

## **Fair skin And Female Beauty in Visual Media And Literature: A Comparative Study of Television Commercials and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

**Manjeet Rathee**

Professor of English Dept. of English and Foreign Languages Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, India

---

### **Abstract**

The concept of female beauty that is being increasingly promoted by media in general and advertisements in particular, is confined to externally imposed standards of perfect beauty which necessitate the use of various cosmetics and whitening agents. The whole myth of female beauty is constructed around this central premise that a woman, as she is in actuality with all her strengths and limitations, is not beautiful and hence unacceptable to the society. This acceptability and beauty can only be 'acquired' through constant resort to the market manufactured beauty products and standards dominated by whitening creams. The present paper attempts to critically analyse this whole myth related to white beauty in visual media and literature and its impact on society at large.

**KEYWORDS:** Female beauty, Whitening creams, Fair and lovely, Advertisements

The Bluest Eye

---

The concept of beauty in the contemporary era is integrally and strategically linked with male power. Beauty norms and criteria are being rebuilt and re-defined as a means to perpetuate and legitimize conventional areas of male power and to keep intact the long embedded unequal power relations in terms of class, caste and gender. Visual media can not afford to represent women as beautiful on their own grounds and conditions. They have to have men as 'others', to look at, recognize, appreciate and establish their beauty and formulate the prevalent beauty norms. As per modern advertising standards, an ideally beautiful woman is the one who has been modeled and designed by a man and for a man. Hence it is not beauty for its own sake that is sought after and longed for by a woman. What majority of women crave for are the standards of beauty that men would admire and cherish in the form of a perfect face and a perfect body figure.

Seen in the above context, the image of female beauty that is being increasingly promoted by media in general and advertisements in particular, is confined to externally imposed standards of perfect beauty which necessitate the use of various cosmetics and whitening agents. The whole myth of female beauty is constructed around this central premise that a woman, as she is in actuality with all her strengths and limitations, is not beautiful and hence unacceptable to the society. This acceptability and beauty can only be 'acquired' through constant resort to the market manufactured beauty products and standards dominated by whitening creams. These standards of perfect body figure and ever glowing face set by the Western media and being blindly followed by rest of the world place impossible demands on a woman to always appear 'young, fair and thin' with spotless face and extra white and ultra soft skin. The dignity, prestige and self

esteem of young girls and women alike has so inextricably been linked with external appearance and above all with 'fair and lovely' skin that anything shorter than this is 'ugly' and hence undesirable and unacceptable. Though males are also under the scanner of these artificially created beauty norms and are increasingly being affected by all kinds of creams, shampoos and deodorants yet while male 'ugliness' can still be compensated by their social and financial status, a female can just not afford to ignore her appearance any longer, however intelligent, good and famous she might be. Hence one finds the mad rush for attaining the highest standards of beauty by resorting to various cosmetics, fairness creams, surgeries, strict dieting schedules and skin graftings

Due to this reduction of female beauty to external looks and appearances, one finds young girls and women vying with each other to 'look' fairer and smarter since this is the image of beauty that sells the most in the market. The female protagonist in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, an eleven-year-old black little girl, is guided by the same standards of American African beauty as are propagated by the media and longs to be fair in colour and have 'bluest' pair of eyes so as to appear beautiful and charming. Women in the global market economy set up are just another 'commodity' to be bought and sold at a price which means that their 'price' is calculated on the basis of their physical attractiveness and aggression. Like a commodity, she has to be judged and valued by her looks and body alone and hence has to be 'packaged', 'decorated' 'rated' and made 'presentable' in the same manner as products.

**Whitening creams and agents:** Since the concept of beauty as propagated by media is based on the premise of fair and light skin, a major chunk of cosmetic business thrives on spreading the network of fairness creams and agents. Even in countries like India where majority of people are brown or dark skinned, white colour based agents are able to make a significant dent because fair and light skin is made to associate with beauty and whiteness with purity and cleanliness. In spite of the fact that the colour of the skin has no innate value, the glorification of white skin continues in a most brazen manner in majority of the advertisements and of late got extra value and quality attached to it in the form of fairness being linked with success and happiness in the life of a woman. A girl with dark complexion is presented as a consistent loser, a persistent victim of inferiority and low self esteem and the 'whiteness' achieved after applying fairness creams transforms her into an instant beauty who is now able to achieve anything in life ranging from good husband to lucrative jobs, promotions and all the happiness in life. Since the only positive attribute assigned by the media to a woman is her 'fullness of figure' and 'fairness of face', this implies that a woman who is devoid of this is bound to be doomed for ever. While goodness of character can compensate for a male not being 'beautiful' in the media constructed sense of the term but no amount of goodness and substance can be enough for a female with dark skin and spotted face. She has to constantly bear the brunt of being 'ugly' looking and hence 'incomplete' and 'despicable.' Even her parents and family members are depicted as being constantly worried about her bleak future prospects with dark skin.

