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The ambivalent effects of white female beauty standards in multiracial
America, as reflected in modern literature

Diplomová práce

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Introduction

Light skin — is this a recipe for beauty? A mere glance at the rack of fashion magazines might lead us to think so. And we do not even have to go that far. Mainstream media deluge our society with pictures of women who are white, blonde, and blue-eyed. If women of color do appear, the ones who are picked are usually the ones with slenderer features and strikingly lighter skin. And it is not just a matter of skin color. The Western ideal of female beauty also promotes other characteristics associated mostly with white women, such as tiny nose, thin lips, straight hair.

Women of different ethnicities act in conformity with the absurd idea that has crept into society that fair and lovely go hand in hand. They are constantly attempting to move closer to the realms of what the ideal of female beauty appears to be by manipulating their skin tone, and, especially in Asian culture, undergoing surgery to get closer to European shape of eyelids. Happiness is sacrificed on the altar of conformity, of acceptance. Black women are using skin bleaching products while Asian women opt for wearing umbrellas to avoid sun exposure, as pale skin is associated with eliteness in Asian culture.

The outcome of the white beauty myth is, sadly, frequently internalized self-hatred as they realize the ideal is unattainable for them. In response to this, many modern writers, both male and female, challenged the Western standards of beauty, pointing out to the absurdity and unattainability of the ideal and its devastating impact on women's self-perception and self-worth. This thesis aims to explore both positive and negative ways in which women of different ethnicities are influenced by the standards of white female beauty and how their experiences are reflected in modern literature.

For the purpose of my thesis, I have chosen literature covering the period roughly from the 1920's up to the present. My thesis is divided into two main part. The first part is concerned with internalized European beauty standards among black women. Three novels will be used to illustrate this phenomenon – *The Blacker the Berry*, *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*. First, *The Bluest Eye* and its main character, Pecola Breedlove, will be discussed. I will

examine how the beauty icons of the period shape the heroine's self-perception and the dangers of idealizing white female beauty standards that are promoted by mainstream American society. In this part, I will also show that family background plays a not insignificant role in shaping the heroine's self-worth. Then I will compare Pecola's character to that of Emma Lou Morgan, the protagonist of the novel *The Blacker the Berry*. Finally, I will discuss one of the most recent literary attempts to tackle the issue of white female beauty, Toni Morrison's novel *God Help the Child*. This novel revolves around the life of Bride, born as Lula Ann, who is shunned by her mother because she loathes the unusual dark color of her skin. Bride finally learns to love her dark skin and wears it with pride, which is what differentiates her from the protagonists of the previous novels.

The second part of the thesis handles the multitude of challenges that Asian-American women face in multiracial America when it comes to beauty standards. In this part, attention will be dedicated to the novels *When the Emperor was Divine* by Julie Otsuka and the way it presents loss of identity that comes with loss of sense of place, the ways in which the daughter conformed to white supremacy viewpoints on female beauty despite the fact that they are blatantly discriminating against her family, and how she finally comes to embrace her Japanese heritage. I will also analyze the character of the mother, and the loss of her feminine identity. In addition to that, I am going to discuss two other novels *Typical American* by Gish Jen and *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, both of which the issue of assimilation and feminine identity.

Apart from the close reading of the individual books, my aim will be to raise concern about both positive and negative aspects of the feminine beauty standards. I will conclude my observations by giving the summary of the main arguments and relating them to broader historical context of the period in which they were written and contemporary trends

1 African American experience

1.1 Slavery

To gain a deeper understanding of the role of how Western ideal of female beauty shapes standards in African American community, it is crucial to view them in a historical context. Historically, slavery and colonization have been most significant forces in shaping the subjected people's view on female beauty. From the slave owner's perspective, the tone of individual's skin and texture of hair assigned them to do either household work (as was the case with light-skinned Negro population and mixed-race mulattos) or work in the fields, which was reserved exclusively for their darker-skinned counterparts with kinky hair. Light-skinned slaves enjoyed greater privileges – they were, as Jaynes has noted, “spared the hot and dirty work of the field hands”,¹ but they also had a greater chance to access education, they could achieve higher social status and, most importantly, enjoy the blessings of freedom that their dark-skinned counterparts could only dream about.

Fairer complexion was closer to the Western standard and was therefore more desirable. This was confirmed by Myrdal in his *American Dilemma* in which he observed the following:

...light-skinned blacks were initially preferred because they were more aesthetically appealing to whites and because the prevailing racial ideology of that time held that blacks with white ancestry were intellectually superiors than those of pure African ancestry.²

This, of course, concerned women, too. Female slaves endowed with fairer complexion were, according to Kerr, considered to be “gentler, kinder, more attractive, smarter and more delicate.”³ African Americans adopted the dominant culture's view of beauty and this paved a way for developing what is known today as the color complex.

¹ Gerald D. Jaynes, *Encyclopedia of African American Society* (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2005), 558.

² Gunnar Myrdal, *American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 162.

³ Audrey Kerr, "The Paper Bag Principle of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism," *The Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 469 (2005): 273.

Not only did African Americans start to judge beauty based on fairness of individual's complexion but dark complexion was commonly used as a basis for discrimination within the African American community, which we will see in the analysis of the novels *The Bluest Eye* and *The Blacker the Berry*.

1.2 Influence of mass media

After the 1920s, African American women were increasingly coming under the influence of mass media that portrayed Black as ugly and White as beautiful. The majority of advertisements “consistently promoted a beauty standard of smooth, glossy hair and light complexion, [and] some...crudely portrayed black hair and skin as defects that needed to be corrected through the use of hair straighteners and skin whiteners.”⁴

In the 1930s, Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted famous ‘doll study’ experiment among the children in segregated schools in Washinton, DC. The only difference between the dolls was their skin and hair color. The results of the experiment demonstrated that African American children showed preference for play with white dolls over black dolls. Moreover, when asked to pick the ‘bad’ doll they subconsciously opted for the black one. The results of the experiments were used as an argument against segregation, maintaining that it caused feelings of inferiority among the African American children. However, it can be contended that the results also manifest the effects of the imposition of white beauty standards and positive qualities associated solely with white skin color that might lead to internalized racism. There have been various remakes of the experiment but the results were highly similar to the original one.

1950's saw a rise in consumerism and mass media started to have a huge impact on everyday lives of the Americans. Remarkable amount of products marketed to women upheld the light complexion as an ideal of femininity and beauty. Let us take an example from early 50's edition of Amsterdam News, the Harlem weekly, an advertisement for what was once known as Dr. Fred Palmer's skin whitening cream. The advertisement boldly stated “Be Whiter, Be Better, Be Loved”. We may alter this advertising slogan with a famous question of an evil stepmother from the fairytale Snow White: “Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the

⁴ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 37.

fairest of them all?” Even in this fairytale, “beautiful” and “light-skinned” go hand in hand.

1.3 Split identity

The African Americans permanently lived in the state of exile in their own country, forever split between American and African American identity as W. E. Dubois has effectively shown with his notion of double consciousness: “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”⁵ On one hand, they acknowledged United States as their home, on the other hand they lifted their eyes up to the land that was yet to come, the promised land. Instead of the system, they often blamed themselves for their plight, which according to Izgarjan could be correlated to their adoption of the notion of the American dream in which the individual is to be blamed for failing to achieve success. American society, which “privileges the ideal of white beauty and master narrative of self-reliance...tends to blame an individual for failing to achieve success conveniently absolving the society of its responsibility.”⁶

‘Cosmetic westernism’, as sociologists Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall in their study published in *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color In a New Millenium* labelled this phenomenon, referring to “internalized ideal held by people around the world that being lighter skinned and more Western looking is better,”⁷ is permeating across all cultures. Any deviation from it is perceived like a conscious affront. Yet, we often underestimate the fact that the Western world sets standards on different things because it often holds the microphone.

No matter if the black female is “brilliant, accomplished, and rich, she must still deal with a relentless standard, almost always internalized, which tells her she is inferior”⁸ The journey to building healthy self-esteem and self-

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 45.

⁶ Aleksandra Izgarjan, “Breathtaking Beauty: Gender and Race Conventions in Toni Morrison’s the Bluest Eye,” in *The Beauty of Convention: Essays in Literature and Culture*, ed. Marija Krivokapić-Knežević and Aleksandra Nikčević-Batričević (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 140.

⁷ Ronald Hall, Introduction to *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, edited by Ronald Hall, Kathy Russell and Midge Wilson (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), xiii.

⁸ Sara Halprin, *‘Look at My Ugly Face!’: Myths and Muslims on Beauty and Other Perilous Obsessions with Women’s Appearance* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995), 158.

acceptance seems always to hinge on the dire need of accepting and celebrating the very things that make us fundamentally unique. Our beauty breathes out when we embrace the marks that the life leaves on us, when we transform what everybody else considers to be weakness to our strength. This is wonderfully captured in each of the works which will be mentioned in subsequent chapters.

2 The Bluest Eye

Before proceeding to the analysis of the novel itself, I would like to attempt to place the novel in the context of the events which surrounded its occurrence. The novel was published in the aftermath of the turbulent 1960s with its Civil Rights Act (1964), The Voting Rights Act (1965) and the nationalistic Black Power movement. The novel's influence can be traced back to Black Power Movement, as a demonstration of how white supremacy is maintained through socially and racially constructed concept of beauty and how devastating is its effect on the lives of African Americans. Along with the destructive power of white hegemony, the novel laments the unsettling lack of resources to fight against the white supremacy, as well as the inability to attach positive connotations to the outer appearance of black individuals, which often has tragic consequences.

The novel's significance lies in a direction other than that of the majority of artistic representation in the 1970s. Instead of focusing on strong black woman, it takes the perspective of a vulnerable little black girl who is not aware that her black is beautiful. Pecola, the protagonist, dreams of blue eyes which, as she believes, will make her beautiful. When asked about her novel idea source, Toni Morrison recollects a conversation with her childhood friend who was questioning the existence of God because her prayers for blue eyes have not been answered:

I looked at her and imagined her having them [blue eyes] and thought how awful that would be if she had gotten her prayer answered. I always thought she was beautiful. I began to write about a girl who wanted blue eyes and the horror of having that wish fulfilled; and also about the whole business of what is physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else, and how devastating that was and yet part of all females who were peripheral in other people's lives.⁹

Each of the chapters in the novel begins by a recitation from a typical first-grade primer, "Dick and Jane," which was a textbook used to teach the children to read. The images from the primer represent a happy, white, picture-perfect

⁹ Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 95–96.

family with a pretty house and happy parents who play with their children. The first lines of the primer set the tone of the novel from the very beginning: here is an image of the world populated by ‘good’, prosperous white families living in an idealized, harmonious settings. It seems almost as if the inhabitants of this world knew so sorrow, no gloom.

However, there is another world that creeps up almost unnoticed. This world mars the ‘good’ and ‘perfect’ peace of the white characters and casts shadow over their happiness. Against the backdrop of the ‘good’ white laughing, playing, happy family, the author looks at the lives of the novel’s black characters, whose lives are somehow fragmented, broken, with each day edging closer to a financial ruin. The ‘peace’ of the white world is suddenly disturbed. The only way how to get out of the ‘vicious circle’ of black life, the only way to be successful in life, is to have lighter skin, therefore closer to the Western ideal of beauty. This, however, demonstrates to a certain degree underlying hypocrisy as it essentially involves denying one’s background. This is demonstrated in the case of Geraldine and Maureen Peal.

2.1 The Privileged

Geraldine tries to separate herself and her family from the rest of the black community. She refuses any association with them. She straightens her hair and puts lotion on her son Junior’s skin so as not appear too black. She tries to maintain a clean and orderly household, the qualities which in her mind are associated with being white as opposed to dirt and disorder associated with being black. "Whiteness" is viewed as some kind of spectrum, related to a complex web of factors — not only the color of one's skin but also to a place of origin, socioeconomic status, and educational background. She views those less fortunate ones, those who grow lived where “grass wouldn’t grow” with disdain, as can be seen from her words to Pecola after she is falsely accused of killing her cat: “Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.”¹⁰

This is also the case of Maureen Peal, a “high yellow dream child,”¹¹ light-skinned girl from a prosperous family. Maureen is a new girl who comes to Pecola’s school. Both her teachers and classmates, especially boys, are completely

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970, London: Vintage Random House, 1999), 91-92.

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 52.

mesmerized by her. Which is quite surprising as Maureen's appearance does not really correspond to dominant culture standards of beauty: yellow skin, dark green slanted eyes, a tooth with pointed tip exposed when she smiles. Her light skin and social status are, however, enough to compensate for all the flaws in her appearance.

Moreover, according to Hiraldo, "Maureen's comfortable financial standing depicts a relation between lighter skin color and economic ascendancy in white-idolizing society."¹² By hinting at the underlying connectedness of the color of one's skin and economic stability, Hiraldo suggests, the author "unearths an issue that typically had only been hinted at in earlier U.S. representations of bi-racial and mulatto/a characters."¹³ Being light-skinned, rich, "swaddled in comfort and care,"¹⁴ she personifies precisely those qualities that the other children wish to have, "the fantasies many African Americans have about mitigating the oppression directed against them by acquiring lighter skin and straighter hair, the typical features of white beauty."¹⁵

Nonetheless, Maureen does not initiate positive responses from all of her classmates. Claudia cannot comprehend why people treat Maureen so kindly. "...what was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?"¹⁶ She realises that what she despises the most about her is the thing that makes her beautiful: "the Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us."¹⁷ It is "the ideology of whiteness that makes Maureen appear beautiful."¹⁸ As Bouson argues, the 'Thing' Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty that members of the African American community have internalised, a standard that favours the 'highyellow' Maureen Peal and denigrates the 'black and ugly' Pecola Breedlove.¹⁹ Hiraldo adds to this a kind of controversial observation that the standard of beauty accepted by African Americans is "a form of self-genocide,"²⁰ represented by the "lynch ropes"²¹ that Maureen is wearing.

¹² Carlos Hiraldo, *Segregated Miscegenation: On the Treatment of Racial Hybridity in the North* (New York, Routledge, 2003), 82.

¹³ Hiraldo, *Segregated Miscegenation: On the Treatment of Racial Hybridity in the North*, 82.

¹⁴ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 57.

¹⁵ Hiraldo, *Segregated Miscegenation: On the Treatment of Racial Hybridity in the North*, 82.

¹⁶ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 57.

¹⁷ Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, 58.

¹⁸ Giavanna Munafa, "'No Sign of Life' – Marble-Blue Eyes and Lakefront Houses in the Bluest Eye," *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 6, no. 1-2 (1995): 8.

¹⁹ J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000), 31.

²⁰ Hiraldo, *Segregated Miscegenation: On the Treatment of Racial Hybridity in the North*, 82.

²¹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 52.

Claudia is aware of the dangers that the internalized white feminine beauty standards impose on the individual's psyche. She recognizes that if we aspire to the dominant culture ideal of beauty where a white woman is put on the pedestal and alter our appearance in accordance with this ideal, we may be considered beautiful by the people around us but there are others who will suffer. Therefore, as Furman argues, Claudia blames the black community which adopts "a white standard of beauty" ... that worships Maureen but at the same time "makes Pecola its scapegoat."²²

Maureen tries to be friendly towards Pecola – she protects her from her tormentors and even offers to buy her ice cream. Eventually, however, she descends to the same level as Pecola's tormentors. Her internalized racism comes to light as she screams at the girls: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly!"²³ In other words, she adopts the prejudices associated with darker hues of skin by the dominant society. With a firm belief that her lighter skin tone brings her closer to being white, she assumes a position of superiority. She refuses to acknowledge that she herself is only a shade lighter than the girls she mocks. She gave up her identity for the sake of passing as white, for the sole purpose of belonging, of better integration into the white society. Being black to Maureen, and to the society she has been indoctrinated by, is associated with being unsuccessful, poor, and criminal, the qualities she that she wants to distance herself from.

2.2 Pecola's idols

Pecola prays for blue eyes because is the eye color of choice for the society surrounding her. More than for the blue eyes, however, she is longing for the things that the blue eyes represent: to be loved by someone, to be perfect. In the 1930s, which is the period when the novel is set, Shirley Temple's popularity was at its peak. Shirley was a child actress who was seen as a role model for little girls. She was a true American sweetheart, an icon of beauty. The image of a smiling little girl with curly blonde hair, bright blue eyes and light skin adorned advertisements for everything. She seemed to embody all the traits that made girls cherished, that were viewed as favorable by the society.

The significance of Shirley Temple for the novel is great. As most of the

²² Jan Furman, "Black Girlhood and Black Womanhood: The Bluest Eye and Sula," in *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 219.

²³ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 73.

little girls of her age, Pecola is influenced by the omnipresence of the Shirley Temple persona. While staying at MacTeer's house, she drinks three quarts of milk out of Shirley Temple mug, in Claudia's opinion just to "handle and see sweet Shirley's face."²⁴ At first glance Pecola's connection to the mug does not strike the reader as unusual. We might be reminded of any child enraptured by a cartoon movie, trying to get their hands on the merchandise of their favorite character; however, far beyond the physical reality, the mug is enriched with symbolic meaning. It might embody Pecola's desire to get closer to the ideal of beauty accepted by the mainstream society. Holding a piece of that beauty on her hands for at least a brief moment will, in her mind, entitle her to the same love and affection enjoyed by white girls. Milk is white and pure, just as Shirley Temple.

