

UNWINDING THE CONSTRUCTED: GENDER IN DARJEELING

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I have struggled to express myself as a child. Growing up, I always felt like I had to be this soft-spoken, humble, and beautiful woman when I grew up. As a teenager, I refused to wear short skirts to avoid unnecessary attention from strangers. I wanted to experiment with so many things in terms of my appearance, but I always chose the path that was believed to be 'right' for a woman. As a result, I struggled to discover myself. I have always admired women who could break the barrier of 'judgment' and express themselves the way they want.

This town believes that women and men are equal. I believe their notions of equality are different from mine. There remains an unseen force judging others, making comments, every time a woman defies gender norms through her appearance. In Darjeeling, people follow strict gender rules. A man has to be masculine enough and a woman must be feminine. Anyone who deviates from this path is often laughed at, if not ridiculed openly.

From the day a child is born, he or she is trained to behave a certain way to suit the demand that gender places. Gender plays a major role in our lives. While sex connotes one's biological connotation, gender denotes one's nature and choices. It is not based on biological

connotation. At times when gender itself is changing, how do we determine gender?

Self-expression is an important aspect of our lives, whether through clothing or the things one decides to do to one's body. It becomes a challenge when people question basic self-expression and link it directly with character. There still remains an unseen force that subconsciously compels women to follow a particular road to prevent themselves from being vilified.

I remember how my grandmother always used to strictly instruct me to take care of my hair, as it served as a jewelry for a woman to make her look good, to be more feminine. It would always confuse me though. Because for men, it was exactly the opposite. Whether it is having long hair or short, it should be a choice, not a compulsion. Most would agree with me that when one wears something that is a little revealing, you do not end the day without getting taunts from strangers. My friend one day decided to wear a skirt on a sunny day only to get a comment from an old man. He said, 'haven't your parents taught you how to come out in public?' There is an unseen force that is constantly guiding and framing both men and women to behave. Nose piercing is acceptable if a woman does it, but is a taboo for a man. A man and a woman have completely different road maps to follow

Despite us all being humans and having a body and a soul, if a woman has a tattooed body, she is judged too soon. People do not take it as what a good woman does. Therefore, they are judged even more.

I feel expressing oneself through appearance is the first step towards equality. No matter how 'equal' people think they treat both the genders, there still remains a gap between a man and a woman. I have seen people not only making fun of but also choosing to stay away from people who do not assign them as either a male or a female. When talking about expressing oneself through appearance, this freedom seems to be guarded by rules and old notions. Women have even more restrictions. When people question basic self expression and link it directly with character, there exists a force that makes women walk a particular path to prevent them from being vilified by

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others. However, when one chooses not to abide by this force, society often seems to have concerns and questions about her.

This photo essay captures rebels who are defying gender norms through their appearance in the society that we live in. Their actions will bring change and create space for the coming generations to not abide by the same old societal constraints and explore the basic right to express oneself freely. At the same time, this photo essay also attempts to question the relevance of gender at this time when gender itself is changing.



