

THE CATEGORY OF BEAUTY AS A POWERFUL INSTRUMENT OF “MASS CULTURE” IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

Mirakbarova Dildora Miralisher qizi

Associate Professor of the Tashkent International University,
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philosophy Tashkent, Uzbekistan
dmirakbarova2207@gmail.com

Abstract

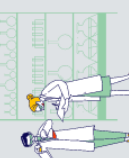
In the era of globalization, many fields, including aesthetics within philosophy, have undergone significant changes. Centuries-old standards of inner and outer beauty have been replaced by false, artificial standards that have negatively impacted people's aesthetic tastes. This article conducts a comparative study of the secular and religious foundations of beauty, and analyzes it as one of the weapons of “mass culture”.

Keywords: Ethics, aesthetics, beauty, beauty standards, “mass culture”, falsehood, outer and inner beauty.

Introduction

It is well known that philosophy is referred to as the “father of sciences”, and many fields have been developing within this discipline for centuries. One such discipline is aesthetics, commonly referred to as the philosophy of beauty. Among aesthetic categories, the concept of beauty occupies a central position, as it constitutes the primary object of aesthetic inquiry. Despite its fundamental significance, there is no exhaustive scientific definition or universally accepted interpretation of beauty. For analytical purposes, this study relies on the definition presented in the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Philosophy, which characterizes beauty as a phenomenon inherent in nature, society, and art, and as a core aesthetic category. “According to this definition, beauty exerts an emotional influence that enhances an individual’s physical and spiritual energies, generating feelings of joy, pleasure, and profound spiritual fulfillment. Usefulness, in turn, is understood as that which serves the advancement of society. As aptly noted by Friedrich Schiller, beauty manifests itself as a symbol of human purity. Individuals, regardless of place or circumstance, derive pleasure from the beauty of nature; whether consciously or unconsciously, they experience joy and enrich their spiritual world. Furthermore, beauty is perceived and evaluated in accordance with the social ideals and aspirations of particular social groups, reflecting the close interconnection between aesthetic perception and socio-cultural values”. [1:98-99]

When defining beauty, it is essential to take into account its multidimensional nature and the subjective character of its evaluation. Beauty cannot be confined solely to material



manifestations; rather, it also encompasses the spiritual sphere and is expressed through human qualities and moral virtues. This perspective highlights the intrinsic interconnection between aesthetics and ethics.

Historical evidence demonstrates that humanity has consistently aspired toward beauty. Various forms of beauty: material, spiritual, human, and natural contribute significantly to personal development and the cultivation of creative potential. As the French literary scholar Edmond Feral aptly noted, “Only a person capable of perceiving beauty can truly comprehend and understand the essence of human life”.[2:34]

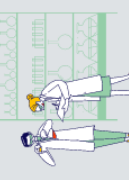
MAIN PART

Since ancient times, humanity has sought ways to determine the criteria of beauty. In the perception of beauty, such factors as the individuality of human aesthetic taste, societal values, and prevailing cultural tendencies are taken into account. Although the primary objective of every civilization has been to identify the standards of “perfect beauty,” this question remains unresolved. Nevertheless, by examining the history, literature, and art of ancient civilizations, it is possible, at least partially, to gain insight into the beauty standards of those periods.

In Ancient Greece, where art, literature, and politics were given particular importance, special attention was devoted to defining the criteria of beauty. In antiquity, beauty was understood as the harmony and perfection of both body and mind. Attempts were made to determine standards of beauty through mathematical proportions and geometric forms. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato emphasized that the quality and measure of the object under consideration constitute fundamental criteria of beauty and art. According to his view, fundamental human aspirations include the desire to be beautiful, to be healthy, and to attain prosperity through honest means. Although Plato sought to express beauty through mathematical relations, he stressed that beauty is not limited to the external proportionality of the body, but also lies in the harmony between one’s inner world and outward appearance. As he metaphorically stated, “If you wish to see yourself, do not look at your external image in the mirror, but rather into the mirror within,” thereby implying that external beauty originates from inner virtue.

Ancient Greek thinkers and artists made a significant contribution to defining the standards of “perfect beauty” through various forms of art. Paintings and sculptures embodying beauty were created, and written works explored the qualities that enhance female beauty. Sculptors such as Polykleitos and Praxiteles, who worked in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, produced works that became exemplary sources for representing beauty. Praxiteles’ distinctive depiction of the Greek goddess Aphrodite portrayed the deity with refinement and grace. Unlike earlier representations of the female body, which were often depicted in a coarse, masculine manner, Praxiteles’ sculpture elevated the artistic representation of femininity and became a benchmark for beauty standards.[3:115-116]

In Ancient Greece, particular emphasis was placed on the physical health of both men and women. Consequently, a strong and well-developed body was regarded as one of the key criteria of beauty. For women, physical fitness symbolized endurance, the ability to overcome



hardships, the capacity to give birth to healthy offspring, and, when necessary, participation in warfare.