Another demonstration of internalized white female beauty standards is the candy that she buys in the shop. Morrison emphasizes that the shop owner refused to touch her hand when she was giving him the coins: "He hesitated, not wanting to touch her hand."²⁵ This merely increases the distance between them. It is a crucial scene whereby Pecola realizes that other people find her body repulsive. She is utterly shocked by the "total absence of human recognition"²⁶ that prevents the shop owner from seeing her as a human being. Moreover, she perceives herself as worthy of his ignorance. The sense of her own worthlessness that deepens its roots in her in that moment is underscored by the dandelions that appear in the scene: before entering the doors of the shop, she was admiring their beauty, wondering why people think of them as weeds and throw them away. As soon as she leaves the shop, she is filled with anger: "Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, 'They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds.'" ²⁷ The society's definition of what is beautiful and what is not once again takes root in her and makes her stop seeing beauty both in herself and the dandelions with which she identifies. She is frustrated, gobbles the Mary Jane candies she has bought, with an illustration of a pretty, blond, fair-skinned, blue-eyed girl with a bonnet on the wrapper: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." ²⁸

²⁴ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 22.

²⁵ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 48.

²⁶ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 48.

²⁷ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 49.

²⁸ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 50.

Similar scenario is repeated. Pecola is made to believe that ingesting the candies might protect her against harsh behavior of the shop owner who sells her the candies and finally against merciless society.

2.3 Family background

Pecola's approach is in sharp contrast with Claudia MacTeer, the narrator of the book who appears to be immune from societal standards of beauty. She is distrustful towards Shirley Temple mania and instead voices her admiration for Jane Withers who, in the movie called *Bright Eyes*, represented an opposite of Shirley Temple: a bad little girl with no dimples, no curly hair, treating others in an obnoxious, inconsiderate manner. When given a white baby doll as a present (after all, "all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured),"²⁹ she is sickened by the sight of it. "I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair. The other dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite."³⁰ The doll for her is associated both with motherhood which she cannot find any enthusiasm for but also the most sought-after traits for women in mainstream culture.

Her disdain for the feminine beauty standards that she is expected to emulate finds manifestation in physical destruction of one of its symbols: the baby doll:

...the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What make people look at them and say, 'Awwwww', but not at me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them.³¹

She enjoys destroying the white dolls because it enables her to undermine the increasingly whitewashed definition of beauty dictated by the mainstream

²⁹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 20

³⁰ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 24.

³¹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 24.

society which labels her as black and ugly. She is actively resisting the given standards of beauty because she is aware of the dangers associated with blind adherence to these standards. Claudia and her sister Frieda seem to embrace their blackness: “We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness.”³²

Claudia’s experience is less painful because she gets acceptance from her family. Unlike Pecola’s father Cholly, who indulges in drinking alcohol and Pecola’s mother Pauline who spends most of the time outside the house, MacTeers are far from ideal family, nevertheless, they succeed at teaching their daughters how to nurture their self-esteem which enables them to survive in the world that is treating them as inferior. Although Mrs. MacTeer often complains, she shows love for her daughters through her deeds. As Eva Lennox Birch suggests in her *Black American Women’s Writings*, Claudia’s is a “healthy survival of one cocooned by familial love”³³. Birch further explains that Claudia, “nurtured in a home echoing with her mother’s singing, assured of her father’s protection and the loving of a sister,” acquires “values that are emotional, not materialistic.”³⁴ This is demonstrated when she wishes for Christmas “to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with [her] lap full of lilacs, and listen to Big Papa play his violin for [her] alone.”³⁵ Home for Claudia is associated with warmth and acceptance.

Pecola, on the other hand, is in the opposite situation. Her parents are unable to profess love for their children (which is ironical given their surname, Breedloves). The distance between Pecola and her mother becomes obvious when the reader learns that Pecola is allowed to address her mother only as Mrs. Breedlove, while the children of her employers call her Polly. Her mother distances herself from her family and spends most of the time in the house of her employers where she seeks consolation from the downward spiral of her emotionally destructive marriage.

We learn that when she was two years old, Pauline stepped on a nail, injury which explains her limp and crooked foot and which consequently makes her feel separate from the people around her and unworthy of love:

³² Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 57.

³³ Eva Lennox Birch, “Toni Morrison: The power of the Ancestors,” in *Black American Women’s Writing*, ed. Eva Lennox Birch (New York, Routledge, 2014), 156

³⁴ Birch, “Toni Morrison: The power of the Ancestors,” 156.

³⁵ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 24.

Slight as it was, this deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done . . . why nobody teased her . . . Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot.³⁶

Pauline's sense of unworthiness is awakened again at the hospital when she is about to give birth to Pecola. Although she is determined to love Pecola no matter what she looks like, when the doctor compares her delivery to that of a horse, she feels humiliated and she is no longer able to express genuine joy at the birth of her child: "The baby come. Big old healthy thing...but I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair but Lord she was ugly."³⁷ Eventually, Pauline ends up in a lifeless storefront, constantly fighting with her husband and threatening to kill him. She finds fulfilment solely in the house of her white employers which gives her the opportunity to make up for the lack of harmony in her life.

For Cholly, the emotional wounds that occurred in his childhood and adolescence are carried onto his adulthood. Abandoned by his mother who left him at the junk heap, Cholly was raised by his great aunt who died when he was still in his teenage years. He sets out to find his father but he is rejected by him. The ghosts of his childhood, as well as the absence of positive real-life role model, result in his inability to cope with fatherhood and its responsibilities and finally also in him becoming a habitual. He is basically living the life of an outcast in his own home. He is direct opposite of the father from the Dick and Jane primer.

The family background becomes increasingly important throughout the novel. It is crucially correlated with how the characters feel about themselves. Nurturing family environment helps them develop awareness of their identity and thus greater resilience against the standards of beauty forced upon them by the society. Hostile environment, on the other hand, does the opposite. Therefore, Birch seems right in remarking that "Pecola Breedlove imagined she was unloved because she was unlovely, in contrast to Claudia, whose

³⁶ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 110-111.

³⁷ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 127.

home life provided an assured basis for growth towards fulfilment in self-love.”³⁸ Pecola finds her only consolation in her dreams of acquiring blue eyes, a gift that she thinks will transform her into a beautiful girl worthy of everyone’s love, affection and preoccupation. She uses the phrases “Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook eyes”³⁹ and “Morning-glory-blue eyes”⁴⁰ as some kind of mantra that comforts her and simultaneously foreshadows her descend into a state of madness whereby she becomes completely absorbed by her desired imaginary, blue-eyed beautiful version of self.

She is dumped by the society: being victim of incest, pregnant with her father’s child and mad, she becomes object of disapproving glances that she believes are sign of everyone’s jealousy of her newly acquired blue eyes. Having no one to talk to, she creates an imaginary friend who, as suggested by Bhandari, “validates all her desires and gives her an allusion of belongingness”⁴¹. By this, Morrison seems to emphasize alienation of the black people who harbor aspirations to pass as white. Claudia and Frieda feel guilty and so they plant marigold seeds in the backyard. By planting of seeds of marigolds, the girls believe they will attain the necessary redemption for both Pecola and the baby that is about to be born. If the seeds bloom, the girls believe that the baby will survive and hopefully have prosperous life. The marigolds do not grow that year. Claudia thinks it might have been because Cholly’s raping of Pecola disturbed the natural order, but then she notices that marigolds did not grow anywhere in the whole city, she thinks that maybe the earth is to blame for it was too hostile to the marigolds, as society is too hostile to the dark-skinned Pecola.

The outcome of Pecola’s wish come true is pitifully sad: even though she acquired the blue eyes that she wished for (at least in her imagination), she can never be happy because there will always be someone who has bluer eyes than her. Through Claudia, however, the novel maintains a more positive stance, indicating that some are capable of resisting the white dictate of beauty because they see the disturbing effects that this dictate has. But for the vulnerable, ostracized victims of such indoctrination this awareness may come too late.

³⁸ Eva Lennox Birch, “*Black American Women’s Writing*,” 156.

³⁹ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 40.

⁴⁰ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 40.

⁴¹ Sumedha Bhandari, “Quest for Blue Eyes in the Bluest Eye,” in *Toni Morrison’s Art: A Humanistic Exploration of the Bluest Eye and Beloved* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2017), 40.

3 God Help the Child

God Help the Child (2016) follows the story of Lula Ann Bridewell, a blue-black woman who, unlike Pecola Breedlove, receives compensation for the lack of parental love and attention in her childhood. She blossoms into a successful woman, working as a manager in a cosmetic company which gives her an opportunity to create her own cosmetic line, named You, Girl, targeted at “girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk.”⁴² She changes her name to Bride, with “nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one memorable syllable,”⁴³ and falls in love with Booker, a street musician who enables her to detach herself from the painful memories of her childhood and feel wanted and accepted.

All seems to be going well for her until she shares with him her attachment to Sofia Huxley, a former kindergarten teacher. She confesses that she falsely accused her of sexual abuse before the court just to win her mother’s pride and affection. Booker is unable to bear it and eventually abandons her, saying: “You not the woman I want.”⁴⁴ After Booker leaves, her traumatic memories are reignited in her mind. We learn that, as was the case with Pecola, Bride was rejected by her mother as a child for being too dark.

3.1 Bride’s childhood

Bride’s mother, Sweetness, grew up in a society with prevalent disdain toward blackness, in which dark-skinned people met with a hostile reception. She herself is ‘high-yellow’, and so is Bride’s father. She does not understand why such dark-skinned child was born to her. “Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don’t go with her skin. You might think she’s a throwback, but throwback to what?”⁴⁵ Sweetness is appalled by the color of her daughter: “She was so black she scared me. Midnight black. Sudanese black.”⁴⁶ She even admits that the color of the baby embarrassed her: “I thought I was going crazy when she turned

⁴² Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (New York: Vintage International, 2016), 10.

⁴³ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 11

⁴⁴ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 10.

⁴⁵ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 3.

⁴⁶ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 3.

blue-black right before my eyes.”⁴⁷ She thinks about suffocating her, but she cannot find strength to do that: “...I held a blanket over her face and pressed...but I couldn’t do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn’t been born with that terrible color.”⁴⁸ The baby’s color becomes the reason of fights between Sweetness and her husband who harbors suspicion about the fidelity of his wife. Sweetness suggests that the fault for her blackness might be on his side of family, which outrages him and makes him abandon her. Sweetness becomes a single mother. She is convinced that her daughter’s blackness is responsible for the end of their marriage: “That’s what did it – what caused the fights between me and him”. She goes on to say that they had a peaceful marriage “but when she was born he blamed me and treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger — more than that, an enemy.”⁴⁹

She points at the hardships that she had to face, being a single mother with a child who was dark skinned. Pushing her in a baby carriage, she has to face the looks of shock from onlookers, both friends and strangers who “would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning.”⁵⁰ In an attempt to distance herself from her daughter, she asks her to call her by her first name, ‘Sweetness’, instead of ‘Mother’ because she is afraid that her daughter, being too dark and calling her ‘Mama’ would “confuse people.”⁵¹ Comparison with Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* suggests itself. Like Pecola, Bride is deprived not only of maternal love and affection but also of her basic right, to call her mother ‘Mama.’

The estrangement of mother and daughter is highlighted in many more moments throughout the novel. Some inspire sense awe in the reader, for instance when Bride recalls her mother’s bathing of her, which evokes expectation of tenderness and love but turns out to be quite the opposite: “Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me...”⁵² Instead of love and tenderness, the reader receives an account of a striking lack of emotion of any kind, rarely a hint of affection from Bride’s mother’s side. Her mother finds her daughter’s black skin too repulsive to touch.

⁴⁷ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 3.

⁴⁸ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 5.

⁴⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 5.

⁵⁰ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 6.

⁵¹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 6.

⁵² Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 5.

Bride's thirst for her mother's love, and the devastating consequences of touch deprivation, are perhaps most powerfully illustrated when she recalls: "I used to pray that she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch."⁵³ She indicates that she "made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated."⁵⁴ After years of deprivation of intimacy, she is positively shocked when her mother finally slaps her as she starts her period for the first time and her mother washes her menstrual blood: "Her shock was alleviated by the satisfaction of being touched, handled by a mother who avoided physical contact whenever possible."⁵⁵

3.2 Facing the obstacles

In addition to her mother's disdain, Bride's color aggravates her position among her classmates. Her presence at the school is somewhat alien and threatening to her classmates: "they treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper."⁵⁶ She does not find the courage to report it to her teacher for she is worried that she might be expelled from school. She opts for quiet, passive resistance: "So I let the name calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins,"⁵⁷ knowing that there is no other option, "no antibiotic available."⁵⁸ She is unable to defend herself against her classmates. With hindsight, however, she sees that she learned one of her most valuable lessons during that time: "I built up immunity so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' was all I needed to win."⁵⁹

Her color also hampers her access to respectable employment. When she finally finds a job, her employers make sure that she does not come into direct contact with customers: "After I don't know how many refusals, I finally found a job working stock — never sales where customers would see me."⁶⁰ Lower occupational prestige as opposed to her light-skinned colleagues is indicated also when she sees them promoted earlier than her. She gains a better position only

⁵³ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 31.

⁵⁴ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 31.

⁵⁵ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 79.

⁵⁶ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 57.

⁵⁷ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 57.

⁵⁸ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 57.

⁵⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 57.

⁶⁰ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 36.

after they have done a grave mistake: “I got to be a buyer only after a rock-dumb white girls got promotions or screwed up so bad they settled for somebody who actually knew about stock.”⁶¹

Later in life, she has problems finding a partner. Majority of men are attracted to her because of her racial features, her dissimilarity. She complains that none of her partners was interested in who she was as a person. They did not truly appreciate her, they were gratified by the color of her skin and the physical features associated with it: “Not one of them giving, helpful—none interested in what I thought, just what I looked like.”⁶² In one of the episodes in the novel, Bride recalls dating a man from the north who persuaded her to visit his parents: “As soon as he introduced me I knew I was there to terrorize his family, a means of threat to this nice old white couple.”⁶³ She realizes that his interest in her is not sincere, the main reason why he introduced her to his parents that in bringing a blue-black girl to his parent’s house, he sensed an opportunity for revenge. His desire for revenge becomes clear when she sees his eyes “gleaming with malice.”⁶⁴

3.3 Objectification

As time goes by, Bride learns to use her blackness and walk with confidence, “not a strut, not that pelvis-out rush of the runway — but a stride, slow and focused.”⁶⁵ She becomes aware that the color of her skin can be perceived as strength, as something desirable, rather than limitation. Following the advice of her friend Jeri, she decides to wear “only white and all white all the time”⁶⁶ to make her name, Bride, and also the color of her skin stand out. “With Jeri’s help, she had capitalized on her dark skin, stressing it, glamorizing it.”⁶⁷ She is, nonetheless, still viewed as a commodity, as an object of exotic attraction rather than really appreciated for what she is. The looks she gets from strangers, “stunned but hungry”⁶⁸ are a powerful evidence that she is objectified for the

⁶¹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 36.

⁶² Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 37.

⁶³ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 37.

⁶⁴ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 37.

⁶⁵ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 36.

⁶⁶ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 33.

⁶⁷ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 143.

⁶⁸ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 34.

color of her skin. In addition to that, Jeri compares her to “a panther in the snow,”⁶⁹ again indicating a mere exotic attraction. After all, as Jeri notes: “Black sells. It’s the hottest commodity in the civilized world.”⁷⁰ This might also be seen as an evidence of a shift away from the Western ideal of a light skin color. However, it also demonstrates that her embracing her dark skin is rather superficial at first. Her attempts at a surface beautification are merely a means to outrun her haunting past.

The awareness of the privileges of her skin color does not have positive consequences. Although she gets the attention she has been longing for, she does not find fulfillment in life. During the recovery after Sofia attacked her, she is constantly looking at the mirror, observing the skin on her face slowly healing. She laments: “I look almost beautiful again, so why am I still sad?”⁷¹ Here, a parallel between *God Help the Child* and *Bluest Eye* can be seen. Similarly as in the case of Pecola whose blue eyes did not bring her happiness, the attention Bride gets serves the same purpose and prompts her even more to question the permanence of her achievement.

3.3 Self-absorption

Moreover, the awe that she inspires in others causes Bride to become increasingly self-absorbed and materialistic. Her obsession with herself is apparent when she is listening to a radio while driving her car and has to switch channels because Nina Simone’s singing is “too aggressive, making [her] think of something other than herself.”⁷² When she meets Booker, she is not really interested in his family, his past, his life in general. It seems almost as if what he has to say did not concern her as long as he treats her right. Only after he abandons her does she become interested in his past and personality that she overlooked when she was with him.

Her obsession with material things is demonstrated when she travels to the house of Sofia Huxley, the teacher whom she falsely accused of sexual abuse. She puts emphasis on the things she owns, on designer clothes and Luis Vuitton handbag, and beautiful Jaguar she is driving. She thinks that her money can

⁶⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 50.

⁷⁰ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 36.

⁷¹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 34.

