

## **Relationships with the Self: A Study into the Relationship between Individuals and Their Head Hair**

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‘Society’s norms and rules often determine what is considered taboo or acceptable, and these norms and rules influence multiple facets of people’s lives. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, and the activities we enjoy all have common social meanings assigned to them that are dictated by the popular culture of that time. Fashion is one example of this. Historically, clothing served as a means of displaying or revealing one’s gender identity, religious views, and socio-economic class...One commonly overlooked facet of society is the length, color and texture of the hair on one’s head. Head hair is similar to style of dress because it too is easily manipulated, changed and given meaning.’ (Manning, 2010)<sup>1</sup>.

The head hair is considered to be nothing more than just hair in common sensical knowledge. The ideas that women have long hair while men have short hair has been normalized and internalized so much so that one does not even question it. It is only when one finds a girl with short hair or a boy with long hair that such an idea is re-considered. It is interesting how the importance and relevance of the head hair becomes highlighted only when there is an absence of the head hair. In other words, one notices the relevance of head hair in the society if and when someone goes bald or shaves their head. In this paper we would look at the various experiences of men with regards to their head hair. The relevance and rationale of looking at one’s relationship with their hair as an act of representation of one’s identity may be evident through the various works around head hair such that of Maria Warner (1994), when she said:

‘The body reveals to us through hair the passage of time and the fluctuating claims of gender; strangers offer us a conspicuous glossary of clues in the way they do their hair on their head, for in all societies all over the world, callings are declared through hairy signs: the monk’s to ensure, the ringlets of the Hassidic scholar, the GI’s crewcut, the sansculotte’s free flowing mane, the flower child’s tangled curls, the veil’ (Maria Warner: 1994).

Warner’s idea of the head hair being an extension or representation of one’s identity and personality has also been studied by scholars like Sir Edmund Leach. Leach’s work provided a direct relationship between the length of one’s hair and their sexuality. Though Hallpike (1969)<sup>2</sup> argues for a re-analysis of such an understanding of one’s relationship with their hair, we find that even popular culture complies to the idea that long hair represent untamed sexuality as is evident through the current hairstyles of movie and television actors. While Hallpike looks at hair with context of religion and sexuality, Jodi Manning (2010) looks at hair styles and hair colors as symbols, specifically in the case of college students. Manning’s and Gill Perry’s (2004)<sup>3</sup> works show how stereotypes, with regards to gender, sexuality and overall personality, are created and re-produced through head hair in the society.

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<sup>1</sup>Manning, Jodi (2010). The Sociology of Hair: Hair Symbolism Among College Students. *Social Sciences Journal*, 10 (1), 35-48.

<sup>2</sup>Hallpike, C. R. (1969). *Social Hair*. *Man, New Series*, 4 (2), 256-264

<sup>3</sup>Perry, Gill (2004). Staging Gender and “Hairy Signs”: Representing Dorothy Jordan’s Curls. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38 (1), 145-163.

However, Deborah Pergament (1999)<sup>4</sup> argues that despite the social significance of one's hair, such symbolism and interpretations have no space in the legal sphere, despite the arguments for protection against forced taking of hair, which was a dominant form of systematic humiliation used by the Nazis.

The head hair, then, become an important form of symbolism for the human society. However, similar to other gender-defined attributes and behavior, people may be unaware or unconscious of the choices they make with regard to their hair styles and hair colors. There are however, people who make a conscious choice to not comply to their gender assigned hairstyles, such as women who shave their hair or trim them so they resemble the short hair look prescribed for men, or men who keep long hair, which is the prescribed hairstyle for women. This research would attempt to examine the relationships that individuals have with their hair. The main aim of the study would be to understand the reasons behind such a choice, with context to their gender identity, sexuality and religious beliefs. The relevance of this study may be understood through the idea of exploration of one's relationship with one's body, and modifying it (here, head hair) as a symbol to express to the society. Maintaining one particular hairstyle may also be seen as an act of group identity, like in the case of the Amish community. Also, men keeping certain kind of hairstyles and hair color have come to be identified as queer. In this sense, this study would understand if challenging the prescribed norms regarding head hair, means challenging the structure of the larger society and acting as a medium for expressing agency and individuality.

