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**Women, the Beauty Industry, and Personhood:
The Poetics and Politics of Face
in Selected Contemporary Fiction**

[Kobiety, kanony piękna i tożsamość.

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Introduction

This PhD thesis explores the representations of the face and the appearance norms pertaining to women's faces in selected contemporary fiction by American and Korean-American writers published in the years 1999-2020: *Invisible Monsters* (1999) by Chuck Palahniuk, *Look at Me* (2001) by Jennifer Egan, *Fix* (2006) by Leslie Margolis, *The Fold* (2008) by An Na, *Slant* (2008) by Laura E. Williams, and *If I Had Your Face* (2020) by Frances Cha. The selected texts include fiction by established, award-winning authors such as Chuck Palahniuk and Jennifer Egan, as well as works published by emerging writers, and Young Adult fiction. This corpus has been selected in order to offer a focused yet varied literary landscape. Therefore, the works discussed include representations of teenage and adult characters, as well as Caucasian, Korean American, and Korean women. In the analysis of these texts I intend to show the differences and similarities in how the six writers depict female beauty standards, how their characters react to and cope with expectations of attractiveness, and what social, psychological and philosophical reflection these works of fiction inspire.

My interest in the study of the face has undoubtedly been influenced by my identity as an autistic scholar. Faces, for me, are both a subject of immense fascination, as well as a source of discomfort, which neurotypical persons might not experience. In social situations I find the face, my own and that of my interlocutor, uniquely troubling. Similarly to many neurodiverse individuals, looking at others' faces is frequently a challenging, even stressful experience. As certain aspects of interaction do not come naturally to me, I tend to wonder whether I am maintaining an

appropriate level of eye contact: if I am not staring too intensely or, on the contrary, if I am not avoiding looking at the other's face in a way that might be perceived as impolite or dismissive. During an encounter, my own face also becomes a subject of worry, as my mind intensely focuses on producing appropriate facial expressions that balance politeness and the display of my true emotions, with varying results.

These experiences with the face emphasize its crucial role in autistic masking, the effort to hide or diminish the pronouncement of one's autistic traits, often in order not to confront various forms of hostility in society, find employment and relationships, and “compensate for the social and communication differences” (www.autism.org.uk) for autistic women and feminine-presenting people. Beautifying oneself with makeup in socially approved ways can also serve as a mask¹ one puts on in order to be able to face the world and society at large (Millman 2022: 121, 146). As Ginny Russell et al. note, for many autistic women feminine facial and bodily self-presentation “is adopted, enacted rather than predetermined” (Russell et al. 2025: 8). These experiences with the face and beautification subvert mainstream narratives about beautifying practices, which center on self-expression and authenticity, and define engagement in beautification as pleasant ‘me-time’ and a self-care act. My experience with makeup and skincare has been similarly complex, prompting me to often ponder upon their meaning and how they affect my own and other feminine people's selves. The discomfort that I associate with the face in social settings, as well as my complicated relationship with beautification, makes their representation in fiction, filmic closeups, and celebrity photographs, among other sources, particularly fascinating and enticing. These images render the face more accessible to me,

¹ For many autistic women, using cosmetics can be used strategically as a way to hide their neurodivergence and increase the chances of being socially accepted. However, it is worth noting that makeup is not merely a part of the mask that mimics neurotypicality for all female autistics. For some, like the transgender woman Mia in Susannah Louise French's study, wearing makeup can be a path to unmasking by showing one's feminine identity in an authentic way (French 2025: 310, 325).

allowing me ‘to face the face’ in a stress-free environment. In turn, the depictions of struggles with beauty standards and beautifying strategies, increasingly present in pop-culture and fiction, explore topics deserving of further discussion.

As Umberto Eco notes in *On Beauty*, what is considered beautiful, whether in human beings or in various forms of art, “has never been absolute and immutable but has taken on different aspects depending on the historical period and the country” (Eco 2004: 14). One of the key technological developments that has influenced our obsession with facial beauty, our self-image and self-esteem in the first decades of the 21st century was the introduction of smartphones, which allow users to browse social media and take photographs easily and anytime they want. The exact time of the inception of smartphones seems difficult to pinpoint as it depends on how this type of appliance is defined. However, the introduction of the first Apple iPhone in 2007 is frequently named as the starting point of modern smartphone history (www.celluralsales.com). In 2010, Apple premiered the iPhone 4, which was the company’s first device with a front-facing camera (www.gsmarena.com). This feature allowed users to take *selfies*, which are self-portrait photographs taken with a front-facing camera (Killingsworth 2013). This type of photograph, usually posted on social media, rose in popularity quickly, which resulted in the word selfie being named “the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2013” (Killingsworth 2013).