Far from being a recent or sudden phenomenon, this ignominious bias for 'fair skin' can be traced to the historical and cultural context in India but the unholy alliance of global beauty and cosmetic corporations in the contemporary era has provided a new boost to it.

Actor and advertisement man Adman Bharat Dabholkar feels that: “Obsession with fairness exists in Indian society and is given a boost by all these ads. While deodorant ads get banned, fairness cream ads are there for men too now. So they demean both men and women. Actors too put a lot of make-up and look many shades fairer. The companies should ask themselves, ‘Do we really want to earn money by demeaning the dusky Indian skin?’ (2011)

This obsession with fair complexion blatantly acquires ominous proportions at the time of marriage of a girl when parents of girls of darker skin tone spend sleepless nights worrying finding grooms for their daughters and every matrimonial advertisement reads “wanted a tall, fair and beautiful girl.” In fact the supremacy of white colour is an age old bias that is reflected in various ways and it predates even the Britishers whose rule for more than 250 years has left an indelible mark on our collective consciousness through deep internalization of the mentality of the colonized for fair and white skin. The Rig-Veda also referred to two classes of people- Aryans and Dasas. The Aryans were white skinned religious people and followed the Vedas, performing all the rituals and the black skinned Dasas served the Aryans. The colour of skin has been associated with power and supremacy and it has become a sign of social division that has created a hierarchical culture in society. Every class develops a particular form of culture. The culture of ruling class (white skinned) people tends to become dominant in our society. With the passage of time and revolution in mass media, the myth of supremacy of white colour has almost been converted into a reality. White beauty, as ‘hegemonic beauty’, has constructed itself as the standard beauty by ignoring all the other shades of beauty associated with different colours. Visual media has played a decisive role in presenting white beauty as perfect and supreme. Media is a potent tool that is used to influence its audience. Its bite is very quick and its message seeps into the very fibres that are woven together to create a culture of misconception about beauty. Advertisements related to fairness creams have created an environment that has devalued the real beauty. These advertisements clearly convey the message that ‘white is beautiful’ which implies that ‘black is not beautiful’.

Black colour of the skin is presented as a sort of lack of something without taking into consideration its impact on the audience, particularly on the impressionable minds. We have become so used to the references like ‘fair and handsome’, ‘fair and lovely’, ‘fair ever’ and ‘white beauty’ that we do not bother to deconstruct the prejudice that lies behind these statements. Various national and multinational companies have launched the beauty products that claim to provide fair skin within a few days. The subject of majority of the advertisements depicts darker skinned women needing a solution to her ‘problem’ of not being chosen for good job and life partner. This fascination is not just restricted to women but now the passion for white colour has reached its height in men too. These fairness creams are endorsed by some of the well known film and sports personalities whose opinion affects certain sections very deeply. It is totally unethical to use their power over people to reinforce deep seated prejudice that can hurt an individual’s sense of self.

Some of the glaring instances of this include ‘**Fair and Lovely**’ advertisement which shows dark skinned girl getting neither a job nor a boy friend. But use of fairness cream magically transforms her into such a beautiful girl that she is able to win a good job as

well as her love. The latest version of Fair & Lovely advertisement (2012) shows that it is not just a cream but fairness treatment. It shows dark colour of the skin as a sort of disease which needs to be treated by using fair & lovely. **Ponds White Beauty BBT fairness cream** claims in its advertisement that ponds white beauty cream not only improves skin texture and effectively lightens skin from within but also provides natural looking instant glow. It is especially for Asian skin. This commercial clearly promotes the racial bias which is against the constitutional norms. The commercial related to **Dove Beauty Cream (HUL)** shows that dove beauty cream will give you brightness, effectiveness, freshness and hundred percent confidence. It helps the skin retain natural moisture, bringing out its natural softness and true beauty which will give you confidence. This implies that a person having dull complexion and rough skin has no right to be beautiful and confident.

