheikh 387-403). This work elucidates how, in many Asian cultures, the experience of shame does not typically lead to outward expressions of anger or defiance, as might be more common in Western contexts. Instead, shame often results in a more internalized process, where the affected individual remains silent or withdraws, reflecting a tendency towards internalizing blame rather than externalizing it through confrontational responses (Sheikh 387-403).

This perspective sheds light on my own reaction, or lack thereof, to my aunt's comments. The cultural backdrop against which this interaction occurred plays a pivotal role in understanding my response. In Asian cultures, including my own, shame is not just a personal feeling but a complex social emotion that involves the perception of one's actions or characteristics in the eyes of others. The fear of disrupting social harmony and the deep-seated value placed on maintaining interpersonal relationships often lead to a preference for silence over confrontation when faced with shameful situations (Sheikh 394-397). Moreover, the study highlights that in collectivist societies, like many found in Asia, shame can serve a more constructive role, promoting social harmony and discouraging actions that might damage communal relationships. This contrasts with individualist cultures where shame might more readily lead to anger or aggression as a means of deflecting blame. In my situation, the cultural inclination to preserve social cohesion and the high value placed on familial respect and harmony likely influenced my

silent response, aligning with the patterns of behavior discussed in the literature (Sheikh 394-397).

This analysis not only contextualizes my personal experience within a broader cultural and psychological framework but also underscores the intricate ways in which cultural norms and values shape individual emotional responses and coping mechanisms. Sheikh's insights provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between cultural context and individual behavior, particularly in situations involving shame and social expectations.

Reflecting upon my experiences in Nepal, where remarks on one's appearance are commonplace, I find a profound connection with the research conducted by Thornton et al. Their study meticulously examines the intersection of gender role typing, the superwoman ideal, and their collective impact on eating disorders, offering a pivotal lens through which to view my own narrative (Thornton et al. 470-482). Their findings suggest a nuanced understanding of how societal pressures—manifested through casual comments on physical appearance—mirror broader gender norms and expectations. For instance, their analysis reveals that women who strongly adhere to a superwoman ideal, attempting to excel across diverse roles, face an increased risk of developing eating disorders. This risk is particularly pronounced among those who conform strictly to traditional gender roles (Thornton et al. 478-482).

In my personal story, the comments on weight gain or physical health, though seemingly benign, reflect a deeper societal preoccupation with appearance that Thornton et al. identify. The research underscores the complexity of navigating these societal expectations, which resonate deeply with my reflections on interactions with my aunt and father. The expectation for women to embody the superwoman ideal—juggling multiple roles while adhering to conventional standards of femininity and beauty—parallels the challenges I have faced and observed within my own culture (Thornton et al. 473-475).

Moreover, Thornton et al.'s exploration into the psychological impact of these gendered expectations and their contribution to eating disorders illuminates the broader implications of such societal norms. Their work reveals how deeply ingrained perceptions of gender and physical appearance can influence one's self-esteem and mental health, echoing the internal conflict I experienced when confronted with my father's and society's comments (470-471). Their insights not only validate the personal and cultural observations detailed in my stories but also highlight the critical need for a broader societal shift towards more inclusive and compassionate understandings of gender, body image, and identity. This nuanced understanding of societal, psychological, and cultural influences on body image and eating behaviors profoundly resonates with my personal experiences and observations in Nepal, providing a critical lens through which to examine the complex dynamics at play.

### **3.2.2 Between Silences: Confronting Body Image Across Cultures**

This reflection ventures into a personal exploration of cultural contrasts and self-discovery, tracing my journey from the norms of Nepal to the perspectives of the Western world on body shaming. It examines the transition from a society where casual remarks on appearance were commonplace to an environment where such comments are identified and criticized. This narrative seeks to unpack the emotional challenges, the difficulties of challenging cultural conventions, and underscores the pivotal role of empathy, respect, and understanding in transforming our dialogues. Through this account, I aim to share the invaluable insights gained and my dedication to advocating for a more empathetic and inclusive discourse on body image across different cultural settings.

Looking back on these experiences, I have learned that what may seem like harmless comments to some can be emotionally challenging and damaging to others. My journey from Nepal to the Western world has made me realize the cultural differences in how we perceive and address body shaming.

In Nepal, casual comments on one's appearance were the norm, and I often felt uncomfortable but lacked the courage to respond. Moving to the Western world, I discovered that such behavior is considered inappropriate and termed body shaming. It highlighted the significance of empathy, respect, and understanding in our interactions. I can't help but wonder if I will ever be fortunate enough to avoid experiencing body shaming during my lifetime. The struggle to respond to comments from elder figures in my community remains, as it is considered rude to correct or talk back to them. These experiences have underscored the importance of promoting compassion and understanding in a world where appearances are frequently judged, and I am more committed than ever to upholding these values in my interactions with others.



As I reflect on my experiences, I have come to understand the profound personal growth and valuable life lessons gained from living in two distinct cultural contexts—Nepal and the Western world. These experiences have highlighted the stark contrast in how body shaming and comments on one's appearance are perceived and addressed.

**Cultural Differences:** In my journey, I have encountered significant cultural disparities in the perception and handling of body shaming. In Nepal, it was customary for casual comments on one's appearance to go unchallenged, leaving me often feeling uncomfortable but without the courage to respond. This laid the foundation for a deeper exploration of cultural norms and their impact on individual experiences.

**Learning from Cultural Contrasts:** Transitioning to the Western world, I discovered that behavior considered normal in one culture can be deemed inappropriate and labeled as "body shaming" in another. This realization has underscored the importance of understanding and respecting different cultural perspectives and sensitivities.

**Emotional Impact:** I have come to acknowledge the profound emotional impact of body shaming and comments on one's appearance. Innocent remarks can cause others to be emotionally challenged and potentially harm them even though they may seem innocuous to some. This recognition emphasizes the need for empathy and sensitivity when dealing with such issues.

**Challenges of Responding:** My story also addresses the inherent difficulties in responding to comments, especially when they come from elder figures in the community. Correcting or talking back to them is considered rude, presenting a cultural challenge in promoting self-expression and asserting one's feelings.

**Commitment to Compassion:** Despite these challenges, I remain steadfast in my commitment to promoting compassion and understanding in a world where appearances are frequently judged. This commitment represents a personal growth journey towards becoming a more empathetic and considerate individual in my interactions with others, even in the face of cultural obstacles.

In summary, my journey has led me to an awareness of the cultural differences in addressing body shaming and comments on appearance. It has emphasized the emotional impact of such comments and the vital need for empathy and respect. My commitment stands unwavering in upholding values of compassion and understanding in my interactions with others, regardless of the cultural challenges I may encounter.

### **3.3 "Jango" ra "Pulsar Mathi Pulsar" Breaking Stereotypes and redefining identity**

These two stories merge to tell the experience of my resistance against the constraints of societal labels. I confront the label of "Jango" ["huge"] that society has affixed to my physical form, delving into the profound effects such stereotypes have on one's self-image. "Pulsar Mathi Pulsar" ["Pulsar on top of a Pulsar"] follows my defiance of gender expectations as I embrace the world of motorcycling, a realm typically dominated by men in Nepalese society. These accounts extend beyond mere acts of defiance; they are introspective explorations of my identity, the external perceptions that seek to define it, and my continuous quest for a genuine sense of self within the bounds of cultural norms.

#### **Jango**

I progressed into my rebellious teenage years. Not sure if I still am, but I always felt like the odd one out in my family. Failing the SLC (School Leaving Certificate — grade ten) was a first for anyone in my family—it's a big deal. School did not interest me much back then. I didn't really think about needing a job in the future. I hopped from one relationship to another, thinking maybe life would sort itself out after marriage (which didn't happen until I hit 30). It's like waiting for a fairy tale ending, where everything magically falls into place. I thought of marrying early just to get out of my parents' house—it never felt like home. All I craved was freedom and fun, something most parents wouldn't approve of.

In Nepal, schooling goes from grade one to ten, and then there's this separate plus two phase. Those who pass the SLC often get cool rewards like new bikes or scooters from their parents. Grades eleven and twelve are when teenagers tend to let loose. I was already a bit wild, and things just escalated.

Looking back now, it is like I hardly recognize who I used to be. Yet, faced with the same choices, I might have ended up doing the same things again. I turned into someone who was always causing trouble, picking fights and such. Weekends were all about hitting the Day Disco, and a slight bump while dancing could turn into a brawl. If someone said sorry, I'd let it slide, but if not, things got pretty heated. I ended up becoming somewhat of a bully, almost like a dominant figure among girls my age. Getting into fights, whether in gangs or one-on-one, became too common. That was just how things were. With my height and physique, I stood a bit taller and had a larger build than the average woman in Nepal, both in height and body weight.

I wasn't considered overweight, but compared to other women in the country, I had a more solid physique. Some men were as tall as me or even shorter.

During my eleventh grade, hormones on the rise, it felt natural to feel drawn to the opposite sex. I had a bunch of guy friends in my class, and we all got along famously. Somehow, in our close bond, one of my best pals started calling me "Jango." It is a word that means "huge." Oddly enough, it kind of felt like a compliment—or at least that is how I chose to see it. It implied I was sizeable, maybe even a little intimidating to others. But then, I have always been an optimist, seeing the glass that is half full rather than half empty. That optimistic side of me probably pushed away any discomfort from being called "Jango," reframing it as some sort of compliment.

However, it persisted within me. To be honest, I didn't welcome that nickname. Yet, before I realized it, everyone else caught on and began addressing me as "Jango," and it stuck. Did I relish being labeled as "HUGE"? Absolutely not! Could I have done something about it? Perhaps, but if I had asked my friend not to call me that, it might have come off as rude. Yet wasn't being called "Huge" itself rude? The dynamics of the situation and the reactions to it were perplexing.

The complexities are puzzling. How does calling someone a name tied to their body image become so commonplace? Why is it normalized in my culture and many others I am acquainted with? Correcting them might be seen as offensive, yet it is seemingly acceptable if they offend me.



Fig. 6-8: Grade eleven snapshots capturing the era I was dubbed "Jango," showcasing the physique that inspired the nickname.

## Pulsar mathi Pulsar

While I may have been considered the odd one out within my family, I had my own unique ways of convincing my parents to grant my wishes. Most of the time, it involved a considerable number of false promises and clever persuasion tactics.

Initially, my mother didn't harbor ambitions for education. Her aspirations leaned toward marrying a "Government Officer," envisioning a life brimming with independence and pleasure. However, my father, resolute in his convictions, urged her—more like pressured her—to pursue further studies. He pointed out that her sister-in-law, who was junior to her in relation, had already earned a master's degree. So, she did not have any choice than to study. The specifics of how she managed this feat remained a mystery, especially while juggling the responsibilities of raising three daughters, alas, no sons—the societal preference in Nepal. Despite the odds, she doggedly persisted in her pursuit of education, eventually achieving dual master's degrees, surpassing even my father's educational achievements.

It is an undeniable truth that she wished for a boy. In Nepal, the universal desire for a son meant I was viewed as somewhat of a disappointment right from my birth because I was the third girl child in the family. However, I firmly hold onto the belief that a mother's love surpasses societal pressures and expectations. Over time, my mother underwent significant personal growth, largely propelled by her exposure to diverse experiences and her commitment to education.

In grade five, I remember asking my mom for a Changa ra Lattai [Kite and Kite thread/holder]. Her reaction surprised me—instead of just one, she bought a hundred kites because she was ecstatic that her daughter showed interest in something stereotypically associated with boys. Flying kites was not common among girls, but my

mother's support shattered that stereotype, and she encouraged me by purchasing a whole bunch of kites.

Later, around grade 12, I managed to persuade my mother, who had just completed her degree in Gender Studies, to buy me a motorcycle. It was quite uncommon for women to ride motorcycles at that time, most preferred scooters. However, she was delighted to support my wish because it challenged societal norms. Her encouragement strengthened my resolve.

The motorbike she got for me was a Pulsar, with an advertisement tagline that read "Definitely male." It was a hefty motorbike, presenting a considerable challenge to handle at first. However, through dedicated practice, I soon mastered the skills required to ride it confidently. Embracing the "Definitely male" label, I was intrigued and drawn to it, recognizing a challenge to societal expectations that I was ready to meet. The bold assertion of the bike's masculinity in the promotional material ("Watch the Original Pulsar Definitely Male Commercial," 2010) was a perfect fit for the spirit of defiance that I was nurturing against gender norms. Growing up, I often encountered societal contradictions, especially in a family that didn't ascribe to gender favoritism. This backdrop set the stage for questioning and challenging the traditional norms that didn't resonate with my personal experiences or the beliefs instilled in me by my family.

However, certain societal norms did not make sense to me. For instance, the idea that women could not enter a temple during their periods shook my belief in religion. Nepal is a country filled with numerous temples. While traveling from one place to another, you inevitably pass by several temples, and being constantly reminded that you are treated differently based on something inherent like your gender, was something that did not sit well with me.



In every situation, I stood ready to defy the odds. People were often taken aback when they saw me riding my bike. It was a source of deep pride for me. Among a hundred riders, all men, I became the first Nepalese woman to ride a different bike, a Royal Enfield. Riding was not just a hobby; it was my passion, something that truly ignited my spirit.

Yet, a comment I overheard at the gas station still echoes in my mind: "Pulsar mathi Pulsar" implying a huge person atop a huge bike. Why does this phrase linger in my memory? Why hasn't it faded away with time? I have fought numerous battles, but that comment struck a chord that I could not confront. It saddened me then, and it continues to haunt me now. It is a foolish comment that inexplicably persists, casting a shadow over my experiences.



Fig. 9

Fig. 9: Riding my Pulsar (This is a scene where I, along with two friends, undertook a triple ride to the Chinese border in Nepal, just an hour's journey from the resort we were staying at. This trip was a segment of a larger motorcycle expedition with fellow Enfield riders. Notably, I was the only woman rider among a group of around 100 men.)

### 3.3.1 Narratives Interwoven with Scholarly Discourse: A Literary Exploration

Oswald et al.'s research offers a critical view on how societal biases around body shape foster stereotypes that affect both men and women, often categorizing them in ways that don't align with traditional or desirable gender traits (842). This insight is crucial for understanding the broader context of my experiences, especially as they relate to the undue gendered expectations and stereotypes stemming from comments on physical appearance. For instance, Oswald et al. point out that "the societal perception of body shape significantly influences the social and personal identities of individuals" (843), a statement that echoes my struggles with societal perceptions and the nickname "Jango" I have come to embody.

The narrative of adopting "Jango" as a form of resistance against societal pigeonholing reflects a broader theme discussed by Oswald et al., where they argue that "individuals often internalize these societal norms, which can lead to a complex process of identity formation and resistance" (844). My journey illustrates this complex interplay, underscoring the internalization and subsequent pushback against restrictive societal norms regarding body shape and gender expression.

Moreover, the continuous reference to Oswald et al. throughout this discussion not only situates my personal experiences within a broader academic context but also highlights the pervasive nature of stigmatization based on physical appearance. As Oswald et al. aptly note, "challenging these stereotypes requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both societal attitudes and personal perceptions" (845), a sentiment that aligns with my narrative of embracing "Jango" and the ongoing struggle against societal expectations.

In weaving together Oswald et al.'s academic findings with my personal narrative, the discussion transcends mere academic analysis, offering a nuanced understanding of

the societal norms on sexuality and gender expression and their impact on individual identities. This approach not only contextualizes my experiences but also underscores the importance of scholarly research in understanding and addressing societal stigmatization.