During the classical period, Greeks also attached great importance to the harmony and balance of bodily and facial features. A fair complexion, lightly rosy cheeks, a straight nose, large blue eyes, a modestly sized mouth, a relatively low forehead, and wavy golden hair were considered the prevailing standards of beauty of that era.[4]

In Ancient Egypt, the physical appearance of men and women, their adornments, luxurious clothing, and facial care practices served as indicators of social status. Archaeological research on Ancient Egyptian settlements reveals that public bathhouses existed in the city of Tebtunis as early as the third century BCE. This evidence demonstrates that the fundamental criteria of beauty in Ancient Egypt were cleanliness and strict adherence to personal hygiene. Sand and soap were commonly used as hygienic agents, while animal and plant-based oils, particularly olive oil, not only nourished the skin but also served as remedies for dermatological conditions. In addition, bathing in pools filled with milk or salt was practiced as a rejuvenating treatment. Women of this period possessed distinctive perfumes and cosmetic items, including lip and nail pigments.

In Ancient Egyptian culture, Queen Cleopatra was regarded as the ideal embodiment of beauty. According to popular belief, no one could surpass Cleopatra in beauty. Historical descriptions, however, suggest that she had a sharply contoured, aquiline nose, a pronounced chin, and relatively small, deep-set eyes.

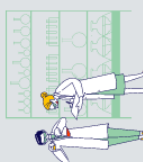
In Ancient Egypt, tall, well-proportioned, broad-shouldered men and women with fair skin, almond-shaped black or green eyes, straight noses, and full lips were considered exemplars of “perfect beauty.” Women possessing these features were often likened to Queen Nefertiti. Egyptian beauty standards favored a pale yellow complexion for women and a reddish wheat-toned complexion for men.[4]

According to Judaism, one of the ancient monotheistic religions, Noah’s eldest son was named Japheth (Yefet in Hebrew), a name meaning “beautiful” or “handsome.” When blessing his son, Noah prayed, “May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of worship.” This indicates that beauty was associated with devotion and spirituality.

The Talmud states that ten measures of beauty descended from heaven, nine of which were bestowed upon Jerusalem, while the remaining one was distributed across the rest of the world (Kiddushin 496). In Jewish thought, true beauty is defined by the radiance of the human face. Beauty is said to emerge at the point where heaven and earth converge, when the inner self transcends the outer form and manifests as light. Accordingly, a physically beautiful body detached from spirituality is considered an illusion.

Judaism does not prohibit external beauty; rather, it emphasizes that inner and outer beauty should complement one another. Beauty is also viewed as an important element in fostering spiritual harmony between spouses.[5]

In Christianity, it is stated that “God created humankind in His own image” (Genesis 1:27) and endowed them with divine attributes. The human body is described as beautiful, perfect, and endowed with great potential. A biblical verse expresses gratitude to God for creating humans



in such a marvelous form (Psalm 139:14).[6] Thus, Christianity does not prohibit striving for beauty.

The Bible mentions female beauty in approximately twenty passages and male attractiveness in several others. For instance, Jesus, Moses, and the Virgin Mary are portrayed as physically attractive figures in order to emphasize their moral purity and spiritual virtue. The Virgin Mary, in particular, is depicted as a symbol of beauty, often illustrated as a woman with a long, fair face and large eyes.

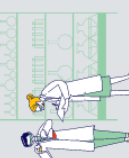
Christian teachings repeatedly emphasize the harmony between inner and outer beauty. In the “First Book of Samuel” (16:7), God instructs His prophet not to judge by appearance or stature, stating that while humans look at outward appearances, God looks at the heart. Similarly, in the “First Epistle of Peter” (3:3, 4), believers are advised to adorn themselves not with external ornaments but with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and calm spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.[6]

The Bible also attributes unique forms of beauty to different stages of human life. In the “Book of Proverbs”, it is stated that “The glory of young men is their strength, and the splendour of the aged is their gray hair” (Proverbs 20:29).[6] Gray hair is thus portrayed not only as a sign of beauty, but also as a symbol of wisdom.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, social life was largely governed by Christian doctrine, which profoundly influenced perceptions of beauty. Piety was prioritized, and the human body was often regarded by the Church as a source of sin. Consequently, individuals were encouraged to conceal their bodies beneath layered garments. Physical attractiveness and the ability to captivate others through appearance were considered sinful. Visible bodily contours in women were associated with low social status. Beauty standards of medieval women included a broad forehead, long neck, small nose, slender body, modest lips, and an overall restrained appearance. In the eleventh century, Archbishop Anselm issued a decree condemning hair-lightening practices as impure.[4]

In Islamic tradition, Imam al-Bukhari’s work *Al-Adab al-Mufrad* includes a chapter entitled “Hady and Beautiful Appearance.” The term *hady* refers to righteous conduct, while *as-samt al-hasan* denotes proper outward demeanor and appropriate personal presentation. These two concepts parallel the relationship between faith (*iman*) and practice (*Islam*), emphasizing the harmony between a person’s inner and outer worlds.[7:190] Islamic teachings emphasize cleanliness, personal grooming, and presentability as forms of beauty pleasing both to oneself and to others.

