

## **Occidentalisation of Beauty Standards: Eurocentrism in Asia**

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### **Abstract**

Beauty standards have long been set in place within society. However the origins of such beauty standards are a topic of discussion and frequently up for debate. Our paper takes a look into the origins, impacts, and implications of beauty standards within various regions of Asia, including Central Asian, South Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East and whether they can be linked to Europe and the Age of Exploration. We used an archival approach, looking into previous records regarding European colonization of Asia and popular folklores and figures. Our findings conclude that European colonization can very well be attributed to the beauty standards across Asia; for much of these regions, the ideal standard of beauty is heavily influenced by the ideal European figure, such as their light skin and light colored eyes. However, it may not be the sole contributor to said standards. Some of these standards were set and stone far before the Age of Exploration, and in modern society, what people see on social media may also affect their notion of what beauty standards are. Using our research and results, we hope to see how beauty standards affect modern day females and whether or not the understanding of the European beauty standard causes a clash in ideology against the beauty standard of said person's own culture.

## Introduction

It was during the 15th century when Europe began their assault on the world by conquering foreign countries and expanding their power over them. Majority of these established colonies were ‘exploitative’ meaning that regions were conquered to drain them of their natural resources and capitalise on the indigenous people. Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) argue, "institutions [established by colonials] did not introduce much protection for private property, nor did they provide checks and balances against government expropriation. In fact, the main purpose of the extractive state was to transfer as much of the resources of the colony to the colonizer, with the minimum amount of investment possible." Edwards Said’s groundbreaking work ‘Orientalism’ (1978) explores the long-term effects of Western colonisation on colonised people. According to Said, the Westerners have fabricated the image of the Orient as being primitive and the uncivilized “other” to create the contrast to the progressive and civilized West. Therefore, in the name of “enlightening, civilizing and even humanizing” them, they have imposed a Western language and culture on the colonized people through ignoring and distorting the “culture, histories, values, and language of the Oriental peoples” (Hamadi, 2014).

This paper examines the effect of eurocentrism on the modern Asian beauty standard and how Eurocentrism may have impacted this through historic European imperialism in East Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia. Eurocentrism is defined by a viewpoint where European culture is looked upon favorably and biased against non-western civilizations. Western beauty ideals include being thin and tall, having long hair, having light/tanned skin, having big breasts, large eyes, a small nose, and high cheekbones (1). The modern beauty standard in Asia for females shows evidence of aligning with eurocentric ideals, for example East Asian beauty standards stress having large eyes, a small nose bridge, and white skin. While countries like South Past and present beauty standards will be explored along with how this also affects the pressure asian youths may feel to conform to a beauty standard not inherent to their own culture.

## Method and Materials

Our method of research included archival research in which we inspected various primary sources and evidence from established sources to analyze how and if European colonization has affected beauty standards in the past and present. We searched for documents and statements which emphasized beauty in that specific time. Keywords in our search for sources included searching for the word “beauty” followed by a specific time period. We utilized evidence and quotes from specific time periods to correlate when European colonization occurred to subsequent beauty standards, from how they changed in the past to the present. For research into East Asians, we investigated the causes of the alignment in beauty standards by searching for the

culture surrounding the appearance of highly sought features like light skin and double eyelids. We also searched for origins of light skin and why it was desired in most of Asia.

## Results

### Central Asia

Central Asia is a region in Asia that ranges from the Caspian Sea to Afghanistan and Iran. This region consists of former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Because central Asia was part of the isolated soviet union for most of the 20th century, their beauty standards were based heavily on traditional native poetry which emphasized lighter skin, dark eyes, and black hair. Darker skin is seen as a stigma of lower hierarchy, as lighter skin gives the impression of your family being from urban areas.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, all of these nations gained their independence. During this process, societal norms changed through reforms such as an increase in the advocacy of women's rights. Governments throughout central Asia banned polygamy, forced marriage, and other societal norms such as the veil. In this time, we see these former isolated nations step into the public sphere, entering the western world. Central Asian women were immediately treated as a symbol of liberation and were fetishized for their "exotic" beauty. Even in central Asian communities, women's appearances were being treated as a form of national identity where people juggled the choice between the traditional narrative of beauty and the emerging western standards.

This surge of European standards was heavily influenced by the rise of social media, and heavily contradicted the ethnicized look. This caused a divide as many young people struggled to come to their own terms on beauty. In today's society, many young girls are exposed to skin whitening products as well as ads for plastic surgery, especially double eyelid surgery and blepharoplasty. The rise of these practices and their accessibility are visibly affecting the societal norms in these countries as beauty standards are slowly shifting to a more eurocentric look.