The discussion by Spears Brown and Bigler on discrimination offers an insightful exploration into how discriminatory behaviors manifest across a broad spectrum, from subtle nuances to overt actions (534). Their analysis serves as a critical framework for unraveling the complex and profound effects such behaviors exert on individuals, shedding light on the often-overlooked subtleties of discrimination that can be masked by a veneer of benign intent. This nuanced understanding resonates deeply with my own experiences, where discrimination was not always overt but rather cloaked in seemingly harmless comments or actions, leaving a lasting imprint on my self-perception and the way I interact with the world around me. The subtlety of this discrimination, while less apparent, has been equally impactful, shaping my journey and my responses to societal perceptions.

In reflecting upon my personal stories, particularly towards their culmination, the discussion by Oswald et al. on the active traits attributed to fat bodies stands in stark contrast to the negative stereotyping that is rampant in society (854-857). This juxtaposition underscores a significant aspect of my narrative, illustrating the essence of my resistance and adaptation through the personas of "Jango" and "Pulsar Mathi Pulsar." As a woman diverging from traditional gender roles and embracing motorcycling—a realm predominantly occupied by men—I encountered societal pushback not just on the basis of my appearance but also regarding the activities I pursued. This dual challenge highlights the societal tension surrounding evolving gender norms and perceptions of body image, where my engagement in a traditionally male-dominated sphere served as both a statement and a battleground for challenging and navigating societal expectations.

The commentary and reactions to both my appearance and my ventures into motorcycling encapsulate the broader societal struggle with gender norms and body image perceptions. Despite the progress in some areas, the persistence of traditional stereotypes and the slow pace of change in societal attitudes towards gender roles and body shapes become evident. This duality captured in my experiences—of active resistance against negative stereotyping and the adaptation to navigate through societal landscapes—reflects a microcosm of the broader societal dynamics at play. Through "Jango" and "Pulsar Mathi Pulsar," my narrative does not just tell a story of personal defiance but also illuminates the ongoing societal discourse on gender norms, body image, and the spaces women occupy in traditionally male-dominated arenas.

### 3.3.2 A Personal Journey Through Gender Norms and Body Image Perceptions

Reflecting on these facets of my life, I present a personal meditation on the emotional and cultural landscapes I have navigated. This reflection is not merely recounting experiences but delving into the profound emotional resonance and cultural insights gained from confronting societal norms and stereotypes. It is an introspective journey through the challenges of emotional sensitivity, cultural sensitivity, and the quest for empathy and compassion. These reflections serve as a lens through which I examine the intricate impact of societal perceptions on my personal identity and self-worth, inviting a deeper understanding of the nuanced interplay between individual experiences and broader societal constructs.

**Emotional Sensitivity: Navigating Societal Expectations:** Embarking on this journey, I've encountered an intricate tapestry of emotions stemming from the societal norms and stereotypes that have shadowed my path. The label "HUGE" was not merely a descriptor but a societal imposition that profoundly influenced my interactions and internal dialogues. This journey has been an intimate exploration of my emotional landscape, revealing the tumultuous process of feeling markedly different, not just within the confines of familial relationships but also within the broader societal framework. It has been a deep dive into understanding how these external perceptions mold our self-view and emotional wellbeing, pushing me to navigate through these challenges with a blend of resilience and introspection. This reflection on emotional sensitivity amidst societal expectations is not just a recounting of personal adversities but a broader commentary on the resilience required to forge one's identity in a world quick to label and judge.

**Cultural Sensitivity and Understanding: Unveiling Nepali Societal Norms:**

Reflecting on my story, I delve deeply into the cultural fabric of Nepali society, unveiling the profound societal norms and perceptions that have shaped my experiences. This journey through my narrative, especially highlighted by my embrace of motorcycling, a domain traditionally dominated by men, and the reaction to my physical stature, underscores the restrictive gender roles and biases deeply ingrained in Nepali culture. It's an introspective examination of how these cultural constraints and biases challenge personal freedoms and identity, particularly for women pursuing paths less trodden. Through this exploration, I aim to shed light on the need for greater cultural sensitivity and understanding, advocating for the acceptance of diverse individual choices within the intricate mosaic of Nepali society. This reflection is not merely about personal defiance but a call to broaden our collective understanding of identity and freedom against the backdrop of deeply rooted cultural norms.

**Empathy and Compassion: Upholding Personal Aspirations:** I have experienced how stories can evoke empathy by shining a light on the struggles of individuals who bravely challenge cultural norms. Through my own experiences recounted in these narratives, I have faced the daunting task of defying societal expectations and breaking stereotypes. However, amidst these challenges, the unwavering support and encouragement from my mother have been instrumental. Her actions demonstrate a deep sense of compassion and empathy towards our shared desires and aspirations. It is through her unwavering support that I have found the strength and courage to forge my own path, unapologetically embracing who I am and striving towards my dreams. In my journey, her support serves as a constant reminder of the importance of empathy and understanding in upholding personal aspirations.

**Body Image and Societal Perception: Impact of Stereotypes:** The exploration of body image and societal perceptions is a central theme in both of my stories, shedding light on the profound influence that words and stereotypes can have on an individual's self-perception. Through my personal experience with the nickname "Jango" and the derogatory comment "Pulsar mathi Pulsar," these narratives vividly illustrate the impact of societal remarks on body image and self-esteem. The nickname "Jango," though initially brushed off as a term of endearment, ultimately underscores the societal emphasis on physical appearance and its effects on one's sense of self. Similarly, the comment "Pulsar mathi Pulsar" resonates as a hurtful reminder of the judgment and scrutiny faced when deviating from societal norms.

In essence, these narratives delve into the emotional complexities, cultural nuances, and inherent challenges of navigating societal pressures and stereotypes. They serve as poignant reminders of the importance of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the profound impact of societal perceptions on personal identity and self-worth. Through introspection prompted by these stories, one is compelled to consider the power of words and the necessity of fostering environments of understanding and acceptance, where individuals are free to embrace their true selves without fear of judgment or ridicule.



### 3.4 Bidesh: Discovering Culture and Compassion

As a student in Mumbai, India, I never considered India a foreign country. Being originally from Nepal, the cultures and languages were not entirely unfamiliar to me. I could fluently converse in Hindi, which made my stay in India feel like a natural transition. My life in Mumbai was, in many ways, an extension of my Nepali roots.

My journey to Thailand was something new and thrilling. Thailand was my first real adventure into what I saw as a "foreign" country. The excitement was tangible. I felt incredibly proud of my mother, who had earned her second master's degree at AIT, a prestigious university, on a full scholarship. This was no small achievement, especially for a woman in our society. Back in Nepal, getting a good education was not only about opportunity but also about overcoming financial hardships. Our government offers free education only up to the 10th grade, and its quality is poor. The majority of people who are able to afford it tend to attend a private school. Earning a scholarship abroad was a big deal, not just for our family but for society as a whole.

My journey to Thailand, was an exciting prospect. It marked my first venture into what I considered a "foreign" country. The anticipation was palpable. I wore my mother's accomplishments like a badge of honor; she had earned her second master's degree at AIT, a prestigious university, with a full scholarship. This was no small feat, especially for a woman in our society. Education in Nepal was not just a matter of opportunity, but of financial hardship. Securing a scholarship symbolized an extraordinary achievement not just in our family but in society itself.

Following in my mother's footsteps, my elder sister also pursued a master's degree, though not a double one, at AIT. She eventually settled in Bangkok with her husband, and her pregnancy added a new dimension to our family. I was ecstatic about the impending arrival of the first baby in our household. Driven by this excitement, I

applied for a visa to Thailand, eager to experience a foreign country firsthand. To my delight, I received a one-month visa to stay in Bangkok.

So, what does one do in Bangkok? The answer was clear: shop till you drop. My daily routine involved a 30-minute ride in a micro van to reach the city, followed by a sky train journey to the shopping district. From there, a small passenger motorcycle whisked me to various malls. The round trip took nearly an hour, but the experience was worth it. The prices of goods in Thailand were significantly lower than the imported items I had encountered in Nepal and India. My backpack served as the receptacle for my shopping spoils. On some days, I even returned with one or two extra bags in tow.

One particular day, as I returned from a marathon shopping spree, I was laden with my usual cargo: the trusty rucksack and multiple plastic bags. As per the general etiquette of the train, seats were to be offered to the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and pregnant women. I was weary from my day of shopping, but all the seats were taken. I stood, carrying my bags, when a kind-hearted lady looked up and offered me her seat. Initially, I thought she might be disembarking at the next station, and that's why she was being so courteous. But to my surprise, she remained in place as we passed the next station, and then the one after that. It gradually dawned on me that she had mistaken me for a pregnant woman and offered me her seat out of compassion.

At this point, I decided to play along, hoping to give her the satisfaction of her kind gesture. I gently rested my hand on my belly, mimicking the gestures of a pregnant woman reassuring herself about her baby. In that moment, I found the situation humorously absurd, and I shared the tale with friends for years to come. I was grateful for the seat and the chance to rest, and my heart was touched by the stranger's empathy.

Looking back, I realize that the incident, while amusing to me, could be emotionally challenging or even damaging to some. It underscores the importance of compassion and

understanding in a world where appearances can often be deceiving. My brief stint in Bangkok opened my eyes to the complex interplay of cultures and the significance of empathy, making me appreciate the nuances of life more deeply.



Fig. 10: A photo in traditional Thai attire, altered at the studio to make me look fairer and slimmer, meeting beauty standards.

Fig. 11 & 12: Photos of me in empire-line dresses, always amidst friends, never a solo shot, a tactic I have used to conceal my body in images, a habit that persists.

### 3.4.1 Narratives Interwoven with Scholarly Discourse: A Literary Exploration

In integrating personal experience with theoretical insights, my narrative offers experiences that intersect with the scholarly explorations of compassion and empathy by Dreyfus, and Mezzenzana and Peluso. As I embarked on my journey to Thailand, leaving behind the familiar landscapes of India, I found myself on the threshold of a new cultural adventure. The anticipation of exploring a truly foreign country, coupled with the pride in my family's academic achievements, set the stage for a transformative experience.

Reflecting further on the incident on the Bangkok train, I draw upon Dreyfus's insights from *Is Compassion an Emotion? A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Mental Typologies*. Dreyfus challenges the simplistic view of compassion as just an emotion, proposing instead that it's a construct influenced by cultural and moral factors. He suggests that different cultures may emphasize various aspects of compassion—such as empathy, altruism, or benevolence—based on their cultural contexts (Dreyfus 36-44). This theoretical perspective sheds light on the woman's act of offering her seat on the train, which can be seen as a manifestation of compassion that is deeply rooted in Thai societal norms but also speaks to a broader, universal human inclination to assist others. Thus, my experience on the train becomes a personal reflection of the broader complexities of human behavior and societal norms Dreyfus describes, underscoring the nuanced interplay between culture, morality, and compassion.

In the context of my experience on the Bangkok train, Dreyfus's insights shed light on the complexity of compassion. The woman who offered me her seat may have been influenced by societal expectations regarding kindness towards pregnant women, reflecting a cultural norm ingrained in Thai society. However, her act of compassion also transcended cultural boundaries, highlighting a universal inclination to help others in need, even if based on a misunderstanding. By drawing on Dreyfus's exploration of compassion as a culturally embedded phenomenon, my encounter on the train becomes

more than just a personal anecdote. It becomes a reflection of the broader complexities of human behavior and societal norms, underscoring the nuanced interplay between culture, morality, and compassion.

In the introduction to their edited book *Conversations on Empathy*, Mezzenzana and Peluso delve into the significance of empathy as a means of bridging the gap between self and others, particularly across diverse cultural backgrounds. They argue for empathy's pivotal role in fostering understanding and connection amidst cultural differences, advocating for its importance in navigating the complexities of human diversity. They explore how empathy enables individuals to transcend their own perspectives and immerse themselves in the experiences of others, thereby facilitating genuine connections and mutual understanding (Mezzenzana and Peluso 5). They emphasize the transformative power of empathy in breaking down barriers and fostering empathy across cultural divides (Mezzenzana and Peluso 10). Moreover, they discuss empathy as a dynamic process that involves both cognitive and affective components, allowing individuals to not only understand but also emotionally resonate with the experiences of others (Mezzenzana and Peluso 15). They highlight empathy's capacity to facilitate meaningful interactions and foster a sense of shared humanity amidst cultural diversity (Mezzenzana and Peluso 18).

In light of their insights, my decision to accept the woman's seat on the Bangkok train takes on a deeper significance. By recognizing her intent and accepting the gesture rather than correcting her misunderstanding, I engaged in an empathetic response that transcended cultural differences. In doing so, I embraced the authors' notion of empathy as a tool for navigating and appreciating human diversity, demonstrating a willingness to connect with others on a deeper level despite apparent differences. I contributed to the cultivation of understanding and connection across cultural boundaries, fostering a sense of unity amidst diversity.

The incident on the train, while seemingly trivial, holds deeper implications in the context of cross-cultural empathy and compassion. It highlights the universality of human emotions and the capacity for individuals to extend kindness and understanding beyond cultural boundaries. By engaging with the scholarly insights of Dreyfus, and Mezzenzana and Peluso, I gained a deeper appreciation for the nuances of compassion and empathy, recognizing their pivotal role in fostering meaningful human connections.

### 3.4.2 Beyond Appearances: Cultivating Empathy in Human Interaction

In the intricate web of human interaction, initial impressions often overshadow the deeper complexities of individual experiences and cultural backgrounds. Reflecting on personal encounters, such as being mistakenly perceived as pregnant, unveils the nuances of emotional sensitivity and cultural awareness in navigating societal norms and expectations. This thematic reflection delves into the multifaceted nature of human perception and emotional response, emphasizing the importance of empathy and understanding in fostering inclusive and compassionate communities. Through introspection and reflective insights, we embark on a journey to explore the transformative power of empathy amidst the diverse landscapes of human interaction.

**Emotional Sensitivity:** Emotional responses to situations like mistaking someone for pregnant can vary widely based on individual sensitivities and cultural backgrounds. Some individuals may find it triggers negative emotions or self-esteem issues due to their personal experiences and perceptions of body image and appearance. It's essential to recognize and validate these emotions, acknowledging the potential impact they may have on an individual's well-being and self-esteem.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** It's crucial to acknowledge that body image and pregnancy are highly sensitive topics in certain cultures. Instances like being mistaken for pregnancy can inadvertently touch upon cultural norms and expectations, potentially causing distress. Therefore, it's essential to approach such situations with cultural sensitivity and awareness. Taking the time to understand the cultural context and norms can help prevent misunderstandings and ensure respectful interactions.

**Compassion:** Acts of kindness, such as offering a seat on the train, demonstrate compassion towards others. Even if assumptions are not entirely accurate, recognizing and appreciating these gestures fosters a sense of connection and understanding



between individuals. Compassion transcends surface judgments and encourages empathy towards others, contributing to a more compassionate and inclusive society.

**Understanding:** Understanding and empathy play pivotal roles in navigating human interactions. It's important to consider others' perspectives and feelings, even when they differ from our own. By fostering understanding, we can build more inclusive and compassionate communities, bridging gaps and fostering connections regardless of cultural backgrounds. Taking the time to listen and empathize with others fosters a sense of mutual respect and understanding, strengthening relationships and promoting a more harmonious society.