The Qur’an, in Surah Az-Zukhruf (43:18), highlights that girls are raised with adornment, indicating that the inclination toward beautification is inherent in human nature. Islam advises men to consider piety, lineage, wealth, and beauty when choosing a spouse. A woman’s beauty and neat appearance are regarded as factors that enhance marital harmony. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) advised his daughter Fatimah to maintain cleanliness and use kohl, describing it as a form of adornment for women.[8:106] He also reproached individuals who neglected personal grooming or cleanliness, emphasizing that purity and neatness are



fundamental measures of beauty in Islam.[9:261] Among all beautifying means, clean water is regarded as the most essential.

Islamic teachings prescribe specific guidelines for male and female adornment. Men are prohibited from wearing silk garments and gold jewelry, while they are encouraged to maintain neat hair, beard, and personal hygiene. Women, on the other hand, are permitted to wear silk, gold jewelry, and henna, provided they observe modesty and avoid excessive display.[10:382-388] The Prophet Muhammad stated, “Eat, drink, dress, and give charity, so long as there is no extravagance or arrogance”. [9:262] Thus, Islam defines clear boundaries for permissible adornment, emphasizing simplicity, humility, and natural appearance as key criteria of beauty. By the thirteenth century in Europe, the growing inclination of the knightly class toward luxury led to the gradual secularization of culture, which also influenced beauty standards. Women began dyeing their hair blonde, creating elaborate hairstyles, and accentuating bodily features. A slim waist, fair aristocratic complexion, curly blonde hair, elongated face, straight nose, blue eyes, and vivid lips became defining criteria of female beauty during this period.[4]

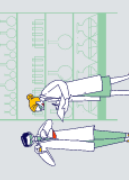
In the East, particularly in China, women with small “lotus feet” were considered symbols of beauty for nearly a millennium. Mothers tightly bound their daughters’ feet from the age of five, forcing them to endure severe pain and permanent deformation. The so-called “lotus shoes,” crafted from silk or cotton and small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, were decorated with floral and animal motifs. This practice was abolished in the twentieth century, and today lotus shoes are preserved in museums and private collections.

By the time of the Western Renaissance, fuller female figures replaced the previously admired slender body type. Nevertheless, fair skin, facial rosiness, and thick, curly blonde hair retained their aesthetic significance. During this period, wigs, large and elaborate headpieces, as well as dresses with open fronts, lace elements, and long trains became fashionable. Women’s hairstyles were often highly complex and structurally elaborate, requiring considerable effort to maintain. In order to preserve these hairstyles, women attempted to bathe as infrequently as possible. For instance, Isabella of Castile, Queen of Spain, is reported to have refrained from bathing for twenty-five years, bathing only twice in her lifetime: at birth and on her wedding day. Similarly, Louis XIV preferred bathing only during the spring season.

Corsets, which were widely worn during this era, caused serious harm to women’s health. Prolonged use of corsets led to dysfunctions of internal organs such as the lungs, intestines, liver, and stomach. Constant pressure on the chest area often resulted in women losing the ability to breastfeed.

From the nineteenth century onward, beauty standards began to change at a remarkably rapid pace. The image of an attractive yet nervous and fragile woman became a symbol of modernity. In the 1920s, a pale complexion resembling illness, a flat body without pronounced curves, large eyes, short dark hair, and an exposed neck came into fashion. After the Second World War, fuller figures with accentuated curves and a slender waist became symbols of beauty. Notable examples include Brigitte Bardot, Sophia Loren, and Marilyn Monroe.

The technological revolution of the twentieth century, along with the rapid development of cinema and television, caused the image of the “ideal woman” to be reshaped approximately



every decade through models and actresses. In the twenty-first century, this process has accelerated even further.[3] Today, an hourglass-shaped body, long legs, a small nose, naturally shaped lips, and a height of no less than 175 centimeters are considered fashionable beauty standards. Prominent Hollywood actresses such as Julia Roberts, Angelina Jolie, and Megan Fox are often cited as examples.[4]

In contemporary times, South Korea has gained global recognition not only for its successful films and talented actors but also for its distinctive and evolving beauty standards. The development of South Korean beauty culture has deep historical roots. For centuries, beauty ideals in this society have emphasized flawless, smooth skin, delicate facial features, and an elegant physique.