The collective message generated by these advertisements is that fairness is the essential requirement for anything significant in life. The virtues such as truth, honesty, loyalty, harmony are relegated to secondary position and almost exclusively get replaced with white beauty. This obsession towards white skin affects the human mind consciously as well as unconsciously. A dark skinned person becomes a victim of depression, self hate, low self esteem, lack of confidence and inferiority complex. People very easily reject the girl for not being fair skinned even though she fulfills all the other qualifying standards set by them. This smashes her self confidence and curtails her love for herself. Her rejection becomes a stigma on her personality and she has to face mockery and humiliation from family and friends. Along with social and psychological effects, the passion towards white beauty also affects the health of a person. The claims made by companies that their cream carries no side effect and provides perfect fairness are totally false and baseless. A new study by Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) pollution monitoring lab has found mercury in 44 percent of all the fairness creams it tested. Presence of mercury in cosmetics is completely illegal and unlawful. L'Oréal, HUL and Kocher companies were found guilty of using thin toxic chemical in fairness products. Mercury is a neurotoxin. Inorganic mercury that is present in fairness creams can damage kidneys and might cause rashes, skin discoloration and scarring. It can also cause anxiety, depression and psychosis. Chromium is also present in these products that are known to cause cancer in human beings. Synthetic fragrance used in creams may cause head ache, nausea, skin allergies and rashes, coughing, asthma and vomiting.

Any single monolithic standard of beauty is untenable and makes no sense. Nature, with its phenomenal diversity provides a mode of range and variety that beauty may assume. Thus, a lily is no more beautiful than a rose. Beauty in our cultural context meant being beautiful first and foremost in our actions towards others. Worth and value of a person can best be assessed on the basis of what one does. It is time to declare that fair is not the only kind of lovely and people should be looked at as human beings and not as a shade of colour. One should understand that self esteem does not come from 'fairness' but from good education and a healthy body and soul.

A similar concept of female beauty as discussed above in relation to visual media is presented by Toni Morrison, one of the American's greatest living novelists and a Nobel laureate in 1993, in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970. She was

born in Lorain, Ohio and grew up in a working class family in a steel town. Though the family did not live in the South, the vibration of supremacy of white colour was still deeply felt and shaped her sensibility.

The novel *The Bluest Eye* is about the life of the Breedlove family who reside in Lorain, Ohio in the late 1930s. The family consists of the mother Pauline, the father Cholly, the son Sammi, and the daughter Pecola. The novel revolves around daughter Pecola, an eleven-year-old black little girl who is trying to conquer a bout with self-hatred. She longs for acceptance from the world. She is rejected by her own parents because of her dark skin. She leaves her home and stays with the MacTeer family. She is always the main character to be mocked at in the jokes that usually refer to her very dark skin. Her mother cherishes the white daughter of the family she works for and calls her own daughter Pecola a 'rotten piece of apple.' Pecola believes that the only thing that would rescue her from this ugliness is to possess blue eyes. She wanted these blue eyes to confirm to the standards of white beauty. She also believes that these blue eyes would give her the ability to see things differently, as if having blue eyes would change the reality. Pecola associates blue eyes with the happy, white race. If she were white, blonde and very blue eyed, she would be loved by her parents, friends and society.

Pecola endures verbal and physical abuse at home as well as school due to her black colour. Claudia, the narrator of the story describes that: "When one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy; or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, "Boby loves Pecola Breed love! Boby loves Pecola Breed love!" (Morrison 34) Pecola feels the humiliation at every step when she goes to grocery store to bring a candy, the middle age white man acts very tersely towards the little black girl. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. Pecola feels the inexplicable shame:

Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she is a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown mail eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has been it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. But her blackness is static. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (Morrison 37).

Her mother also curses her due to black colour. These reasons compel Pecola to believe that white is beautiful. The theme of beauty plays a great role in the whole novel. Throughout novel Pecola seems worshipping the beautiful white icons. She goes as far as drinking three quarts of milk so that she can use the cup with Shirley Temple's picture on it. Her mother Pauline also seems to worship the white icons. She wears her hair like the white actress, Jean Harlow. Maurine Peal, who belongs to middle class black family, is light skinned and wealthy girl. She thinks herself pretty due to her light skin. Claudia describes about her spell in the school "she enchanted the entire school. Black boys did not trip her in the halls; white boy did not stone her. Black girl stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly." (Morrison 48). Geraldine, a middle class black woman who lives in the neighbourhood of Pecola, is obsessed with physical appearance of herself and her family. She does not like her son Junior to play with niggers. She explains the difference between coloured peoples

and niggers. According to her coloured people are neat, quiet; niggers are dirty and loud. When she finds Pecola in her house, she explodes with anger and calls her “a nasty little black bitch.” It expresses the discontent of Geraldine with her own race (black).

Another character Soaphead Church, who is a light skinned West Indian, is a self-declared reader and interpreter of dreams. He belongs to a family which is so obsessed with physical appearance and colours of their skin that they participate in inter marriage to breed lighter skin. Cholly, Pecola’s father suffers great humiliation as a kid. He is black and so is humiliated by the white man while he is losing his virginity with his first girlfriend Darlene. He begins to be repulsed by women and family which leads to his alcoholism and finally his rape of her own daughter Pecola. All these characters suffer from unfair whirlwind of white beauty standards. The characters suffer from an internalised superiority complex of white beauty that challenges their values within their family and community. The simple comparison of Maureen’s light skin to be considered cute and Pecola’s dark skin to be ugly is a perfect example.