This paper focuses on the relationship of men with their hair. This is done because while on the one hand the common sensical knowledge dictates that men do not bother with fashion and hairstyles as much as women do; on the other hand, religion dictates rites that require shaving off of the head hair of the men for particular rituals/occasions. In order to understand such polarized connotations of the head hair of the men, this paper looked at the experiences of men with regard to their head hair. Four men (three below the age of 30 years or young men, while one above the age of 60 years) were interviewed in order to get a glimpse into their experiences. The ages of the respondents are relevant as they represent the generational gap between the experiences and views of the men with regard to their head hair. Also, all the respondents claimed to be followers and believers of their respective religions, which was a criterion for selecting the respondents, in order to understand the religious aspect of the head hair. Also, the reason for interviewing men for this paper, and not women is because men are not the focused demographic when it comes to exploring the issues related to head hair. This is evident through the various hair products that are promoted by the various celebrities. Almost all of such products are made for women, and the few that are made for men are usually promoted in a different manner. This may be seen through the various TV advertisements that promote hair products. The advertisements that target women focus on the beauty and health of the head hair while those advertisements that target men focus on head hair problems like dandruff and balding but not beauty. Also, almost all such advertisements have actors with head hair that comply to their respective gender prescribed hairstyles.

The men that were interviewed for this paper, however, did not all have head hair that complied to their prescribed gender specific hairstyle. One of the respondents had long hair. On asking for the reason behind such a hairstyle he responded that he 'wanted to try something new'. He also justified his long head hair with the increasing number of men keeping long head hair with the influence of the popular culture. This reminds one of Manning's argument that popular culture affects and molds the hairstyles of the youth. The different hairstyle becomes acceptable for the society through popular culture, even though certain sections of the society (like the respondent's parents and their friends) might not completely accept such 'deviations'. Another form of deviation from the prescribed form of hairstyle was that of a Sikh boy who had cut his hair short while in school. This was a major step for him because the Sikh community maintains long head hair only. In a way, the long head hair, covered with a cloth or turban, forms the identity marker of the Sikh community.

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<sup>4</sup>Pergament, Deborah (1999). It's Not Just Hair: Historical and Cultural Considerations for an Emerging Technology. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, 75 (1), 41-59.

By choosing to cut his hair short, the respondent, in a way, rejected/distanced himself from his community's identity marker. He said that even though he faced objection from his community for the same, it was the family unit or specifically, his parents, whose support mattered to him. Here, the importance of family as a source of support and acceptance is highlighted. Also, such acts that represent going beyond, if not against, the norms of the society, may be viewed as not only deviations but also individual's means of exercising their agency or individuality in the face of the structured norms and rules of the society.

These two acts of the two respondents were voluntary. However, balding is involuntary and assumed to be more common among the men. This assumption was common and accepted by all the respondents. Also, the three young respondents expressed 'fear' towards balding while the one older respondent expressed how balding is only natural. Here, the generational gap is highlighted. Also, the older respondent felt that much of the health of the head hair was affected by one's lifestyle and eating habits. This view was absent among the younger respondents. The latter found solace in the various new treatments and remedies that are becoming common and popularized by celebrities, with regard to re-growth of the head hair. Another point that was highlighted here was that with regard to gender. The interviews revealed how men felt that women had more option when it came to head hair, and that wigs were more of a woman's thing as none of the respondents were in favor of them. They preferred treatments and remedies to wigs. This reflects how much intense is the fear of losing one's hair that not even fake hair is accepted as substitutes. The issue of balding is also discussed by Phelpstead (2013)<sup>5</sup>, wherein he shows how baldness and beardlessness were symbols of unmanliness in the medieval times and a man with a bald head or inability to grow a beard was at the margins of the society. These ideas may also be seen relevant in today's world. With the trends like no shave November, men who cannot grow beards are mocked on social media and may be looked at as the 'other'. However, with the change in the times from the medieval times, nowadays, the prescribed dress codes of professional spaces require men to shave their beard off, which may hide one's inability to grow a beard. But the popular culture and social media put people on display and scrutinize them.

Yet another form of hair loss is the voluntary shaving off of the head hair. This is most talked about with the context of religion. This is because there are many beliefs/religions that follow that at the time of someone's death, a member of the deceased's family, usually a male, is required to shave off their head hair. Phelpstead (2013) examines how the voluntary shaving off of the head had varied meaning during the medieval times. Though such an act represented mourning, it also represented priesthood and femininity among men. He argues that priests are often mocked as men in dresses because of the way they dress up and maintain a shaved head. The voluntary shaving off of the head also symbolized learning as the students would shave their heads off before joining a school during the earlier times. Moreover, the voluntary shaving off of the head hair is also looked at as a form of punishment or shame. This is relevant in today's context as well. This may be evident from the recent incident regarding the popular Bollywood singer, Sonu Nigam. Nigam's complaint of the loud sounds of the early morning call for prayer for the Muslims or the azaan reaching his home and causing disturbance; resulted in a fatwa being released against him, awarding anyone who shaved the singer's head with price money. Though the fatwa was released with the understanding that shaving off of one's head would mean shame and insult; Nigam's response to it by publicly getting his head shaved gave new meaning to the act, one of revolt or power. In this sense, one may observe how the meanings of head hair vary with the varied contexts.

