

**BEAUTY AND THE BRECK:  
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF IDEALIZED  
LIGHT SKIN VIS-À-VIS ASIAN WOMEN**

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**Introduction**

Influenced by Western culture, Asian women worldwide have internalized a pathological appreciation for Eurocentric standards of beauty. Travelers to India, Pakistan, Japan, Korea and the Americas will be struck by the various applications utilized by such women in their efforts to conform to light skin as the ideal mark of beauty. Unmentionable, however, is the disdain among these women for relatively darker skin. The existence of such contempt is invisible to the casual observer and is immune to dispute in the aftermath of racism and Western colonization.

Akin to the emergence of Western influence is light skin as a prerequisite to perceptions of feminine beauty, which is a demonstration of the increasing significance of skin color among non-European populations. That significance is subject to a tendency to assess feminine beauty in proximity to Caucasian light skin. Given the canonization of Western influence, however, this tendency is deemed questionable on civil grounds. Hence, in the midst of an expanding global population, it is imperative to consider “colored” skin color in lieu of “white” skin with ontological depth. Succinctly put, aesthetic assessments of skin color will require significant cultural modifications to incorporate that of Asian women (Germain, 1991). Supposed modification will allow for deviations from Caucasian ideals and similar traits deemed less relevant.

The aforementioned modification is best illustrated via analogy. Asian and Caucasian women who reside in the West are obviously similar in genetic structure. Both occupy a common existential space and both rely upon nourishment from the environment of that space to evolve. But their environmental evolution within that space may differ significantly: for Asian women, skin color has become critical, whereas for those of European descent, though relevant, it is all but inconsequential (Frost, 1989).

Thus, analysis of commonality in some respects may co-exist with acute contrasts in others. As pertains to Asian women, perceptions of feminine beauty by those who would assess without reference to light skin

would be in error. The most significant consequence of this error has been a tendency to underestimate the impact of skin color because an analogous impact does not necessarily pertain to women of European descent. As a result, what is known in the U.S. about Asian women is less accurate than in reference to Eurocentric women because for Asian women Western science misses the crux of their existential experience. Without intervention such an inaccurate account will help sustain light skin as the standard of idealized feminine beauty among Asian women (Arroyo, 1996).

The objective of this paper is to illustrate the impact of skin color as an alien standard of beauty among Asian women. It will empirically substantiate the significance of skin color among Asian women simultaneous to its omission by mainstream interests. Of particular concern is the devastating impact of skin color upon the ability of Asian women to regard themselves as beautiful in the context of alien Western traits. It is an oversight that provides a rationale for the introduction of skin color into the scholarly literature which may then accommodate the evolution of a more comprehensive knowledge base. Via the introduction of skin color issues, the intelligentsia will have at their disposal an intellectual tool commensurate with an increasingly diverse American society. The incorporation of skin color as it pertains to the ideal standards of feminine beauty will provide an unadulterated representation of knowledge without regard to any single perspective, political whim and/or intellectual preference.

#### **Ideal Standards of Feminine Beauty**

The ideal standards of feminine beauty in the U.S. define the beauty of Asian women in a Eurocentric context. That is, all matters which pertain to anything other than a Eurocentric phenotype are determined to be less than ideal. Following WWII and the colonial liberation of Asia and Africa, the consciousness of non-European people worldwide changed dramatically (Barik, Katare & Seth, 2001). This had an impact upon accepted traditions heretofore unchallenged. In the aftermath, Eurocentric traditions as the ideal standard of feminine beauty have been subjected to persistent challenges from people of color (Ngozi, 1997; Kebede, 2001). Those challenges are no doubt fundamentally justified in the necessary evolution of society. The script is that Asian women must challenge established traditions, which by their very nature have denigrated all but Eurocentric phenotypes, i.e., skin color (Potocky & Rodgers-Farmer, 1998; Cox, 2001).