⁷² Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 78.

compensate Sofia for her false accusation that put her into prison and enable her to start a new life, however, her offer is met with a surge of violence she had not expected. Her materialistic mindset is further revealed when Booker abandons her:

“What did he mean by ‘not the woman’? Who? This here woman? This one driving a Jaguar in an oyster-white cashmere dress and boots of brushed rabbit fur the color of the moon? The beautiful one, according to everybody with two eyes, who runs a major department in a billion-dollar company, who doesn’t realize blackness is a commodity measured by success.”⁷³

This excerpt could be used to argue that she adopts American way of thinking and measuring success – she thinks that running a major department in a billion-dollar company, wearing fancy clothes and having a nice car entitles her to be loved and cherished by her boyfriend. Paradoxically, these are precisely the values she despises in people: “Every girl I know introduces her boyfriend as a lawyer or artist or club owner or broker or whatever. The job, not the guy, is what the girlfriend adores.”⁷⁴

During her recovery after Sofia’s attack of her, she has a lot of time to assess her relationship with Booker. She is still preoccupied with her appearance – maybe that’s why she notices the alternations to her body, like clothes that do not fit anymore. “That’s when she understood that the body changes began not simply after he left, but because he left.”⁷⁵ She is worried that the changes she notices about her body may signal that she is being transformed back into a “scared little black girl” she once was.”⁷⁶

Booker appears to be the first boyfriend who can truly appreciate Bride’s beauty as that of a woman, not merely objectifying her. In his eyes, she is a “midnight Galatea always and already alive.”⁷⁷ He is amazed by her aesthetic beauty, “the edge of her cheekbones, her invitational mouth, her nose, forehead, chin as well as those eyes” which are made “more exquisite, more aesthetically

⁷³ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 143.

⁷⁴ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 62.

⁷⁵ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 94.

⁷⁶ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 142.

⁷⁷ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 132.

pleasing because of her obsidian-midnight skin.”⁷⁸

Without Booker, she is once again left at the mercy of the hostile world around her. She sets off on a road trip to find him and confront him. During this road trip, her Jaguar crashes into a tree. She is rescued by a poor family living in an old-fashioned house, with resources that enable them to fill only the most basic needs. She feels humiliated when she realizes that these people take care of her and are not interested in who she is or where did she come from. They give away from their modest resources yet ask nothing in return for their care. “Here she was among people living the barest life, putting themselves out without hesitation, asking nothing in return.”⁷⁹

3.3 A road to recovery

In Steve and Evelyn’s house, she becomes close to Rain, the child they rescued and accepted as their own. Rain shares with Bride her story, how her mother sold her to prostitution and threw her out of the house when she bit one of the men. Bride recognizes herself in the story and, as Wyatt observes, “the extreme of maternal rejection recounted by Rain cuts through Bride’s habitual self-absorption.”⁸⁰ All of a sudden, she feels the pain and suffering of her fellow, she has to “fight against the danger of tears for anyone other than herself,”⁸¹ which indicates that for Bride this is a completely new experience. Perhaps because she herself experienced the pain of rejection by her mother, she can supply Rain’s needs and becomes her confidant. Her gradual move towards selflessness, although a minor one, is yet again demonstrated when she goes for a walk in the forest with Rain and two boys shoot at them with birdshot. Bride throws herself in front of Rain so that she is wounded in place of Rain. Empathy towards Rain enables her to shift away from the identity of an abused and scared little girl towards that of a strong woman.

Bride’s pride receives a final blow after arrival to Queen Olive’s (Booker’s aunt’s) house. Upon seeing her, Queen Olive notes that she looks “like something

⁷⁸ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 133.

⁷⁹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 90.

⁸⁰ Jean Wyatt, “Love, Trauma and the Body” in *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison’s Later Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 185.

⁸¹ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 103.

a racoon found and refused to eat.”⁸² Bride’s view of herself, which up to this point had been shaped largely by the responses she gets from the people around her, is shattered. Her self-value is not yet internalized enough to stand the test of criticism:

Bride swallowed. For the past three years she’d only hear how exotic, how gorgeous she was – everywhere, from almost everybody – stunning, dreamy, hot, wow. Now this old woman with woolly red hair and judging eyes had deleted an entire vocabulary of compliments in one stroke. Once again, she was the ugly, too-black little girl in her mother’s hour.⁸³

Queen Olive’s remark awakens her to truth. She realizes that she cannot achieve self-fulfillment by leading materially affluent, but empty life. Queen Olive helps her realize that obsession with looks breeds shallowness. She believed that surrounding herself with material things can protect her from the ghosts of her pasts, however, she gradually comes to realize that they are just “thrillingly successful corporate woman façade of complete control.”⁸⁴ Her shift from self-absorption is apparent when she saves Queen Olive from the burning house and takes care of her at the hospital with Booker: “...they worked together like a true couple, thinking not of themselves, but of helping somebody else.”⁸⁵

Therefore, to diminish the power of beauty standards, she has to, as Grass suggests, “free herself from the prison of artifices”⁸⁶ that she tucked herself in, believing it can mask her self-doubt. The novel ends on a positive note and gives the reader hope that Bride finally understood that trying to subscribe to artificial standards of beauty created by the society will not help her find her true value. Queen Olive can be seen as Bride’s guide on her journey who empowers her to “discover a sense of self that is not tied to the myth of a post-racial and post-feminist America,”⁸⁷ and understand that it is not something given by others but rather something she has to find within herself.

⁸² Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 144.

⁸³ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 144.

⁸⁴ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 134.

⁸⁵ Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 167.

⁸⁶ Delphine Gras, “Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*,” *Humanities* 5, no. 4 (September 2016): 14.

⁸⁷ Gras, “Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*,” 16.

4 The Blacker the Berry

The last African-American novel to be analyzed in this thesis is *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) by Wallace Thurman. Apart from sexual connotations, the phrase “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” to which the title of the novel alludes also carries deeper meaning: the exterior cannot be used as a reliable measurement for judging what is inside. As a black girl growing up in Boise, Idaho, Emma Lou — the protagonist of the novel — is brought into an environment where colorism plays a significant role. Her grandmother was the founder of the “blue vein” circle whose members perpetuated the tension to “grow whiter and whiter every generation,”⁸⁸ until their grandchildren possess all the traits necessary to pass for white so that “problems of race would plague the no more.”⁸⁹ Here, Sarah E. Chinn, the author of *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence*, observes that “it is not whiteness as a racial category that is being privileged here”, rather, it is “whiteness as color – or, perhaps, more accurately, an absence of color,”⁹⁰ that is of utmost interest to the members of the blue vein circle.

The members of the blue vein circle believed that they were “fair skinned enough for their blood to be seen pulsing purple through the veins of their wrists,”⁹¹ blue blood being a sign of aristocracy, of noble birth. Blue veins were more noticeable on pale skin, which was the reason why many members of aristocracy possessed a profound sense of superiority, so profound that they insisted that they were of different biological origin than the peasants who had dark skin. This view was adapted also by the members of the blue vein circle. They maintained that just by virtue of having light a complexion, they were entitled to the same respect and social well-being as white people. The lone conciliatory voice in the family is uncle Joe who insisted that “Negroes were Negroes whether they happened to be yellow, brown, or black, and a conscious effort to eliminate the darker elements would neither prove nor solve anything.”⁹²

⁸⁸ Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929. New York: Scribner, 1996), 28.

⁸⁹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 29.

⁹⁰ Sarah E. Chinn, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence* (London: Continuum, 2000), 84.

⁹¹ Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929. New York: Scribner, 1996), 28.

⁹² Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 36-7.

The birth of Emma Lou presents an unwelcome hindrance to the assimilation efforts of the blue veins. Her mother is described as “abysmally stunned by the color of her child.”⁹³ She hoped that the baby would acquire some of her features, “golden brown” skin or at least “a luscious admixture,”⁹⁴ however, she does not take into account that her daughter’s genes may be transmitted from some of the family’s distant ancestors who had been black. What she describes as “tragic mistake” which could not be diminished even after she attempted to settle the matters by marrying a “red-haired Irish negro” which consequently restores her tarnished reputation to the blue vein circle.⁹⁵

Interestingly, her hair texture is just as was expected by her mother – “a black, curly mass of hair, rich and easily controlled.”⁹⁶ On the other hand, she also carries the genes of her father, dark skin and flat nose “as distinctly negroid as her too thick lips.”⁹⁷ Her hair strikes people around her as unusual, they remark: “such a lovely unnigerish hair on such a niggerish-looking child.”⁹⁸

The narrator indicates that Emma Lou’s mother was not the only person who was distressed by the color of Emma Lou’s skin — “it was an acquired family characteristic.”⁹⁹ By the virtue of her too dark skin, she is made to feel unwelcome by her family. Her mother Jamie seeks consolation from her mother, who sees chance to put the blame on Emma Lou’s father, “an ordinary black nigger”¹⁰⁰ who is responsible for the suffering caused by Emma Lou’s color.

Emma Lou admits that she wishes that she was born a boy instead, due to bleak prospects of growing up as a black girl: “black boy could get along, but black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment.”¹⁰¹ This confirms the observation of Hunter that “although colorism affects attitudes about self for both men and women, it appears that these effects are stronger for women than men.”¹⁰² Black women’s sensitivity to colorism as a major factor influencing their attitude towards self is a natural outcome of their interactions with the world

⁹³ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 14.

⁹⁴ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 14.

⁹⁵ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 31.

⁹⁶ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 31.

⁹⁷ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 31.

⁹⁸ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 31.

⁹⁹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 31.

¹⁰¹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 21.

¹⁰² Margaret Hunter, “The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality,” *Sociology Compass* 1, vol. 1 (2007): 240.

in which dark-skinned women were frequently occupying the lowest ranks in the social hierarchy, were the most disadvantaged group when it came to marriage, options for higher education and career advancement.

4.1 Color consciousness

Due to constant complaining and moaning over her blackness, Emma Lou grows increasingly color-conscious, concluding that “her marked color variation from the other people in her environment was a decided curse.”¹⁰³ She is so fixated on the color of her skin that she accepts it as her fate, as a “decided curse.” In a vain attempt to resist the beliefs instilled to her by her community, she enrolls at the university in Los Angeles where she hopes to escape the small-town mentality and daunting racial stratification that is all around her. She is firmly determined to prove to the people around her that blackness does not necessarily mean that one cannot go far. On the contrary, black girl can get “as much opportunity and as much happiness as a fair-skinned girl.”¹⁰⁴

On her first day at the university, she makes a decision to associate solely with what she refers to as “the right sort of people.” Curiously, she only has a vague idea of what it means. She only knows that these people must be fair-skinned, educated, “northerners like herself or superior southerner, if there were any, who were different from whites only insofar as skin color was concerned.”¹⁰⁵ These are, according to Emma Lou, the only people that are worthy of her attention. This may serve as an example of her family’s influence. She may have simply learned the values of her family and their opinion about whom one should associate with, however, she did not attain inner standards as to what is right to do.

From her family she also adapted the attitude of superiority, which comes to surface when she meets Hazel Mason: She refuses to be associated with “any one so flagrantly inferior, any one so noticeably a typical southern darky, who had no business obtruding into the more refined scheme of things.”¹⁰⁶ By “refined scheme of things”, she means university education, for African American students a means of attaining upper class status in the community. In Emma Lou’s eyes,

¹⁰³ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 53.

¹⁰⁵ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 26-27.

such privileges should be denied to “vulgar” people such as Hazel. This can be seen as a sign of Emma Lou’s hypocrisy. Emma Lou, like Hazel, is familiar with the disdain for the color of her skin prevalent in the society, yet she shows no pity for her. Instead, she sides with the society that turned both of them into scapegoats. She tries so hard to distance herself from the lower class African Americans that she subconsciously subscribes to same kind of clichéd and limited definition of her own race accepted by the dominant society, the same society which instilled in her hatred for her skin and caused her pain.

To gain the acceptance of crowds, Emma Lou has to carefully select her friends. Being friend with someone who was not acceptable for them, in this case with Hazel who was labelled too loud and too dark, could hinder any chance of getting close to them in the future. Unless, of course, the dark girl could be useful to them in some way. Emma Lou learns this rule when she tries to join a sorority and is not accepted “because she was not a high-brown or half-white.”¹⁰⁷ Other girl with a dark complexion, Verne Davis, is nevertheless accepted into the sonority. The key reason lies, according to Grace Giles, Emma Lou’s friend, in the fact that she is “a bishop’s daughter with plenty of coins and big buick,”¹⁰⁸ the characteristics which make her the obvious choice for the sonority. This demonstrates that in some cases, dark-skinned girls were accepted into what was termed as “mulatto bourgeois”, but only if they, “like Verne, had many things to compensate for their dark skin.”¹⁰⁹ Otherwise the place at the top of the university social hierarchy was occupied almost exclusively by wealthy, light-skinned African Americans.

However, financial status is not the only criterion that determines the acceptance of dark-skinned students into sonority. Hazel Mason is not accepted into sorority despite her father’s oil wealth. Hazel incites people by her conduct — speaking in a loud voice and using vernacular language which ultimately marks her as inferior. This implies that ‘race’ is far broader concept than simply color of one’s skin – it is, as Sarah Chinn indicates, “no longer a blanket racial definition but a set of intersections between color, behavior, clothing, and class:

¹⁰⁷ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 27.

¹⁰⁸ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 27.

¹⁰⁹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 31.

all external signs, not genealogical determinants.”¹¹⁰

Catherine Rottenberg in her “Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* and the Question of the Emancipatory City” concludes that the vast majority of African American students at the University of Southern California came from families which moved from the Deep South and were “interpellated into a world that constantly reinforces the desirability of whiteness”¹¹¹ which led them to “reproduce ideals of whiteness through the exclusion of Emma Lou and other dark, unexceptional female students.”¹¹²

4.2 Double consciousness

The idea of double consciousness is central to the book. It was introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois in ‘The Souls of Black Folk.’ Du Bois understood it as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”¹¹³ The concept of double consciousness could be further divided into two subissues: ‘second sight’ which means that they see themselves through the eyes of the dominant white society, and the issue of existing ‘behind the veil’ — by adapting the identity that the dominant society assigned to them, they develop a distorted view of themselves. Therefore, African Americans negotiate dual or biracial identity: as members of American society and at the same time bearers of black culture and values and expectations associated with it. They are often unable to reconcile these two identities.

This can be seen in case of Emma Lou. She spends her time at the campus in constant fear that someone might see her in the streets with Hazel, her dark-skinned fellow student. Hazel steers towards exercising authenticity. She successfully maintains sense of self-acceptance by wearing bright clothes that emphasizes the color of her skin. Emma Lou finds this open assertion of her racial identity repulsive. She considers Hazel “a barbarian who had most certainly not

¹¹⁰ Sarah E. Chinn, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence* (London, Continuum), 85.

¹¹¹ Catherine Rottenberg, “Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* and the Question of the Emancipatory City,” *Mosaic* 46, no. 4 (December 2013): 65.

¹¹² Rottenberg, “Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* and the Question of the Emancipatory City,” 65.

¹¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903: New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 5.

come from a family of best people.”¹¹⁴ In Emma Lou’s opinion, “Negroes must always be sober and serious in order to impress white people with their adaptability and non-difference.”¹¹⁵ This stands in direct opposition to *Bride in God Help the Child*, who is encouraged to wear white clothes simply because it makes her skin tone stand out. Emma Lou insists on her superiority over other dark-skinned girls such as Hazel Mason, “typical Southern darkies”, as she terms them, because she comes from a good family and knows how to conduct herself. What she does not realize is that the place among the elite, the “right sort of people” is being denied to her not by virtue of her association with Hazel but by virtue of being a too-black girl.

What is particularly striking about Emma Lou is, in Jarraway’s account, how she “swings between an overwhelming sense of superiority and an equal sense of inferiority.”¹¹⁶ Her sense of superiority manifests itself with respect to other dark-skinned people such as Hazel Mason, believing that such people do not deserve her friendship and threaten her reputation with the mulatto bourgeoisie that she wants to impress. On the other hand, she develops a sense of inferiority by desperately trying to connect to the elite social group that rejects her and instills in her a profound insecurity. Hence, she “idolized the one thing one would naturally expect her to hate.”¹¹⁷ It seems almost as she was subconsciously seeking experiences that leave her feeling excluded. Indeed, it could be argued that “Emma Lou herself careens between two equally fictive identities: disassociating herself from blackness and hyper-identifying as the most degraded kind of black.”¹¹⁸

Her stubborn disassociation from blackness is clearly seen when she refuses the friendship of a girl who was, unlike others, willing to associate with her, for the sake of approval of those who were not. Emma Lou displays the inner conflict of those African Americans who identified their very being with the ideals represented by the dominant society, the society which rejected them and made them feel abandoned. In L.A., just like in Boise, Emma Lou is viewed with

¹¹⁴ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 27.

¹¹⁵ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 27.

¹¹⁶ David R. Jarraway, “Tales of the City: Marginality, Community, and the Problem of (Gay) Identity in Wallace Thurman’s Harlem Fiction,” *College English* 65.1 (2002): 46.

¹¹⁷ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 129.

