

Beauty Standards In The Western And Eastern Cultures

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Once of the peculiarities of human mind is the ability to think using the rationale and through intuition. The culture of the west is such that they rely heavily on rationale and science opposed to the eastern culture. The westerners reside within the body and the body is made up of various divisions. The eastern culture is deep-rooted; people there believe in the higher consciousness and consider body to be a tool to accomplish what they are here for. According to the Hindu scriptures, the shape, form, and size of the body are all related to the experiences in previous lives. Thus, the concept of body image differs phenomenally in the western and the eastern world on this basis.

The perception of the human body has changed dramatically over the last decades both in the Western and Eastern countries. Although initially the Eastern culture was directed to inner beauty, the Western media fever has spread on it too.

Religion, socio-economic background, family environment, differences in culture all contribute to the thought construct in any society. In the male-dominated society, in both the eastern and the western world, men through the ages have defined the ideal beauty and body image. According to Cohen (1984), "Men reflected a lot of status by having a wife who fit the ideal of that time. Women attempt to conform to what others find pleasing and attractive and also what she perceives them to consider pleasing and attractive." They measure the women's worth by these standards.

Body image in the western society is a major issue today. Susan Bordo (cited by Lupinski K G 2003) points out that, “preoccupation with fat, diet, and slenderness in women is normative and Western culture surrounds women with clear messages that overweight must be destroyed and eliminated, the ideal body is tight and completely under control” (Bordo, 1993, p. 186.). Psychologists and counselors agree that body image is directly related to self-esteem. A negative body image or low self-esteem “can contribute to clinical depression and eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia” (Bierma, 2005). The eastern society, on the other hand, shows no conscious fear of becoming fat as reported by Lee et al. (Lee, 1993). The last decade has seen changes in the east too. Anorexia nervosa was unheard of outside west, but today eating disorders have also appeared in major cities in low-income Asian countries, such as China, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia (Lee, 2000).

Body image can be defined by many constructs: how you see yourself, how you feel others perceive you, how you feel about your body, and how you feel in your body. The women’s body is advertised and sold as a product in the west. They are used as supermodels to sell one product after another and selling beauty, perfection, and even happiness. Self-mutilation among female teenaged Americans is reaching almost epidemic proportions, says Woods (2004). Women identify themselves with the body and give more importance to it than the intellect. They remain dissatisfied with their bodies, as there is a constant competition. As a

contrast, in the eastern world, in Hinduism and Buddhism, the female body is depicted according to a very constant ideal of beauty, says Pieruccini (2002). The woman's body evokes sensuousness, fertility, and auspiciousness. Women may have been the neglected and the oppressed lot, but they have always been worshipped. She is the form of shakthi (power), full of energy, the dynamic energy. She is considered a source of bliss hence also an obstacle to renunciation. In the Islamic countries, women still veil themselves under purdah (curtain) signifying that she is not an object to be desired by men. Women of the eastern world are projected in the media for their ethnic beauty or feminine appearance.

The eastern world believes that beauty in a woman is inherent. If her thoughts are pure, if she has a clean mind, the beauty of her true nature will reflect on her external appearance. It is believed that practices like meditation help release the toxins from within; the body and mind become purified and this purity reflects externally. Physical appearance was not emphasized even in Hong Kong and inner beauty was considered more important attribute. Cohen (1984) believes that “the essence of beauty lies in internal well-being, wholesomeness, and harmony. Beauty is the expression of physical excellence and purity, of health and clean blood, vitality and above all, efficiency”.

While this was the culture and belief in both the worlds at one time, gradually in the twentieth-century changes started taking place. Fundamental changes in women's attitude

towards sexuality and issues like women's rights brought about a change in the form and shape of an ideal woman. Hynowitz and Weissman (1978) state that "to be socially acceptable, to be attractive, to win a husband, to keep a husband, women had to look sexy, free and available". This is the philosophy, which changed the values radically in the western world. It is only recently that the eastern world has become a victim of such an outlook too.

Today worldwide women are bent on having a slim and trim look, which is the reason the billion-dollar weight-loss industry is thriving. In Singapore culture, "we don't accept people who are big," said Tey Beng Hea, head of the weight-management program in Singapore's Alexandra Hospital explaining the obsession with being thin (cited by Agence France Presse,2002).

Counselor Rodgveller (2003) opposes the idea of media sending negative messages to the women that their body is more important than real accomplishments in life. Their efforts in attaining the right body appeal leave them physically and emotionally shattered. Nevertheless, the American society places a strong value on a female living up to an ideal image. Peer pressure plays a big role in influencing women. The body image of others makes them conscious of their own negative body image. Women in the eastern world have a more positive body image. An emaciated look depicts poverty and an unhealthy life; being overweight signifies prosperity and well-being. Even if they desire a thinner body there is a lesser tendency to go in

for diet control compared to the west. The western influence though is seeping in all countries like Hong Kong, China, and Japan.

To sum up, whatever the culture, whichever the society, a mix of good and bad, the right and the wrong, the positive and negative has always existed and will continue to do so. A balanced approach where the body is given importance to the extent necessary for the real accomplishments in life is desirable. Differences in culture and the socio-economic background cannot be eliminated. This perhaps is what makes the world an interesting place.

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