The modern standard ideal of feminine beauty is a post-colonial tradition that has dominated the American conscience (Monteiro, 2000). This otherwise obvious assumption is not the least subject to challenge. Standards of beauty are no doubt a recapitulation of the colonial world-order, which has been sustained by a Western geo-political tradition since the era of Europe's global imperialism. What is more, as part of a geo-political tradition, American standards of beauty originated largely in the contexts of Western experiences. Thus, until recently, all mainstream representations of feminine beauty hailed from France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and the U.S. Furthermore, despite the trek toward diversity feminine beauty remains a bastion of Eurocentric operatives (Iida, 2000). Commensurate with said operatives, ideal standards of beauty evolved in correlation to Eurocentric norms, Eurocentric preferences and Eurocentric skin color, i.e., Eurocentric standards. Hence, it was virtually inevitable that Asian and other women of color in the U.S. and elsewhere would idealize the Eurocentric standard of feminine beauty and, in their desire, emulate the celebrated attributes of the "Breck Girl."

Western fantasies of idealized feminine beauty are not irrelevant to the Breck Girl as pertains to Asian women. Around 1936, an American businessman named Edward Breck inherited a shampoo company started by his father in Springfield, Massachusetts (Minnick, 2000). In his first order of business he contracted the services of a Mr. Charles Sheldon who was a commercial artist living in the area at the time. In the beginning, what Sheldon represented as Breck Girls depicted "provocative, even sensual, female poses executed in pastels, with soft focus and haloes of light and color to create highly romantic images of feminine beauty and purity" (Minnick, 2000). Sheldon was succeeded by a Mr. Ralph Williams, who depicted in his art what he envisioned as perfect feminine beauty that has been sustained over numerous decades. Women who represented the essence of Western beauty were characterized by blue eyes, blond hair and skin so light it appeared alabaster-like to the observer. All three traits are noted by the absence of color. Light skin having the most dramatic impact, it became the Western standard of what the ideal in feminine beauty should look like. For any woman not born with such traits, products could be obtained to bleach the hair and skin so that even the darkest of women could attain some approximation to the idealized traits of the light-skinned Breck Girls. This phenomenon lives on today in the sale of cosmetic contact lenses and bleach creams to effect Caucasian blue eyes and light skin.

In the mind of every Western male, the Breck Girl represented the ultimate ideal. The artists who created her did not do so without conceptual influence. Instead they found their inspiration in the person of Ms. Roma Whitney (Minnick, 2000). Ms. Whitney was one of the original Breck Girls. She was selected in 1937 at the youthful age of seventeen. She was considered such an example of perfect feminine beauty that her face was chosen in 1946 by the Breck company to help launch their first national advertising campaign. By 1951 her face became the registered trademark for Breck company products. Men gazed at her blonde mane and light skin while the women of her day looked on. No one ever considered the devastating effects her image might have upon the self-esteem of Asian or other women of color.

The Breck Girl as the vision of feminine beauty did not produce a Western male counterpart, although, most women had some idea of what an attractive man should look like. The Breck Girl was more likely the fantasy of Western males as seen through the artists who created her. There will always be debate as to how certain preferences came about, but that they exist in the ideal of light skin is usually accepted without question. The standardization of light skin as ideal of Western feminine beauty seems to be a post Breck Girl phenomenon.



### **The Psychology of Light Skin**

“Fair skin is considered an asset in Asian countries such as India,” says Rachna Gupta, a 38-year-old part-time interior designer (Leistikow, 2003). About once a month, she visits her local beauty salon in south Delhi for an application of Jolen Creme Bleach. The package states that it “lightens excess dark hair,” but Rachna has it applied to her face to lighten her skin. “It’s not good for the skin,” she insists, “but I still get it done because I am on the darker side and it makes me feel nice. Aesthetically, it looks nice” (Leistikow, 2003).