**Reflective Insights:** Reflecting on personal experiences, such as the incident on the train, deepens appreciation for the complexities of human interaction and cultural diversity. It highlights the importance of understanding and respecting cultural differences to foster meaningful connections based on empathy and mutual respect. These reflective insights encourage self-awareness and growth, guiding individuals towards more empathetic and compassionate interactions in their daily lives.

### **3.5 Ghurera heryo [Stared] Under the Unforgiving Gaze: A Journey of Visibility and Vulnerability**

In 2007, I began a new chapter of my life in Mumbai. Having a father from Dehradun, India, meant that I was no stranger to the country before settling in Mumbai. Having a background in navigating through the streets of India, I was confident about adjusting to life in Mumbai. I moved there for my studies, initially believing that it would be my permanent home. This chapter of my life in India lasted nearly six years. As someone of Nepalese origin, we were often cautioned about the challenges of navigating India, a nation vastly larger and more populous than Nepal. This unfamiliarity made it easy to feel lost. My mother constantly reminded my sisters and me to stay together, especially on trains, and to never stray. The caution stemmed from multiple concerns. Firstly, the crime rate in India seemed higher compared to what we knew in Nepal, a point often discussed in our household. Secondly, and more disturbingly, were the rampant issues of sex trafficking, a topic that cast a shadow over our perceptions of safety. Tales of young girls being deceived and trafficked in cities like Mumbai were common and alarming. These stories and warnings shaped our approach to life in India, always treading with vigilance and care.

Looking back, I can see there were numerous occasions where I faced inappropriate behavior. Unwanted advances and touches occurred frequently, yet at such a young age, I lacked the understanding and the means to respond. The distinction between appropriate and inappropriate physical contact was never a topic addressed by our parents. There seemed to be an unspoken expectation that we would navigate these challenges on our own and mature into well-rounded individuals without explicit guidance. This reflects the time in which I was raised, a period when parental involvement often stopped at meeting the basic needs of their children - ensuring they were fed, clothed, and housed - without delving into the more complex aspects of emotional and personal development.

My upbringing was in Kathmandu, situated in the northwestern part of the Kathmandu Valley, just north of the Bagmati River, spanning an area of about 50.7 square kilometers. In Kathmandu, travel was relatively quick and convenient, largely because the city's expanse was contained within a 27-kilometer Ring Road. Coming from a family of means, I had little experience with public transport; my motorcycle was my primary mode of transportation, efficiently carrying me across the city in a matter of minutes.

Relocating to Mumbai was an enlightening experience for me. My daily commute to college was a journey of an hour and a half. It began with a ride in an auto-rickshaw, a common three-wheeled vehicle, to the train station. From there, I would catch a train to another station near my college, followed by a short cab ride to reach my final destination. Navigating the auto-rickshaw part was fairly straightforward. However, mastering the train commute was a challenge. On my initial attempts, I missed the first few trains due to the overwhelming crowds. I struggled to find a way through the crowd and onto the train. It took a year of adapting to this bustling environment, but eventually I learned to jump onto the running train as it arrived, a tactic driven by necessity and the need to adapt to the survival-of-the-fittest mentality prevalent in such busy cityscapes. Successfully boarding the train often meant securing a seat for the 45-minute journey, a small victory in the uncomfortable heat, especially since the trains lacked air conditioning. There were days when I didn't get a seat, but those were just a few of the many small battles one faces in such a dynamic environment.

The intense heat in Mumbai was something I could never quite adjust to. I often described to my friends how Delhi felt like stepping into a sauna and Mumbai like a steam bath, except that you're fully dressed in both scenarios. The heat was relentless and unfamiliar, making even a short walk to my college an ordeal as I would end up drenched in sweat. To avoid this, I often opted to wait in the sweltering heat for 10-15 minutes to

hail a taxi, which was a challenge in itself, as many drivers were reluctant to take such a short trip, and these cabs, too, lacked air conditioning.

This was a stark contrast to my life in Kathmandu, where I only experienced such sweating when engaging in vigorous activities. In Mumbai, the absence of a place to freshen up at college meant enduring this discomfort throughout the day. I'd sweat, dry off, and then sweat again, especially if I stepped out during lunch. The cycle would repeat until I finally got home and could take a shower.

In Nepal, it was common to eat out rather than bring lunch from home. However, in Mumbai, I noticed that most of my classmates brought their lunches. Faced with the choice of braving the heat to eat out or bringing my own lunch, I eventually started packing my lunch too. This allowed me to eat in the cooler, air-conditioned environment of the college, avoiding the additional discomfort of stepping out into the heat.

Imagine living in a place where the constant heat battles with cultural norms, making it impractical to wear shorts. Although possible, the prospect of attracting unwanted attention made it a less desirable option for me. My daily commute became more than a mere physical journey; it evolved into a mental challenge. The stares from both men and women, unsettling in their intensity, followed me. This was especially true in the women's compartment of the train, where the piercing looks of fellow passengers left me feeling exposed and scrutinized. The Indian saying, "They rape you with their eyes," sadly mirrored my own experiences, as the relentless, invasive stares felt like a violation, a heavy burden I carried daily.

In light of these experiences, I put considerable thought into my wardrobe choices. My outfits typically consisted of dresses, under which I consistently wore calf-length leggings to maintain modesty and dispel any worry about unintentional overexposure. Each of my dresses had sleeves, as I consciously avoided sleeveless options. This

approach was my means of navigating the dual challenges of the climate and societal scrutiny, aiming to strike a balance between personal comfort and shielding myself from unwanted attention. A vivid memory remains of disembarking the train, feeling so unnervingly observed that I had to ask a friend at the station to check for any rips in my outfit. These experiences led me to form a hypothesis about why Indian women often wear salwar kurtas – a three-piece ensemble that covers the crotch and bust, thereby preventing onlookers from objectifying their bodies.

In my childhood in Nepal, I was keenly sensitive to the intense and scrutinizing stares that followed me wherever I went. This experience led me to make a solemn promise to myself: if I were to have a daughter in the future, I would do everything in my power to protect her from enduring similar experiences. I harbored a belief that in Western countries, the freedom and rights of women were more highly esteemed and respected. The persistent eve teasing, aggressive confrontations, and the never-ending struggle against prying eyes seemed to be a relentless part of life. In Nepal, there were times when a direct, firm gaze would discourage such intruders. However, in India, and Mumbai in particular, attempting to confront or return their stare often resulted in even more blatant and unashamed staring. This left me with no choice but to lower my eyes and cover my face, possibly provoked by the piercing on my upper lip. It made me question whether they perceived me as a fellow human being at all. Despite not having any striking differences from others, I couldn't help but feel exceedingly vulnerable and exposed.

After a year and a half of relying on public transportation, I finally bought a car. During that time, I don't think I have ever felt more exposed or vulnerable. While many people enjoy standing out and being noticed, my desire was the opposite; I wanted to blend in and be invisible. It seemed to me that everyone appreciates a certain level of attention, but the kind of attention I was getting wasn't what I desired. I believe there's a distinction between a "good" stare and a "bad" stare. A "good" stare might come from someone attractive or someone I find appealing. But this made me wonder: if I looked at

someone attractive, would that be considered a “bad” stare from their perspective? Personally, I would only offer a brief glance to someone I found appealing, not an extended stare. It raises the question: How do we learn the appropriate way to look at people? Who teaches us these social cues?

My deep appreciation for Mumbai's dynamic life and energy was undeniable. Yet, this feeling was tinged with the realization that I could never feel completely safe or at ease there. Should I have a daughter, I knew she might face similar challenges in feeling comfortable and finding her place. The relentless, invasive stares were a constant reminder of my outsider status, a source of continuous discomfort in a city that was vibrant yet challenging.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Fig. 13 & 14: Photos from my stay in Mumbai, India, illustrating my careful choice of attire to ensure modesty. In these, I'm seen pairing leggings with a dress.

### 3.5.1 Narratives Interwoven with Scholarly Discourse: A Literary Exploration

The complexities of living in Mumbai, juxtaposing my experiences with the scholarly insights provided by Johnson and Ghosal. Each piece of literature contributes distinct perspectives that align with different facets of my narrative. It becomes apparent how deeply the intersections of class and gender influence personal experiences and societal dynamics in India. My own narrative, marked by a transition from Nepal to Mumbai, and my initial unfamiliarity with public transport due to coming from a family of means, is intricately tied to broader systemic issues.

Johnson's exploration of the pervasive influence of patriarchy in "The Oppression of Women in India" underscores this point, revealing how patriarchy infiltrates every aspect of life, from family to law, shaping individual identities and perpetuating violence against women (1054-1055). Johnson's work illuminates the societal backdrop against which my personal experiences unfold, highlighting the patriarchal structures that dictate a woman's role is to serve men, a sentiment deeply ingrained in many societies and manifesting in daily spousal abuse (1055). This scholarly perspective provides a macroscopic view of the microcosmic experiences narrated in my story, where navigating public spaces in Mumbai becomes a metaphor for navigating the oppressive structures of patriarchy.

Furthermore, the analysis in Ghosal's article "Major Trends of Feminism in India" sheds light on the historical context of feminism in India, particularly the notion of "Brahminical feminism" identified by Anupama Rao. This concept speaks to the colonial legacy of social reform movements that, while modernizing gender relations in upper-caste families, simultaneously disenfranchised lower-caste women (794). This historical perspective enriches my understanding of the complex layers of gender and class that permeate my own story, offering insights into the systemic barriers that women from different social strata face.



My encounters with inappropriate behavior and the constant need for vigilance reflect not just personal challenges but also the broader societal norms and values dictated by a patriarchal culture. The unspoken expectation for me to navigate these challenges without explicit guidance echoes the silent perpetuation of patriarchy, where discussions about boundaries and consent are often sidelined.

Johnson highlights the pervasive violence against women within the patriarchal society of India, including dowry deaths and sati, as extreme manifestations of gender-based oppression (1064). These forms of violence are indicative of a broader societal disregard for women's autonomy and life, reflecting the systemic challenges that women face. This societal backdrop provides a stark contrast to my personal story of navigating Mumbai's public transport system, illustrating the multifaceted nature of challenges women encounter in India, not only in public spaces but also within the domestic sphere and institutional structures that perpetuate their oppression.

Ghosal elaborates on the emergence of feminism in India as a response to these entrenched patriarchal norms. It outlines the evolution of feminist movements that strive for women's autonomy, equality, and the right to participate fully in society (795-796). The narrative of personal struggle and adaptation in Mumbai mirrors the broader feminist efforts to challenge and navigate societal norms and restrictions, symbolizing the individual and collective resilience of women in the face of systemic oppression. Furthermore, the feminist movement's efforts to address violence against women, caste discrimination, and the need for legal reforms are reflective of the broader struggle for gender justice in India. These movements have sought not only to challenge patriarchal norms but also to create spaces where women can assert their rights and autonomy (795-796).

Johnson (1063), underscores the global issue of women's rights violations, including violence and rape, rooted in patriarchal structures. This echoes my experiences of feeling scrutinized and unsafe in Mumbai, where societal norms heavily influenced by patriarchy impact my daily life, from navigating public spaces to choosing my attire. Johnson's analysis offers a theoretical backdrop that explains the underlying societal attitudes contributing to my discomfort and the invasive stares I encountered.

Johnson discusses the vulnerability of Indian women to violence, particularly in relation to marital status changes, attributing this to the patriarchal and capitalist influences in Indian society (1065). This perspective sheds light on the broader context of the challenges I faced, suggesting that my experiences of vulnerability and exposure are symptomatic of deeper societal issues that affect many women across India.

Ghosal provides a historical overview of feminism's evolution in India, highlighting the complex interplay of caste, gender, and colonial legacies (796). This helps contextualize my own narrative within the broader history of feminist struggles in India, showing how past reforms have both advanced and limited women's rights. The discussion continues to explore the impact of colonialism and nationalism on Indian feminism, pointing out the limitations of early feminist movements that primarily benefited upper-caste women (Ghosal 798). This analysis helps me understand the intersectional nature of gender and class issues in my own experiences, highlighting the importance of recognizing diverse feminist perspectives.

The contemporary feminist movements in India, focusing on the fight against violence and the quest for gender equality (Ghosal 802-803), resonates with my personal commitment to protect future generations from similar experiences of scrutiny and vulnerability, reflecting the ongoing struggle for women's rights in India. The challenges and opportunities facing Indian feminism today, emphasizing the need for a multifaceted approach to gender justice (Ghosal 810). This aligns with my reflections on the complexity

of navigating societal norms and the importance of continued advocacy for women's rights.

In comparing these texts, it becomes evident that my personal experiences narrated in "Ghuryo" are not isolated incidents but are part of a larger context of gender-based challenges in India. The systemic oppression of women, highlighted by Johnson, and the feminist responses detailed by Ghosal provide a comprehensive understanding of the landscape within which individual stories of resilience and adaptation occur. The journey of navigating Mumbai's public transport system thus becomes a metaphor for the broader feminist struggle against societal norms and patriarchal oppression, reflecting the individual and collective resilience of women in India.

### 3.5.2 Beyond Norms: Cultivating Empathy in the Shadow of Patriarchy

**Heightened Awareness from Nepal:** In the forthcoming sections, I embark on a reflective journey through the cultural and societal landscapes of Nepal and India, examining the challenges and norms encountered within these patriarchally dominated societies. This introspection explores the gender privileges and disparities deeply embedded in both contexts, highlighting a culture of dominance and systemic disrespect towards women. Through my personal narrative, I aim to dissect the impact of gender biases on identity and societal structures that excuse such inequities. Emphasizing the critical role of empathy and cultural sensitivity, this discussion navigates the complex journey towards understanding and dismantling the ingrained gender disparities that pervade our interactions and self-perceptions across both Nepalese and Indian societies.

**Adaptability in Mumbai's Pace:** Adapting to Mumbai's dynamic pace demanded more from me than I anticipated. The city, with its endless energy, pushed me to adjust rapidly to its crowded streets, densely packed public transportation, and the intense heat that seemed to mirror the intensity of life itself. These elements of the city's daily life were not just physical challenges; they symbolized the broader societal pressures that permeate the city. Learning to thrive in this environment required resilience and a deep understanding that adaptability is not merely about surviving physically but also about navigating the complex societal norms shaped by longstanding patriarchal traditions. This journey of adaptation was a testament to my evolving resilience, as I learned to find my footing and assert my space within the bustling chaos of Mumbai, all while maintaining my identity and values in the face of overwhelming odds.

**Cultural Sensitivity and Understanding:** Residing in both Kathmandu and Mumbai enriched my cultural awareness and sensitivity, particularly regarding women's safety and societal roles. This immersion allowed me to grasp the complexities of cultural practices and norms, shedding light on the historical struggles and achievements in

gender justice. Understanding the layered experiences of women in these diverse settings underscored the importance of cultural sensitivity, driving my commitment to advocate for gender equality and challenge systemic barriers, all while appreciating the rich cultural tapestry that shapes these societal norms.

**Balancing Comfort with Societal Expectations:** In Mumbai, carefully choosing my attire to strike a balance between personal comfort and societal expectations became a subtle act of resistance against the pervasive, scrutinizing gaze. This decision-making process highlighted the delicate navigation required to respect cultural norms while maintaining one's individuality and comfort. It underscored the broader challenge of confronting and pushing back against the silent yet powerful forces of patriarchy that often dictate and limit women's choices and freedoms, particularly in public spaces.