### South Asia

At the turn of the millennium, into the twenty-first century, three US magazines featured Indian women on their covers to symbolise India's emergence into the new global economy. The *National Geographic* for their *Millennium Supplement* issue in 1999 emblazoned two Indian women on its cover: one draped in a traditional red saree with heavy gold brocade and jewelry glancing approvingly at the other woman; a high fashion model in a tight black vinyl bodysuit gazing fiercely at the camera. The glaring contrast between the femininity of the old and new captured the central story of that issue, concerning India's entering of modernity. In 2006, *Newsweek* and *The Times* published their own covers featuring beautiful Indian women.

*Newsweek* had the actress-model Padma Lakshmi in a loosely tied sari with hands clasped in *namaste* - a traditional Indian greeting - along with the caption 'The New India'. For *The Times*, a UCLA business student and classical Indian dancer Gunjan Thiagarajah graced the cover donning a traditional ornamental headpiece alongside the caption 'India Inc.'. Reddy (2011) notes that all these women depict the faces and bodies of diasporic Indian American women - that is, they are not living in the sub-continent itself - to represent this new Indian globalness. As Reddy explains it; 'these photogenic diasporic Indian women have been used to represent the globally modern Indian nation, displayed as a corporate brand.' The emergence of India into modernity has been symbolised by Indian beauty through the Western lens.

The entire subcontinent of South Asia had an opulent history from being one of the earliest civilisations on Earth, to emerging as the wealthiest and the most advanced empire - with the economy showing signs of industrialisation - until the 19th century where British imperialism savagely exploited the region of their riches and natural resources. Thus, analysing the standards of beauty in South Asia means exploring aeons back in history. Mauryan figurines are seen to be the first depictions of women from the 1st til the 4th century BCE which presented full breasts, wide hips and tapered legs; largely fitting in with other ancient standards as it usually denotes fertility (Dhavalikar,1999, Bracey, 2007). This started to change with the coming of the 1st century as Sanchi female figurines contorted the body into S-shaped curves to emphasise sexuality and by the Kushan era (1st-4th century), beauty sculpted onto the figurines had been standardised into 'eyes that were placed two-thirds of the way up the face, the bottom of the breast were placed one heads height below the chin, the whole figure stood seven heads high... and the use of a fairly round face' (Bracey, 2007). These portraits indicate that the artists were trained to make figurines in such a way because these proportions were not the natural features of Indian women. These were considered idealized beauty standards (Deheija, 2006) Another representation of Indian beauty ideals is the portrayal of Parvati; the Hindu goddess of fertility, love, harmony, marriage and children; thus, it can be inferred that her depiction set the standard of beauty for South Asian women. Parvati is a "slender-bodied maiden of comely hips and moon-like face," inferring slim bodies with prominent hips were considered attractive with a round face (ibid.).

Poets from South India wrote about beautiful women, for example, the Shringarashata of Bhartihari describes a woman whose 'skin eclipses gold lustre', who has 'heavy hips' and 'thick tresses that shame black bees'. From such literature, it can be inferred that thick and black hair with golden skin was the idealised standard of beauty because South Indians generally have darker features than in other regions in the subcontinent (Varma and Mulchandani, 2004). This is a contrast to Gandhara artworks which originates from a region which covers modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Gandhara region had strong connections with the Mediterranean

world resulting in immigration thus Greco-Roman influences can be seen in sculpture such as freer form in the anatomy and Aryan features (Kurt Behrendt, 2018).

Modern South Asia, like in historical times, has a systematised idea of beauty but through several invasions from foreign powers it has morphed from the envisioned traditional South Asian features into a highly idealised projection of what beauty should be. Most notably and most recently, South Asia was colonised by the British beginning from the East India Company setting up trading posts from 1612 to acquiring ‘presidencies’ from 1757 to completely transferring power from the Company to the Crown in 1858. The so-called ‘British Raj’ gained independence in 1947 and has since fractured into present day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. A legacy said to have been left by western imperialism is having fair skin. In India, the words for fair and beautiful are synonymous (Franklin 1968; Hall 1995). Whiteness is a source of symbolic cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986) that is associated with upper class images, luxury, prestige and success in Asian cultures (Rhada, 2007). Colonial administrators like Herbert Risley Hope were said to have expertise in ‘scientific-racism’ (which has now been discounted). Risley Hope had divided the native population into the ‘Aryan’(Indo-European) and ‘Dravidian’ (similar to South Indian) races based on the width of the nose. While this distinction was meant to be employed by the British to understand the people, it polarised the society by introducing systematic oppression so that those from deep within South India struggles in their livelihoods and attempts to climb up while their Northern counterparts - descended from the Aryan immigrants of ancient times - received comparatively better treatment.