¹¹⁸ Chinn, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence*, 85.

disdain because of her dark skin. She seems unable to escape colorism because she always carries with her her color consciousness even in city community where she had expected to find “modern thought and progress.”¹¹⁹

4.3 Wearing the Mask

The concept of double consciousness was later revisited by Paul Lawrence Dunbar in his poem “We Wear the Mask.” The purpose of the mask, according to Sarah E. Chinn, was to “disguise the pain that white supremacy visits upon the black self.”¹²⁰ The mask “hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,”¹²¹ which serves as a representation of how many black Americans adopted rather hypocritical mindset, denying their conscience, acting like they were happy with the situation in the society when in reality they had quite contradictory feelings about it but they were too scared to raise their voice.

There are two kinds of masks at play in *The Blacker the Berry*. One is related to the surface, to Emma Lou’s outward appearance. Emma Lou views her black skin as an “unwelcome black mask,”¹²² the reason for her loneliness and frustration. She believes that removing this unwelcome black mask by lightening her skin will help her get rid of her problems and allow her to be accepted to her desired social group: “What she needed was an efficient bleaching agent, a magic cream that would remove this unwelcome black mask from her face and make her more like her fellow men.”¹²³

Emma Lou’s yearning for lighter skin reaches a point where she eats arsenic wafers used for skin whitening. Arsenical solutions utterly fail as “they had only served to give her pains in the pit of stomach”¹²⁴ Nevertheless, they can be used to demonstrate how far the African American women were willing to go to achieve the desired skin color. As Emma Lou, they were willing to undergo excruciating pain for the sake of getting close to white skin ideal of beauty. They deceived themselves into believing that the products are working but they did not

¹¹⁹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 13.

¹²⁰ Chinn, *Technology and the Logic of American Racism: A Cultural History of the Body as Evidence*, 83.

¹²¹ *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company 1965), 167.

¹²² Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 27.

¹²³ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 27.

¹²⁴ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 27.

realize that they are absorbed through their skin, causing skin irritation, nausea and sometimes even poisoning. Despite her efforts, Emma Lou is unable to get rid of the “unwelcome black mask.” The color of her skin is resistant to change.

The other mask in the novel takes the form of hypocrisy. In her attempts to gain the approval of her desired social group at the university, Emma Lou gradually internalizes the racist attitudes towards the members of her own ethnic group. Moreover, by making the obsession with color the most salient aspect of her defined identity, as well as adapting the racist attitudes of the dominant society, she paradoxically integrates this mask into her personality. She has not met anyone who would tell her that she can construct her own identity and become whoever she wants to become, therefore, she adopts the identity that has been assigned to her, without outright complaint. No matter if she is staying in Boise or living in Los Angeles, she is unable to move on with her life because she carries the burden of her own color-consciousness with her.

Life in Los Angeles brings her the sad realization that life in a big city is not so different from that of a small city, at least for a girl like her. As Cook puts it, “she has travelled west only to end up symbolically in the South of her ancestral past”¹²⁵ No matter how much she tries, she is coming to terms with the fact that due to her color, she is bound to be discriminated against in the mainstream society. The Blacks transplanted from the Deep South whom she desperately tries to make ties with continue to “segregate themselves from their darker skinned brethren,”¹²⁶ as they did in the South. Emma Lou contends that “Her Uncle Joe had been wrong – her mother and grandmother had been right. There was no place in the world for a dark girl.”¹²⁷

4.4 Emma Lou’s Awakening

Disappointed by Los Angeles, Emma Lou comes back to Boise where she experiences a turbulent summer romance with Weldon Taylor. While it may go unnoticed, this romance plays a large role in shaping her identity. Her color consciousness fades, at least momentarily: “What did being black, what did the

¹²⁵ Martha E. Cook, “The Search for Self in Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*,” in *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*, ed. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 144.

¹²⁶ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 30.

¹²⁷ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 61.

antagonistic mental attitudes of the people who really mattered mean when she was in love?”¹²⁸ She is willing to let go of her aspirations for him – abandon her studies, stay at home, tend to Weldon and their children.

Her visions of the future with Weldon however take a bitter turn when he abandons her. She is yet again trapped in the mindset that nothing good can happen to her because she is a “too-dark girl.” She does not realize that her assumptions are in fact misconceived as Weldon carried several romantic affairs in every town that he came to, with any available girl, not caring “whether her face had been white, yellow, brown or black.”¹²⁹ Weldon’s life was simply one man’s quest of “a place where money was plentiful and more easily saved”¹³⁰ and he sees women as a mere complement to his accomplishments, enabling him to fulfill his physical desire.

The relationship with Weldon is, nevertheless, the first milestone in Emma Lou’s development as a character. Her affair with Weldon shows that Emma Lou has not been deprived of her capacity to reconstruct her identity, quite the contrary. She experiences what might be perceived as sexual liberation, which awakens her to the possibility of constructing a completely new identity in which she finds herself assured and valued. Suddenly there is not just one identity but multiple, changing identities that she can adopt. For a moment at least, she sheds her old racialized self and adds new elements to it. She turns into “vibrant, joyful, being.”¹³¹ It seems that her newly discovered sexual desire has a potential of liberating her spirit from the oppression of the color complex instilled in her by her family.

After her relationship with Weldon is over, she decides to handle the situation herself, “determined to go to East where life was more cosmopolitan and people were more civilized.”¹³² She eventually decides to settle in Harlem, believing that life in “the world’s greatest colored city”¹³³ will enable her to “escape the haunting chimera of intra-racial color prejudice.”¹³⁴ She is eager to

¹²⁸ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 34.

¹²⁹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 37.

¹³⁰ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 37.

¹³¹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 34.

¹³² Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 41.

¹³³ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 187.

¹³⁴ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 70.

obtain “a permanent and tasty position,”¹³⁵ preferably as a stenographer for “some colored business or professional office.”¹³⁶ She maintains a positive attitude – she assumes that she will have no difficulty finding a job that is suitable for her. Nonetheless, her visions of future are almost immediately challenged by the first interviews where she encounters astonishing unwillingness of African American employers to hire dark-skinned women. She is told by the employment agency administrator only that the African American businessmen “have a definite type of girl in mind and will not hire any other.”¹³⁷ What is meant by “a definite type of girl” is nevertheless evident, though not explicitly avowed.

Emma Lou is not in the least bit discouraged by the initial hostility that she encounters and maintains a positive outlook on her new environment. She preserves a superior attitude and refuses jobs which are in her opinion not equal to her status. For instance, she refuses to work as a maid for a black actress: “Imagine her being a maid for a *Negro* woman! It was unthinkable.”¹³⁸ This also points to her continuing disdain for her dark-skinned fellow men. Apart from that, when it comes to dating, Emma Lou places herself on pedestal, rejecting potential partners because they are not “her type.”¹³⁹ For instance, she refuses to date John because “he was too pudgy and dark, too obviously an ex-cotton- picker from Georgia.”¹⁴⁰ After a few weeks with no “suitable” job in view, she realizes that as a dark-skinned woman, she has no other option but to accept the job of a maid that she previously viewed as inferior. She is drowning in dissatisfaction about the state of her life. Harlem is far from the “promised land” that she imagined it to be.

Eventually, Emma Lou makes acquaintance with a girl named Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn’s mother, unlike Emma Lou’s mother, “preached for complete tolerance in matters of skin color.”¹⁴¹ She takes Emma Lou to church with her and insists on the superiority of dark-skinned people over “high yallers.” She insists that Emma Lou should associate more with her dark-skinned “brethren.” Gwendolyn’s attempts prove quite counterproductive: Emma Lou is irritated and simultaneously grows “more impatient with her own blackness, for, in damning

¹³⁵ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 42.

¹³⁶ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 43.

¹³⁷ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 55.

¹³⁸ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 75.

¹³⁹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 97.

¹⁴¹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 128.

[light-skinned people] Gwendolyn also enshrined them for Emma Lou...”¹⁴²

In addition to that, Emma Lou grows quite suspicious of Gwendolyn’s reliability – Gwendolyn has a light-brown skin and she can hardly comprehend the tribulations of blackness. She even suspects that Gwendolyn’s attempts might be masked by ulterior motives: “She always thought that the reason Gwendolyn insisted upon her going with a dark-skinned man was because she secretly considered it unlikely for her to get a light one.”¹⁴³ This is rather questionable, since Gwendolyn has been taught from early age to despise racial discrimination, she simply does not know anything else. This could serve as a manifestation of pervasive color consciousness in Emma Lou’s mind, which makes her ascribe beliefs and desires to their behavior, even though they may not be true.

In Harlem, Emma Lou also meets Alva. She thinks that her dreams of gaining the affection of a fair-skinned person have finally come true. Once again, she ascribes to him qualities that he does not possess as the main reason why Alva asks her for a dance when they meet for the first time is that he senses her loneliness. Apparently, he is not as impressed with Emma Lou as she is impressed by him. He merely takes an advantage of her. After all, he is the one who uses the quote ‘The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice’ in the novel, here used with obvious sexual undertone, mainly boasting in front of his friend. However, Emma Lou is so dazzled by his appearance (his “smiling, oriental-like face, neither brown nor yellow in color, but warm and pleasing”¹⁴⁴) that she excuses his lack of emotions.

Despite being in a wrong relationship, Emma Lou finally gets a respectable job which offers her a compensation for the “tortuous periods of self-pity and hatred caused by her despised skin color.”¹⁴⁵ She seems to at last have achieved everything she set her mind to — thanks to Gwendolyn, she made the acquaintance of the right sort of people, as she calls them, thanks to her job, she achieves the capacity to be economically independent, and lastly thanks to Alva, she opens her mind to new life experiences. Yet, achieving her dreams does not bring fulfillment to her life. On the contrary, she realizes “the right sort of people

¹⁴² Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 129.

¹⁴³ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 149.

¹⁴⁴ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 107.

¹⁴⁵ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 129.

were actually quite wrong.”¹⁴⁶

Curiously enough, it seems, as Jimoh suggests, that “Thurman... moves Emma Lou away from class-consciousness more easily than from color-consciousness. The impact of a discourse of color is more deeply a part of Emma Lou’s psyche than is the impact of class considerations.”¹⁴⁷ There are several indications that she has not yet developed a steady identity that can persevere under the trials of racial prejudice. She keeps using bleaching products and moreover, when Alva’s friends raise the question of race she automatically supposes that they are mocking her. She yet again ascribes thoughts to other people that may not even be there just because her mind is poisoned by color-consciousness. Her identity is not stable and she lets her insecurities overwhelm her, entirely dependent on Alva’s approval and affection, it therefore seems likely that once her illusions of his perfection are shattered, her complex of inferiority and hatred for her skin color will return and she will end up on the same road where she was before she met him. She does not realize that she, like Alva, has the capacity to think and accept the color of her skin as her own. The only thing she has to do is to get rid of the inferiority complex that she has been carrying around.

Alva grows tired of Emma Lou’s constant complaining about the color of her skin and confronts her in an argument in which he accuses her of “always beefing about being black.”¹⁴⁸ Moreover, he suggests that by constantly emphasizing it and expecting bad things to happen to her because she is too dark, she encourages other people to become prejudiced: “ ‘It’s your kind helps make other people color-prejudiced.’ ”¹⁴⁹ His words are a torment to Emma Lou but constantly return to her thoughts and she slowly starts to realize that she must get rid of her inferiority complex and accept the color of her skin to be able to live independently.

When her and Alva break up, she returns to her former mindset. She starts dating another light-skinned man, Benson Brown, solely because “she was

¹⁴⁶ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 130.

¹⁴⁷ A. Yemisi Jimoh, *Spiritual, Blues and Jazz People in African American Fiction: Living in Paradox* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 89.

¹⁴⁸ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 97.

¹⁴⁹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 180.

flattered that a man as light as he should find himself attracted to her.”¹⁵⁰ Her choices of boyfriends based solely on light skin prove not to bring her the desired satisfaction. She cannot stop thinking about Alva and decides to end the relationship with Benson. Her decision to return to Alva rouses Gwendolyn to anger and she calls her “a common ordinary nigger”¹⁵¹, displaying the racial prejudices that she had withheld for a long time.

Emma Lou proves that she can see beyond the burden of color that she brought from her family. However, she is still not completely free from her color consciousness. She gets a teaching job and keeps using bleaching products to make her skin appear less dark. Moreover, she believes that fellow teachers give her curious looks because of her skin color. Her victimized mindset blinds her to the point where she is not able to see the vast array of opportunities that have opened up before her. She constantly ascribes racist thoughts to other people who may be willing to be her friends. Emma Lou’s catharsis comes at the point when she gets a teaching job. She realizes that “she was being discussed” by her fellow teachers not because of her dark skin but because of the obvious traces of excess of rouge and powder which she insisted upon using. She gets an anonymous note from her fellow teachers, advising her to use “fewer aids to the complexion.” She is dubious at first. “It never occurred to her that the note told the truth and that she looked twice as bad with paint and powder as she would without it.”¹⁵²

She consequently ends up in Alva’s apartment where instead of splendid, spirited young man that she admired she finds a habitual drinker. She decides to stay and take care of him and the disabled child who was born out of his relationship with Geraldine. She patiently endures his abusive behavior and manipulation but she soon realizes that the main reason why she stays with him is that she is enchanted by the fairness of his skin, and therefore, as Jack Salzman and Pamela Wilkinson have suggested in *Major Characters in American Fiction*, “her victimization is the result of her enslavement to the idol of the blue vein motto – “whiter and whiter every generation.””¹⁵³ Appalled at her realization, “forcing herself to turn a deaf ear to the loud, pathetic cries of Alva Junior, she

¹⁵⁰ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 132.

¹⁵¹ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 136.

¹⁵² Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 156.

¹⁵³ Jack Salzman, Pamela Wilkinson, *Major Characters in American Fiction* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 65.

abandons Alva and with him, her life of servitude to intra-racial prejudice.”¹⁵⁴

At this point, she realizes that the vital thing that she needed to do was to “accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable, to realize that certain things were, had been, and would be, and with this in mind begin life anew, always fighting, not so much for acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself by herself.”¹⁵⁵ She will always encounter racism but she must not let race be central to her identity, she must not let it determine her value as an individual.

¹⁵⁴ Salzman, Wilkinson, *Major Characters in American Fiction*, 65.

¹⁵⁵ Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 142-3.

5 Chinese American women

5.1 Historical context

The first Chinese immigrants who were coming to the “Gold Mountain,” as they called the United States, were almost exclusively men. In fact, Ronald Takaki asserts that “in 1852, of the 11,794 Chinese in California, only seven were women.”¹⁵⁶ In 1900, the proportion of Chinese women rose, the proportion of men was nevertheless higher: of the 89,863 Chinese on the United States mainland, only 4,522, or 5 percent, were female.”¹⁵⁷ Migration of Chinese women to the United States was restricted largely due to China’s traditional views on gender roles. According to Confucian thinking, a woman was “instructed to obey her father as a daughter, her husband as a wife, and her eldest son as a widow.”¹⁵⁸ A married woman was expected to join her husband’s family after the wedding and she was also responsible for taking care of them in their old age.

Bound feet, apart from being a status symbol, also had a practical reason: the women whose foot were bound were forced to modify their steps and were therefore less likely to wander too far away from their home or home of their husband’s family. Takaki quotes one Chinese merchant who settled in San Francisco, explaining why bringing their wives with them was an unusual practice for the Chinese immigrants into the United States: “the women of the better families generally had compressed feet and were unused to winds and waves.”¹⁵⁹ This, however, did not apply only to better families. Women of all social classes were expected to stay at home and take care of the children and household. Besides that, accompanying their husbands to the United States was expensive for the family.

American government did not encourage the migration of Chinese women. The Page Act, which was passed in 1875, did not only close the door to Chinese prostitutes, it also prohibited the entry of Chinese women into the United States in general. Chinese Exclusion Act, which was published seven years later, was built upon this act. Many Chinese women were involuntarily brought to the United

¹⁵⁶ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 209.

¹⁵⁷ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 209.

¹⁵⁸ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 209.

¹⁵⁹ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 210.

States as sexual slaves, forced into prostitution because they became indebted to their master/mistress for food and passage into the United States. They were treated very poorly by their masters/mistresses, they would often beat them if they had not made enough money and some were even beaten to death. Some of the women made enough money to free themselves, others escaped. The unfair reputation as prostitutes dogged the Chinese women for a long time. Mainstream American society condemned them as “depraved class, their immorality associated with a physical appearance but a slight removal from the African race.”¹⁶⁰

5.2 Bicultural identity

Today, Chinese American women have a bicultural identity: on one hand, they are expected to align themselves in direction determined by the dominant group that is no longer one of their ethnicity, while on the other hand trying to be true to their heritage, the values of the traditional Chinese society passed from their parents. After centuries of being forced to endure the trials of footbinding, they finally seem to have attained liberation, both metaphorical and literal. But is it liberation in the true sense of the word? There are overwhelming pieces of evidence to the contrary. They show that bound feet were replaced by yet another confinement, tied to the realization that they are unable to conform to Western standards of beauty. This is one of the crucial factors triggering the occurrence of eating disorders among Asian American women. In addition to that, there is growing interest in cosmetic surgery in the community. In her article “Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery,” Eugenia Kaw confirms the assumption that “Asian American women’s decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is an attempt to escape persisting racial prejudice that correlates their stereotyped genetic physical features.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 248.