Corporate executives in the bleach cream business are likely confident that the obsession by Indian women with light skin will continue. As a result, beauty business enterprises in America and Europe are in an intense struggle for a share of the bleaching market business. Brands such as Avon, L’Oreal, Lancome, Yves Saint-Laurent, Clinique, Elizabeth Arden, Estee Lauder, and Revlon have their own line of bleaching products. As with most lucrative business ventures, there also exists less expansive imitations of the more expensive products such as “Cure and Lovely.” The Delhi-based Center for Advocacy and Research, an agency which keeps track of media and accounts of public opinion, moved to accuse the business of being engaged in “unfair trade practices” by “using a social stigma to sell their products.” Some businesses responded by pulling advertisements off the air. Then began the “Fair and Lovely Foundation,” in an effort to “encourage economic empowerment of Asian women across India.” Women in India would be provided financial assistance for education and business. The company’s marketing manager announced that her corporation was committed to the women “who, though immensely talented and capable, need a guiding hand to help them take the leap forward” (Leistikow, 2003). What is more, Hindustan Lever Limited, which is one of India’s most prominent manufacturing and marketing firms, halted two of its media ads for Fair and Lovely Fairness Cold Cream. Their actions came after an extensive campaign conducted by the All India Democratic Women’s Association. More concern on the part of women has resulted in a change in culture as pertains to skin bleaching. In an Asian country such as India where the skin color industry amounts to sixty percent of bleaching sales, profits have reached \$140 million in a single year. The parent company is owned by Europeans and located in London (Leistikow, 2003).

In many Asian languages the words “fair” and “beautiful” are often used synonymously (Banerjee, 1985). Asian folklore places a high value on light skin. For example, the ideal bride, whose beauty and virtue are praised

in the songs sung at weddings, almost always has a light complexion. An Indian girl who is dark-skinned is often a problem for her family because of the difficulty of arranging a marriage for her. Marriages among educated Indians are sometimes arranged through advertisements in the newspapers; even a casual examination of the matrimonial columns shows that virginity and a light skin color are among the most desirable traits that men and their families look for in a young Indian bride, especially the middle class. In a society where purity of descent is associated with a wide diversity of physical types, these features may be in short supply. Those who do not correspond to the ideal must be accommodated. Among some Indians, a dark-skinned girl has a low value in the marriage market. But, at the same time, a dark-skinned girl may be preferred by her local group which is not exposed to global trends. Wherever physical differences cut across caste lines – and they frequently do – the factor of culture can carry greater weight. That is sure to confuse outsiders. And while there is clearly a preference for light skin in almost all sections of Indian society, it is difficult to define the social implications. The best evidence is to be found in the choice of marriage partners. The choice of a light-skinned bride or groom must be made, however, within limits that are strictly defined by considerations of other kinds, such as culture, group, locale, etc. Thus, in certain parts of India women are very light-skinned and have features that are positively valued. However, this does not seem to negate the fact that a bride, be she light-skinned, would not normally be acceptable in every household. Ultimately, skin color of a particular kind is somewhat important to Indian Asians, but other characteristics are not irrelevant.

Light skin has much greater weight in choosing an Indian bride than a groom. In the case of the groom, qualities such as wealth, occupation, and education play an important role. Skin color is important but secondary. To marry off a dark-skinned son is not so much of a problem in either case for a middle class family, for he can more easily acquire other socially desirable traits, unlike skin color which is set at birth. For Indian grooms, the norms for attractiveness relative to light skin in America and in the “old country” are no less important than they are for women – but for different reasons. In general, those who have light skin may be regarded as more strikingly handsome (Banerjee, 1985). But that belief alone does not necessarily determine their overall appeal because it may not coincide with group norms for masculinity or sex appeal. However, consistent with the greater value placed upon light skin, Asian men in India who have darker skin are viewed as more sinister and threatening by both the upper and

lower caste populations. One such example are the scores of dark-skinned male film stars, who play the role of villain while their lighter-skinned counterparts play the role of leading man or hero (Banerjee, 1985).