**Deepening Empathy for Women's Experiences:** Navigating public spaces in both cities and witnessing the scrutiny faced by women has significantly heightened my empathy. This understanding is not just about individual experiences but also ties back to the larger societal and patriarchal norms that shape these interactions. It is a reflection on the broader context of women's rights and the systemic issues of violence that are prevalent in many societies, including India. This deeper empathy motivates a commitment to understand and address the complexities of women's experiences across diverse cultural settings.

**Building Resilience under Scrutiny:** Facing the constant scrutiny and navigating public spaces in both the cities profoundly deepened my empathy towards women. This journey illuminated the complex and varied experiences women endure, heavily influenced by societal norms and patriarchal culture. It exposed the global challenges of women's rights violations and the widespread issue of violence, urging a deeper understanding and compassion towards the struggles faced by women in different cultural contexts. This empathy has become a cornerstone of my perspective, driving a

commitment to understanding and addressing the systemic issues that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

**Emotional Intelligence and Growth:** My journey has been a significant catalyst for enhancing my emotional intelligence and deepening my understanding of human dynamics. This growth is not isolated but connected to collective efforts toward challenging societal norms and navigating through patriarchal structures. It reflects a journey of resilience, highlighting a broader context of striving for gender equality and the empowerment of women against systemic barriers.

**Dedication to Advocacy and Change:** My experiences across two distinct cultural settings have solidified my dedication to advocating for a safer, more inclusive world for women. This dedication is reflective of the contemporary feminist movements focusing on the fight against violence and the quest for gender equality, resonating with my personal commitment to protect future generations from scrutiny and vulnerability.

In summary, my narrative from Kathmandu to Mumbai is not just a story of geographical change but one of personal metamorphosis, characterized by cultural adaptability, increased empathy, and a commitment to positive change. It is a journey that aligns with the broader feminist struggle against societal norms and patriarchal oppression, reflecting both individual and collective resilience in the quest for gender justice in India.

## Chapter 4: Design Development and Garment Analysis

### 4.1 Between Worlds: Navigating Liminality in Art and Identity

Embarking on my exploration of fashion design in 2010 has led me to a continuous balancing act between meeting commercial market demands and pursuing artistic innovation. This dynamic tension consistently presents me with a critical decision: to follow prevailing market trends for commercial viability or to courageously explore innovative realms, fully aware of the ambiguity this may entail. This internal conflict has not only been pivotal in shaping the narrative of my career but also influenced significant life choices, including my relocation from Nepal to the Western world, a setting more open to my avant-garde designs. This journey reflects the liminal experiences described by Cabrera-Polk, where the melding of diverse identities and cultures becomes a source of strength. It enables me to navigate the spaces between art and commerce, akin to Judith Ortiz Cofer's embrace of her multifaceted cultural identities and Gloria Anzaldúa's 'mestiza consciousness' concept - a consciousness of the Borderlands that balances and celebrates multiple cultures within oneself (Cabrera-Polk 65-83).

My journey took an unexpected turn during my education in Australia, where I delved deeply into the realm of Visual Arts, with a particular focus on sculpture. This transformative experience ignited a newfound passion within me and planted the seeds of an ambitious idea: to blur the boundaries between art and design, creating something entirely innovative and unique.

This exploration's culmination in 2021 led me to explore kinetic sculpture, drawing inspiration from the silhouettes of both human figures and garments. Figures 15 (A to D) showcase the beginning phase of my design methodology where I generate patterns inspired by the silhouettes of a mannequin, the shape of a female human figure, or a garment silhouette. These patterns lay the groundwork for the body's base structure. I

embarked on creating various prototypes, resulting in 18 prototypes/sculptures that necessitated manual manipulation, such as pushing or pulling, to animate. Despite this, my goal to incorporate a mechanical function remained unfulfilled. Then, in the summer of 2023, I traveled to Nepal to undertake an independent study. It was during this time, with the help of the innovation center in Nepal, that I successfully managed to integrate mechanized components into my sculpture, thus enabling it with dynamic energy that could be triggered by a simple push of a button. The period I spent in Nepal from April to June 2023 deeply impacted my artistic perspective, leading me to depict the stunning silhouettes of women beautifully dressed in a variety of Nepalese costumes (Fig.16 A). Design Development (Fig.16 B & C). The process of pattern cutting, the preparation of 36 pieces for each pattern, and the prototype of the sculpture demonstrate the iterative design development (Fig. 17 D-F).

The 5 feet metal sculpture created in Kathmandu, Nepal, as part of my independent study, marks a considerable leap forward. Although the sculpture's movement was somewhat limited due to the actuator's range, this achievement represented moving beyond the need for manual manipulation that characterized my earlier works. The integration of motorized components into this sculpture marks a notable progression in my artistic development (Fig. 18 A & B). This step forward serves as a critical juncture, fueling my excitement and drive to delve deeper into the possibilities of incorporating motors into my sculptural work. This breakthrough not only infused my creations with a new vitality but also symbolized the broader theme of navigating and embracing the liminal spaces of our identities and creative expressions. This journey echoes the *mestiza* consciousness discussed by Anzaldúa, where the creative process becomes a tool for bridging disparate cultures and identities, fostering a unique space that transcends traditional boundaries (Cabrera-Polk 72).

Amid these technical accomplishments, I found myself facing a more profound, existential dilemma. As a Nepali native who has made Canada my new home, I am



perpetually caught in a quandary of identity. Do I see myself as fully Nepali, fully Canadian, or do I inhabit some in-between space? This sense of being in a liminal state, of existing in the interstices between two distinct cultures without wholly belonging to either, has become a defining characteristic of both my personal identity and my creative expression.

Reflecting on my dual identity as a Nepali native now residing in Canada, I've encountered a profound existential challenge. This duality has placed me in a unique position, navigating between two cultures without pledging full allegiance to either. This condition has imbued me with a deep sense of liminality, a state of being that straddles the threshold of two distinct identities (Cabrera-Polk 74). Informed by the narratives on page 74 of "Finding Peace in the Liminal Space," this passage mirrors the experiences detailed by Gloria Anzaldúa and Judith Ortiz Cofer, where they articulate the complexities of navigating multiple cultural identities. They describe the process of creating a "mestiza consciousness", a mental space that embraces the hybridity of one's identity, acknowledging the beauty and challenges of living in the 'borderlands'—spaces that are neither here nor there but somewhere in between. Through this lens, my journey in the worlds of art and fashion becomes a testament to the rich, albeit intricate, tapestry of living within the liminal spaces of identity, culture, and creativity, constantly moving between the known and the unknown, the old and the new, in a quest for personal and artistic fulfillment.

This liminal state has blossomed into a profound source of inspiration and solace for me. My kinetic sculptures or kinetic garment components—challenge the conventional binaries of functional garments and traditional art forms, embodying this state of in-betweenness. They exist in a dynamic interstice, defying straightforward categorization and capturing the essence of liminality. This artistic endeavor mirrors the narratives discussed by Cabrera-Polk (75), where the power of storytelling and the embrace of one's hybrid identity serve as vehicles for navigating and celebrating the liminal spaces of our

lives. Through the act of creation, these sculptures become metaphors for the liminal experience, standing as testament to the rich, transformative potential of inhabiting spaces that are neither here nor there but somewhere in between.

At the heart of this artistic exploration lies a conscious selection of materials, chosen for their ability to defy easy classification, thus reflecting the intricate complexity of liminality. Integrating textiles with dichroic elements, my work not only reveals the inherent beauty and complexity of transitions but also captures the fluid nature of identity and expression. This alignment with the discourse on the evolving dynamics of identity, as discussed by Cabrera-Polk (78), marks a deliberate approach to materiality. In a pivotal step forward, my subsequent work, inspired by the insights gained during my time in Nepal, involved a deliberate shift from conventional thin sheet materials to the use of jump rings. This not only facilitated a more robust connection method, eliminating the need for rivets but also opened up new possibilities for interactive engagement. I ventured further into mechanical integration, developing a prototype that could autonomously open and close, enhancing its interactivity and embodying a dynamic energy reminiscent of life itself (Fig. 19). Such innovation underscores the storytelling and creative journey in traversing the realms between cultures, identities, and artistic disciplines. This methodology embodies the dynamic cultural fusion and the formation of a 'mestiza consciousness' that Anzaldúa champions—a consciousness forged from personal experiences, reflections, and the conscious crafting of an identity that transcends singular narratives. Through this lens, my work aspires not just to navigate but to celebrate the liminal spaces that shape our existence, offering a visual narrative that mirrors the linguistic and cultural amalgamation that defines our perception of the world and our place within it.

Ultimately, my exploration across the realms of design and art underscores the profound impact of engaging with the unknown and questioning established norms. This journey affirms the value of divergent thinking, moving beyond set patterns and goals

towards a more inclusive perspective that embraces rather than excludes (Cabrera-Polk 80). My creations are a testament to this process, aiming to blur the lines between distinct disciplines. They invite viewers into the complex, fertile territory of liminality, a space ripe with potential for true innovation. In this in-between space, innovation thrives, fueled by the ability to hold and explore contradictions and to cultivate "a tolerance for ambiguity" (Cabrera-Polk 80). It is here, in the liminal, that my work seeks to dissolve the arbitrary distinctions between art and design, inviting an engagement with the rich, nuanced landscape that lies beyond the conventional boundaries.

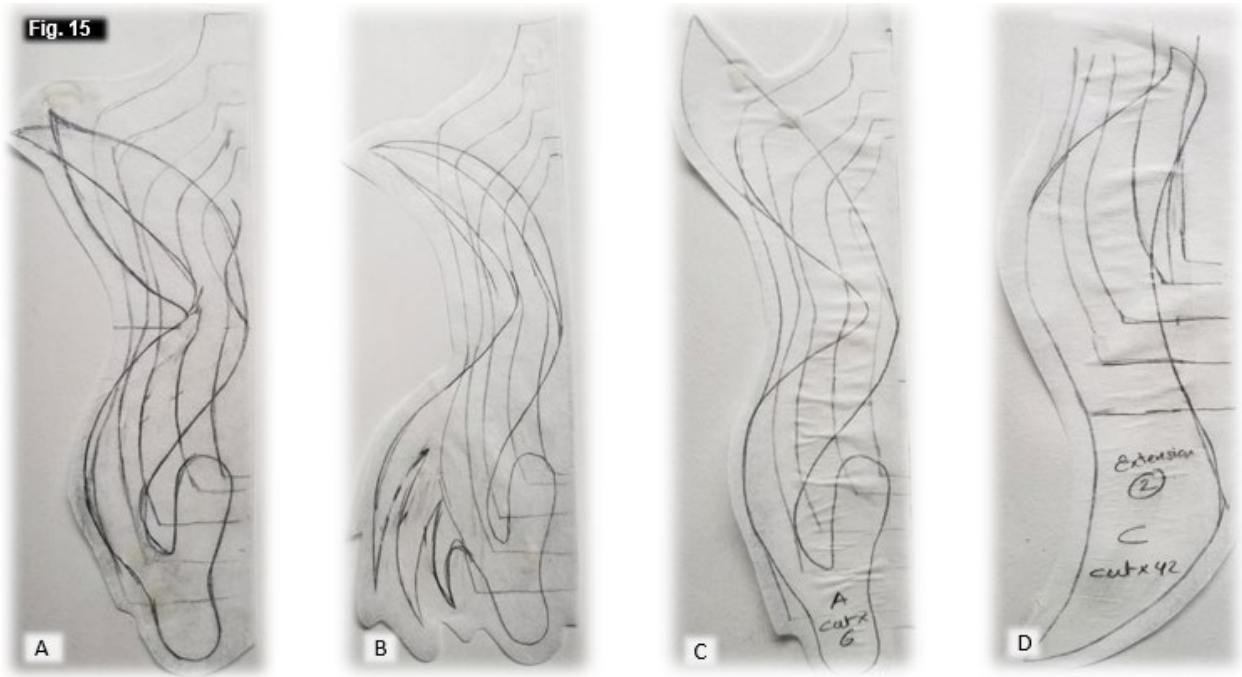


Fig. 15 (A-D): Initial stages of design exploration, crafting patterns influenced by the contours of human figures forming the foundational structure of each piece.



Fig. 16 (A-F): Inspired by my stay in Nepal, showcasing the evolving design of Nepalese woman's silhouette.

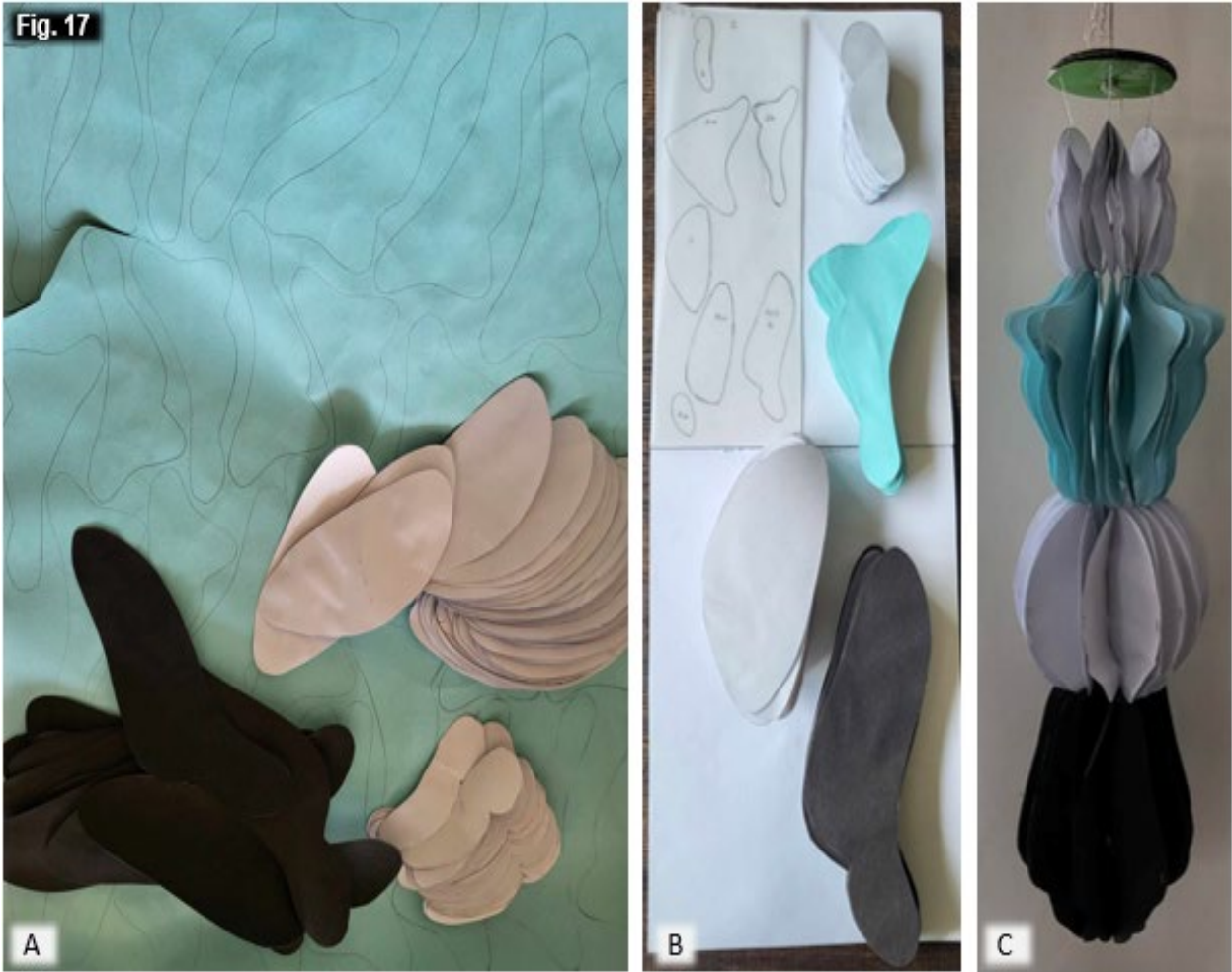


Fig. 17: The process of pattern cutting (A), the preparation of 36 pieces for each pattern (B), and the prototype of the sculpture (C).