¹⁶¹ Eugenia Kaw, “Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly New Series* 7, no. 1 (March 1993): 75.

5.3 Chinese American Beauty Pageants

When discussing Chinese American perception of beauty, it is useful to consider Chinese American beauty pageants such as Miss Chinatown U.S.A. This beauty pageant came under fire especially in late 1960s, when it was criticized “for judging women based on physical standards and portraying them as ‘China dolls.’”¹⁶² Chinese American feminists maintained that “despite the flowery language used to invoke Chinese standards of beauty, [the pageant] actually used white standards to judge Chinese-American women.”¹⁶³ Their criteria were in line with the images of beauty represented in the mainstream media, emphasizing that “a beautiful woman has a high-bridged, narrow nose, a large bosom, and long legs.”¹⁶⁴ One of the critics of the contest pointed out that “these and many other physical traits are not inherent in many Asian women,”¹⁶⁵ nevertheless, they are still expected to align themselves with this ideal to be successful in the contest. If they cannot, they can at least “compensate by setting [their] hair, curling [their] eyelashes, or wearing false ones, applying gobs of eye make-up, and going to great lengths to be the most ‘feminine’ women in the world.”¹⁶⁶

This unfortunately perpetuates images of Asian women as that of what Chi-Kwan Ho labels as “hypersexualized objects of desire of white men,”¹⁶⁷ forcing them to conform to a rather restrictive role, stereotypical image of “submissive women, fragile China dolls with bound feet or erotic Suzie Wong sex pots,”¹⁶⁸ referring to the fictive character from the novel *The World of Suzie Wong*, a Hong Kong prostitute who falls in love with Robert Lomax, an aspiring English artist who becomes her rescuer from the life of prostitution.

Another trend observable in the beauty pageant was the double eyelid, which became increasingly popular among the women in the Chinese American community, especially in the late 1960s. Many contestants underwent plastic

¹⁶² Philip Scranton, *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 290.

¹⁶³ Scranton, *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, 290.

¹⁶⁴ Scranton, *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, 290.

¹⁶⁵ Scranton, *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, 290.

¹⁶⁶ Louella Leon, conversation with Author As of 1987, “the average height of Miss Chinatown U.S.A. winners is 5 feet 5.3 inches.” *Miss Chinatown U.S.A Pageant Souvenir Program, 1987*

¹⁶⁷ Stewart Chang, “Feminism in Yellowface.” *Scholarly Works* 1106 (2015): 249.

<http://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub/1106>

¹⁶⁸ Chi-Kwan Ho, “Gender-Role Perceptions: An Intergenerational Study on Asian-American Women,” *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 4 (Autumn, 1990): 679.

surgery to convert “oriental eyes with the single eyelids into Caucasian eyes, with double eyelids.”¹⁶⁹

I would like to mention one more research which compared attitude to beauty among the exchange college students from China with those of the Chinese immigrant students living in the United States. Their responses were notably different. White skin was the second most frequently mentioned attribute of beauty according to exchange Chinese students, in contrast to Chinese American students, who mentioned it only twice. The authors of the research claim that “exposure to American culture, where skin colors vary, served to decrease the salience of the preference for white skin.”¹⁷⁰ In my inquiry in the following chapter, I found no significant shift in perception of white skin color in the Chinese-American community, however, the novel *Typical American* by Gish Jen could be used to argue that the members of the second generation of Chinese-American immigrants are finding are increasingly finding themselves on the transition between their parents’ traditional values and the values accepted by the mainstream American society, such as women’s independence, casual behavior, individualism et cetera.

¹⁶⁹ Donald Nonini and Aihwa Ong, “Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternate Modernity” in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. Donald Nonini and Aihwa Ong (Routledge, New York, 1997), p.10.

¹⁷⁰ Carly R. Staley, Ginny Qin Zhan, “Perception of Beauty Among Female Chinese Students,” *The Kennesaw Journal of Undergraduate Research* 1, no.1 (2011): 12.

6 Typical American

In her debut novel, *Typical American* (1991), Gish Jen introduces the journey of three protagonists of the novel, a family of Chinese immigrants who come to the United States. The first protagonist is Ralph Chang, who comes to the United States to satisfy the demands of his authoritarian father who wants him to earn a doctoral degree. Originally named Yifeng, he adopts a new name, Ralph Chang, to blend in his host environment. While he was initially only planning to complete a doctoral degree and come back to China, the political circumstances in China indicate that his return to his homecountry will not be as smooth as he expected. He is forced to stay in the United States, along with the rest of the Chinese students.

The pursuit of a doctoral degree and having to take inferior jobs in order to survive make him grow more and more upset. Eventually, he ends up sleeping on bench where, in a fortunate turn of events, he is found by his sister Theresa who has only recently come to the United States. Theresa helps him regain lost enthusiasm for life and, more importantly, introduces him to her friend Helen. The two fall in love and they rent an apartment where they make themselves immune to habits of the society around them, preserving the Chinese habits and way of life. While initially cautious, responding to habits of the American people with mocking attitude, they do not realize they are slowly becoming one of them.

Ralph comes under influence of the book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, given to him by Professor Pierce. He starts to believe that he can become a millionaire if he sets his mind on it. He writes down on a piece of paper: "I can do all things in Christ which strengthens me," puts it in his wallet and carries it with him everywhere, accepting it as his mantra. Later, he meets Groover, a self-made millionaire who ridicules his doctoral degree and shifts his mind to opening his own business. In his pursuit of a material gain, he neglects his wife Helen, who grows more and more estranged from him and has an affair with Groover, and also his family. His sister Theresa eventually steps in and helps him realize that his visions were unrealistic. In this paper, I will analyse Theresa, and how she gradually adapts different attitude towards the values and traditional views accepted in the culture of her Chinese parents.

6.1 Theresa's life in China

In Theresa's story, we notice a huge discrepancy between her former life — traditional life in China, where she lived under the principles of obedience to her parents, and her life in US, where she became free of her family's influence and eventually also achieves financial independence. In the early years of her life, she is living under the principles of Confucianism and its views on gender roles. Her parents expect her to become a homely woman, honor them and be obedient to her husband and her in-laws after she gets married.

Theresa is trying to meet the expectations of her parents. For instance, when she goes walking into the city so that her suitor can see her, her mother insists that she wears a parasol, as “it would be unreasonable to expect a girl to take risks with her complexion.”¹⁷¹ At first, Theresa hesitates. She does not want to wear the parasol. However, she feels that “duty called to her, a voice like her own. *Meimei* – Younger Sister.”¹⁷² Although the idea of wearing a parasol disgusts her, she feels the weight of her responsibility for the younger sister. She must accept the desirable arrangement – younger sister cannot get married before older sister, so Theresa must get married first. And she feels obliged to do whatever she can to increase the likeability of marriage. Eventually, she decides to wear the parasol, and along with that, a new pair of shoes which are too small for her feet. Here Jen exploits traditional symbol of Chinese femininity – bound feet, “the idea being not so much to make her feet more acceptable – her fiancé would be too far away to tell – but to help her maintain a more ladylike step.”¹⁷³ Women modified the shape and size of their feet because small feet were considered as the symbol of the upper classes. In addition to that, they conformed to society's definition of feminine beauty because they made woman's movements more feminine. Women with bound feet had to take tiny steps, which was judged as very ladylike.

In small shoes, Theresa is forced to modify her steps, however, as we later learn, when escapes from the grasp of her parent's rules, she undermines the power of what is feminine by conventional standards:

¹⁷¹ Gish Jen, *Typical American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2014), 49.

¹⁷² Jen, *Typical American*, 49.

¹⁷³ Jen, *Typical American*, 49.

And the girl's gait! In the convent school, she'd not only acquired this English name, Theresa, she'd also taken up baseball – with her father's permission – so that now she strolled when she walked, sometimes with her hands in her pockets.”¹⁷⁴

She receives Western education in the convent school, where her former ladylike steps turn into casual stroll. With her hands in her pockets, she undermines the traditional conceptions of femininity. ideal of feminine behavior. While her mother laments Theresa's behavior, calling her a “paradigm of Western influence gone wrong.”¹⁷⁵ Theresa does not share her mother's concern, “being almost glad to be all wrong in some sphere.”¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, her mother does not give up. She forces her to stop playing baseball and attend dance lessons instead. When this does not help, she resorts to merciless tactics: She straps her to a “stick-and-chalk contraption that was supposed to help her attend to her movements.”¹⁷⁷

Theresa's gait, however, is not the only problem. Theresa is too tall for a Chinese woman: “Her father had insisted on giving the child cow's milk, with the result that Theresa turned out a giantess – five seven! With feet that entered rooms before she did.”¹⁷⁸ When her engagement is arranged with a banker's son from Shanghai, he cancels the engagement due to “unspecified family crisis.”¹⁷⁹ Theresa later learns the main reason for his cancellation of the engagement was that he ran away with his father's lover. As a banker's son, he was likely to follow in his father's footsteps, and Theresa, with her casual gait and tall stature was not likely to impress such man.

6.2 Americanization

When Theresa moves to the United States, one can not help but notice the remarkable changes in Theresa's behavior and appearance. The changes are not as visible in the novel *Typical American* as they are in its sequel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, and therefore I would like to discuss some of the excerpts from the other novel to explain the remarkable change in Theresa's behavior as they are

¹⁷⁴ Jen, *Typical American*, 47.

¹⁷⁵ Jen, *Typical American*, 47.

¹⁷⁶ Jen, *Typical American*, 48.

¹⁷⁷ Jen, *Typical American*, 48.

¹⁷⁸ Jen, *Typical American*, 47.

¹⁷⁹ Jen, *Typical American*, 51.

described in the other novel, even though the novel is beyond the subject matter of this thesis. In *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen reveals more details from Theresa's life in the United States, mainly concerning her assimilation:

She is wearing blue jeans like a hippie, only new-looking and fresh-pressed, with a crease down the front of each leg. The jeans go with a lightly starched work shirt, on which has been embroidered chain after chain of daisies and—in a little half-moon around the shirt tag in the back—her name, only without the h: Teresa.¹⁸⁰

Creased blue jeans, a starched shirt with embroidered daisies and – Theresa's apparel shows influence of hippie culture which gained popularity among young Americans during the 1960s and 1970s.

In *Mona in the Promised Land*, the author also mentions that Theresa has “given up her bun,” and was “wearing her brown hair all loose now.”¹⁸¹ Loose hair is proscribed in many cultures. In Asian culture, women were not allowed to unloose their hair in presence of anyone but their husband, except for unusual circumstances. In his introduction to *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Culture* Obeyesekere confirms this: “loosening one's hair, when extraordinary circumstances demand it, is a cue that selectively activates preexisting cultural associations of loose hair, such that public bathing and similar situations are occasions for gossip, flirting, and relaxed behavior in general.”¹⁸² In other words, loosening hair was considered a mark of loose morals. In Theresa's case, this seems quite fitting. It was not only her appearance which undermines the pillars of the traditional Chinese society. She engages in an extramarital affair with old Chao, which would be unacceptable in her parent's eyes. She becomes an independent woman who pursues her happiness.

Besides the affair with old Chao, Theresa subverts these gender norms in another way. Similar to her brother, she pursues her doctoral degree with diligence. The doctoral degree enables her to achieve economical independence, which would be impossible in the traditional Chinese culture, where women were

¹⁸⁰ Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, (New York: Random House, 1997) 242.

¹⁸¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 242.

¹⁸² Gananath Obeyesekere, Foreword to *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Culture*, edited by Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara D. Miller (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), xiii.

expected to lead traditional family life. Several times throughout the novel, it is actually Theresa's income as a doctor which saves the family. The fact that the Chang family is able to afford a new house is in part due to Theresa's help.

6.3 Back to the roots

While in American society, emphasis is put on individualism, in traditional Chinese society the situation is quite reverse – solidarity, mutual obligation, putting the interests of others above one's own are some of the values deeply seated in Chinese culture. Theresa, despite being assimilated to a certain degree, preserves this Chinese trait:

“She was in many ways Americanized, but in this respect she was Chinese still – when the family marched, she fell in step. And wasn't this what she longed for? Reunification, that Chinese ideal, she could not eat an orange without reciting to herself, as she did on New Year's, *quan jia tuan yuan* – the whole family together.”¹⁸³

Theresa has become Americanized to a great extent, she nevertheless remains faithful to the Confucial ideal of family harmony and in difficult times, she puts her individual spirit aside and attends to her responsibilities to the other members of the family. We can see this, after all, upon her arrival to the United States, when she finds her brother on the verge of desperation, struggling with suicidal thoughts. Along with her friend Helen, Ralph's future wife, she cheers his sinking spirit, helps him get back to his job as a professor and rebuild his self-confidence.

¹⁸³ Jen, *Typical American*, 265.

7 Japanese American Women

7.1 Historical context

At the turn of the 19th and early 20th century, Japan was ruled by a central government which was firmly determined to tighten the rules on immigration to the United States. The quality of the immigrant applicants was judged by the members of the review board, whose function was to ensure that those who were eventually sent to the United States were healthy, literate and “would creditably maintain Japan’s national honor.”¹⁸⁴ The Japanese government was willing to do everything in their power to mitigate the reputational risk, because they were fully aware of the reputation dogging the Chinese male immigrants in the United States, who often fell into gambling, excessive alcohol consumption and visiting prostitutes. This strategy seemed to bear fruit.

Unlike China, whose immigration was severely restricted with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese government eventually begged the United States into acceptance of the Gentlemen’s Agreement in 1908. While this agreement put an end to the immigration of laborers, non-laborers and family relatives could enter without any restriction, which caused major influx of Japanese women. With a rise in immigration to the United States, the distance between families widened, which posed a challenge for the traditional system of arranged marriage. The family matchmakers had to resort to other devices, and so the families exchanged the photos of the prospective bride and groom. And so the era of so-called ‘picture brides’ began.

The experience of Japanese women was different from that of Chinese women. Education was also a significant factor. In Japan, during the Meiji period, great education was put on the education of female children. The government required that “girls should be educated...alongside boys.”¹⁸⁵ Girls and boys alike were encouraged to “learn about foreign countries and become enlightened about the world.”¹⁸⁶ They learnt English alongside with Japanese, mathematics, literature, writing and religion, and English was gradually adopted as a major language in middle school, which became a gateway to the world outside.

¹⁸⁴ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 248.

¹⁸⁵ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 249.

¹⁸⁶ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 249.

In addition to this, economical developments in Japan have been paralleled by broadening opportunities for a more diverse and inclusive workforce, including women. Women were employed mostly in construction works, coal mines and textile mills. Ronald Takaki notes that “by 1900, 60 percent of Japan’s industrial workers were women.”¹⁸⁷ They were used to hard working conditions, exploitation and denial of freedom. Their position was thus different from Chinese women whose workplace was limited to home and the farm. Japanese women continued to work in the United States, many of them helping their husbands, especially on the farms, working “side by side, their hands in constant motion as they felt the hot sun on their backs.”¹⁸⁸ Upon their arrival to the United States, due to demanding work in the fields and constant exposure to sunlight, the color of their skin was quickly changing, from coveted pale to mocked brown:

Face black from the sun
even though creamed and powdered
No lighter for that!¹⁸⁹

Apart enduring the “relentless pace”¹⁹⁰ of work in the fields, Japanese American women had to take care of the housework and the children, sometimes they had to stay awake until midnight to make sure they had done everything that was expected of them. This hardiness made it possible for them to survive in the face of hostile conditions.

7.2 Perception of beauty among Japanese American women

Numerous studies have been conducted on the perception of beauty in Japanese American community. In a study called *Asian Eyes: Body Image and Eating Disorders*, published in 1995, Christine C. Iijima Hall contends that “hegemonic beauty ideals pose a major threat to the self esteem of Asian American women as they are under pressure to conform to American beauty standards.”¹⁹¹ According to Rebecca Chiyoko King, Hall misses a crucial perspective on the problem of

¹⁸⁷ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 248.

¹⁸⁸ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 269.

¹⁸⁹ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 270.

¹⁹⁰ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 269.

¹⁹¹ Christine C. Iijima Hall, “Asian Eyes: Body Image and Eating Disorders of Asian and Asian American Women,” *Eating Disorders* 3 (1): 12.

perception of beauty in the Asian American community because it focuses only on how Asian American women respond to dominant view of beauty and “miss the interplay that goes on between different, sometimes competing models of beauty.”¹⁹² What King refers to as the competing models of beauty are of course hegemonic, white model of beauty and Japanese American standards of beauty.

She suggests that “both models—hegemonic white ones, which see height as an advantage, and counterhegemonic Japanese American ones, which value almond-shaped eyes, black hair, and light skin”¹⁹³ are particularly apparent in the case of mixed race women, who do not fit comfortably into nor Japanese nor American category. They constantly negotiate between the hegemonic white and counterhegemonic standards of beauty, “often finding themselves looking ‘too white’ to be seen as an authentic member of the Japanese American community, and ‘too dark/different’ to be considered ‘white.’”¹⁹⁴ As balance between these two is difficult to obtain, they frequently end up somewhere in between the two, a “beautiful mix,”¹⁹⁵ as King terms it, “they are deemed to ‘sell out’ if they cannot assimilate fully to either model.”¹⁹⁶

“...I begin to notice that some mixed-race candidates are putting on heavier eye make up to make their eyes more almond-shaped, while some consider using brown contact lenses to conceal their blue, “non-Japanese” eyes. Others have dyed their hair a darker shade of black in order to look “more Japanese.” Still other monoracial candidates are trying to make their lips look bigger and to make their *daikon* (“white-radish”) legs look longer and thinner. Both sets of women are trying to conform to beauty standards that are difficult for them to obtain, and race has complicated this matter immensely.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹² Rebecca Chiyoko King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty in Japanese American Beauty Pageants” in *The Sum of Our Parts* ed. Teresa Williams-León, Cynthia L. Nakashima (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 165.

