

We're in an era of celebrating diversity – or are we? The truth is, whether whitewashing or blackfishing, beauty is still filtered through the Western 'ideal'. **Anita Bhagwandas** reports on colonialism's aesthetic legacy

From the moment we're born, we're 'told' what society considers beautiful. It's modelled around us – from the dolls we play with to the media we consume. And if we were to generalise what that version of beauty looked like from an aggregate of 'hottest women' polls? It would be long, straight hair. Clear skin. High cheekbones. Full lips (but not too full). Blue eyes. A small, ski-jump nose. Slim and sun-tanned (but not actual dark skin).

A 2002 US study called Denying Diversity by Maya Poran confirms this. It compared the self images of Latin, black and white women who all agreed on what is thought to be perfect beauty; white, slim, tall with a straight nose. While the study took place almost two decades ago, psychologist Dr Tina Mistry agrees this ideal still holds true. "For centuries we have been told a white face is beautiful. I still see women of colour struggling with their features because of that legacy," she says. It's also telling that a 2016 report by The Fashion Spot found just 22% of models featured in ads in the UK and US were black, Asian or Hispanic.

A lot of our views on beauty are rooted in an uncomfortable history of colonialism. Britain began colonising (establishing control over indigenous people, often through the subjugation of culture, language and traditions) in the 16th century. By the 1920s, the British Empire covered 24% of the globe, including India and parts of the Middle East. But when decolonisation began in the 1940s, it left a vestige of beauty hierarchies in its wake. Premen Addy, a senior lecturer in Asian and international history at Kellogg College, Oxford told The Guardian in 2010: "During the Raj [the British colonisation of India], the very fact that you were being ruled by pale-skinned people meant that they were superior to the natives – you looked up to the white man."

Today, the worship of light skin is still evident in our beauty industry with most brands, until recently, only offering shades for Caucasian skin.

Things are shifting though. In 2017, Fenty released 40 shades as a benchmark for inclusivity, while a more diverse cast of models are finally adorning the covers of seminal fashion titles. But this change is too recent to override decades of brainwashing around race and status. Dr Mistry says, "We carry this historical and intergenerational trauma from slavery and colonisation. We need to explore how that could have impacted the generations above us and how that's filtered down to the beauty standards of today. They can be healed if we talk about them, but it takes deep self-evaluation of our ideals and beliefs."

THE VIRAL WESTERN IDEAL

When Kim Kardashian broke the internet with her contouring selfie back in 2012, it created a shift in our make-up application habits. Though contouring isn't new – coal was first used to exaggerate features on theatre stages in the 1500s – it's become an everyday

beauty hack, with the number of contouring YouTube tutorials now in the millions. But what does that say about our facial features if we're so intent on chiselling them with make-up? "Everyone is trying to look the same to fit into a social media and reality TV look. The danger is, this is a Caucasian beauty ideal for all women," says Mac artistic director Terry Barber.

So should we be thinking more deeply about *how* we're applying our make-up? Terry thinks so: "This new beauty ideal is also based on the idea of surgical correction – the highly sexualised kind you see on *Love Island* and the Kardashians. When you put that look on women of colour, it's saying all racial features should be corrected to look like Caucasian ones. Like shading noses until they're razor thin, it's become about correction and not enhancement. Worryingly, it translates as: racial features *need* to be corrected." Scarier still is how it's become a way to hide or change race, says global beauty strategist Eryca Freemantle. "I've not been able to tell what race people are because of their heavy make-up. It's sad to see."

GLOBAL FACE-OFF

Of course, Kim Kardashian was just capitalising on a pervasive Western aesthetic that is hard to shake,

especially if you've been told your whole life this is what is beautiful. Writer Radhika Sanghani, who is of Indian heritage, used to contour her nose for this very reason. "As a teenager, I was really insecure about my big nose. Back then

I desperately wanted a more Western nose (narrow, with a little snub) convinced it would make me pretty."

According to The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, cosmetic surgery is on the rise year-on-year, with over 28,000 procedures taking place in the UK in 2018. And 43% of GLAMOUR Beauty Club members say they are curious about non-surgical cosmetic treatments. Dr Mistry says, "While there's less shame around it, we have to ask why it's happening at such a high rate, specifically in certain communities." In South Korea – known as the plastic surgery capital of the world – nose or eyelid correction surgery is often given as a graduation gift, as these are two facial areas often critiqued or devalued compared to Western ones. And it's been estimated as many as two million Iranians undergo rhinoplasty.