In this novel, cinema becomes the terrain where ideology is propagated. Characters like Pecola, Pauline and Maureen long for an alteration of their blackness and the eradication of their perceived unattractiveness. The filmic discourse praises and preaches the dominant white beauty. Cinema here acts as an ideological apparatus, a producer of ideology. Maureen, “the high yellow dream child with long brown hair” (Morrison 47) resembles herself with white stars with rich display of fashion. Pauline, Pecola’s mother has a lame foot and always feels isolated. She loses herself in movies, which reaffirms her belief that she is ugly and that romantic love is reserved only for the beautiful. She feels most alive when she is at work, cleaning a white women’s home.

Whiteness in *The Bluest Eye* is associated with beauty, innocence, goodness, cleanliness and purity. Each of the characters who has internalized cultural concept of goodness, beauty and innocence tends to have some kind of obsession with whiteness. Claudia, a nine years old child, narrator of the whole story is the only character who rebels against the black community’s idealization of the white beauty standards. She destroys her white baby dolls. She is frustrated by the society that cherishes white skin and blue eyes and thus can never consider her, a black girl, to be truly beautiful. She attempts to discover how social forces have combined to produce Pecola’s tragedy. Pecola is raped by her frustrated father and becomes pregnant. She comes to Soaphead Church and asks for blue eyes. Knowing that he cannot grant her wish, he tells her that it will be granted if she brings meat to the dog. If the dog eats the meat and behaves strangely, her wish will be granted. Pecola not knowing that the meat is poisoned, brings it to the dog. The dog eats it and starts behaving strangely due to the effect of poison. She feels happy as her wish is granted. She has got blue eyes. When she gives birth to a premature dead baby, she is completely isolated from reality.

By the end of the novel, the blue eyes are no longer simply the code for white beauty; rather, they are how Pecola makes sense of the rape she has endured. She convinces herself that the reason no one talks to her and the reason her own mother cannot make eye contact with her is because everyone is jealous of her eyes. It is just too hard and Pecola is too young to admit that the real reason she is being ignored is because she was raped by her father and delivered his child.

Seen and analysed in this perspective, the concept of female beauty in advertisement as well as in Toni Morrison's novel seems to be concentrated only on the looks and physical appearances, thereby reducing the female entity to body alone and ignoring her beauty of mind, intellect and achievements almost completely. *The Bluest Eye* examines the effect of the media on popular thinking. Using the white, middle to upper class society as a back drop for the black community of Loraino, Ohio, Morrison reflects how the concept of beauty is affected by the mainstream culture.

To conclude, it can be said that such narrow confinement of the concept of beauty based only on the outer appearance of an individual, in ignorance of attributes and qualities of heart and mind, is detrimental not only to the health of the individuals being affected directly and indirectly but to the overall health, value systems and cultural perceptions of the society at large. The real attributes of beauty related to inner abilities and strengths of mind and character and contributing to the wholesome growth and social advancement of society are somewhere lost in the false glitter of outward beauty. Further, as presented in the above discussed novel, the females with dark skin have to undergo all kinds of sufferings and humiliation at home as well as social levels which cause a great damage to their self esteem and character. In the process of catering to the traditional and market demands of female beauty, the real worth and beauty of a woman related to the strength of her character and her multiple achievements remains almost completely unnoticed. This prejudice towards fairness of skin certainly needs to be questioned for the simple reason that it demeans and devalues the very identity and dignity of any individual, particularly of the females, whose individuality, beauty and success happens to be defined by the color of the skin, and not by their abilities and achievements.

### Works Cited

Chandra, Neetu. "The Dark Secret of Fairness Creams: New Study Finds Harmful Metals in Lightening Products and Lipsticks." *Mail Online India* 5 Jan. 2014. *Daily Mail*. Web. 16 Jan. 2014.

Dabholkar, Adman Bharat. "Frieda Pinto's Fairness War Cry." *Times of India* 2 Aug. 2011, natl.ed., Bollywood sec: *India Times*. Web. 2 Aug. 2011.

Fredrickson, Barbarl, and Tomi- Ann Roberts. "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experience and Mental Health Risks." *Psychology of Women* 21.2 (1997): 173-2006. Web. 28 July 2006.

Mckinley, N.M, and J.S. Hyde. "The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale: Development and

Validation." *Psychology of Women* 22.2 (1996): 181-215. *ERIC*. Web. 28 July 2006.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage, 1999. Print.

Nayer, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. New Delhi: Pearson Publication, 2010. Print.