Therefore, one may conclude by saying that the relationship of an individual with their hair forms a contemporary issue around human relationships as before attempting to establish or maintain one's relationships with others, it becomes important to be aware of one's own identity. Head hair reflect a lot about an individual.

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<sup>5</sup>Phelpstead, Carl (2013). Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland. *Scandinavian Studies*, 85 (1), 1-19.

Similar to one's style of dress up it becomes the first impression of one's personality, their identity, on the basis of which one creates relationships with other humans. Also, maintaining a particular hairstyle maybe a form of expressing group identity as is evident in the cases of communities like the Amish and the Sikhs.

This paper, thus, looked at the experiences of four Indian men based in Delhi, with regard to their hair. Though such a small sample size would not lead to any generalizations or even conclusions with regard to the aim of the paper; it does provide certain insights into the relationship men have with their head hair. The issue of the beard is also discussed and it was revealed how professional dress codes restrict the freedom for men with regard to their beards and also hair. The paper also explored how different generations have different experiences and views. Such an exploration revealed that with the younger generation, the question of one's agency is more important than the structure, and norms and rules of the society. The head hair, then, become important symbols for representation of one's identity and personality. The gender identity, however, is not always represented through the head hair as more and more men are keeping long hair and being accepted, to a certain extent, by the society. Thus, it may be concluded that the head hair forms an essential and crucial part of one's identity and medium of expression.

### **Interview I**

Name: Satwant Kishore

Gender: Male

Age: 62 years

Religion: Hindu

Q. Have you always had short hair?

SK: Yes.

Q. Why?

SK: So how else should I keep my hair? I am a guy, so, I will have short hair only.

Q. Have you never wanted to grow your hair out or shave your head?

SK: No. All this only your generation does. When I was young we did not have so many men with long hair. It was not allowed only. In school and college, we had to maintain short hair. Even when I started working, the manager would send off any man who would come with long hair to work, to get a hair-cut.

And shaving of the head is a bad sign in our culture.

Q. How so?

SK: If a boy shaves his head then, that is the sign that his parent has died.

Q. Did you shave your head when you parents died?

SK: No. I just got a few strands of my hair chopped off.

Q. Why did you not get your head shaved?

SK: Because I am a Punjabi Brahmin. There are various categories of Brahmins and they all have different rules and customs. Brahmins from UP and Garhwal shave their heads when someone dies in their families; but the Brahmins from Punjab do not have this custom. In Punjab there are Sikh Brahmins also, so, they would not shave their heads, right.

Also, for a Brahmin the most important and relevant part of the head hair is the one long ponytail, at the back of his head, that a Brahmin maintains. So, mostly we get those few strands of our hair chopped off at times of death in the family.

Q. Did you ever keep a beard?

SK: Yes. When I was young, in college I guess, I had a beard.

Q. Why do you not keep a beard now?

SK: When I started working I had to shave the beard. You cannot go to an office to work with a beard. It is unprofessional.

Q. How do you feel about men with long hair and women with short hair?

SK: I don't feel they should be doing this. I feel that to be a part of a society, one needs to comply to the rules prescribed by that society; otherwise everything is messed up and there will be no structure.

Q. How do you feel about balding?

SK: Well, it is a natural thing. But it can be prevented with one eats right and follows a healthy lifestyle. You people today, use so many chemicals on your body. I ate healthy, did physical work, and maintained a healthy lifestyle. So, you can see how healthy I am today and I how healthy my hair is too. I don't even have white hair, just a few strands now have turned a bit grey.

## **Interview II**

Name: Siddharth Srivastava

Gender: Male

Age: 26 years

Religion: Hindu

Q. Q. Have you always had short hair?

C: Yes.

Q. Have you never wanted to grow your hair out or shave your head?

C: Shave, no. Long hair, maybe, I have thought about it but I cannot grow them out for now.

Q. Why is that?

C: As you can see, I have thin hair. If I had healthier hair then, yes, I might have grown my hair long.

Q. Do you think that anyone would object if you were to grow your hair long?

C: I don't think so. My parents might feel weird and question it. But many guys nowadays have long hair, so, I don't think it would be much of an issue.

Q. Do you keep a beard or always shave?

C: It depends. In summers I shave it because of the heat. Also, when I have interviews or important meetings then, too, I shave my beard.

Q. How do you feel about women with short hair?

C: I don't mind them. Everyone has the freedom to do whatever they want with their hair. But personally, I like women with long hair. I don't think that I would like it if my girlfriend were to cut her hair short. But then again,

it is an individual choice and I would never stop anyone or object. But yes, the hair should look good and not weird. That goes for the boys also. One should not just follow any trend but see what looks good on them.