Asian-American women, like many dark-skinned African-American women, may be saddened by their appearance. Society demands physical beauty in women much more so than in men. Since the perception of feminine beauty closely correlates with the way a woman looks, light skin has emerged as an ideal among both male and female Asians because they are Americans who obviously do not have it and require it to feel acceptable. Thus, the skin color issue among Asian-Americans is germane to American culture and its obsession with light skin. It was facilitated by the importation/migration of Asians that began when they were brought over to work on the railroads in large numbers. Having a long history in America, Asian ethnics have idealized light skin because they were powerless to contest the influence of the dominant population. But, unlike that population, the idealization has resulted in conflict because their contrast in skin color is immediately and undeniably verifiable upon sight. Furthermore, Asians have few options where their features are concerned. Therefore, the issue of skin color and eye shape for Asian-Americans has undoubtedly become very important. It is not merely applied by Euro-Americans – however subconsciously – to assess the aesthetic appeal of other groups, but by Asian-Americans to assess the beauty of Asian women as well. B. Sung, a Chinese scholar of Asian-American studies, inferred this notion by way of research contained in one of her books, entitled *Interracial Marriage Among Chinese-Americans* (1990).

Among Asian women, the Japanese felt disdain for dark skin and preference for light skin long before any significant contacts with Europeans (Hall, 2003b). While most had never encountered Africans personally, they felt their culture inferior and the women less than beautiful. Thus, the Japanese thought of light skin as the ideal of feminine beauty and dark skin as ugly. Their response to the light skin of Europeans and the dark skin of Africans was a historical norm intimately woven into Japanese beauty standards eventually exacerbated by Western influence. Skin color as far as the Japanese are concerned is historically a sign of refinement or barbarity. Perhaps for this reason, they refer to their skin color as “shiroi,” which translated means “white” (Wagatsuma, 1968).

In Japan, “white” and/or light skin has long been an essential trait of feminine beauty. As per a Japanese proverb: “white skin makes up for seven defects” of a woman (Wagatsuma, 1968). For those who are light-

skinned, this will enable such defects to be ignored. Under the auspices of cultural influences, many Japanese women took advantage of concoctions to give their skin a light appearance. Around the Nara period (710-793), ladies of Japanese royalty did not hesitate to apply white powder to their faces (Wagatsuma, 1968). They also colored their cheeks in the form of red so-called beauty spots applied between the eyebrows and the exterior corners of their eyes and lips (Wagatsuma, 1968).

Asian women in Pakistan are no less given to the Eurocentric standards of feminine beauty. One example is a Pakistani woman who is a well educated, 23 year-old named Nasim Jamil (IRIN, 2004). While she is young and attractive she is not at all satisfied with the way she looks. "I am not fair enough," she commented to a local news organization. She further maintains that "White is best. When you ask Pakistani women what their idea of an ideal woman is, they will tell you that she should have fair skin." This is fact according to Fozia Yasmin who works for the Pakistani nongovernmental organization who reported to the IRIN news organization. At least 50 percent of women Ms. Yasmin has encountered have sought her out for concerns about their skin color. Her company employs three practitioners who offer workshops in colleges for building self-esteem in the lives of women who dislike their skin color. "You see advertisements for skin creams everywhere you go in this country," which is not at all uncommon. As women who reside in an Islamic nation they are expected to look their best without exception while simultaneously required to be subservient to men (IRIN, 2004).

### **A Descriptive Analysis**

Among contemporary Asian women there is significant empirical evidence regarding the role of light skin in perceptions of idealized feminine beauty. Among Japanese women, skin color is a significant but seldom publicized aspect of society because it is not polite to discuss this. Using a sample of college students enrolled at a women's institution of higher education in Osaka, Japan, the following null hypothesis was formulated to provide a context for investigating the problem: "There is no relationship between skin color and selected values for skin color ideals." The sample consisted of 117 participants contacted by the author during the traditional school year. Respondents had a mean age of 20 years. A self-report instrument available in Japanese was administered for assessing skin color. Called the Cutaneo-Chroma-Correlate, this instrument was developed and previously pilot-tested by the author to determine the relationship



between skin color and various aspects of bias relative to sections “A” “B” and “C.” Section “B” (of the CCC) was used in this paper to appraise the respondent's personal values pertaining to skin color (Hall, 2000). In differentiating responses, a designation of lightest was noted as 5, light as 4, medium as 3, dark as 2, and darkest as 1. The results are contained in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1  
PRETTY SKIN IS