¹⁹³ King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty,” 165.

¹⁹⁴ King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty,” 165

¹⁹⁵ King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty in Japanese American Beauty Pageants,” 165

¹⁹⁶ King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty in Japanese American Beauty Pageants,” 165

¹⁹⁷ King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty in Japanese American Beauty Pageants”, 163.

Although King deals mainly with mixed race Japanese Americans in her study, she points to the fact that this is not a problem only of mixed race women. Japanese American women in general “contend not only with Western hegemonic notions of beauty, such as big lips and tall, slim build, but also with counterhegemonic models of beauty that often draw on traditional Japanese American attributes, such as fair skin, almond-shaped eyes, and jet-black hair.”¹⁹⁸

King indicates that there are two possible solutions: Japanese American women “have either tried to assimilate and fit in with hegemonic models of beauty” in the United States or to “create a beauty “difference” that itself has been coopted by the mainstream as “exotic.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty in Japanese American Beauty Pageants”, 163.

¹⁹⁹ King, “Mirror, mirror on the Wall: Mapping Discussions of Feminism, Race and Beauty in Japanese American Beauty Pageants”, 163.

8 When the Emperor Was Divine

When the Emperor Was Divine (2007) tells the story of a Japanese American family who is forcibly relocated to internment camp during the Second World War. Although Julie Otsuka, the author of the novel, has not personally experienced incarceration (she was born years after her mother, uncle and grandmother were released from the internment camp), she was gravely affected by the trauma that they experienced. As a next generation Japanese immigrant, she experienced what Marianne Hirsch refers to as “post memory,” “experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated.”²⁰⁰ In attempt to relate to the experiences of her family during the incarceration, capture “what [she] can never truly grasp and yet still feel[s],”²⁰¹ she wrote *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2007) and also short story called “Dien Perdid.”

The names of the main characters are kept secret to the reader and therefore I will refer to them as “the daughter,” “the brother,” “the mother,” etc. The father is mostly absent from the novel. He has been arrested by the FBI on charges of being an “Alien Enemy,” much like Julie Otsuka’s grandfather, and is released only after the rest of the family is back from the internment camp. The novel depicts the scars that the experience of incarceration left on its survivors, and the effect it had on their lives. My primary focus in the analysis of the novel will, however, be quite different. I will explore the influence of mainstream society’s definition of beauty and femininity on the self-perception of the daughter in the novel. I will also examine the shifting identity of her mother, and how it is related to the general experience of Japanese immigrants in the United States.

8.1 The Daughter

From the beginning of the novel, it becomes apparent that the daughter’s self-esteem is very fragile. She is constantly seeking her mother’s approval and

²⁰⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 22.

²⁰¹ Abigail G. H. Manzella, *Gender, Race, and Citizenship in U.S. Internal Displacements* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 124.

attention: “Tell me something. Is this the most beautiful face you’ve ever seen?”²⁰² When the mother assures her that it is, she is still not content and voices a suspicion that her mother is “just saying that.”²⁰³ She is constantly dissatisfied with a particular trait of her body and points out its flaws. When her brother tells her that she should stand up straight, she retorts: “...It’s my head [...] Too round. Too round on top.”²⁰⁴ When she looks at herself in the mirror, all she sees is “a plain girl in a plain blue scarf.”²⁰⁵ Later, when she is complimented on the scarf, she is yet again reluctant to accept the compliment. She repeats that the scarf is “plain.”²⁰⁶ Nothing, not even compliments from strangers, provides a sufficiently convincing evidence about her own uniqueness. Her dissatisfaction with her appearance seems to stem from her position between the two cultures looking ‘too white’ to be considered a member of Japanese American community, yet ‘too different’ to be accepted into the mainstream American society.

8.1.1 Disorientation

The girl makes it clear that she embraced American culture completely: “She was ten years old and she knew what she liked. Boys and black licorice and Dorothy Lamour.”²⁰⁷ This confirms what Lowe has noted, that “Japanese Americans were forced to internalize the negation of Japanese culture and to assimilate to Anglo-American majority culture.”²⁰⁸ Dorothy Lamour was a famous American actress of the era, an epitome of dark-hair beauty. The girl’s admiration for Lamour seems to indicate that, not only was the girl immensely influenced by popular American culture of the era, but also the feelings that she might have been experiencing when confronted with Dorothy Lamour’s pictures, and intrinsic standards of beauty that these pictures embody. Dorothy Lamour had dark hair, similar to the girl, yet there was something alien about the girl, something prevented her from fitting into the mold that the society deemed as “pretty,” while Dorothy Lamour fit quite comfortably.

In her admiration for Dorothy Lamour, the daughter displays the effect of what Abigail G. H. Manzella terms as “disorientation” of Japanese Americans.

²⁰² Julie Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 13.

²⁰³ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 15

²⁰⁴ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 13.

²⁰⁵ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 34.

²⁰⁶ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 33.

²⁰⁷ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 13.

²⁰⁸ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University "

Manzella labels it “disorientation” “because it resulted in the migrants’ loss of a sense of place and self through a complex pattern of movement and alienation from space.”²⁰⁹ The government policies attempted to “disorient by compelling the incarcerated to turn away from the East [...] and to instead adopt an imagined an imagined communal binary view of “us vs. them,” American vs. Japanese.”²¹⁰ This disorientation resulted in loss of sense of place in Japanese Americans, they were no longer sure where to root their lives, and they frequently had a sense of losing their identity altogether.

The danger of disorientation was, as Manzella notes, that “the individual cannot maintain a separation between the oppressor’s tactics and his or her internal thoughts.”²¹¹ Because the daughter had not developed her own sense of self-worth yet, she is forced to follow what is presented to her as beautiful by the Western society, unaware that it is merely the oppressor’s strategy which makes her feel like “an enemy alien.” The Eurocentric ideal of beauty that she internalized leaves her questioning the beauty of her face in the mirror, thinking whether she is beautiful or just a plain girl with a plain scarf.

As we later learn, she is not the only one. On the train to an internment camp, she meets a little American girl playing with a dirty doll that has curly yellow hair and big eyes that open and close quietly, just like real eyes. The appearance of the doll is so stunning that the daughter boldly engages in and asks about the doll’s name. The young girl’s response comes immediately: “Miss Shirley.” The doll’s name draws obvious reference to Shirley Temple, one of the most popular actresses in 1930s and 1940s. What is particularly significant about this excerpt is that the doll that belongs to this American girl has a name, while the Japanese American characters that populate the novel have no name. The doll’s name magnifies the sense of inferiority of the Japanese families in comparison with the American ones.

8.1.2 Embracing the heritage

After the girl is taken from her home and relocated to the internment camp in Utah, she, like many other Japanese Americans, loses a sense of place and

²⁰⁹ Abigail G. H. Manzella, *Gender, Race, and Citizenship in U.S. Internal Displacements* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 125.

²¹⁰ Manzella, *Gender, Race and Citizenship in U.S. Internal Displacements*, 125.

²¹¹ Manzella, *Gender, Race and Citizenship in the U.S. Internal Displacements*, 126.

questions of identity are raised. She seems to privilege her American identity over Japanese identity – she claims the right to full development of her individuality when she moves further and further away from her younger brother and mother and instead cherishes the presence of the girls of her age with whom she eats all her meals in the camp, she begins smoking cigarettes and challenging the curfew orders in the camp.

When she returns from the camp to the place where she belongs, her home, however, her identity becomes more stable. She is aware that by suspicious behavior, she might attract the attention of the U.S. authorities and the experience of incarceration might be repeated. Interestingly, she gradually comes to embrace some of the aspects of her Japanese heritage: whenever she walks out of the house, she wears Panama hat on her head, as a protection from the sun. When her brother asks why she wears the hat, she replies: “Nobody will look at you [...] if your face is too dark.”²¹² This is a clear evidence that she absorbed certain aspects of traditional Japanese culture, such as light skin as the ideal of feminine beauty. Thus, even though the girl is largely influenced by American culture, she does not altogether escape the influence of her parents’ cultural heritage, despite not having any visible ties with it. This confirms Takaki’s assumption about the feelings of Nisei (sons and daughters of Japanese immigrants who were born and educated in the United States):

Deep in their hearts, many Nisei did not wish to be completely assimilated, to become simply “American.” They felt they were a complex combination of the two cultures, and they should be allowed to embrace their twoness. Everything they had learned at school about their country had taken “root,” and they felt they were Americans. Nevertheless, many second-generation Japanese did not want to reject the culture of their parents, which had also become a part of themselves.²¹³

Therefore, instead of embracing the hegemonic view of beauty, the daughter creates a “beauty difference” as King calls it, which has entered into mainstream awareness as exotic.

²¹² Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 58.

²¹³ Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, 276.

8.2 The mother

In the mother, we can also see the consequences of the disorientation and therefore loss of sense of place in Japanese identity. While before the incarceration, the family seemed to have had a peaceful life with a steady home, after the father is arrested and the family is sent into an internment camp, their home is taken away from them. They are forced to pack everything they have into small boxes and move to a place where they have never been before. This is where the transformation of the mother begins, and as we will see in the next section, this loss of place also meant (seeming) loss of her feminine Japanese identity, and adaptation of values praised by the American mainstream society.

The mother subverts the society's expectation of her — both as a wife of a man who has been arrested and it is not clear whether he will come home and when, and as a woman, still influenced by traditional Japanese culture and its rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of femininity. While she feels her husband's absence, she is aware of the responsibilities that she has to fulfill while her husband is detained. She feels obliged to take care of the family, pay the bills, undertake the household chores that her husband used to and, last but not least, help her children cope with the grief and confusion surrounding their father's incarceration.

8.2.1 Forgetting

Immediately following her husband's incarceration, the mother burns everything that reminds her of her Japanese identity – letters from their family in Japan, photographs, kimonos, records of Japanese opera. She also rips up the Japanese flag. Although a denial of Japanese identity, it was a necessary step. As Shirley Jennifer Lim observes, “mainstream society frequently conflated homage to Japanese ancestry with loyalty to Japan.”²¹⁴ Her actions are a manifestation of what was described in the previous section by Lisa Lowe as negation of Japanese culture, a necessary condition for assimilation to Anglo-American majority culture. Any allegiance to Japanese heritage was taken as a statement at the imaginary court, offered in evidence to prove espionage or treason and could put

²¹⁴ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930 – 1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 12.

the whole family in danger. The mother is aware of this when later in the novel she says that “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down.”²¹⁵

Moreover, after they take her husband away, perhaps to further nurture the clearing of her Japanese identity, she instructs her children to say that they are Chinese, not Japanese. She seems to have struck a happy medium between the bonsai trees and ivory chopsticks from her mother, reminders of her Japanese ancestry, and on the other hand, the painted wooden Indian and Joe Palooka comic books, influences of American history and culture. In one of the scenes in the novel, she combines the two without a trace of an internal conflict, eating rice balls stuffed with pickled plums while simultaneously listening to Enrico Caruso singing “*La donna é mobile*.” Thus, she is unable to settle on only one identity, happily embraces the confusion of her bicultural and biracial identity, which perpetuates the disorientation from her Japanese ancestry.

The mother’s seeming loss of Japanese identity serves as both a harbinger and accelerant of her transformation into a new woman – American woman.

8.2.2 Searching for job

In traditional Japanese society, she was subjected to gender hierarchy which placed her at the very bottom, commanded to be under obedience of the male authorities in the family. Certain characteristics – such as fragility, submissiveness, passiveness, humility and shyness – were valued in a woman and considered appropriate, while others – such as independence, assertiveness, powerfulness were condemned. The mother interrogates these traditional Chinese concepts of femininity. After she is released from the internment camp, she starts actively searching for employment. However, she learns that her racial identity is an impediment in finding meaningful employment. Although she sees hiring signs everywhere, once the employers meet her and learn that she is Japanese, they are trying to find excuses not to employ her:

The ads in the papers all said help wanted, will train, but wherever she went she was turned down. "The position's just been filled," she was told

²¹⁵ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 99.

again and again. [...] "I was afraid I'd ruin my eyes back there," she told us.²¹⁶

They refuse to employ her as a cashier because "they were afraid of offending the customers."²¹⁷ Instead, she is offered another job, "adding up sales slips in a small dark room in the back where no one would see her."²¹⁸ The job she is offered instead would therefore be utterly humiliating for her.

When the mother finally finds respectable employment working for a wealthy family, it is far from what she imagined. "You just smile and say yes ma'am and no ma'am and do as you're told."²¹⁹ She maintains that certain amount of friendliness is allowed, however, showing too much friendliness can cause problems: "If you're too friendly they'll think you think you're better than they are."²²⁰ Although she does not acknowledge it — perhaps to prevent her children from worrying too much about her, or to save her face in front of them — she gives hints that the job is quite stressful for her. Emotions have no place in her workplace. She has to obey the family's commands, being forced to suppress her own feelings and opinions, anything that might assert alleged dominance over them. They give her inferior tasks, for instance "dusting the tiny leaves one by one."²²¹ During her husband's absence, she becomes the breadwinner of the family, working hard to secure the family, even though she was promised by her husband that she will never have to.

8.2.3 Revelation of feminine side

Although the family is going through seemingly hopeless times, the mother needs to stay strong for her children. Despite facing challenging circumstances, she maintains hope and teaches her children to be mentally strong, not to dwell on the past but face dismal times with hope: "Keep on walking. Hold your head up. Whatever you do, don't look back."²²² She does not lose sight of the necessity to protect the future of her children in the United States. Any wrong move might

²¹⁶ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 128.

²¹⁷ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 128.

²¹⁸ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 128.

²¹⁹ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 129.

²²⁰ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 129.

²²¹ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 129.

²²² Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 115.

mean that the family is to be deported to Japan. The mother knows this and because of that, she encourages her children to avoid any signs of loyalty to Japan: "There's no future for us there. We're here. Your father's here. The most important thing is that we stay together."

The last sentence in the excerpt stresses the importance of staying together under any circumstances. Strong family solidarity is more typical of Japanese society over American society where more emphasis is put on individualism. This is, therefore, evidence that the mother has not altogether lost her Japanese identity. Moreover, the mother's solidarity with her children helps them survive not only when they are forced to leave their home and live in the internment camp, but also later when they come back and the children realize that everything has changed and they can no longer rely on anyone's help.

Apart from perpetuating traditional Japanese values, the mother does not altogether lose her feminine identity either. When she talks to her daughter about her first encounter with the children's father, her feminine side is revealed: "When I first met your father I wanted to be with him all the time." "If I was away from him for even five minutes, I'd start to miss him. I'd think, he's never coming back. I'll never see him again [...]"²²³ Her recollections leave no doubt that she is in reality a fragile, sensitive woman who developed a mentality of resilience as a choice, as a means of protection from the host society which has no mercy upon her. She finally gives voice to her feelings, her love for her husband and feelings of anxiety over the possibility of losing him. The impression does not disappear even when in the following sentence, she says: "...after a while, I stopped being so afraid. People change."²²⁴ This seems like a vain attempt to exercise her power over the flood of repressed emotions that came out of her.

²²³ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 96.

²²⁴ Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, 96.

9 Indian American Women

9.1 Asian American?

When we think of the Asian Americans, we readily acknowledge Chinese, Korean and Japanese immigrants as part of the group. The whole picture, however, is a wonderfully vibrant palette which encompasses sharply divergent histories and identities. Indian Americans are one of them. Yet, they frequently find themselves isolated and marginalized from the other members of the group, due to what Nazli Kibria called “a sense of profound racial difference from other Asian Americans, [...] creating a racial gap.”²²⁵ Anu Gupta believes that the existence of this racial gap is largely due to “media’s homogenization of the Asian American image: someone with eyes without epicanthic folds, and flat nose, pin-straight black hair and almost white skin.” Indian Americans simply do not fall into this category. Some of them have quite dark skin tones, which “strongly dissuades them from identifying with Asian Americans as a group.”²²⁶ They are simply not considered Asian enough. Simultaneously, their ‘darkish complexion’ “does not fit into recognizable scripts of whiteness *or* Asianness,”²²⁷ which mean that they are fall outside the category of Americanness.

Indian Americans are becoming more visible and so is the need to address their issues. The ambiguity as to how to categorize them nevertheless remains. In a country such as the United States of America, the citizens are forced to exist within the bounds of discrete racial categorization. In case of Indian Americans, the difficulties arise when they attempt to assign one of the racial categories to them. The labels are all taken— they have to choose “other.” The result of this is that Indian American often feel alienated, confused about where they belong and how they should identify themselves.