Fig. 18 (A & B): The 5-foot motorized sculpture

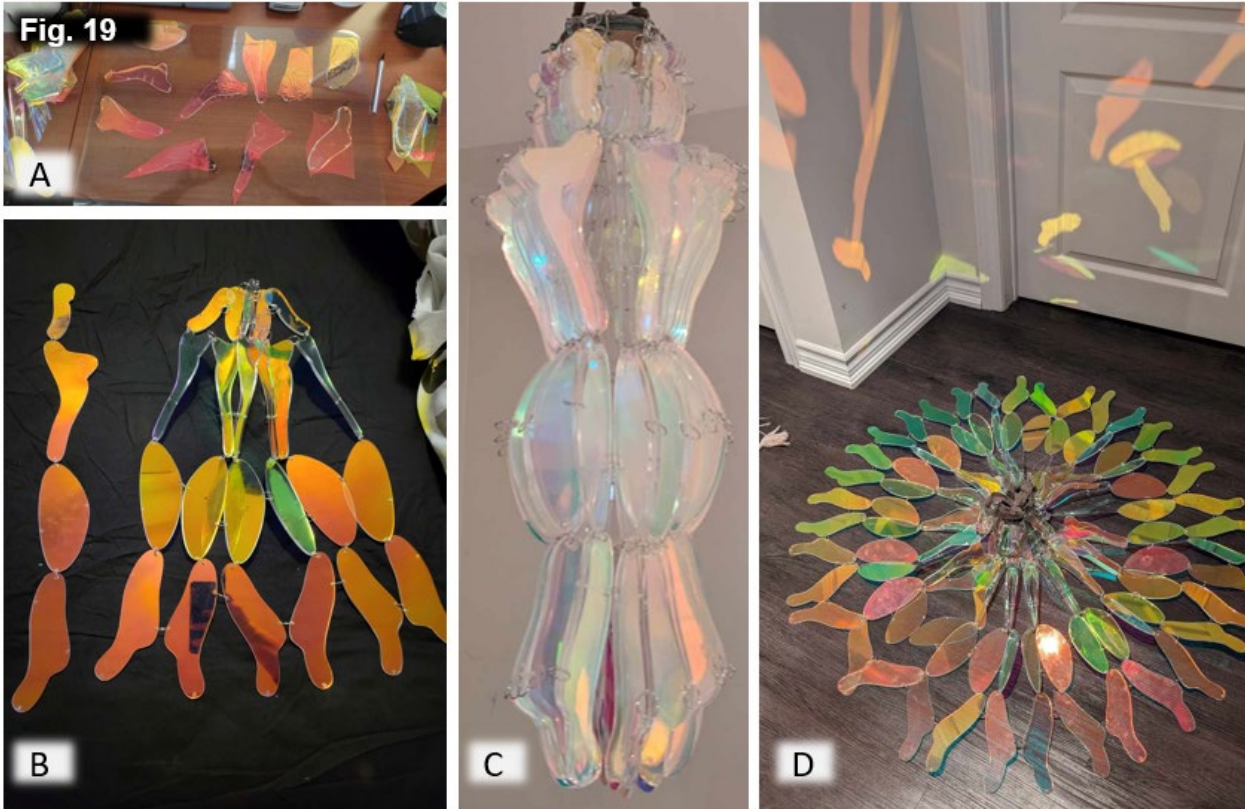


Fig. 19 (A-D): Advanced prototype with jump rings and automated movement, refining the original sculpture.



Throughout the process of crafting my autoethnography, I have employed my own framework to translate personal narratives from various stages of my life into tangible designs, as depicted in Figure 20 A. These designs are born from deep reflection on those experiences. Central to my creative endeavor is the integration of kinetic elements, prompting an exploration into a fundamental inquiry: How can garments in motion reshape both individual and societal perceptions of body image, self-esteem, and the norms that govern them? This exploration extends to sensitive topics such as body shaming, leading me to find irony, and even satire, in spotlighting body parts often subjected to societal stigma, as illustrated in Figure 20B & C.

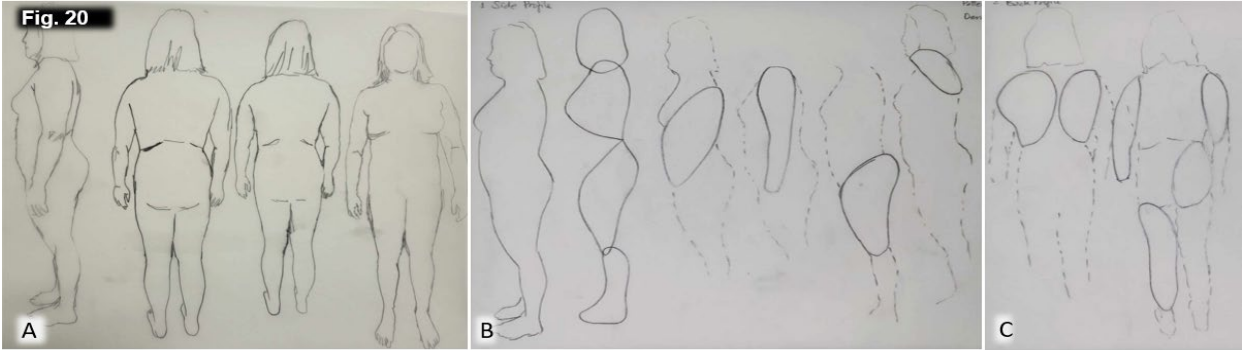


Fig. 20A: Silhouette of my body.

Fig 20 (B & C): Patterns derived from stigmatized body parts.

## 4.2 Elevating Presence: From vulnerability to visibility

Reflecting on my experiences during the period detailed in the "Air Hostess" story, I found myself feeling incredibly vulnerable. It was a time that fundamentally altered the way I presented myself and my very character. My only way to cope was to summon all my strength and fight back. Faced with vulnerability, I decided to harness my courage. This led me to conceive an invention that would, quite literally, elevate me to a position of power and strength. Imagine a scene from a movie where a character undergoes a dramatic transformation, growing in size to tower over their adversary, instilling immediate fear and respect. That was the essence behind my creation: a kinetic device that, once activated, would double my size, making me feel instantly more formidable physically. This mechanism was not just a physical enhancement but a symbol of my resolve to stand tall against adversity, embodying my journey from vulnerability to empowerment.

In reaction to the story "Air Hostess," I sought to subvert this perception by designing an illusion to make me appear larger, creating a voluminous sleeve (Fig. 21 A). This initial design aimed to confront and transform the way my presence was perceived. Following this, I advanced the concept by incorporating a wing-like structure on my back that could expand, significantly increasing my perceived size and further solidifying my stance against the vulnerabilities imposed by others (Fig. 21 B & C).

The development process for these transformative elements was deeply personal and methodical, with patterns derived from my silhouette during the "Air Hostess" period. This meticulous approach ensured that each aspect of the design was a true reflection of my experiences, capturing not just my physical form but the essence of my journey towards reclaiming my sense of self and empowerment (Fig. 22 A-G).

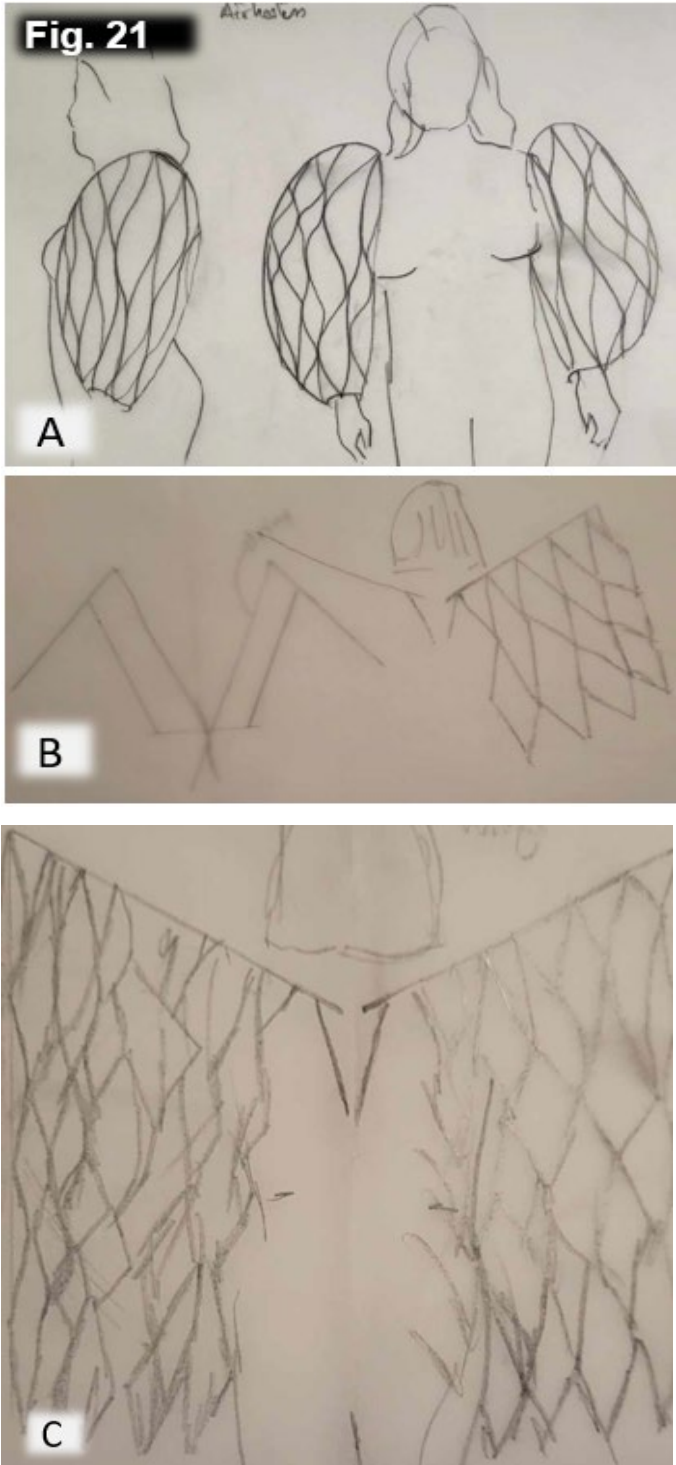


Fig. 21: Design development in response to the story "Air Hostess".

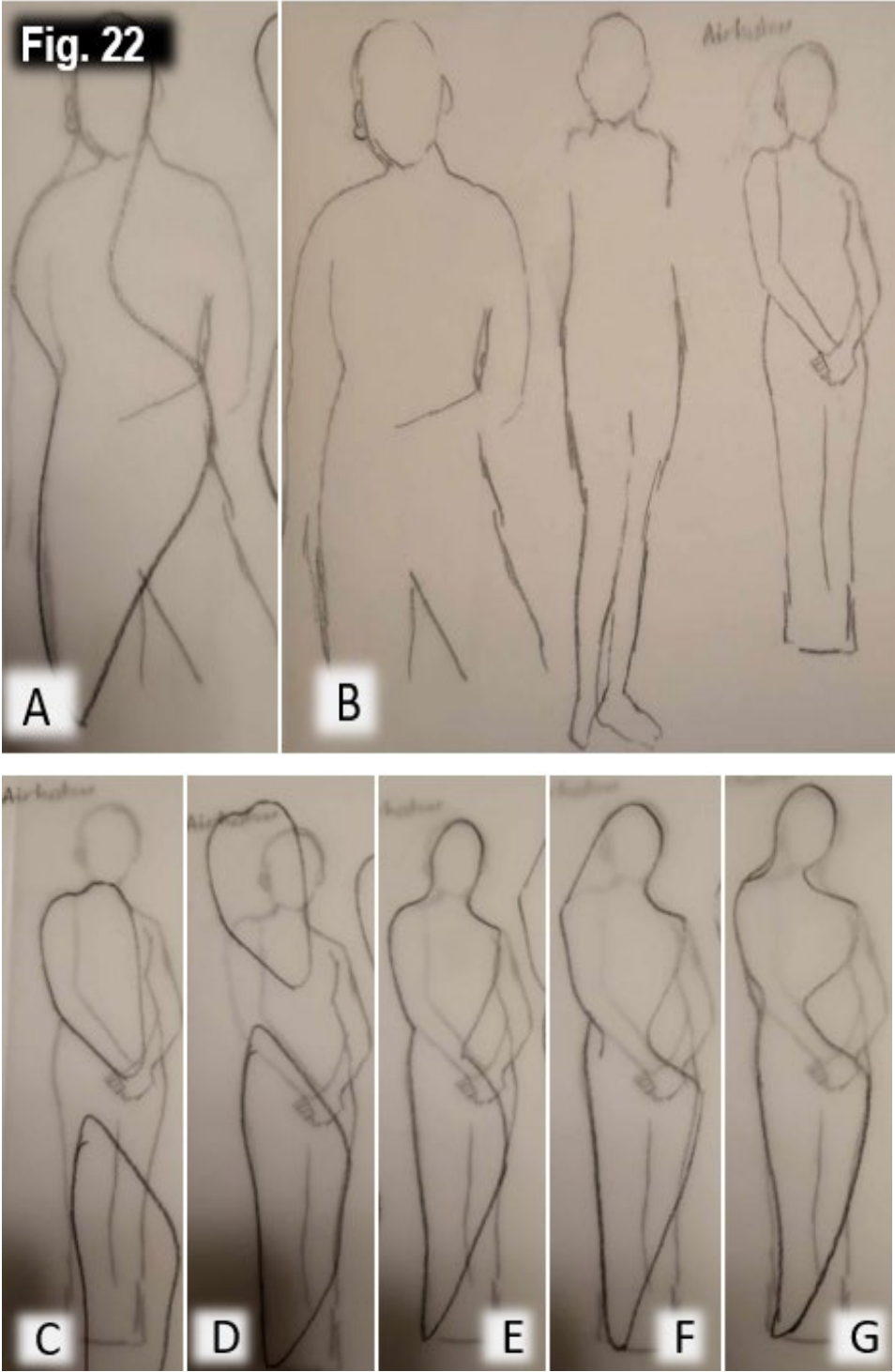


Fig. 22 (A-G): Design development.



Fig. 23 (A and B): The process begins with placing the pattern atop 18 layers of fabric.  
Fig. 23 (C): Each piece was sealed by applying flame from a candle.  
Fig. 23 (D): The layers of fabric were then adhered together, forming a honeycomb structure.