GLAMOUR Editor-In-Chief Deborah Joseph, who is half Iranian, says the shame around a larger nose is something she's seen first-hand in the community, even in the UK. "Parents often buy nose jobs for their daughters' sixteenth ➤

"It translates as: racial features need to be corrected"

Decolonising beauty

birthdays,” she says. “In Iran, it’s seen as a symbol of wealth and pride to walk around with bandages across the nose, post-surgery. Likewise, with our curly hair: my mum blow-dried mine straight from the age of five, and I now realise it was to emulate the silky strands of Western women. But it’s still the look I aim for to this day.”

While wanting surgery is a personal choice, is it because we think there is only one way to be beautiful? Using facial mapping and the ancient Greek golden ratio, a study by The London Centre For Plastic Surgery revealed ten celebrities with the perfect facial ratios. On the list was Bella Hadid who is rumoured to have had, but has denied having, plastic surgery. And it’s perhaps telling that Beyoncé, the only non-white woman who made the list, has lighter skin and features – which accord with ancient Greek ideals and are more readily deemed ‘acceptable’ by the Western gaze.

Yet, in an increasingly polarised society, some are doing the opposite and are ‘blackfishing’, which is using tanning products or make-up to look darker. Everyone from Ariana Grande to influencer Emma Hallberg have been accused of making themselves look like they’re not of

Caucasian descent and some white people use plastic surgery to appropriate features associated with other ethnicities. Freemantle says, “Now the look is about taking black women’s features and appropriating them, such as bigger bums and fuller lips. But they’re not seen as beautiful unless they’re accompanied by pale skin. That’s problematic, because they should be considered beautiful on black women too.”

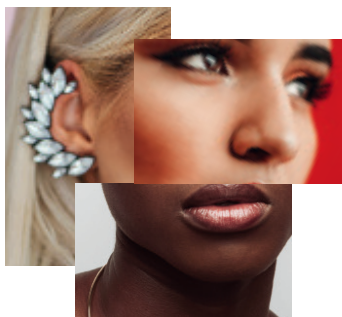
THE COLOUR OF BODY POSITIVITY

Colourism needs to be a more mainstream discussion. Celebrities such as Zendaya are still being whitewashed in photos, and the skin-whitening industry is said to be worth \$23billion – thanks in part to the fact that these products are used by 40% of people in Asian countries. On Indian matrimonial site Shaadi, you can search by skintone – and Hinge lets you filter by ethnicity.

Jenny Yu, a British Chinese PR from London, learned about colourism on a recent trip to Hong Kong. “I’d always been fine with my skin, which is naturally tanned. But when I went to Hong Kong, every department store I walked into, someone said, ‘Miss, you are far too dark! Use this lightening cream.’” It was an eye-opener into how much the white narrative of beauty has influenced China.”

Colourism is everywhere. But where it’s been hiding is the body-positivity arena, which started on Tumblr in 2008 by women of colour looking for a community

that appreciated their bodies. This movement seems enlightened on



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the surface but Steph Yeboah, a plus-size blogger, says it’s

much harder for women of colour, even in the plus-size industry. “It’s still white-centric, especially the fast-fashion brands who choose models with lighter skins.” A scroll across the high street plus-size section shows this instantly. But why – as an insider – does Steph think this is the case? “Brands think lighter-skinned women have a proximity to whiteness, so they think they can sell more that way. It’s frustrating: dark-skinned black women don’t get that visibility, they think we are too urban, which is problematic in itself.” Steph notices how models with tumbling curls and mixed-race light-skin get the most work, especially for underwear shots. “The industry thinks men should want to have sex with you and women should want to be you. Dark-skinned black women just don’t fit in with that. Even before slavery, dark-skinned black women were seen as masculine – those narratives are still in place.”

EFF YOUR BEAUTY STANDARDS

The question remains: how can we reclaim our make-up routine away from a Western beauty bias? Terry and Eryca say it’s about celebrating our ethnic features rather than striving to manipulate them via higher cheekbones and wider eyes.

Dr Mistry thinks we can use social media to tangibly change our mindset. “Fill your feed with people who look like you,” she says. “The dominant beauty narrative may be Eurocentric, but we are in a place where individuality is becoming prized too.” Radhika agrees: “It took me years to realise my nose is unique and that it gives me character. Now I love it.”

With more open dialogue than we’ve ever seen before, the turn of the decade feels like the perfect time for some serious self-analysis into why we feel these insecurities, and thereafter challenging ingrained beauty standards, embracing our authentic beauty and seeing it as valuable and worthy of recognition in its own right. ●

Photographs: Prince Akachi, Felipe Bustillo, Ana-Maria Nichita, all at Unsplash; Stocksy; Getty Images. *Taken from the GLAMOUR Beauty Club survey, July 2019-January 2020