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Valid%</i>	<i>Cumulative%</i>
Valid				
1 Lightest	14	12.0	12.2	12.2
2 Light	75	64.1	65.2	77.4
3 Medium	22	18.8	19.1	96.5
4 Dark	3	2.6	2.6	99.1
5 Darkest	1	.9	.9	100.0
Total	115	98.3	100.0	
Missing System	2	1.7		
Total	117	100.0		

Table 2  
THE SKIN COLOR OF PRETTY WOMEN IS

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Valid%</i>	<i>Cumulative%</i>
Valid				
1 Lightest	11	9.4	9.5	9.5
2 Light	79	67.5	68.1	77.6
3 Medium	24	20.5	20.7	98.3
4 Dark	1	.9	.9	99.1
5 Darkest	1	.9	.9	100.0
Total	116	99.1	100.0	
Missing System	1	.9		
Total	117	100.0		

*Summary of Results*

As per Table 1, most students (76.1%) responded “lightest” or “light” when questioned about pretty skin. Only 3.5% responded “dark” or “darkest”. However, 18.8% of student participants responded “medium” to pretty skin. Less than 1% thought of “darkest” skin as being pretty.

As per Table 2, most students (76.9%) responded “lightest” or “light” when questioned about the skin color of pretty women. Only 1.8% responded “dark” or “darkest” and 20.5% responded “medium” as pertains to the skin color of pretty women. It would appear that light skin is in fact a prerequisite of ideal feminine beauty among the Japanese sample selected. Hence, as per the data it is plausible to reject the null hypothesis: “There is no relationship between skin color and selected values for skin color ideals,” and accept the alternative: “There is a relationship between skin color and selected values for skin color ideals.”

**Conclusion**

The aforementioned results of idealized feminine beauty as pertains to Asian women should leave no doubt as to the significance of skin color in their lives. In mainstream America and elsewhere in the West, skin color is a less salient issue (Bonila-Silva, 1991). Whatever the existential differentiation between the mainstream and Asian women, skin color is rendered less significant for non-Asian women.

The imposition of alien standards of beauty upon Asian women is universal and extends to their physiological as well as psychological well-being. Without exception, perceptions of feminine beauty are an environmental social force that disrupts Asian women’s well-being in ways irrelevant to men. The literature acknowledges sexism among the list of societal pathologies, but the idealization of light skin vis-à-vis Asian women has been all but institutionalized (Solomon, 1992). Greater focus upon diversity in feminine beauty would enhance the ability of society to purge itself of sexism and, perhaps, oppression.

To educate the populace about the significance of skin color will require its introduction into mainstream literature. Discussions of skin color have up to the present been all but overlooked on the basis of cultural taboos and maintaining polite professional discourse, in particular where women’s physiological attributes are concerned. Some of the prohibitions include assumed implications of skin color which are little more than myth. Disqualifying myths from polite conversation in fact sustains Eurocentric standards of idealized feminine beauty.

Acknowledgement of the skin color issue ultimately minimizes the potential for conflict and complies with the genesis of a new era in rescuing the self-esteem of Asian and other women of color. It is increasingly evident that, at least among women of color, skin color is not only pertinent to self-esteem but their overall well-being. Its acknowledgement is a necessity in a world fast becoming not only less Eurocentric physiologically but intellectually as well. The subsequent diversity has facilitated assertions on the part of all women of color to redefine who they are and the crux of their human worth.

Lastly, the minimal documentation of skin color issues in mainstream literature is challenged via the idea that all populations have aspirations and the desire for a better quality of life. In the wake of Eurocentric standards of feminine beauty applied to Asian women, that motive is the driving force for social interactions. While Eurocentric standards remain dominant, those who espouse them are not necessarily malicious. Various institutions including higher education have become critical vehicles to sustaining dominant group ideals. Thus, in a post-colonial society, what suffices as feminine beauty is more often in association with the views of those who control power. For this and other reasons, the significance of skin color among Asian women continues to be overlooked. The future viability of their self-esteem rests on the willingness of society to accommodate alternative standards that incorporate the skin color and other physiological traits of Asian women universally. Subsequently, the Breck Girl would then fade into the myths of yesterday's Americana.

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