Mishra (2015) analysed traditional folklore and stories originating from the region and found that there were many dark-skinned heroes. She writes ‘one can assume that at the time, the colour black was acceptable as a skin colour for heroes, some of the most powerful gods and goddesses, and beautiful princesses and therefore it is unlikely that people of the time saw being black as a bad thing.’ (Mishra, 2015). The heroine of *Mahabharata* was Draupadi who had ‘skin as dark as night’. Krishna, another central god in Hinduism, was also black before later depictions began to show him as blue because the Sanskrit name Krishna itself means dark skin.

However, it would be extremely reductionist to assume that modern South Asian beauty standards have solely been influenced by eurocentrism. As already established, during ancient times, there was significant Aryan immigration after the conquering of the regions now in modern day Pakistan by Alexander the Great. South Asia was also ruled by the Turkic-Mongol Mughals who arrived in the seventh century and ruled from 1526 to 1858; they had fairer skin, straight and sharp noses and angular bone structure. It can be assumed that fairer skin was an ambiguous standard until occidentalisation took grip.

Another dimension to the argument against eurocentrism is the work done by Majumdar (2004 on marriage and advertisements in the twentieth century. Marriage advertisements were

used in the ‘research of traditional Indian societal beauty standards’ as they indicate what values are appreciated in a bride, or more generally, in women. In one of these marriage advertisements, a girl’s family from Calcutta in 1910 characterises their daughter beautiful by describing a “medium complexion skin color, and good figure” (Majumdar, 2004). Another girl’s parents in 1927 described their daughter as having a ‘glistening dark complexion’ (ibid). This article shows that there is a preference to medium or dark complexions and implies that the centuries old standard from ancient India has managed to remain. Nevertheless, through foreign invasions, an association between fairer skin and beauty has been calcified.

Li et al. (2008) investigated the culture of skin lightening and beauty in Asian cultures. The study focuses on how advertisements portrayed skin colour to women. Using content analysis from 108 advertisements and the identity of the model, they found that throughout different cultures ideal skin was depicted as smooth, shiny and white. For the country India, the majority of the models were Indian models or Indian high profile celebrities. (Li et al, 2008) This can be attributed to the recently globalised Indian beauty with the Western export of beauty pageants. While film and global pageants have had the positive effect of familiarising the world with Indian beauty there is a severe selection bias with the actresses and models being fairer skinned and with caucasian features reminiscent of their ancient Aryan ancestors. The study also suggests that the media has an integral role in shaping the Indian beauty standard.

And so, by the end of the twentieth century, the modern state of India emerged as a competitor in the global economy which was signified by photographing Indian women on the covers of the most popular magazines. While it took time to recover from the trauma of Western suppression, there has been a shift in the paradigm of perceiving beauty. The fairness cream brand ‘Fair and Lovely’ had been notorious for perpetuating archaic beauty standards that fairer women achieve more success than darker women. On July 2nd 2020, it was announced that the company would be rebranding to ‘Glow and Lovely’ after a 22-year-old woman filed a petition for the company to change its narrative and regressive advertising. While it may be the same old wine in a new bottle, the brand has lost credibility through the several years of outrage and protest. Thus, it is worthy to note that beauty standards are not static; they are ever-evolving and with South Asia’s rapid development it seems that a separate path is being carved out independent of eurocentrism or any foreign influence.

### **East Asia**

Contrary to the other parts of Asia, Eastern Asia has never been colonized by the West. Countries such as Japan, Korea, and China, have practiced isolationism for long periods of time, with the shared purpose of limiting foreign influence. As a result of this, East Asian nations influenced each other, rather than having foreign “initiative”. When it comes to beauty

standards, popular to contrary belief, it doesn't seem that East Asian beauty standards were only formed after eurocentric ideals. As the longest continuous civilization in the world, China has had beauty standards way before the European Age of Exploration, where Westerners colonized and imposed their ideas on others.

East Asians women are held to a standard that enforces the idea that East Asian women are youthful, cute, and innocent. One of the prominent features that the beauty industry in East Asia focuses on is the size of an individual's eyes. Larger eyes are viewed as more attractive, because it makes females seem cuter. We subconsciously associate big eyes to baby mammals, so they're seen as a visually cute clue (Borgi, et al., 2014.) Double eyelids are a characteristic that creates the illusion that one's eye is larger, contributing to the rising eyelid surgery cases in Asia. In Korea, nearly fifty percent of women in their twenties undergo this procedure to achieve the youthful look that's treasured. Furthermore, many women in Korea also undergo a specific procedure called "aegyo-sal cosmetic surgery". 'Aegyo sal' is a term used to refer to small fatty deposits under your eyes, and it's valued as it makes an individual seem younger. Although many believe that the East Asian beauty ideal of having large eyes is influenced by eurocentrism, it's just preferred because it signifies youth and innocence. "Kawaii" is a term that originated in Japan that is used when describing something cute and almost baby-like, big large being one of these features. Most people believe that the instinctive liking towards "kawaii" things is because of the human nature of nurturance. However, protective behavior is not the only reason why humans find kawaii intriguing, but also because it attracts attention, makes one more attentive, and has a calming, healing effect on others (Hiroshi, 2019). This contributes to why East Asians emphasize a correlation between beauty and success.