Smartphone *selfies* have been a frequent subject of scientific studies, which explore the problems they can cause. According to Erdoğan Özgür, Nuray Bayar Muluk, and Cemal Cingi the increased popularity of taking photographs for the purpose of publishing them on social media has made people more conscious of their appearance than ever in history (Özgür, Muluk and Cingi 2017: 425). The authors claim that users of social networking websites tend to realize that a more attractive

appearance in pictures can contribute to gaining popularity among the website's userbase, resulting in an increase of interactions, such as *likes* and sharing photos with other users. Teenagers seem to be particularly vulnerable as far as taking and viewing self-portrait photographs are concerned (Özgür, Muluk and Cingi 2017: 425). The authors indicate that, as a result, adolescents might develop an obsessive interest around appearance improvement and beautifying practices. Moreover, young people can be tempted to emulate various beauty related trends, although they are not body-safe, such as in the case of #KylieJennerLipChallenge in 2015 (Moyer 2015)².

Selfies usually present a distorted image of the face which can influence the self-perception of the photographed person and contribute to them seeking cosmetic enhancement. Research by Mark P. Pressler, Mikaela L. Kislevitz, Justin J. Davis, and Bardia Amirlak proves that the nose size in selfies, "taken with a front-facing smartphone camera," differs from photographs made using "a digital single-lens reflex camera" (Pressler et al. 2022). However, people might often not be aware that images do not reflect reality. Therefore, as Amirlak highlights, such individuals can be driven to seek plastic surgery in order "to fix problems that don't exist except in the world of social media" (Amirlak 2022).

In the first decades of the 21st century, the prevailing societal beliefs about facial and bodily beauty have started slowly evolving into a more varied picture. This change was perhaps triggered by the body positivity movement which hit the mainstream in the 2010s. On the one hand, this was a welcome change: the world seemed to be moving on from the extremely strict standards of bodily appearance which I remembered from my early childhood, such as the heroin chic of the 1990s and extreme body shaming on television in the early years of the 21st century, where

2 The #KylieJennerLipChallenge was a social media trend consisting of sucking on a small object such as a tumbler glass in order to create pressure. This was supposed to give the person trying this method plump lips resembling those of the celebrity and model Kylie Jenner (Moyer 2015).

an average-sized woman would be called obese. On the other hand, while witnessing a slowly growing acceptance of body diversity, I kept asking myself: what about faces? Why are most models championed by the media as exemplars of body positive representation conventionally attractive when it comes to the look of their faces? Where are, to list just a few, crooked noses, acne, scars, thin lips, large foreheads, crossed eyes or facial asymmetries? Unfortunately, facial diversity in the global culture and media is still quite rare. The body positive movement has not sparked an analogous wide-spread face positive wave, and organizations working on behalf of people with facial differences and disfigurement, such as Face Equality International (faceequalityinternational.org) or Changing Faces (changingfaces.org.uk), remain largely unknown to the general public.

While body positivity is certainly a noble idea at its core, it unfortunately can be warped and misused. According to Jennifer A. Harriger et al. in “The Body Positivity Movement is not all that Positive on TikTok: A Content Analysis of Body Positive TikTok Videos,” some media that uses the ‘body positive’ label might in fact reinforce the societal focus on the importance of beauty, as well as propel those who already fulfill the appearance standards, such as “young White women rather than individuals from marginalized groups” (Harriger et al. 2023: 257). For instance, an overwhelming majority of body positive TikTokers fulfill the mainstream expectations of appearance either “somewhat (44.2%) or to a great extent (48.5%)” (Harriger et al. 2023: 259), which shows that while in some areas body positivity has perks, it still centers on beautiful individuals. In “Are Diverse Models Really Non-idealized? Investigating Body Positivity Public Feed Posts of Fashion and Beauty Brands on Instagram,” Femke Konings et al. also call attention to the problem of narrow appearance ideals in brand advertising. Most of the time, makeup companies’

