

Beauty Standards and Exclusion

A Perspective From an Outsider

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For this paper, we were asked to bring analysis to Ng'endo Mukii's video essay called *Yellow Fever*. This documentary calls into light the practice of African women bleaching their skin with creams to transform their skin tones to something lighter, ideally white, but settling more on yellow. The most damning adjective to describe this practice is summed up in Ng'endo's niece's answer to the question of how she feels like when she looks into the mirror, and the answer is "uncomfortable". This paper examines the concept of beauty standards, not just for African women, but women worldwide from the perspective of someone who is male, white, and worst, of a personality type that eschews social mores and seeks independence, and I am not going to be polite about the matter. I intend to lambaste the entire concept of beauty standards and women's addiction to them.

Yellow Fever, the Video Essay

Yellow Fever, as a video essay, is of very good quality. It is partly shown in animation, and partly in the live physical display of two women performing modern dance. The animated parts focus on Ng'endo's story of being in a beauty salon and conversing with her niece and mother. By using animation that simplifies detail, it allows the viewer to transfer their sense of identity from "This happened to this specific person" to "This happened to a general person". That is, this circumstance is not just happening to Ng'endo and her niece and her mother, but to African women in general. It also helps preserve their privacy, allowing them to say what may be perceived as embarrassing.

The sections of the essay that are focused on the live woman dwell on Ng'endo's present, private thoughts, as opposed to the social aspects examined in the animation. They explore her inner feelings and the dance suggests that she is haunted by a shadow of her darker self.

Being an Outsider to Beauty Standards

I feel like in order to pass judgement on beauty standards, I have to explain my perspective. It isn't fair to the reader to pretend that I have all-encompassing rationality when in reality I'm not affected much by standards of beauty. I am a 50 year old white American male. I am skinny and pale. I had begun balding at age 18. I have never had a muscular physique or anything nearly as attractive as the woman presented in the video. I am okay looking and above average in facial features, but would not describe myself as handsome. And at 50, it is a long, slow slide into eventually resembling a troll.

So, when the woman displays her very toned, low BMI body on the screen and complains that her skin tone doesn't match Western beauty standards I think with a great deal of sarcasm "Oh you poor, poor thing. You are practically a social pariah with that amazingly flat tummy, muscular long legs, and gorgeous face. Why, I bet that your mocha skin only allows ten men to hit on you a day, instead of the thousand or so that you so richly deserve."

Now, I know the intention of the video is to raise the awareness of women of darker skin tones and change their beauty standards, but at the same time, I have never been under the radar of anyone's standard of beauty. Furthermore, I think that the whole concept of being in a beauty standard is a level of vanity that women (and some men) easily and too readily subscribe. I think its overall damaging to women's self-image and I will postulate two motivations to why it is subscribed to: money and fame.

The Disaster of Greed

Yellow Fever starts out in a beauty salon. A seven-year-old Ng'endo is complaining about the pain caused by having her hair braided. She mentions that her sister has chocolate skin, while hers is mocha. The woman braiding her hair has yellow hands and face from using bleaching cream, but not owning enough to cover the rest of her body. Ng'endo implies a distaste for the woman. I will give four reasons for this. First, Ng'endo is not having a good experience, but is suppressing pain, and the woman is the cause of this pain. Second, when she makes eye contact with the woman, the woman stares back. She is not emoting a friendly demeanor. Third is the fact that the woman has conformed to Western standards of beauty and has bleached her skin. And fourth, and most damning, the woman is poor.

Why is being poor at odds with standards of beauty? Because being rich is desirable. It is a prime reason for the standards. It is the rich who put on fashion shows and display what the top designers have created upon the most well-paid models in the show. It is the rich who purchase authentic luxuries with brand names. This struggle for luxury and authenticity was touched upon in Unit 3 of the course “Dress as Performance”, in Unit 6 “Value” and in Unit 7 “Authenticity, appropriation”. To be fashionable is to be economically well-off and to be socially elite.

The woman braiding Ng'endo's hair cannot afford to bleach her entire skin. Her skin then becomes a paradox for all to see. She desires both uniformity and conformity, but ends up looking ridiculous. But for her, the state of being seen as ridiculous is even better than the state

of not being able to afford any cream at all. Her skin colors state: “Yes, I’m not rich, but I’m not as poor as those other women.”

The Poison of Fame

Ng’endo’s niece is watching television as she is being interviewed. On the television is a colorful cacophony starring a white, blonde pop star. She is obviously idolizing the pop star and seeks to emulate her in appearance. It’s important to note that this type of advertising is consistent, and is seen daily. In the beauty salon, there are photographs of glamorous women on the walls.

The child craves fame. Fame is the adoration of an audience, which would include one’s family and friends. The person who receives fame becomes more than human. The early film actors in Hollywood were called “stars”. Stars are beautiful and bright, but they are also far away. They are also well-paid, dovetailing back into greed. Stars are told that they are good looking and talented by their fans. A fan is held by a slave, who fans their master on a hot day. I almost wrote ‘servant’ for ‘slave’, but you couldn’t pay a servant enough to fan you because they would get hotter with the exertion.

To be famous is to be in a very lopsided relationship with those around you. People crave your attention. Some may seek to emulate you or feel closer to you by purchasing your works and merchandise. It is not a healthy peer relationship. Ng’endo’s niece wants to be famous because in her present state, she may feel overlooked and needs attention. Or she may be just that vain, but we should not expect moral standards from an innocent child. My point is, being famous is not a healthy relationship. It’s very human to worship, but no human should actually be worshipped.

The Problem of Vanity

Ng'endo Mukii is to be applauded for bringing awareness to the social and economic inequality brought upon by adulating Western beauty standards. However, I do not think the solution to the problem is simply to add African standards or to remove the deluge of Western advertising and media programs that Africa is subject. I think beauty standards are an overall appeal to vanity. Whenever I walk into a pharmacy, the first two aisles on the right are dedicated to women's makeup, closest to the door. Think about that. A place dedicated to the sales of medicine sells women's vanity products closer to the consumer than the medicine itself. Whenever I walk into the front of a department store, I am forced to walk through or around a maze of scents and women's beauty products. There is no denying the economic power of beauty standards.

But is this healthy? Who is being excluded? Well, men. But who cares about them, right? The elderly, having lost their sex appeal, are no longer eligible. People who are even a little chunky could not make it in Hollywood, except as comedic actors. Department stores and soap producers are starting to place different types of models in their advertisements, but no one considers these people stars or idols. It's the same role as being the mom in a commercial. Sure, you're on television, but no one actually adores you.

Conclusion

I don't possess a solution to the problems of greed or fame. It seems very human to desire these attributes. But these two demons are very harmful to humanity in the long run. Colonialism especially, is motivated by profit. Fame places people on pedestals where they are worshipped. Perhaps if everyone was aware about the harm they can create, we could avoid

them. Or perhaps we'll give these two lip-service, shake our fists at them, and walk down their paths when we think no one is looking. Well, I for one, refuse to purchase any beauty products or pop idol merchandise, and I hope you'll join me.