Another beauty ideal, having pale skin, stems from the history of aristocracy in nations such as Japan and China. Traditionally, having darker skin was associated with being a lower class, as peasants were tanner from working in the fields.

While eurocentrism could have influenced East Asian beauty standards, it can't be assumed that eurocentrism was the *main* influence on the beauty ideals. China is one of the longest continuous civilizations in the world, and therefore some of the beauty standards have existed way before the Age of Exploration.

## **Middle East**

The Middle East encompasses the Arabian Peninsula and some parts of North Africa and Iran. Arabs make up the majority of those in the Middle East, and the prominent religion is Islam with Christianity coming in second with heavy influence from Judaism. The British and the French held the most political and cultural influence and power in this region, along with Italy later on having taken control of Libya (Barber, n.d., #). People in the Middle East can be

genetically European or African and other races and varieties of mixes. Meaning, their skin color and other features have a pretty broad range. Typically Middle Easterners are tan, and commonly have an aquiline-shaped nose, thick wavy dark hair, and eyes that can range in color from brown to hazel, green and blue, depending on the region.

Arabs in the Middle East can agree that the way beauty is measured can be most heavily attributed to the amount of melanin in their skin. Having white skin is considered to be a blessing and held as a much higher status than those with darker skin. Frequently, having been from or holding a passport from the Northern Hemisphere can easily secure and guarantee a job, and in addition, determine pay, benefits, and treatment in the workplace. Not many believe in equal treatment due to the divinity of whiteness in this region. Those with darker skin are treated as if they were below society and instantly seen as “ugly” and other harmful and degrading terms.

The Middle East is no exception from having European beauty standards influence that of their own. As early as last year, surveys had been conducted in the Middle East in which consensus group members would present people with images of contemporary beauty icons, such as historical figures Nefertit, Ameera Al-Taweel, and more. Ultimately however, a large portion of the participants chose Angelina Jolie, as they desired to bear her appearance the most (Kashmar et al, 2019). However it is important to note that some beauty standards in the Middle East that are attributed to European beauty standards are innate. Iranians for example, were shown to have European and Persian ancestry, which is why they may often have lighter skin and other features commonly associated with European beauty trends.

While European beauty standards certainly have their implications on Middle Eastern beauty standards, it is not fair to say that it tells the whole story. Much like the other regions of Asia, beauty standards continue to evolve as more and more people find acceptance to their own cultural beauty standards. The Middle East has no shortage of beauty trends they can claim as their own. People from the Middle East take pride in the shape and color of their eyes followed by other facial features such as their nose and cheeks (Kashmar et al., 2019). Aside from facial features, the Middle East is able to make the most out of their clothing too. People who are largely unfamiliar with clothing such as the hijab feel as if it is suppressing towards the women who wear them. However, these women assure that the decision to wear a hijab is their own choice. To them it is not only culturally significant, but beautiful too. These women find ways to incorporate hijabs in a multitude of ways such as combining it with scarves or even creating their own custom designs.

## Discussion

We found evidence that eurocentric ideals continue to modern beauty standards due to the influence American culture holds on the rest of the world. We saw evidence of heavy influence from Eurocentrism in South and Central Asia, especially in South Asia where Eurocentric representations of south Asian women have influenced the beauty standards held for women. However, a diversifying culture indicates that Asian cultures still maintain parts of their culture and identity through diverse representation in the media. We found that the best way to diffuse eurocentric ideals in Asia was to focus on the media and how to portray beauty standards for youths all around the world. Media is highly accessible today by many and those who constantly see images of achievable body standards will gravitate towards achieving that standard. The power also lies in large media conglomerates, which also control what is put out to consumers. Contrary, since East Asians entered isolation and never experienced extreme influences on their culture, they developed beauty standards not heavily influenced by Eurocentrism. Rather, the idea of having larger eyes contributes to the idea of “cuteness” and appearing youthful to others. In addition, the idea of having light skin developed from the idea of class where rich women were not expected to work and therefore could stay inside and not have their skin exposed to the outside.

For future research, we would like to look into how Asian females are affected by this modern beauty standard, and if areas like Central Asia and South Asia feel that European colonization has affected how they view European beauty as opposed to beauty in their own cultures. Especially for Asian Americans who have been exposed to both cultures and may be influenced by both beauty standards. It would also be interesting to look into why East Asian beauty, which developed independently has shown similarities to European culture. The idea that large eyes create a cute “kawaii” like appearance could be related to gender roles, and the impact female stereotypes have on females to appear younger and cuter.

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