²²⁵ Nazli Kibria, “Not Asian, black or white? Reflections on South Asian American racial identity,” *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 2 (1996): 75.

²²⁶ Anu Gupta, “At the Crossroads: College Activism and Its Impact on Asian American Identity Formation,” in *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, ed. Lavina Shankar, Rajini Srikanth. (Philadelphia: Temple Univ Press, 1997), 129.

²²⁷ Vanita Reddy, “Beauty and the Limits of National Belonging in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” 358.

9.2 Ethnochic

The ambiguity concerning Indian Americans permeates also the position of women within the white mainstream Anglo American society, but in a slightly different way. According to Sayantani Dasgupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta, the construction of Indian-American feminine identity is multi-faceted: it is “influenced not only by the white American beauty standard but also by the West’s fascination with the ‘mysterious’ East.” This ‘mysterious’ East continues to beckon, as is after all confirmed for instance in the movie *Mississippi Masala* from 1991, about a mixed-race romance between Mina and Demetrius, Indian girl and African American man. Although the movie is not targeted at mainstream audience and mostly steers away from the racial stereotypes, it lapses into stereotyping when depicting the Indian girl, conforming it to the generally accepted image of “long-hair-swinging, glass-embroidered-shawl-wearing, cosmopolitan ‘ethnochic.’”²²⁸

9.3 Duality of perception

Apart from that, Sayantani Dasgupta also notices duality in the perception of Indian American feminine identity by mainstream American society, being “considered simultaneously ‘ugly’ and ‘exotic,’”²²⁹ exalted and at the same time despised. They elaborate to a great extent on an article published earlier by Yasmin Jiwani, in which she expresses the assumption that “the South Asian woman is both ‘exotic’ and ‘dangerous’, both attractive and repulsive. She is a woman like her white female counterparts, and yet not a woman because of her race. Her difference is what makes her exploitable and a spectacle.”²³⁰ This is connected partially also to the racial gap between Indian Americans and the rest of the immigrants from the Asian American group. The ambiguity and uneasiness as how to classify them pervades also the perception of Indian American women by mainstream American society.

On a more positive note, Sunaira Maira notes that nowadays “the visual

²²⁸ Sayantani Dasgupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta, “Sex, Lies and Women’s Lives: An International Dialogue,” in *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America* ed. Shamita Das Dasgupta (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 121.

²²⁹ Dasgupta, “Sex, Lies and Women’s Lives: An International Dialogue,” 121.

²³⁰ Yasmin Jiwani, “The Exotic, the Erotic: South Asian Women,” *Canadian Women Studies* 13, no. 1 (1992): 42-46.

signs of ethnic difference, clothing and adornment are re-created as signifiers not of South Asian bodies but of American ‘cool.’”²³¹ There is a growing interest in the secrets of Indian beauty — thick, shimmering long hair and glowing skin, and also for instance the art of henna painting by Hindu women. Even Madonna had her hands painted with henna for her performance at the 1998 MTV Video Music awards. The painting was done by Sumita Batra, an Indian American beauty salon owner. Madonna said: “When Sumita hennas my hands and feet, I am transported to another time and place – a world of magic, passion and romance.”²³² India holds mysteries that are still to be uncovered, it represents the mysterious opposite of our Western understanding of the world. This lends a somewhat mysterious and ethereal quality to the novel *Jasmine* (1989) by an Indian American immigrant writer Bharati Mukherjee, which is to be examined in the following section.

²³¹ Sunaira Maira, “Indo-Chic: Late Capitalist Orientalism and Imperial Culture,” in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Thuy Linh Nguyen Thu and Mimi Thi Nguyen (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2007), 237.

²³² Sumita Batra, *The Art of Mehndi* (New York: Penguin Studio, 1999), 9.

10 Jasmine

The journey of the protagonist of the last novel to be analyzed in my thesis — Jasmine (1989) — begins with pain: under a banyan tree, where her forehead is permanently marked with a star-shaped wound when she stumbles over a twig sticking out of the firewood, after a heated argument with an astrologer who foretells her exile and widowhood. Although her sisters shun her, worrying that her face is “scarred for life” and it will grant her the ultimate exclusion from the marriage market, she insists that the wound provided her a perception beyond ordinary sight, a “third eye,”²³³ and thus the opportunity to join the holiest sages who, with the help of their third eye, “peered out into invisible worlds.”²³⁴

However, she will not take any undue risks such as being seen as her imperfect self. She consciously chooses to wear apparel that she describes “movie starrish,”²³⁵ which enables her, at least temporarily, to cocoon her imperfections in comfort and care, until they come to the surface. This she does for instance when she is about to meet Prakash, who later becomes her husband:

Effect must be calculated. I braided my hair three different ways. From my mothe’s rusted out trunk, I extracted one of her Lahore saris, a pale peach silk embroidered all over with gold leaves. I added Pitaji’s [her father’s] dark glasses.²³⁶

10.1 Marriage with Prakash

As it turns out, Jasmine’s marriage prospects are not altogether marred. Prakash is the epitome of the modern urban man, openly opposing feudal conventions. She sees him as a kind of Pygmalion, creating a beautiful statue from the piece of rock. His mission is simply to “break down the Jyoti [she’d] been in Hasnapur and make [her] a new kind of city woman.”²³⁷ The use of the word ‘breaking’ is not coincidental in this case, nor is the comparison to Pygmalion. It serves as an indication that Jasmine’s metamorphosis was not an easy process. It required a lot

²³³ Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 5.

²³⁴ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 5.

²³⁵ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 72.

²³⁶ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 70.

²³⁷ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 77.

of bending to her husband's will and molding her to conform to the norms of the city life. When Prakash asks her to call him by his first name, 'Prakash,' rather than using the pronoun village women use to address their husbands, "eager and obedient as [she] [is],"²³⁸ she tries to satisfy his demand, however, it is very difficult for her to get used to calling him by that name. Despite the hardships that she faces in adapting to life in urban Jalandhar where they move, she tries to be obedient wife to him. Yet, it is clear from the very beginning of their marriage that Prakash, rather than embracing Jasmine as she is, projects onto her the qualities that he considers desirable, much like Pygmalion, and, along with it, as we will see later in this chapter, his own internal conflicts. It is Prakash who turns feudal Jyoti into urban Jasmine because she reminds him of the scent of Jasmine, as he says, she is "small and sweet and heady," believing she will "quicken the whole world with your perfume."²³⁹

The similarities between Pygmalion and the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel do not end here. Much like Lisa Doolittle, Jasmine, even though she undergoes a tremendous transformation on the outside, is the same insecure girl that she was when she left Hasnapur: even though she recognizes that her husband Prakash is faithful to her, she continues to live with a quiet gnawing fear that he will break the trust she instills in him: "I could be jealous of even the air around him if I wasn't there."²⁴⁰ She threatens Prakash that if he leaves her, she will jump into a well. Prakash, however, takes it with a pinch of salt and tells her to "stop regressing into the feudal Jyoti. You are Jasmine now. You can't jump into wells!"²⁴¹ As Jasmine has now turned into a city girl, Prakash expects her to alter the manners she learned in the village and insert the new ones, which are more appropriate to her new role, that of an independent woman. Although Jasmine tries to act in accordance with the role that is prescribed to her, she simply cannot renounce her old feudal self.

Prakash's objections cause growing tension between him and Jasmine. Interestingly, even though Prakash mocks the beliefs of rural Indian society, he fails to align his beliefs with corresponding actions. Although he emphasizes that Jasmine is an independent woman, when he finds out about the money that she

²³⁸ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 77.

²³⁹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 77.

²⁴⁰ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 92.

²⁴¹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 92.

earned from secretly selling detergents, he flies into a fit of rage, accusing her of being “secretive little monkey.” He was determined to take care of her financial-wise and he perceives the job that she has been hiding from him as an injury inflicted on his pride. His rage simultaneously implies that he expects her to adopt a subservient role and he therefore encourages the beliefs of the feudal society that he despises and, hence, the existence of an internal conflict. Jasmine is shocked by his behavior after all the “talk about [them] being equal,” and realizes that her mother was right “husband has layers, like an onion, and you’ll still find things to surprise you [...] years and years after you marry.”²⁴²

Another conflict emerges when they are deciding about their future. Jasmine realizes that her wishes are very different from those of her husband. She wants to establish a family and take care of children, which is an indication that she is still not altogether stripped of her old identity as Jyoti, a rural girl growing up in a rural Punjab, with perceptions of the villagers regarding gender roles deeply instilled in her. Prakash’s primary wish is to finish his studies and build a career. His ultimate dream is to move to the United States. He therefore strongly disagrees with Jasmine’s suggestions about having a family, shouting: “We aren’t going to spawn! We aren’t ignorant peasant!”²⁴³ While at the beginning of their life together, Prakash tried to appease her by talking about gender equality, now he tries to assert his authority over her. Although Jasmine loves her husband, she does not let her feelings for him lull her into a false sense of security, for “it was up to the women to resist, because men were generally too greedy and too stupid to recognize their own best interests.”²⁴⁴

10.2 Remaking oneself

With the help of professor Vadhera, whom Jasmine refers to as Professorji in the novel, Prakash gets the opportunity to study in the United States. The day before they were supposed to leave India for the United States, however, Prakash is killed in a Sikh terrorist bombing. Jasmine is devastated by his death, nevertheless, out of sense of duty towards her dead husband, she acquires false immigration documents and decides to finish her husband’s mission. She is

²⁴² Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 82

²⁴³ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 77.

²⁴⁴ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 78.

steadfastly determined to commit a sati²⁴⁵ after she arrives at the university campus in Tampa. On her way to the United States, however, she meets Half-Face, a skipper on the ship on which she is travelling as a stowaway. Half-Face promises to help her and accompany her to a motel where Jasmine becomes increasingly aware that rather than protecting her as he promised, he perceives her in an objectifying, misogynist way, treating her solely as an object of his sexual desire. It is mainly her foreignness which creates sexual attraction for him. This confirms the the assumption of Sayantani Dasgupta and Shamita das Dasgupta which I mentioned in the previous section: creation of the Indian American female identity is influenced by the fact that they are perceived as something exotic by the American men, who simultaneously shun them for their otherness and the color of their skin yet at the same time are attracted to it.

Half-Face is a Vietnam veteran who maintains many racial prejudices: talking about Asian as the armpit of the universe.”²⁴⁶ He is disgusted by Jasmine because for him, she epitomizes the backward Asia where the disfigurement to his face was inflicted and where he probably also suffered moral injury. Simultaneously, however, he erotocizes her foreignness. Finally, he tries to assert dominance over her (and over the pain of his past) by raping her, after which she attempts suicide in the shower, which she believes will redeem her from her sins and enable her to start a new life: “My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for.”²⁴⁷ The shower, however, causes her to awaken her conscience to her actions:

It was murkiness of the mirror and a sudden sense of mission that stopped me. What if my mission was not yet over? I didn't *feel* the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover's caress. I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission. There

²⁴⁵ Sati is an Indian practice during which the widow offers herself in a sacrifice by fire on the funeral pyre after her husband's death, modelling the act of an Indian goddess who burned herself to death in order to show the commitment to her husband who was being humiliated by her father. It is perceived as a means of upholding the honor of the widow and also her husband's family and is still practiced today in some rural areas.

²⁴⁶ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 112.

²⁴⁷ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 121.

would be plenty of time to die; I had not yet buned my husband's suit. I had not stood under the palm trees of the college campus.²⁴⁸

She realizes that she has a mission to fulfill, and the sense of mission prevails over her wish to die. Instead of killing herself, she turns the knife against Half-Face in a bloody ritual through which her enormous power to rise above her circumstances becomes ultimately visible. She rises up almost to the realm of a goddess — when she stands over Half-Face's dead body “naked, but now with [her] mouth open, pouring blood, [her] red tongue out” (as she previously cut her tongue in the shower), the reader cannot help but recall the terrifying images of the goddess Kali, sticking her tongue out. In the mind of a western reader, the image of Kali is ultimately associated with death and destruction, she is the slayer of demons. However, as I will show in the following paragraphs, this association is not always just.

The act of destruction for Jasmine becomes, in a sense, a purifying act, which liberates her so she can start anew. As she says at the beginning of the novel, destruction carries with itself a potential for remaking oneself: “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams.”²⁴⁹ Half-Face, just like Prakash, attributes her the qualities that he wishes she had — being submissive, exotic beauty who will fulfill his wishes, qualities which simultaneously reveal the wounded aspects of his masculinity, racist attitudes toward Asian women, and thirst for exploitation of the other. Yet there is one important difference from Prakash: Jasmine does not accept the image that he tries to project onto her. By murdering him, she asserts her dominance over him and the image of her that he tried to force together in his imagination. Just like Kali, she becomes to be the slayer of demons. Further confirmation is provided when she burns Prakash's suit and scores at least a temporary victory over her past.

10.3 Jazzy

After she leaves the motel, everything seems to be going right for her. Although she recovers very slowly from the horrifying experience, at the bus station she

²⁴⁸ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 118.

²⁴⁹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 29.

meets Lillian Gordon, a humanitarian worker who soothes her and cuddles her in, in a motherly fashion, renaming her “Jazzy.” Lillian becomes her mentor and teaches her to walk confidently like American women because “if you walk and talk American, they’ll think you were born here. Most Americans can’t imagine anything else.”²⁵⁰ Having learned how to walk properly, she can now continue her metamorphosis through the clothes she wears. While at the beginning of her journey, she was wearing “fake American jacket, salwar-kameez, and rhinestoned Jullundhari sandals,”²⁵¹ after only a few weeks in the United States, she trades them for “Peter Pan collars, maxi skirts, T-shirt with washed-out pictures, sweaters, cords and loafers.”²⁵²

Jasmine is shocked at her own transformation, unable to tell “if with the Hasnapuri sidle [she’d] also abandoned [her] Hasnapuri modesty.”²⁵³ Yet somehow she is also strangely comfortable with her new self: she admits she accustomed to her new American clothes because it “disguised [her] widowhood” and partially also because she “wanted to distance [herself] from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like.”²⁵⁴ Americans viewed her as a student, left on her own. In rural India, however, she would be perceived through the lens of her widowhood and therefore was expected to “show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude.”²⁵⁵ Lillian is also content with her transformation – she gives her, at least imaginarily, the status of the real American — “You pass, Jazzy”²⁵⁶

We might ask: what is the factor that determines whether one can be accepted into mainstream American society or not? In one of the scenes in the novel, Lillian and Jasmine are travelling on an elevator. Lillian explains that “they pick up dark people like you [Jasmine] who’re afraid to get on or off.”²⁵⁷ This can be seen as a metaphor for the assimilation process itself – the people who succeed are the people who confidently walk on and off the elevator, in a literal sense those who accept their host country as their own and take pride in their new identity . As Maria Lauret states in *Wanderworlds: Language Migration in American Literature*, “Passing here is not about looks or sounds [knowledge of English] but

²⁵⁰ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 135.

²⁵¹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 132.

²⁵² Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 133.

²⁵³ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 133.

²⁵⁴ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 144.

²⁵⁵ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 145.

²⁵⁶ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 133.

²⁵⁷ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 133.

about the confident claiming of space,”²⁵⁸ space perceived according to Robert Smith as “existential freedom to feel that one belongs fully amid difference”²⁵⁹ rather than merely a geographical space, in this case the department store. Another important advantage for Jasmine is her skin color. Later in the novel, the friends of her partner Bud admit that “[she] might look a little different, that she is a “dark-haired gir in a naturally blond country,”²⁶⁰ however, her skin is not mentioned as an obstacle to her assimilation. According to them, she is more likely to have come “from generic place, ‘over there,’ which might be Ireland, France, or Italy...”²⁶¹ She says she has a “darkish complexion (in India, [she is] wheatish),” which implies that she has a light brown skin and is supposedly of a mixed origin. This supports the argument of Anne Anling Cheng, that “mélange allows a woman of color to pass as beautiful within predominantly white spaces or under the constrains of white ideals of feminine beauty by denouncing yet revealing [racialized] difference.”²⁶²

The relative ease of Jasmine’s assimilation could also be explained by the fact that she is gradually letting go of the aspects of her native culture : “Once we start letting go—let go of just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead—the rest goes down the sinkhole.”²⁶³

10.4 Jase

With change of her clothes, she adopts new identity and new habits, working as an au pair for Duff, the daughter of Taylor and Wylie Hayes. She falls in love with Taylor, and the name he gives her, Jase, for the name represents her new American identity of “a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants.”²⁶⁴ Her regular income enables her to take her week’s salary and “blow too much of it in stores along Broadway and even in big department

²⁵⁸ Maria Lauret, *Wanderworlds: Language Migration in American Literature* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2009), 245.

²⁵⁹ Robert Smith, *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 10.

²⁶⁰ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 33.

²⁶¹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 33.

²⁶² Anne Anlin Cheng, “Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Beauty, and the Aesthetic Question,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 19, 2(2000): 207.

²⁶³ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 29.

²⁶⁴ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 176.

stores.”²⁶⁵ By accepting the name ‘Jase’ which Taylor gives her, she subconsciously accepts the identity that is attached to the name and puts herself into the role assigned to her by the people around her, especially Taylor.