Q. Why did you say no to shaving your head?

C: Because I do not wish to shave my head. Hair is important. It is part of your look, the first thing anyone looks at and first impressions are important. I would not feel this confident walking outside or giving presentations if I had no hair on my head.

Q. What about shaving off of head hair when someone in the family dies?

C: Well, that is a completely different thing. And my family does not have this ritual. I performed the last rites of both my grandmothers and not once did anyone ask me to shave my head.

Q. How do you feel about balding?

C: It is scary; especially, for us men.

Q. You said you have thin hair. What would you do if you were to go bald soon?

C: I do have a tiny bald patch at the back of my head. So, yea, I fear going bald a lot. I have tried a few oils and treatments. Even now I am getting my hair treated with medicated oil and shampoo; though, they do not seem to work much. But we do have a lot of options nowadays. Even though I would like to avoid surgery or anything that might cause harm, but when you have no option, you take what you get.

Q. What about wigs?

C: They are too obvious! I guess women get the freedom to experiment with wigs more than men. I would never wear a wig and have people mock me for going bald and trying to hide it. I want treatment that can grow my hair back and not let me go bald.

### **Interview III**

Name: Aditya Nagpal

Gender: Male

Age: 27 years

Religion: Hindu

Q. Have you always had long hair?

A: No. I only recently grew my hair long.

Q. Why?

A: Because I wanted to try something new. I got bored of having the same haircut since birth!

Q. Did anyone object to your new hairstyle?

A: Kind of, yes. My parents do not really like my long hair. They are constantly asking me to get rid of my ponytail.

Q. How do you feel about this situation?

A: I feel that it is something new for them and so, they are finding it difficult to accept it. Also, their friends find it difficult to accept so, that adds to their thinking. But at the end of the day, they still love me and not forcing me cut my hair short so, all is fine

Q. Have you ever wanted to shave your head?

A: Not really. Maybe I might in the future if I feel like it. But for now, I want long hair only.

Q. Why not shave you head?

A: I guess because we have been told from childhood that shaving of the head is bad as it means that someone in your family has died. I do not see people following this ritual but still, that stigma is attached to shaving one's head. Also, we have the trend of man buns and not shaved heads. So, I wanted to try out the new trend. We men get so little to do with our hair. I am glad that now people are coming up with trends like man bun and no shave November.

Q. You follow the no shave November trend?

A: Yes. I like it. Also, it makes sense because in summers it becomes difficult to keep a beard because it gets too hot.

Q. How do you feel about women with short hair?

A: I feel women should be able to do whatever they want.

Q. How do you feel about balding?

A: I feel it is a thing that happens to many guys, especially when we get older. I certainly hope that I do not have to face this anytime soon. But there are men who look nice with a bald head so, let's hope that if I go bald I look nice, at least!

#### **Interview IV**

Name: Gurinder Singh

Gender: Male

Age: 23 years

Religion: Sikh

Q. Have you always had short hair?

G: No. As a child I had long hair.

Q. Why did you cut your hair short then?

G: Because I did not like to have long hair. As a child only, I would feel different because all the other boys in my class had short hair. Kids look at you different if you are Sikh. I was tired and irritated of people calling me 'oye, sardar'<sup>6</sup> and teasing me with sardar<sup>7</sup> jokes. I just did not want to be different or stand out in a crowd. So, I requested my parents to cut my hair short but they denied it. So, I started complaining of headaches and what not to get my hair cut short, by any means. Finally, they gave into my request when I was in class 10.

Q. Having long hair is the identity of your community and culture. Did you face any objections from your community or anyone?

G: Yes. There were, and still are people who feel what I did was wrong. But my family has accepted it and that is all that matters to me.

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<sup>6</sup> Hey, sikh (boy/man).

<sup>7</sup> Sikh

Q. Have you then, ever wanted to grow your hair out again or shave your head?

G: No. Neither.

Q. Why?

G: I feel I would not look nice if I shaved my head. And I do not want to go back to long hair. I am happy with my short hair.

Q. Do you keep a beard or always shave?

G: Usually, yes. I do not like to keep a beard. It gets so hot in Delhi and then, I anyways have to shave because of office.

Q. How do you feel about men with long hair and women with short hair?

G: I don't feel anything! Why would I care how other people choose to keep their hair! If it makes them happy then, let them do whatever with their hair. It is their hair after all.

Q. How do you feel about balding?

G: To be honest, I fear it a bit. I have heard that it is common among men. And as I said I do not think that I would look nice if I shaved my head, so, if I were to go bald then, I might not feel as confident and comfortable to be with people. But I guess I would be fine, what with all the treatments and remedies that the actors use. I hope I don't have to resort to them, though.

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