### 4.3 Inflating Boundaries Against Judgement

The first time someone commented on my weight, I was completely taken aback. The shock of hearing such a direct comment about my body was overwhelming, leaving me with a whirlwind of emotions. I was confused, not understanding why my body was suddenly a topic of discussion, and I didn't know how to respond. Unable to muster a reply, I just smiled, trying to brush it off, even though inside, I despised hearing those words. Despite my discomfort, I felt trapped by respect and societal expectations that dictated I should not talk back to my elders. This experience made me wish I could just disappear, to become invisible to those ready to judge my appearance.

This longing for invisibility, to shield myself from further comments, inspired me to create an inflatable neck piece. Designed to act as a barrier between me and the world, it inflates to hide my face whenever someone came too close (Fig. 24A), stemming from the instinctive desire for a barrier the moment the remark "Choree timi ta motaunu thalyo" was made. This led to the conceptualization of an inflatable turtleneck design (Fig. 24B), taking cues from my own silhouette during the time of the incident, integrating these patterns into the design (Fig. 24C). The neck piece served not only as a physical shield but also as a statement of my desire to control how I interact with the world, ensuring I could avoid situations where my body became a subject for critique.

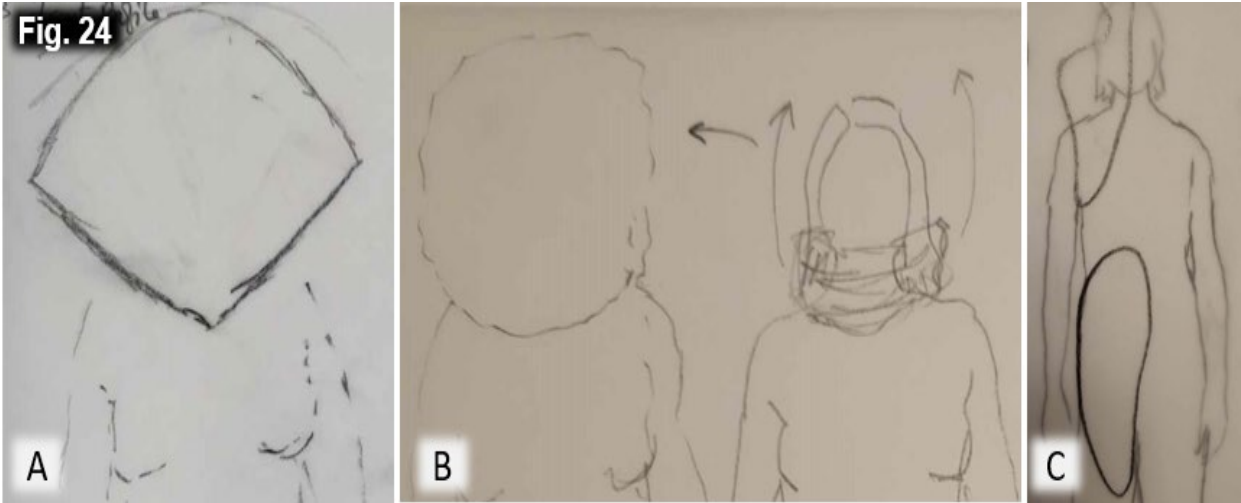


Fig. 24 (A-C) Inflatable turtleneck for privacy, designed around my silhouette.

#### 4.4 Illuminating Identity: A Light against Labels

Even after two decades, the labels "Jango" and "Pulsar mathi Pulsar" still echo in my mind. As a woman who now stands confident and embraces her body wholeheartedly, the remnants of these experiences persist within me. Reflecting on these labels, a part of me wanted to challenge and mock the notions they represented. This led me to the development of a garment that employs optical illusions to convey a slimmer silhouette than my actual body size, in direct response to wondering how I could make myself look smaller in the face of such nicknames. This garment, integrating light strips within, activates through a sensor to create an illusion of slimness (**Fig. 25 A**). This approach is not merely a playful trick; it's a deliberate attempt to shift the focus from my physical appearance to the innovative functionality of what I wear, symbolizing my resistance against superficial judgments. By diverting attention away from my body to the garment's functional value, I aim to question and challenge the societal obsession with physical appearance. This piece becomes a statement not just in terms of fashion but as a declaration of my autonomy over how I am perceived, representing my journey from being labeled to defining myself, from a place of vulnerability to one of empowered self-expression.



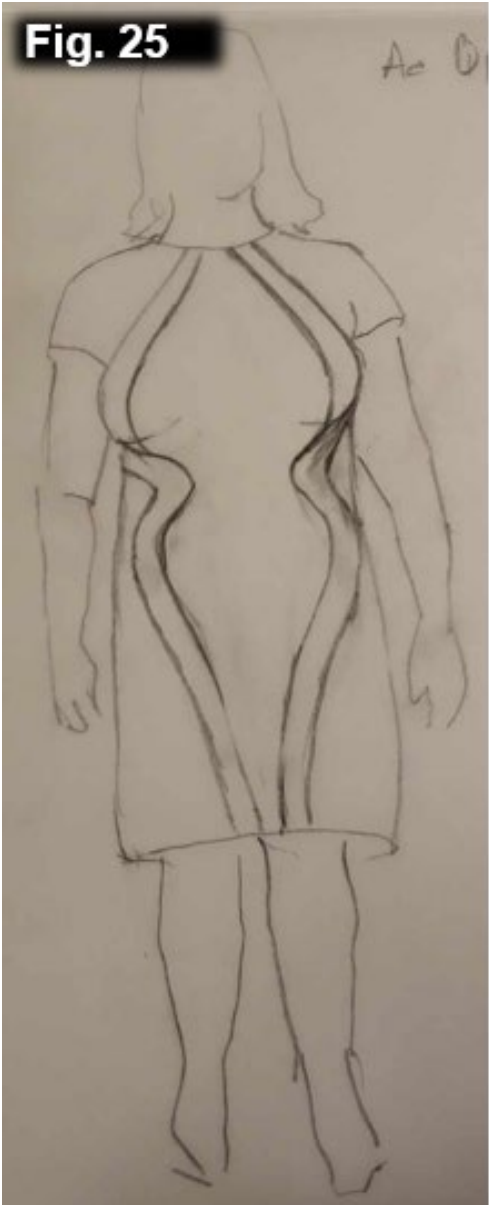


Fig. 25: Garment design: Optical Illusion.

#### 4.5 Fluid Forms: Redefining Visibility and Space

After accepting a seat offered to me due to a misunderstanding that I was pregnant, I found myself embracing the moment rather than correcting it. This experience inspired me to design a garment that shifted focus from physical appearance to its dynamic movement. The garment's design intentionally draws eyes away from the body, instead captivating attention with its kinetic elements. It serves as a visual metaphor for diverting scrutiny from my physical form to the garment's innovative motion, effectively altering how I am perceived in public spaces. This creation not only navigates the complexities of body image but also challenges onlookers to engage with fashion in a way that transcends conventional beauty standards, emphasizing movement and innovation over static appearances.

Motivated by the "Bidesh" story, I developed a kinetic feature intended to be placed over the garment's abdominal area. This creation is meant to divert attention from the wearer's physical form to the garment's movement, offering a creative avenue to deflect body-focused judgments (**Fig. 26 A to C**). The pattern was inspired by different body areas, particularly those that are frequently targeted by societal stigma (**Fig. 26 D to F**).

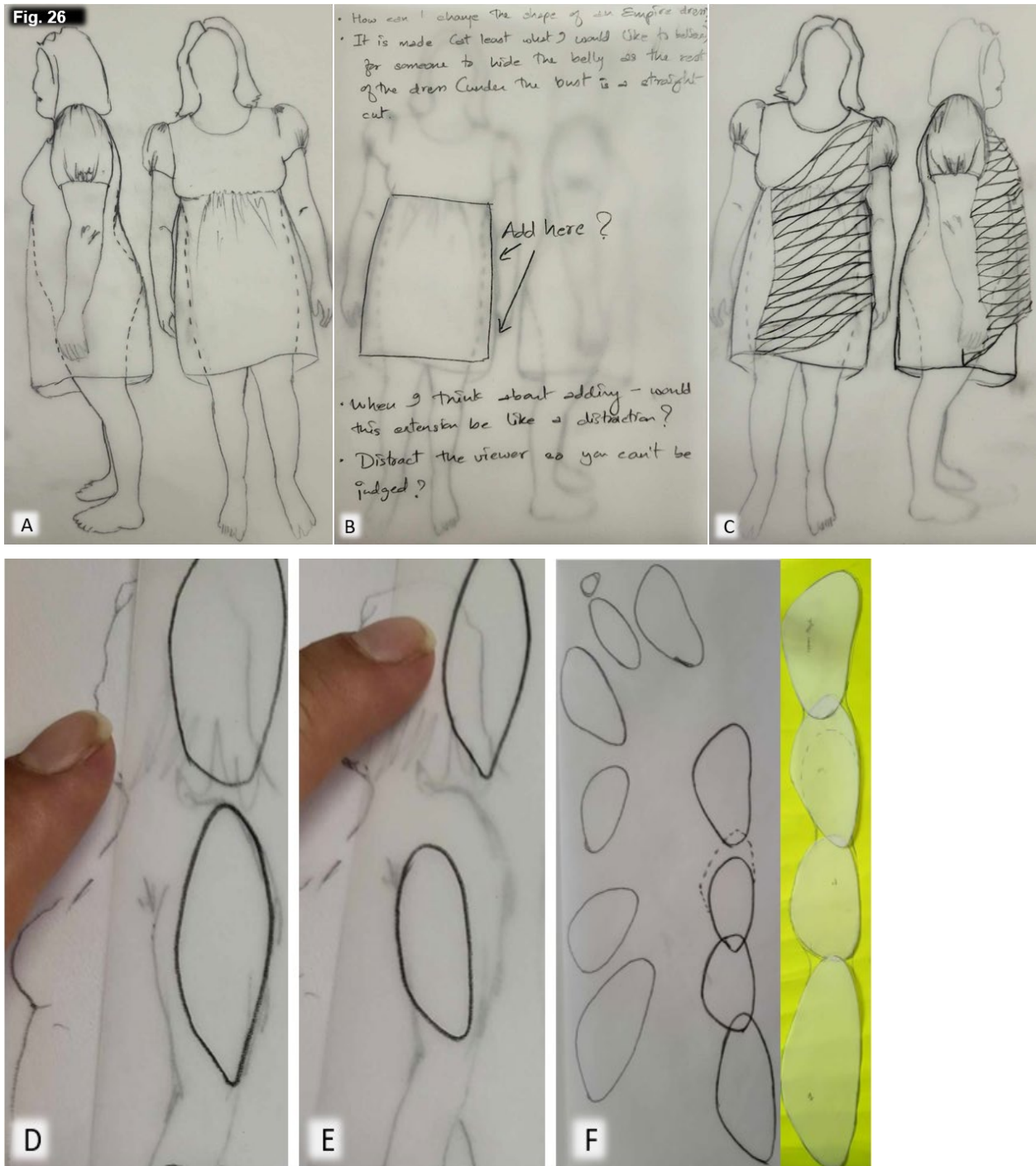


Fig. 26 (A to F): Design Development.

#### 4.6 Under the Unforgiving Gaze: Creating a Shield of Empowerment

Facing constant, unwelcome stares made me feel deeply vulnerable, prompting me to create a piece of headgear designed for personal space and protection. This gear, which elegantly descends to cover my body, was born from a desire to shield myself from those prying eyes that made public spaces feel hostile. It became a protective barrier, giving me the power to decide when and how I am seen, effectively rendering me invisible to unwanted scrutiny. This creation is more than just a garment; it is a statement of autonomy, a way to reclaim my sense of security in a world that often feels unforgiving. It challenges the norms of how we perceive and respect individual space, offering me, and potentially others, a newfound sense of empowerment.

Moved by the narrative in the "Ghuryo" story, I harbored a deep desire to hide my form, to veil my outline, and to stay out of sight. This led me to contemplate acquiring and donning a "burkha". This reflection spurred the creation of a headgear piece designed to cover the body silhouette (**Fig. 27 A and B**). The design was influenced by the form of the eye's iris, representing the relentless gaze of scrutiny (**Fig. 27 C and D**).

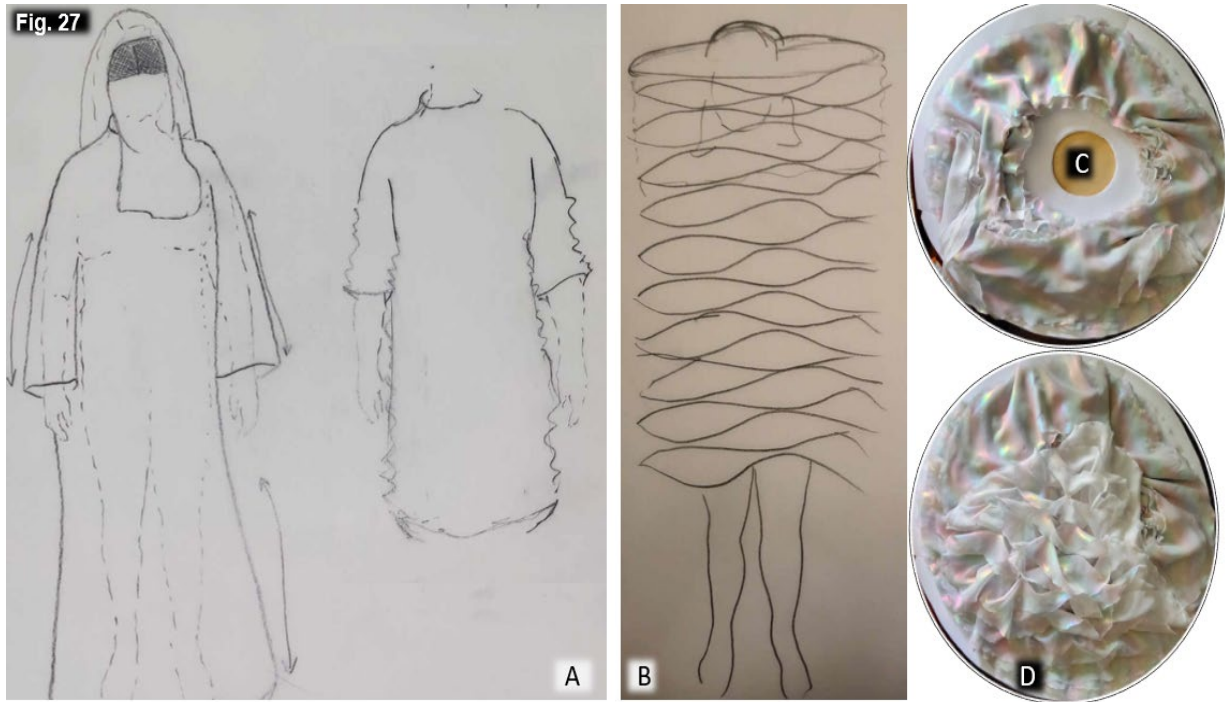


Fig. 27 (A and D): Design Development.

#### **4.7 Transformative Threads: Shaping Self and Society**

Reflecting on the kinetic garments I have created, and the insights garnered from two insightful articles, "Body of Art and Love" by Prue Gibson and "On the Body: Makeup, Clothing, and Hansen's Disease as Identity" by Kathryn M. Tanaka, has been an enlightening journey into the intersection of fashion, body image, and societal norms. These scholarly works have provided a foundation for exploring my research questions through the lens of garment design.