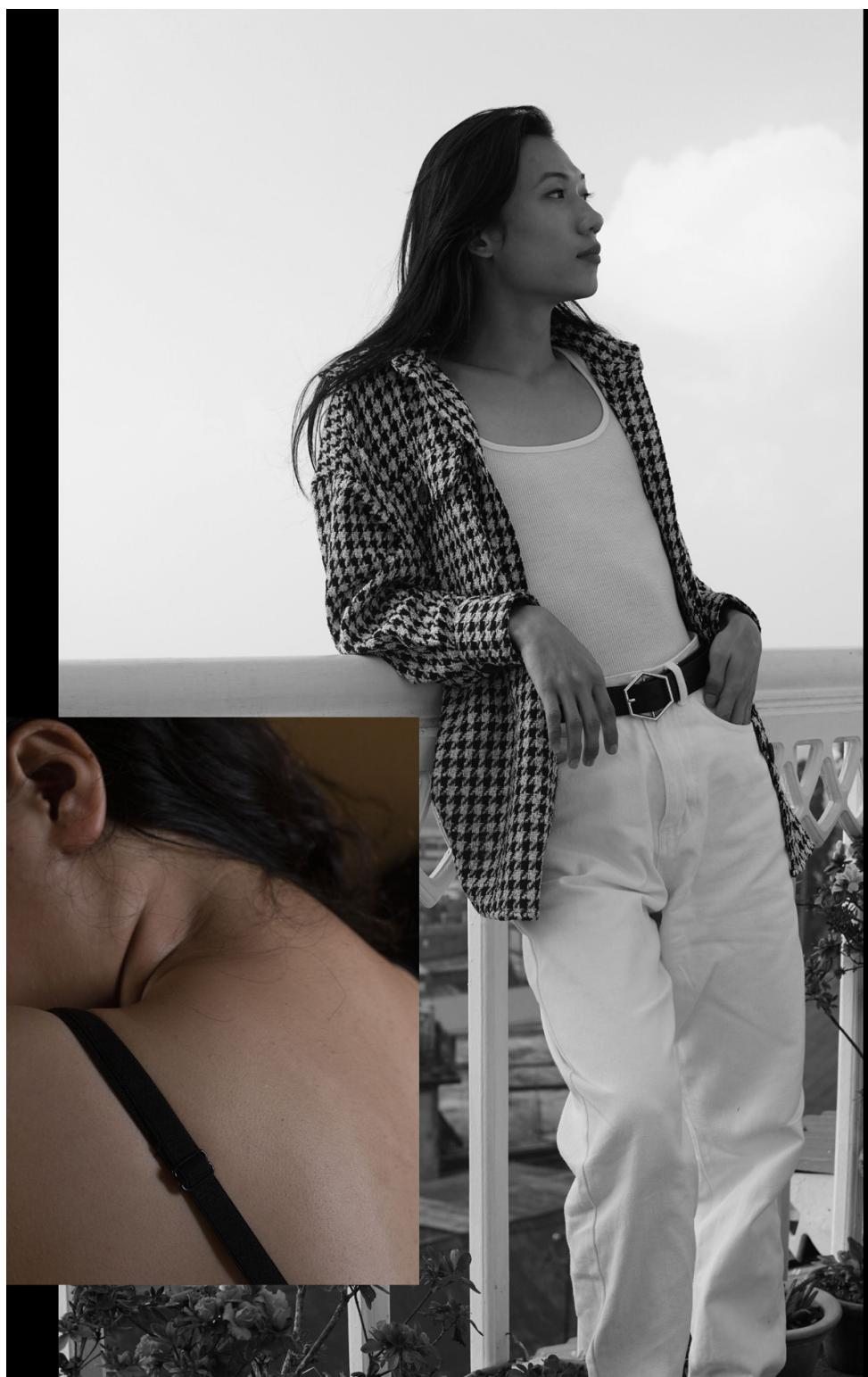
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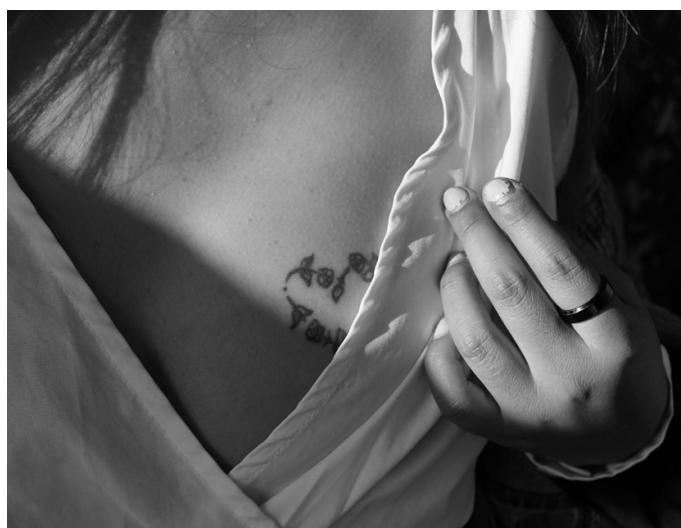
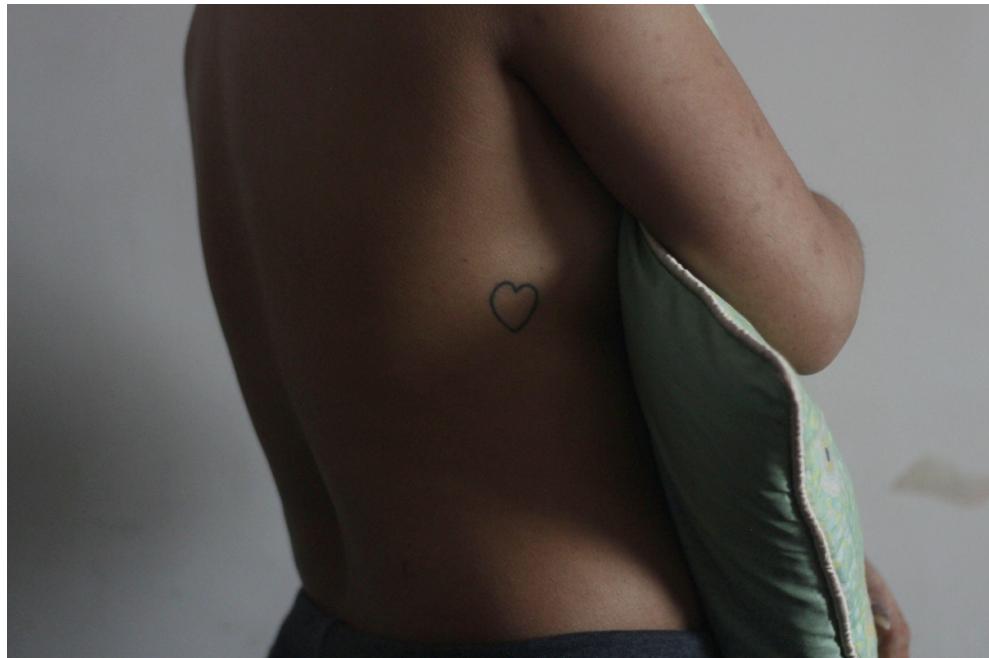
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“Most of my male friends judge me because of the area my tattoo is in.