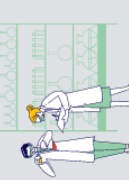
The long-standing Korean principle that “people are welcomed by their appearance” has contributed to the strong emphasis placed on external presentation. As a result, both men and women devote considerable attention to their appearance, viewing it as a key factor in achieving social success. Regardless of gender, individuals are expected to be neat and attractive. Social pressure on women’s appearance is particularly intense, with society actively influencing standards related to eye shape, nose structure, chin contour, skin tone, and clothing size.

In Korean philosophy, beauty is associated with goodness and good fortune. In folklore and literature, virtuous characters are consistently portrayed as beautiful and successful, whereas negative characters are depicted as unattractive and unlucky. Consequently, beauty is perceived as a moral attribute within this cultural framework.

The global popularity of K-pop music, Korean television dramas (dramas), and Korean cosmetic brands has significantly increased international interest in South Korean culture and its beauty standards. Industrial development has led to the creation of beauty ideals that differ from traditional norms.

Traditional Korean beauty standards—such as fair skin symbolizing nobility and refined features—remain influential today. However, globalization has altered perceptions. Whereas physical resilience was once valued in women for childbirth, contemporary standards emphasize slenderness, tall stature, long, straight, glossy hair, a broad and rounded forehead symbolizing intelligence and authority, a small face and head, a V-shaped jawline, large eyelid-free eyes with long eyelashes, a small nose, straight and wide eyebrows, and childlike plump cheeks. Wrinkles, blemishes, and visible signs of aging are generally regarded as unattractive. Beauty standards for men have also persisted and evolved. Traditionally, large ears and noses symbolized wealth, and fair skin was considered essential. Modern male beauty ideals include tall stature at least 180 cm, large eyelid-free eyes with thick eyelashes, smooth and blemish-free skin, a well-proportioned muscular body, a prominent nose, a V-shaped jawline, and a small face.

Individuals who fail to conform to these beauty standards often face psychological and physical violence from family members, society, and the media. Since not everyone can meet such rigid criteria, South Korea has witnessed rapid growth in the beauty industry and plastic surgery sector. Common procedures include blepharoplasty, V-line jaw surgery, skin whitening,



rhinoplasty, and fat grafting. Plastic surgery is widely accepted and practiced by both women and men, with approximately 15 percent of patients being male. In some families, cosmetic surgery is even given as a gift to daughters upon graduation.[11:79-87]

South Korean beauty standards are actively promoted through television dramas, which consistently feature actors and actresses who embody these ideals. These characters are portrayed as engaging in regular exercise, maintaining strict hygiene routines, performing daily skincare and makeup rituals, and wearing elegant clothing. Many dramas emphasize that achieving an ideal appearance—whether through surgery or physical training leads to happiness and success. Characters often suffer social discrimination due to their appearance and only gain confidence and happiness after achieving physical perfection, reinforcing the importance of conforming to beauty standards.[11:79-87]

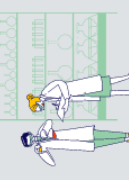
CONCLUSION.

Today, many young people are dissatisfied with their natural appearance, a trend clearly reflected in their use of social media. The frequent use of filters on platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat creates dependency on artificial beauty standards. However, it is essential to recognize that every individual is a unique creation and to instill self-confidence in younger generations. As Rabindranath Tagore aptly stated, “It is impossible to raise a fully developed individual without cultivating a sense of beauty”.[2:36]

In some societies, individuals who fail to meet beauty standards experience physical and psychological violence, sometimes leading to suicide. One such phenomenon is known as “beauty fascism,” which refers to the enforcement of rigid beauty norms and the marginalization or abuse of those who do not conform. Social media and the beauty industry play a significant role in perpetuating this pressure. In contrast, the body positivity movement emerged as a counter-response. Founded in 1996 by Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott, the movement aims to protect individuals from appearance-based social pressure and promote acceptance of diverse bodies. Body positivity advocates self-acceptance, confidence, and the rejection of unrealistic beauty standards.

Body positivity (derived from the English words “body” and “positivity”) is a social movement that advocates the right of individuals to feel comfortable in their own bodies, to express themselves freely, and to accept others’ bodies as they are, regardless of physical appearance. The primary objective of the body positivity movement is to eliminate unrealistic and socially imposed beauty standards, encourage individuals to accept their bodies in their natural form, enhance self-confidence, and promote a healthy and respectful attitude toward self-love.

Beauty standards may evolve, improve, or become distorted over time. However, true beauty lies in the goodness of the human heart, which radiates grace and dignity outward. Therefore, beauty education should be regarded as an essential component of moral and cultural upbringing and should not be left to become a powerful instrument of mass culture. It is crucial to teach younger generations the delicate boundary between natural attractiveness and artificial exaggeration, guided by national and religious values.



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