##### **Can a kinetic garment assist me in questioning prevailing body image norms?**

In delving deeper into how kinetic garments challenge prevailing body image norms, the innovative approach of these garments draws heavily on the insights provided by Tanaka, who eloquently articulates the profound connection between fashion, beauty, and identity. Tanaka suggests that "fashion and makeup within the institution became a way for sufferers to resist the stigma associated with their disease" (Tanaka 2), highlighting how apparel and adornment can serve as powerful instruments for negotiating identity and societal perception. This resistance against stigma and the reclamation of identity through fashion is central to the ethos behind kinetic garments.

The transformative potential of kinetic garments lies in their capacity to question and subvert static beauty ideals. As Tanaka notes, for individuals afflicted with Hansen's disease, "makeup and fashion within the institution became a way for sufferers to resist the stigma" (Tanaka 2). This resistance is mirrored in the design of kinetic garments, which, through their ability to morph and adapt, symbolically challenge the rigid, often unattainable standards of beauty that pervade contemporary society. The dynamic nature of these garments embodies the notion that identity and beauty are not fixed but are fluid constructs that can be redefined and renegotiated.

By harnessing the concept of fashion as both a tool for concealment and a means of expression, as articulated by Tanaka, kinetic garments offer me the opportunity to navigate and redefine the boundaries of my own identity. The garments become a canvas for personal expression, allowing me to either conceal or reveal aspects of my identity as I choose, thus engaging in a dialogue with societal norms of beauty and body image.

In essence, kinetic garments serve as a tangible manifestation of the ideas explored by Tanaka, challenging observers to reconsider their perceptions of beauty and identity. Through their fluidity and adaptability, these garments advocate for a more inclusive and malleable understanding of beauty, one that embraces diversity and encourages individuals to define beauty on their own terms. In doing so, kinetic garments not only question prevailing body image norms but also offer a medium through which I can assert my agency and autonomy in shaping my identity, much like the individuals described by Tanaka who used fashion and makeup as tools for navigating the complexities of identity and stigma.

### **Can garments that change shape enhance my self-confidence?**

Drawing upon Gibson's exploration of the phenomenological experience of art and its profound impact on emotional responses and sensory engagement, the kinetic garments I have designed aim to significantly enhance my self-confidence. According to Gibson, art has the transformative ability to invoke introspection and amplify personal agency (Gibson 1-7). Similarly, these garments encourage a personal dialogue with my attire, allowing me to actively participate in reshaping my appearance.

This engagement with my clothing challenges traditional norms of fashion and body image, enabling a freedom of expression rooted in the ability to modify my silhouette and aesthetic presentation. Such a dynamic interaction aligns with Gibson's insights into art's transformative potential, suggesting that just as art can provoke deep reflection and

bolster agency, so too can fashion—particularly when it serves as a medium for personal expression and resistance against static standards of beauty (Gibson 1-7).

The interactivity between myself and my kinetic garments fosters a sense of autonomy and empowerment, reinforcing my self-confidence. It is akin to the interactive nature of art that Gibson describes, where engagement with the piece contributes to its meaning. Here, that principle is applied to fashion, allowing me to explore and assert my identity through the clothes I wear.

These garments are more than just items of clothing; they are a platform for me to express my individuality and challenge societal perceptions of beauty and body image. As I navigate the possibilities these garments offer, experimenting with how they alter perceptions and push against conventional boundaries, I discover new facets of my identity and gain confidence in my ability to define my presence on my own terms.

### **In what ways do kinetic garments reshape my experience of societal standards of body image?**

In my exploration of kinetic garments and their impact on societal standards of body image, I have discovered that these pieces embody a powerful rejection of static and narrow beauty norms. Inspired by Gibson's analysis of the interplay between art and viewer perception, I have designed garments that invite both myself and observers into a dynamic dialogue about body image (Gibson 1-2). This aligns with the narratives in Tanaka's examination of Hansen's disease patients, who used fashion and makeup as tools for resistance and identity assertion within a stigmatizing society (Tanaka 2-3). The adaptability of my garments symbolizes the malleability of identity itself, offering a direct challenge to the rigid expectations of beauty that dominate our cultural landscape.



My personal engagement with these garments fosters a deeper sense of autonomy over my appearance, empowering me to define my beauty on my own terms. This experience echoes the transformative potential of art and fashion discussed by Gibson, where the act of personalization and reinterpretation serves as a form of creative labor and self-expression (Gibson 1-4). Similarly, the stories highlighted by Tanaka show how individuals have historically navigated the constraints imposed by societal norms through personal adornment, thereby crafting spaces for individuality and resistance (Tanaka 2-11).

The kinetic garments I have created, and wear do not merely exist as items of clothing; they are a statement against the one-dimensional standards of beauty that fail to accommodate the diversity of human bodies and identities. By wearing garments that I can adjust and transform, I engage in an ongoing conversation about the meaning and perception of beauty, inviting others to reconsider their own views on body image. This process of continuous negotiation and redefinition not only reshapes my own experience of societal standards but also contributes to a broader discourse on the inclusivity and diversity of beauty.

These garments stand as a testament to the potential of fashion as a form of expression that can challenge, subvert, and ultimately enrich our understanding of body image and self-confidence.

## Chapter 5: “Kasto Bhayo?” [How did it go?]: Woven Echoes of Movement

In "Katha Haru," my journey intertwines personal evolution with artistic innovation, bridging cultures through fashion and kinetic art. This exploration, grounded in my Nepali roots and expanded through global experiences, critiques and redefines societal norms on identity, body image, and self-expression. The kinetic garments presented not only illustrate the fluidity of identity but also challenge and expand the dialogue on body positivity and cultural expectations, embodying my ongoing quest for personal and societal transformation.



Fig. 28: Exhibition that took place on March 23-25, 2024, Ignite East Gallery.

**Exhibition:** The exhibition was designed to be a profound encounter, with each garment and sculpture embodying a narrative that reflects diverse experiences. My intention was to create a connection with viewers through the stories embedded in the pieces, inviting empathy and understanding across different backgrounds. The space was conceived as one where the commonalities of human experiences could be recognized and appreciated, bridging gaps between genders, ethnicities, and nationalities. Through these creations, I aimed to communicate the nuances of liminal spaces and cultural intersections, hoping to resonate with those who have navigated their own journeys through identity, belonging, and transformation. By presenting kinetic art and fashion as

mediums for storytelling, my goal was to engage viewers not just visually, but emotionally and intellectually, prompting reflections on their own lives and societal norms. This engagement was hoped to foster a deeper comprehension of the comfort and challenges found in liminal spaces, thereby encouraging a broader dialogue about identity, body image, and the fluidity of self-expression in a culturally diverse world.



**Fig. 29**

Fig. 29: Elevating Presence

Visitors were captivated by the empowering aura of 'Elevating Presence', with its structure interpreted as angelic due to its wing-like design, suggesting a figure ready to soar, symbolizing a voyage of liberation and transcendence beyond the confines of reality.



**Fig. 30**

Fig. 30: Inflating Boundaries

'Inflating Boundaries' was created as a reflection on personal battles against societal pressures of body ideals. I envisioned this garment as a shield, a protective layer against societal expectations, empowering individuals to embrace their true selves.



Fig. 31 Illuminating Identity

Through 'Illuminating Identity,' I aimed to evoke empathy and acknowledgment, telling a story about discovering and owning one's identity. It was designed to be a luminous testament to personal growth and acceptance.



Fig. 32: Under the Unforgiving Gaze

Fig. 33: Image taken from inside.

'Under the Unforgiving Gaze' was conceived as a sanctuary from the world's relentless scrutiny, with its meticulously designed interior offering peace and speaking to the resilience within us all.

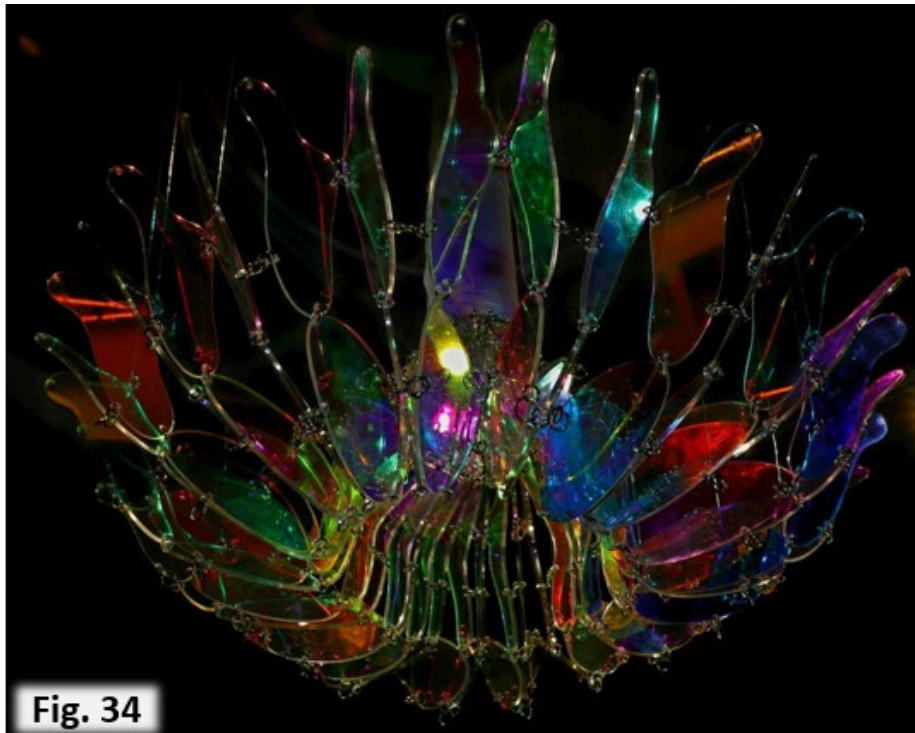


Fig. 34 and 35: Between Worlds

'Between Worlds' was intended to invite viewers into a narrative of continuous evolution and the beauty of existing in the space between realities. Its fluid movements and brilliant colors were designed to captivate and intrigue, suggesting otherworldly elegance.



The garments were created with humor and satire in mind, reflecting my belief in tackling life's hurdles with laughter. My hope was that this approach would resonate, showing how a change in outlook can profoundly alter our encounters with challenges.

**Engaging Through Kinetic Fashion:** In this work, art and fashion emerge as formidable channels for societal critique and evolution. These creations actively respond to inquiries on their capacity to redefine beauty standards, enhance self-esteem through form-changing design, and alter our interaction with societal expectations on body image. At the core of my exploration, these garments serve as concrete answers to the pivotal questions raised: (1) demonstrating that motion-infused attire can indeed prompt us to question and redefine conventional beauty norms; (2) showing that transformative clothing can positively impact our self-view and confidence; and (3) illustrating how such pieces can reshape our engagement with societal pressures regarding our bodies.

Based on my observations and informal discussions with the attendees, it became clear that the kinetic garments showcased at the exhibition were much more than decorative pieces. They had a significant impact, providing a sense of empowerment to both the wearers and the onlookers. These garments encouraged meaningful discourse on the changing perceptions of beauty and the critical role of inclusivity in body positivity. They served as catalysts for conversation and education, promoting the acceptance of various body shapes, questioning long-standing beauty standards, and demonstrating the creative potential of kinetic fashion as a force for change.

**Implications for Future Research and Creative Pursuits:**

Standing on the cusp of a new chapter, I am enlivened by the prospective avenues for further research and creative exploration that my thesis has unveiled. The satisfaction derived from my sculptural work has sparked within me a desire to conceive large-scale public art installations that embody the grace and fluidity I've witnessed in smaller scales within the exhibition. These envisioned sculptures will not merely occupy space; they will bring it to life, inviting interaction and contemplation.

Simultaneously, my commitment to pushing the boundaries of kinetic fashion remains unwavering. My intent is to forge a collection that transcends the runway, creating garments that captivate with their metamorphic qualities, resonating with profound narratives that echo our collective journey through the threads of our individual stories and experiences. This is fashion not as a static spectacle but as a living, breathing dialogue between the wearer and the world—a testament to the continual evolution of our identities.

Reflecting further, integrating performance into this journey opens a new dimension of exploration. The potential of wearing these outfits outside, not just displaying them in a gallery, adds a dynamic layer to the narrative. It's not merely about creating; it's about embodying the art, making the streets my runway, where the kinetic fashion becomes a performance in itself. This isn't just a step forward; it's a leap into a realm where art and life dance in unison, where every movement tells a story, and every fabric holds a memory. This is where I see my next chapter unfolding—where my creations don't just speak; they interact, they perform, they live.

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# **Appendix I: Thesis Defense Presentation**

# **KATHA HARU**

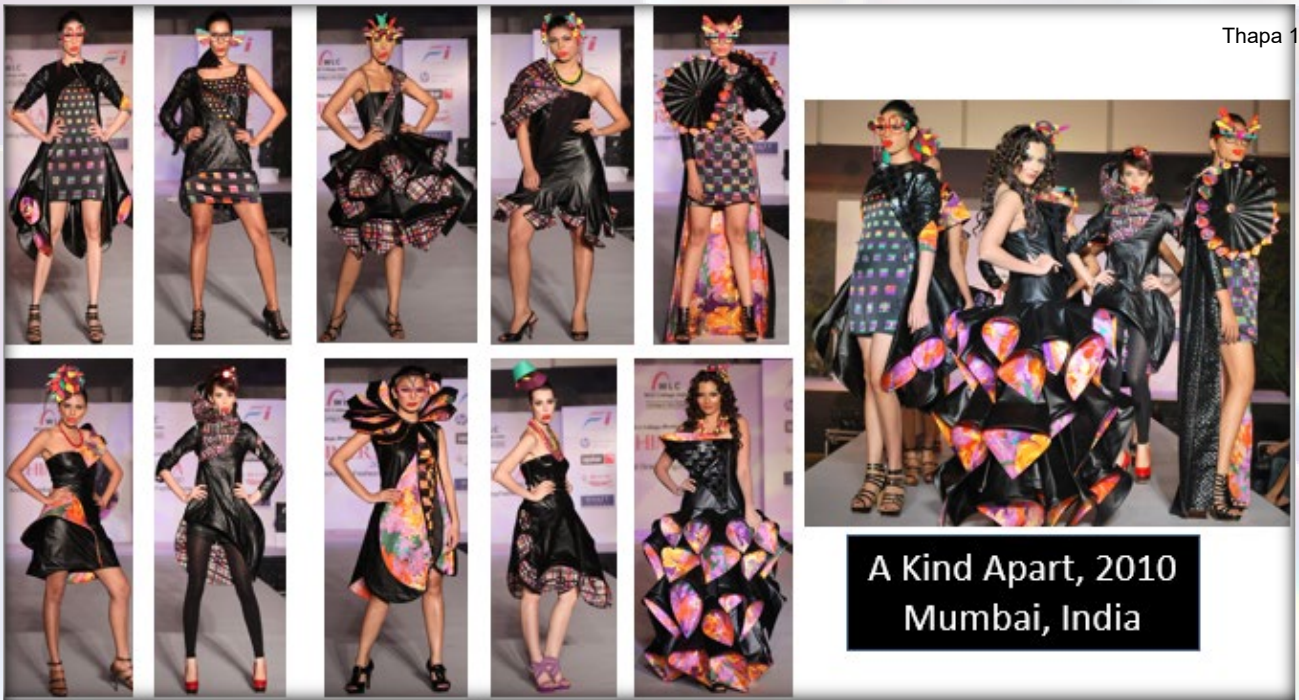
## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STORIES OF CULTURAL IDENTITY, BODY POSITIVITY AND SELF-EMPOWERMENT TOLD THROUGH KINETIC GARMENTS**

**—Ayesha Thapa (Elsha)**



**Ma ko ho ta?  
[Who am I?]**

- As a Nepali immigrant who has recently become a Canadian citizen, I have embarked on a journey that has taken me across three continents and allowed me to pursue my Nepali dream through education in four different countries.