There are some noteworthy points about Taylor that I would like to mention here. Taylor acknowledges Jasmine’s foreignness and he does not want to “scour and sanitize [the foreignness].”²⁶⁶ In fact, he welcomes it. When they first meet, Taylor and Willie are trying to be understanding, telling her immediately after her arrival that she is “probably tired of Americans assuming that if you’re from India or China or the Caribbean you must be good with children,”²⁶⁷ in the immediately following sentence, their remark about “ancient American custom, dark-skinned mammies”²⁶⁸ implies that even though they recognize the importance of her ethnic and national identity, they subconsciously place her into the same category as black slaves, which proves that Vanita Reddy’s point that “fetishization of non-European racial difference might very well lead to the kind of benevolent and not-so-benevolent racism.”²⁶⁹ Taylor is charmed by the intoxicating flavor of her foreignness, for him, she indeed becomes, as Malini Johar Schueller puts it, “the epitome of foreignness, a difference he eroticizes and wishes to maintain even as he remains ignorant of her bloody past.”²⁷⁰ Yet, paradoxically, it is him who gives her the new identity and turns the Jyoti who was cautious about saving every rupee into the Jase, the American woman who “went to movies and lived for today,”²⁷¹ for as she says: “For every Jasmine the reliable caregiver, there is a Jase the powling adventurer. I thrilled to the tug of opposing forces.”²⁷²

The furthering of a parallel with Kali’s story that I mentioned earlier in this chapter can be seen in the maternal bond she develops towards Duff. Apart from being the slayer of demons, bringing about the annihilation and destruction, Kali was also known to have been “transformed from a wild, ferocious deity of

²⁶⁵ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 176.

²⁶⁶ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 185.

²⁶⁷ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 168.

²⁶⁸ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 169.

²⁶⁹ Vanita Reddy, “Beauty and the Limits of National Belonging in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 2 (2013): 358.

²⁷⁰ Malini Johar Schueller, *Locating Race: Global Sites of Post-Colonial Citizenship* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 94.

²⁷¹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 176.

²⁷² Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 176.

death to a benign youthful mother...²⁷³ This comes true also for Jasmine (or Jase). She gradually develops maternal feelings towards Duff, which is visible when the mother, Wylie, leaves the family to be with Stuart: “I crushed my head into her sweatshirt. If I let go of her, I’d be losing everything.”²⁷⁴ She starts seeing the Hayes family as her own. During the mother’s absence, the bonding becomes so strong that she prays that Wylie would stay in Europe for as long as needed, as it would enable her to “lavish care on my new, perfect family.”²⁷⁵

It becomes clear that similar to Taylor, she remains ignorant of her bloody past, fully embracing the identity of Jase assigned to her by Taylor and trying to act in accordance with it: “I wanted to become the person they thought they saw – humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful.” Moreover, it implies that she relies to a large extent on her exotic beauty so as to atone for her past sins. Vanita Reddy might be right in assuming that Jasmine’s exoticity “invariably conditions and secures her will-to-assimilation.”²⁷⁶ as assimilation in the novel “is held out as a social reward for the immigrant’s woman’s exceptional beauty.”²⁷⁷ – due to the exoticity and her foreignness that she radiates, she enjoys a relatively secure social position and benefits, with people willing to look away from her status as an undocumented immigrant and her problematic past.

Then, however, something unexpected happens. During a beautiful day in a park where she relaxes with her new family and finally feels happy, she sees one of the terrorists who murdered her husband Prakash walking past her. The encounter with Prakash’s murderer in a park is in a way encounter with her own shadow, reminding her that her former self still lays here and she cannot completely separate herself from it. Furthermore, she realizes that she is helpless against it: “I’m illegal here, he knows that. I can’t come out and challenge him. I’m very exposed.”²⁷⁸

²⁷³ Sanjukta Gupta, “The Domestification of a Goddess,” in *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, ed. Rachel Fell McDermott, Jeffrey J. Kripal (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003), 65.

²⁷⁴ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 182.

²⁷⁵ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 183.

²⁷⁶ Reddy, “Beauty and Limits of National Belonging in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” 359.

²⁷⁷ Reddy, “Beauty and the Limits of National Belonging in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*,” 339.

²⁷⁸ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 189.

10.5 Jane

To protect herself and her American family, she moves to Iowa where she starts working and falls in love with Bud, a banker bound to a wheelchair. The objectification reoccurs because, as she states, Bud likes her because of her foreignness, “darkness, mystery, inscrutability” and because “the East plugs [her] into instant vitality and wisdom.”²⁷⁹ Bud also gives her a new name: Jane, which becomes her final ‘incarnation’: “Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn’t get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as Jane in Russell, not Jane as in plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other.” The desire to become plain Jane implies that she wants to let go of any of the observable characteristics on the basis of which she might be identified as belonging to a particular race.

Lastly, Jasmine mentions that “[her] genuine foreignness frightens him,”²⁸⁰ which might be seen confirmation of Yasmin Jiwani’s assumptions: The Indian women are perceived by American mainstream society as as exotic and attractive, yet simultaneously their perception of them is afflicted by a sense of threat. Futhermore, their racial difference causes that they cannot be identified as Asian nor American. They are considered women yet there is an uncanny quality, an alien quality, about them.

Jasmine is constantly shifting between rural Indian and cosmopolitan American, “caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness,”²⁸¹ she cannot wholly embrace one nor the other and so she resorts to adopting the identities assigned to her by the people surrounding her. John K. Hoppe aptly observes that “the unifying theme [of the novel] is Jyoti/Jasmine/Jane’s mutability, her adaption to circumstances, expressed as a change from passive, traditional object of faith to active, modern cross-cultural shape of her future.”²⁸² In this, we find the confirmation of our initial hypothesis, that Indian American (women) find it difficult to categorize themselves within the discrete bounds of racial categorization in the United States. They exist within both the category of Americanness and Asianness yet somehow outside of the

²⁷⁹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 200.

²⁸⁰ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 26.

²⁸¹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 240.

²⁸² John K. Hoppe, “The Technological Hybrid as Post-American: Cross-Cultural Genetics in *Jasmine*,” *Melus* 24, no.4 (1999): 139.

two.

Jasmine's assimilation is to a great extent successful, nevertheless, her two identities exist in constant hostility: she has not altogether dropped her Indian identity as Jasmine/Jyoti, which is visible in the name of the novel itself, and she is somewhat hesitant about the role that she is performing, of an American woman. She has yet to learn how to develop harmony between her identities, as well as cultural values represented by these identities.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine the effects of exposure to white female beauty standards that have been created by the Western society, and how they are reflected in modern literature. For my research, I chose six novels in which the heroines are confronting the standards of beauty inflicted on them by the society.

The first part of the thesis was focused on the experience of African American women. The first novel which was analyzed in this thesis was *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The protagonist of the novel, Pecola Breedlove, internalizes the belief that having fair skin and blue eyes equals to being loved by the people around her. Her self-perception is influenced by the mainstream images which unanimously portray fair-skinned girls with curly blonde hair and blue eyes, such as Shirley Temple. She consumes mainstream products depicting these happy, blue-eyed little girls who convey brightness of future, with a firm belief that consuming these products will bring a touch of happiness to her life, it will enable her to take possession of the characteristics they have and, as a consequence, she will be accepted, cared for and cherished by her unloving parents and hostile society.

Moreover, the novel warns the reader of the dangers of relying too heavily on physical appearance as a means to evade her problems, such as emotional absence of her parents and lack of acknowledgement from their side and the side of their peers. Although Pecola does eventually get the blue eyes that she has been praying for (at least in her deranged mind), she does not get the happiness which she associated with it. There is still the nagging doubt in the back of her mind, putting into her head the idea that there is someone whose eyes are bluer than hers. She is so lonely and neglected by the society that she has to imaginary friend as a source of comfort in her helpless state. Pecola thus becomes the slavish adherent of the opinion and beliefs of crowds, which has negative consequences for her self-esteem and contributes to her descent into madness.

Through Claudia MacTeer, we see that crowds can be a positive force in shaping the individual's self-worth. However, it is important to note that if one wants to reap benefits, their beliefs and behavior must be used

correctly. Claudia used the behavior of a crowd to change her own behavior. She dismembered the white dolls that everyone considered beautiful to unravel the secret of what is beautiful about them, and not beautiful about her. She acknowledges the standard of white beauty as a judgement accepted by the crowds but simultaneously is not satisfied by simple adherence to doctrinal assertions about what is beautiful, rather curious to know why particular racial features are preferred over others.

Nurturing family environment also helps Claudia develop healthy sense of self which subsequently empowers her to resist the pressure to conform to the omnipresent white ideal of female beauty. On the other hand, Pecola's mother and father are both emotionally distant from their daughter. Pauline (Pecola's mother) spends most of her time in the house of her white employers while Cholly, Pecola's father, is an absent, abusive father who drowns his sadness in alcohol. There is not a sign of love from her parents – her mother has shown disdain for the blackness of her skin since she was born, and to increase the distance between them, she asks her to call her “Mrs Breedlove,” while she allows the children of her white employers to call her “Polly.”

Despite initially absorbing the beliefs and racial prejudices of her family, Emma Lou, the protagonist of the novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), eventually accepts the color of her skin as part of herself. There are three major events that contribute to this: first is her affair with Weldon, which helped her discover that she possesses the capacity to reconstruct her identity from the one assigned to her by her elitist family into her own, new, unique identity, liberated from fear and feelings of inferiority. Secondly, moving to Harlem enables her to achieve everything that she wanted in life: she becomes self-reliant, gains acceptance by her desired social group, and starts dating a light-skinned man. It is her relationship with Alva which leads to her final awakening. She realizes that she can never truly liberate her mind unless she overcomes her color consciousness. She will always encounter racism, but her proper concern should be how to change her response to it. At this point, what she has yet to do is to accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable and fight not so much for acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself by herself. Racism is not central to her identity, therefore, she must not let it determine her value as an individual.

The third novel that I analyzed was *God Help the Child*. In this novel, Toni

Morrison explores parents whose life has been ruined by the myth of white beauty, which subsequently led them to pass their own feelings of self-loathing to their children. Sweetness, Bride's mother, neglects her daughter both emotionally and physically. She cannot bring herself to love her daughter because of the color of her skin. Bride, however, emerges seemingly victorious from her childhood trauma. Through her, the reader can see another positive effect of the crowds. Thanks to the positive reaction from the people around her, she gradually learns to value the beauty of her skin and how to make it stand out. There is, however, one serious drawback: not having anything else to offer, she becomes victim of objectification for the color of her skin. She surrounds herself with material things which give her a false sense of security, immunity from the pain inflicted upon her by her past. Toni Morrison seems to indicate that mere beauty is not enough, and the drive to accumulate wealth and possessions to escape problems can be potentially destructive to individual's self-worth.

Only when Bride stops to be so concerned about her body and herself does she find her true value that protects her from the world which taught her to despise herself. There are two encounters which influence her perception in a significant way and bring healing to her soul. One is the encounter with Rain, the daughter of who was, as was the case with Bride, abused by her mother. She clasps her heart in a loving embrace and Rain finally gives her an opportunity to shift away from her self-absorbed state into a more giving and sacrificing one, which becomes visible when she saves Rain from being hurt in the forest.

Another transformative encounter is with Queen Olive, the aunt of her former boyfriend Booker who accommodates and consoles him after their breakup. Queen becomes her mentor and teaches her to overcome pride. Taking care of Rain and Queen Olive in the hospital enable her to shift away from being served as she was used to to servanthood, devoting her energy to helping others. The changes to her body suddenly stop and everything goes back to normal. By shifting the focus from herself to others, therefore, Bride gains ultimate victory in the quest of finding her own identity.

The second part of my thesis was dedicated to three novels featuring Asian-American protagonists: *Typical American* (1991) by Chinese American author Gish Jen, *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) by Japanese American author Julie Otsuka and *Jasmine* (1989) by Indian American author Bharati

Mukherjee. All of the aforementioned novels appear to suggest that neither slavish adherence to the Eurocentric standards of beauty, nor resistance at any cost, are the right solution. The solution lies with pursuit of an interactive process whereby women try to create a balance between the norms of their native countries and their cultural heritage and what is offered to them in the mainstream American society. Theresa in *Typical American* (1991) does not find fulfillment by defying of what is accepted as feminine behavior by her traditional Chinese parents. Nor does the daughter in *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) when she constantly seeks the approval of her mother and brother who repeatedly assure her that she is beautiful even if she does not fit the mainstream definition of beauty, still it does not help. Even Jasmine/Jazzy/Jase/Jane does not find fulfillment in accepting and acting with accordance with the identity bestowed upon her by the society around her.

Only by learning to find a balance between the two cultures can women overcome the oppressive consequences of standards of beauty. Theresa by finding a balance between solidarity to her family and American individualism on the other hand. The daughter by taking pride in her appearance as an integral part in her Japanese cultural heritage, just as wearing the parasol to avoid the sun. And finally Jasmine by striking a happy medium between cruel Kali — the slayer of demons of her Indian past, and Jase — gentle, caring, and generous mother-like American woman.

Today's America is a pluralistic society in which whiteness might soon bear the mark of certain kind of exoticity. Action towards neutralizing the feelings of animosity in the society is gaining more and more importance. As humans, we cannot proceed without learning to live and finding beauty and strength in diversity, and acknowledging that the narrow societal standard of feminine attractiveness that we accepted needs a serious update.

Resumé

Cílem této práce bylo poukázat na pozitivní a negativní účinky ideálu ženské krásy tak, jak jsou zaznamenány v díle amerických etnických autorek. Ve své práci jsem se zaměřila na ženské a dívčí postavy různého etnického původu, jež spojuje místo, kde se buď narodily a prožily dětství, nebo emigrovaly, pro všechny z nich je nicméně nynějším domovem: Amerika. S tímto místem si tyto ženy do značné míry přisvojují a zvnitřňují normy toho, co je společností považováno za krásné.

Analýza každé z knih je doprovázena seznámením čtenáře s širším literárním a kulturním kontextem jednotlivých etnik: v první části se jedná o etnikum afroamerické, přičemž práce sleduje tři romány afroamerických autorů: *The Bluest Eye* a *God Help the Child*, jejichž autorkou je Toni Morrisonová, a *The Blacker the Berry*, dílo jednoho z nejmladších průkopníků afroamerické literatury, Wallace Thurmana. Pozornost je věnována především tomu, jak se převážně dívčí postavy vyrovnávají se stereotypně utvářeným obrazem, který jim podsouvá, že nespĺňují ideál krásy, a jaké jsou faktory napomáhající vlastnímu sebezpřijetí a získání pozitivního přístupu k sobě sama.

Druhá část je věnována Američankám s asijskými kořeny – Gish Jenové, čínsko-americké autorce románu *Typical American*, Američance s japonskými kořeny Julii Otsukaové a jejímu románu *When the Emperor Was Divine*, a konečně také rodačce z indického města Kalkata, Bharati Mukherjeeové, jež je autorkou závěrečného románu *Jasmine*. V obecnějším úvodu ke každé z jednotlivých podkapitol – ať už se jedná o čínsko-americkou, japonsko-americkou, nebo indo-americkou – se práce snaží zasadit dílo do širšího kontextu, a to konkrétně jak se do jednotlivých děl a myšlení postav promítá to, co je v té dané zemi považováno za krásné a jak se mění identita ženských a dívčích postav v závislosti na prostředí.

Za nejvýznamnější přínos této práce považuji to, že se zabývá dosud poměrně neprobádanou zkušeností Indo-Američanek, což nadále skýtá velký výzkumný potenciál.

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Anotace

Příjmení a jméno: Bc. Barbora Vidašičová

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Název práce: Ambivalentní efekty standardů ženské krásy v multirasové Americe a jejich odraz v moderní literatuře

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc.

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Klíčová slova: mýtus bílé krásy, Spojené Státy, Toni Morrison, Wallace Thurman, Gish Jen, Julie Otsuka, Bharati Mukherjee

Tato práce je zaměřená na obrazy ženské krásy v americké společnosti, a pozitivní a negativní efekty těchto obrazů na sebepojetí žen pocházejících z různých etnických prostředí. Práce se sestává z dvou hlavních částí: afro-americké a asijsko-americké zkušenosti, přičemž každá z nich se dále dělí na teoretickou část, jejíž náplní je zejména vykreslení kulturního a historického kontextu, který je nutná pro pochopení analyzovaných literárních děl a sociálního postavení jednotlivých etnik, a praktickou část, která se věnuje amotné analýze děl autorek pocházejících z těchto dvou prostředí.

Annotation

Name: Barbora Vidašičová

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title of the thesis: The ambivalent effects of white female beauty standards in multiracial America, as reflected in modern literature

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Keywords: white beauty myth, United States, Toni Morrison, Wallace Thurman, Gish Jen, Julie Otsuka, Bharati Mukherjee

This thesis concentrates on the images of feminine beauty in the mainstream American society, the ideals of beauty that they represent and the effects that the ideals have on women of different ethnicities. The thesis is divided into two main parts: African American and Asian American experience. Theoretical part provides a historical and cultural context which is necessary for understanding the literary works analyzed in the thesis and the position of the individual ethnic groups within the mainstream American society. Practical part focuses on the analysis itself.