SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

A Narcissus Omnibus

Suddenly he's everywhere, Man the Vain, happy in his vanity

OF all silhouettes, the morph magicians—visual illusionists who stalk social media—imagined an angarkha-style white anarkali for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In this morphed image that circulated on social media during the PM's recent visit to China, he was seen walking a step ahead of Chinese diplomats, clearly the prince, wearing a white mulmul anarkali with a silver border, delicate white embroidery and silver cords with tassels wrapping the garment around him. A Rohit Bal classic, if you must ask. Modi's sunglasses had been pushed over his forehead to hold back his salted hair, and his body language, not morphed, was of a diva. A diva with a purpose; a Mr India who pledges to save the world and his own country, his jawline taut with vanity and vim.

The photo was forwarded to me by a professor of sociology who found the image telling. So it was. This wasn't facile satire—the anarkali has been seen on men on Indian catwalks, in fickle and infrequent hauls of androgyny, but not as elegantly worn as this. What cologne would the PM be wearing, I wondered, momentarily trapped in the illusion of the morphed photo. It had an aura that could be seen, heard and smelt. Smelt, yes. Obsession, by Calvin Klein?

Fade in to Bollywood star Ranvir Singh. It's a scene-and-heard tale this time. Every time the dude walks out for a film promotion, a jaunt to a TV studio or live show, or to feature in an ad, he sheds star dust. Chopping board, washboard, or board-me-now abs sucked in just right to create torso tension, short hair slickly gelled back or grown longer to fall fancifully around the neck, a two-day stubble or a twirled moustache or just a clean shave, hats or suspenders, pointy brocade shoes or Dior brogues, dark suits or white vests, a smile and a wink. Purry, look-at-me swagger. One hand up on the cheek, a shoulder perfectly titled towards the camera. Cool, right? Or is the word hot?

Last month, when Sonam Kapoor launched Michelin-starred chef Vikas Khanna's book *Utsav: A Culinary Epic* at Cannes, and Khanna, the first Indian chef to walk the red carpet, smiled cheerily at the cameras, another male diva moment zoomed in. Khanna's sherwani, his dimples, his wavy-yet-spiked hair and sculpted face was a damn good recipe to compete with Sonam Kapoor's white gown with a seriously plunging neckline. Khanna's book, priced at ₹8 lakh, weighs 15 kilos, we are told, but the chef himself looked vulgarly slim. Pretty man that, no stranger to Indians who see him often on TV ads, telling us what's cooking in his life.

MALE VANITY HAS BEEN AROUND AEONS BEFORE SALMAN WENT SHIRTLESS. WHAT'S NEW IS THE WILLINGNESS OF MEN TO BE SEEN AS VAIN.

Even before you finish typing 'hottest men on Indian TV' on Google, a dozen lists scroll up—Mohit Raina, Rannvijay Singh, Gurmeet Choudhary, Karan Singh Grover and choreographer Terence Lewis, tashan boys of TV, their shirtless poses and pauses, dusted with a Salman Khan flourish, beam at you. They are fast products of the social media meat factory—strewn with glistening male bodies. Many of them are fantastic dancers too—they twist and twirl, serenade and fall. Then stand up to do the drill again, all the while smiling like wicked saints. The naked, multi-packed torso may have become a repetitive sight, but notice how it is now offset by a twinkle in the eye, a breathless glance away from the camera in a heady mix of awareness and aloofness, half a sexy grin and a sweetly sunken cheek. Male, male, male.

Sachin Tendulkar made hard money by selling Jaypee cement, but Virat Kohli? Besides Pepsi, some deodorants and shampoos and the Audi RS6, he is also the face of Flying Machine apparel. The tag line: 'I am Sexy When I Am Me'. His divaesque signature—flaunt your good (and bad) self to get attention. On the fashion ramp, beautiful, long-haired models like Amit Ranjan bare their chests, blare the bugle of masculinity and hawk jewellery as well as slinky sarongs.

It's been a while since the hunk John Abraham and the never-hunky Shahrukh Khan—the latter now a case study for how not to age gracefully—sold fairness creams and frolicked in bathtubs with rose petals and wasted milk. Or, when India's most missed male model, Milind Soman, became alluringly 'Mantastic' in his Old Spice after-shave ad. The waxed male chest has been stalking us for some years. But fuelled by its unfailing presence, its new interpretation is now rooting itself as a symbol of cheesy glamour in a culture that largely associated male chests with hair, macho stiffness, repressed emotions and heart disease.

Male vanity is not new. What's new is how it has been repurposed by the willingness of men to be viewed as vain. Heterosexual 'male divaness' is a visible urban sticker now. Vanity is the foil, not the antithesis, of big success. It is not the pink 'other' in a resume of stoic maleness. It is blue as well as bare. Its outwardly shape may have been authored in blatant, come-hither ways by the shirtless Bhai Khan of hit-and-run notoriety, and is still aped unoriginally by the Sonu Sood garden varieties, but male divaness itself has become bigger than a bubble.

Let's stop confusing it with some long-awaited crisis in masculinity that urges men to embrace their feminine side, as homo-eroticism or a ripple effect of gay dressing in Indian fashion culture. Once you leave psychobabble at the doorstep, Masculinity Lite blooms big and pretty. There is reason then, to admire Karan Johar preening in yellow jackets, looking more attractive than the lippy Anushka Sharma in *Bombay Velvet*. Or understand why Salman Khan was offered an enormous fee by P.N. Gadgil Jewellers of Pune to dress up in a purple dhoti, with kurta and dupatta, and an enormous gold necklace, in the brand's ad, titled 'Bold to Spread Gold'.

These male divas are now a challenge for our stylists and image managers to push and probe what modern masculinity means and what it must look like. To visualise it imaginatively without photographic cliches that currently mimic international trends or putting flowers in the hair of male models, as Gucci's creative director Alessandro Michele did for a show. That is not we want or need in India.

Florid flamboyance has finally become a male pursuit. But being pure physics, there is never an external movement without an internal 'force'. So instead of disguising it in mulmul anarkalis or sensing it through moist torsos, let's sift through the black, the white and the obvious to turn the gaze to the unexplored features of Masculinity Lite. Before it becomes the new bitch. ◘

Show and shine Karan Johar flaunts himself in mustard splendour, Salman speaks the Eternal Me in silken purple and gold, Hrithik oozes the sinful V-word, and our lady in yellow is lost in glistening beefcake