- While studying fashion design in Mumbai, I was deeply influenced by designers like Alexander McQueen and Guo Pei, whose innovative work ignited in me a desire to create pieces that transcended the ordinary.



- As a Visual Arts' student in Australia, I stumbled upon Theo Jansen's kinetic sculptures online named STRANDBEAST and I was completely captivated.
- This moment ignited a passion within me to blend the realms of fashion design, sculpture, and mechanics, guiding my focus towards creating kinetic sculptures inspired by the elegance of human silhouettes.





**Creative Endeavors Since 2021:  
Prototypes, Sculptures, and Performative Sculpture**

- Since 2021, I have been creating different prototypes, sculptures, and performative sculpture in pursuit of that dream.



**At the Innovation Center in Nepal, 2023**



- It was a visit back to Nepal, last year, after five and a half years, that rekindled my connection to my roots.
- Growing up in a society where patriarchal values are prominent, I often found myself dreaming of life in the West—a place I perceived as offering greater freedoms and rights for women, thanks in part to the portrayal in media.
- This visit, marked by an unsuccessful IVF treatment but a successful independent study, exposed me to a barrage of comments on my body and personal life—comments that, somewhere along the way, I had learned to find offensive, a testament to my Westernization.
- Working at the Innovation Center in Nepal, surrounded by the intense heat under a tin roof, the absence of health and safety measures in place, evoked vivid memories of my upbringing.
- The occasional drift of cool air brought temporary relief but mingled with the pungent odor from nearby washrooms, triggering a nostalgic flashback.
- This experience prompted reflection on my existence in the West, which had somewhat faded amidst the challenges of migration.

**Who am I?**

**A fashion designer or an artist – or none?**

**A Nepali or a New Canadian?**

**If I am a new Canadian, do I call myself an Old Nepali?**

**Where do I belong?**

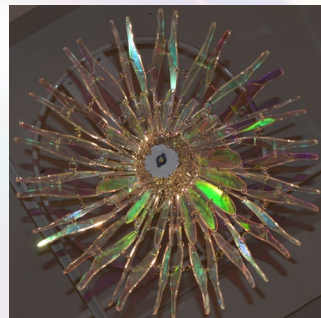
**My research Questions:**

**Can garments with kinetic components challenge prevailing body image norms?**

**Can garments that change shape enhance self-confidence?**

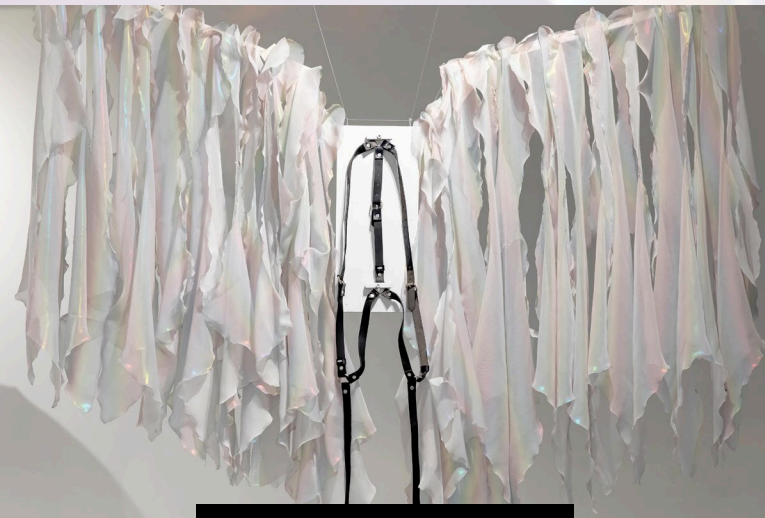
**In what ways do kinetic garments reshape experiences of societal standards of body image?**

- Embarking on this master's journey introduced me to complex ideas around decolonization—a challenging concept, - especially coming from Nepal, a country untouched by colonial rule, and as an immigrant aspiring for the iconic house with a white picket fence.
- It still is a challenging process to balance my appreciation for the opportunities my adopted country has offered me with a mindful recognition of its historical injustices.
- The leap from a fashion designer to becoming an artist seemed immense. Yet, through conversations with peers and introspection, I learned to navigate the space between conflicting feelings and identities.
- This process helped me embrace the liminal spaces bridging two continents, and the realms of art and fashion that define my experience.
- Reading the book "A Gurkha's Daughter," which is a collection of short stories – which was filled with labels like 'Kali' [dark-skinned], 'hatti' elephant and 'motti' [fat,] unearthed forgotten memories.
- Consequently, I adopted autoethnography as my research methodology.
- This dichotomy of experiences, of living between two worlds—propelled me to use my creations as a voice for the untold stories of my life.
- This approach facilitated a deep exploration of my research questions through personal narrative intertwined with academic inquiry.
- In embracing my identity—I was inspired to blend kinetic sculpture with fashion. This led to the idea of developing a collection featuring garments with kinetic components.



Between Worlds

- This sculpture is the starting point. It is the connecting piece between the sculpture and **garments with kinetic components**.
- The inspiration of patterns, colors, its origination navigates the liminal spaces between cultures, highlighting the duality of my Nepalese heritage and Western influences.



Elevating Presence



- This garment emerged from my exploration of personal visibility and vulnerability.
- "Elevating Presence" symbolizes the journey from feeling exposed and scrutinized to a state of commanding visibility and strength.
- It challenges the gaze that seeks to define or diminish, transforming it into a platform for asserting one's identity and space.
- The garment's expanding mechanisms metaphorically elevate the wearer's presence, contesting traditional narratives of vulnerability and turning them into expressions of empowerment and visibility.

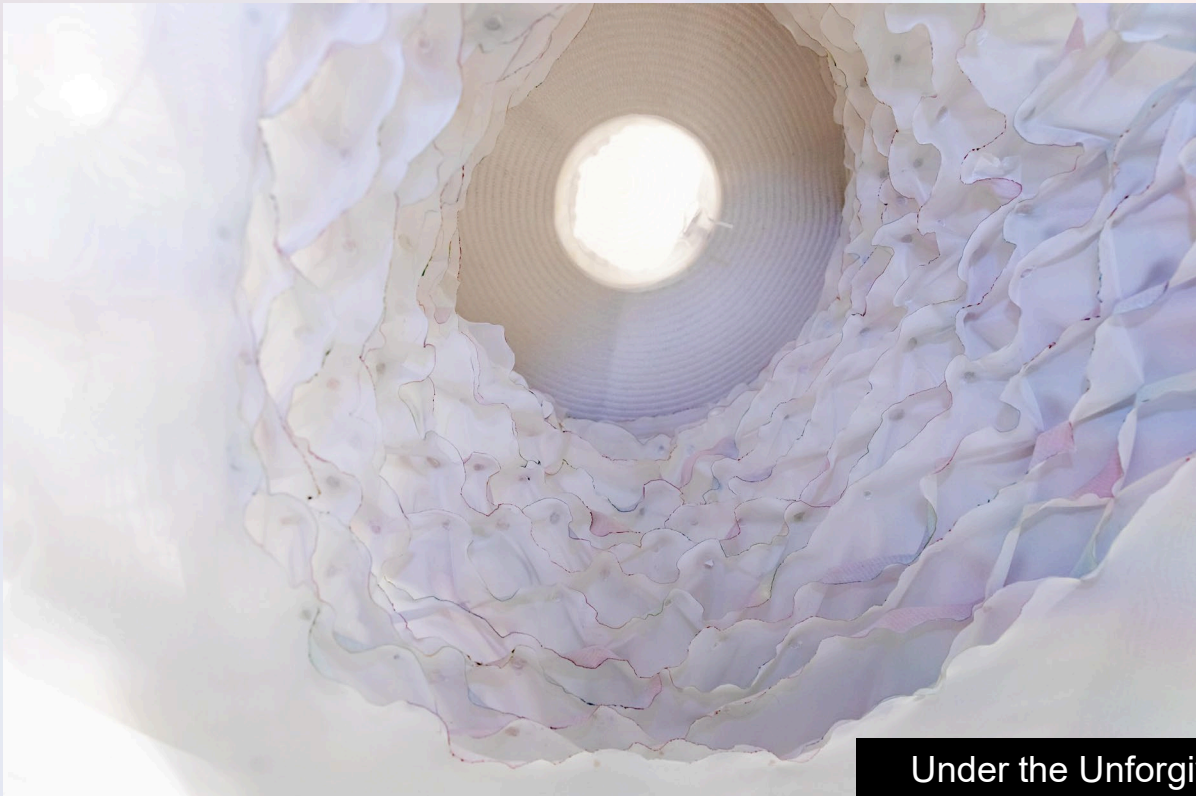
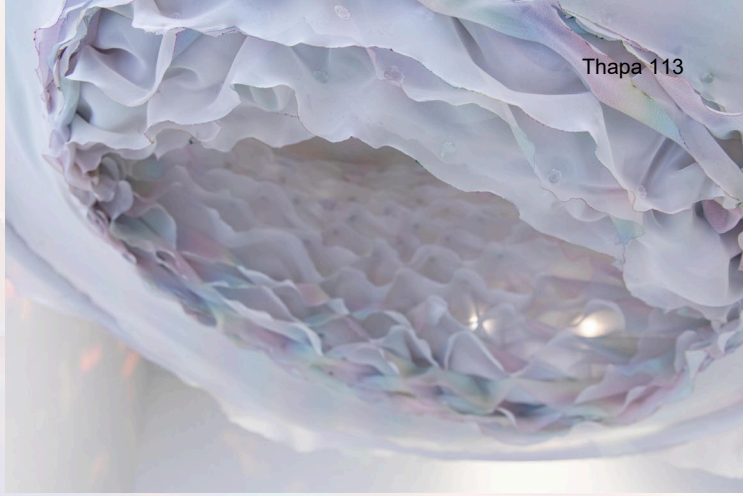


- "Illuminating Identity" was crafted as a response to enduring labels from my past, specifically "Jango" and "Pulsar mathi Pulsar," terms that have lingered in my consciousness.
- Integrated light strips within the garment activate via sensors to craft this illusion, serving not just as a playful design but as a deliberate commentary on societal fixation with slimness.
- This piece moves the conversation from physical appearance to the garment's innovative functionality, embodying my resistance to superficial judgments.
- By focusing attention on the creativity and function of what I wear, "Illuminating Identity" questions societal obsessions with physique, marking my transition from being defined by labels to asserting control over my self-representation, a journey from vulnerability to empowered self-expression.



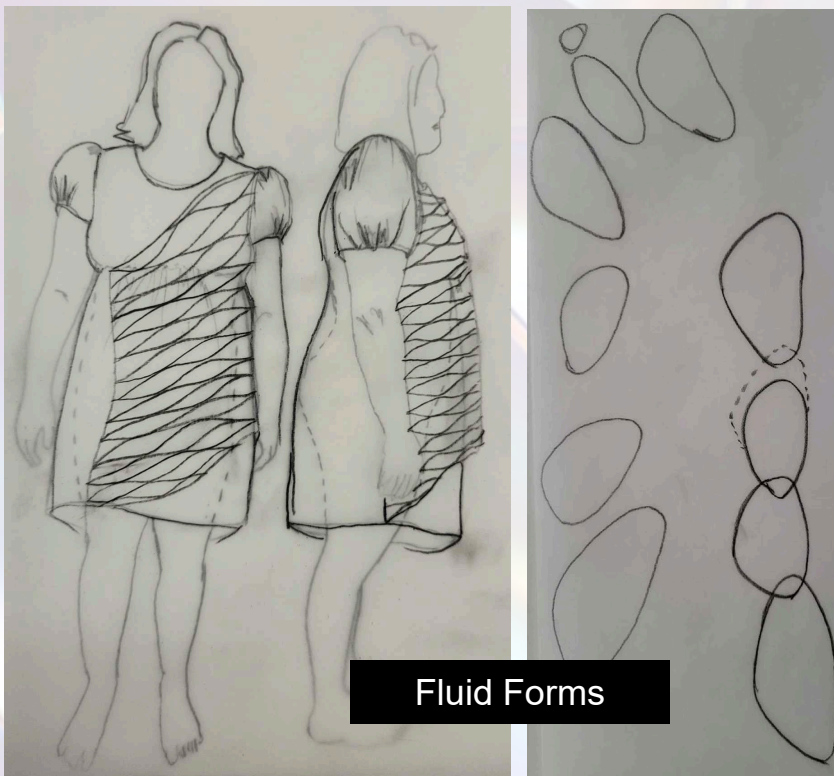
## Elevating Presence

- Inflating Boundaries addresses the critical issue of societal beauty standards and the often-unwelcome judgments that accompany them.
- Equipped with sensors, this garment inflates around the neck and conceals my face when someone approaches, serving as a deliberate barrier against any comments about my body type.
- This transformation is both a personal shield and a broader statement against the rigid norms that attempt to define us solely by our appearance.
- It challenges these constraints by showcasing the ability to change shape, advocating for a more inclusive view of beauty, and promoting a space where body positivity is celebrated in its most versatile forms.



## Under the Unforgiving Gaze

- "Under the Unforgiving Gaze" confronts the reality of always being watched and judged. It serves as a protective layer, shielding the wearer from critical eyes while also making a bold statement against such scrutiny.
- This piece is about taking back control of how we are perceived, challenging the stories others may narrate about us.
- It stands for strength and the determination not to be limited by what others expect of us, calling for a recognition of each person's true self, beyond just looks.
- Additionally, it provides a refuge, offering protection from unwelcome attention.



- Fluid Forms was inspired by a realization that our identity and how others view us are always shifting.
- Inspired by a moment where my physical appearance led to a mistaken assumption about pregnancy, this garment was designed to shift the focus from the body's form to its movement, effectively altering the viewer's perception.

- With illuminating Identity- I challenge the beauty norms with kinetic garments that defy the slimness ideal. "Elevating Presence," strengthens self-assurance, elevating wearers beyond perceived vulnerabilities. "Fluid Forms" shift the beauty narrative from static appearances to dynamic artistry, redefining attractiveness beyond the conventional.
- My exploration into garments with kinetic components has not only provided a fresh perspective on fashion's capacity for personal empowerment but also its potential to initiate societal shifts.
- The significance of my research lies in its contribution to a more inclusive and empowering dialogue around fashion and identity.
- It highlights the importance of expanding our approach to fashion, embracing diversity and innovation not just in the way we design but also in the stories we choose to share through what we wear.
- As a fashion designer, my aim has always been to craft garments that stand out or break new ground. Now, embracing my role as an artist, I see the importance of ensuring my designs not only captivate but also convey stories and spark ongoing dialogues.