They think I gave access to some unknown male in that space.

It was done by a female tattoo artist and also, IT IS MY CHOICE”

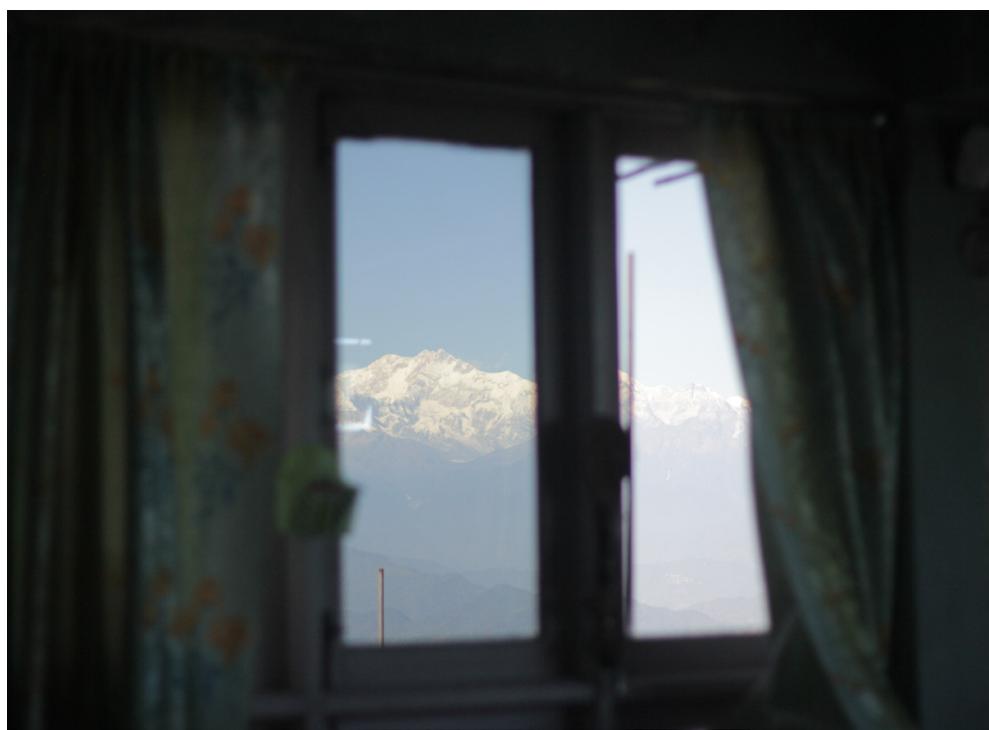
—Neha Lepcha

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"I know a friend of mine was quite ashamed to take me out and hangout with other people. He used to tell me to look more like a girl. Eventually lot of people started suggesting me to grow my hair and look feminine. However, I am loving the women I am becoming. I try to avoid them as much as I can. "



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