online “posts displayed only one aspect of diversity” (Konings et al. 2024: 1), which suggests that only a limited divergence from the mainstream Western ideal is acceptable. As shown in this recent study, the face remains the most neglected area. Only 12% of the images analyzed by Konings’s team depicted faces which do not meet the beauty standard. Among the diverse facial traits, nose shape was the most common, whereas facial asymmetry was the most rare feature of diversity (Konings et al. 2024: 7). Konings et al. explain that while the woman portrayed in an advertisement might be a person of color or have a larger than average body size, she usually will have a classically attractive face. According to the scholars, most body positive models still possess the typical “symmetrical facial features, large/wide eyes, full lips, narrow nose, full and nicely shaped eyebrows [...]and] clear skin” that are highly valued in Western society (Konings et al. 2024: 1-2). Additionally, the non-Caucasian women featured in beauty and fashion brand imagery tend to possess rather “Eurocentric facial features,” which once again reinforces the societal preference for white faces and the marginalization of people of color (Konings et al. 2024: 8).

Unfortunately, the 2020s have brought on additional troubling changes in the world of mainstream beauty standards. Compared to the 2010s, the spread of body positivity in the media, especially on the Internet, has seemingly decelerated. Some, like journalist Sarah Manavis, even argue that 2024 can be called “[t]he year that body positivity died.” The movement’s decreasing popularity has been partially affected by constructive critique, such as its aforementioned limitations in representation, as well as its commodification and commercialization by brands (Manavis 2024). However, other causes of its falling relevance in the mainstream point to significantly more worrisome factors. The rise in the use of the drug Ozempic, which can cause dramatic weight loss, the promotion of plastic surgery, as well as

condemnation of visible aging on social media (Manavis 2024), suggests that female beauty norms continue to be particularly strict.

The ‘facial status-quo’ appears to be as strong as ever. It is perhaps best exemplified by the popularity of *clean girl* makeup. The style aims to “create the illusion of effortless perfection” with the extensive use of skincare and makeup in neutral shades. Instead of reaching for colorful cosmetics, like striking lip and eye products, the so-called *clean girl* prefers “[the] glowy, barely-there” type of beauty enhancement (Machell 2025). Importantly, the trend overwhelmingly favors Caucasian women and their facial features, while excluding women of color (Artzy 2024). Gracie Machell argues that the rise of the clean girl correlates with the more conservative political climate, as it “reinforces traditional beauty ideals” and fulfills the expectations of normative, heterosexual femininity. The trend’s name itself is also questionable, as ‘clean’, being a polysemantic word, does not only evoke an image of tidiness, but can also be interpreted as highlighting the association between facial attractiveness and morality (Machell 2025). Thus, the traditional belief that “what is beautiful is the same as what is good” (Eco 2004: 8) seems to be embedded in the *clean girl* aesthetic. The trend has yet another problematic dimension in its striving for the impression of effortlessness. As Machell points out, the desired look demands women to diligently apply skincare and makeup, spending a significant amount of “time and money” in the process. However, as the result is almost imperceptible to the untrained eye, the individual’s effort can often go unrecognized (Machell 2025).

The affects connected with beauty and ugliness have not gone unexplored in contemporary (pop) culture. In the recent horror film *The Substance* (2024), the character played by Demi Moore is depicted staring at her face in full makeup which she quickly smears in frustration as she judges her aged visage as unsightly and

undeserving of romantic involvement. On her hit album *Brat*, Charli XCX admits: “I just wanna rewind / I’d go back in time to when I wasn’t insecure / To when I didn’t overanalyse my face shape” (Charli XCX 2024: “Rewind”). Importantly, while ugliness tends to be negatively perceived by the societal mainstream, it also possesses an undeniable potential for challenging the preconceived norms and expectations. Some figures, like the artist Orlan, willingly cross the standards of facial beauty in order to criticize “socially fabricated” nature (Henderson 2015: 61). Others, such as the shock rocker Marilyn Manson, who dons a paper-white face, dark makeup, and colored contact lenses, find admirers and imitators who appreciate unconventional looks (Eco 2007: 426), or, more recently, the dominant-turned-actress Julia Fox with her signature blacked-out eyes and numerous experimental makeup looks. Eco argues that the presence of celebrities who openly reject the status quo of appearance, and their positive reception by the younger generations can prompt the redefinition of the aesthetic standards: as a result, “the opposition beautiful/ugly *no longer has any aesthetic value.*” Thus, ugliness could emerge as a neutral concept, instead of its former negative connotations (Eco 2007: 426; emphasis in the original).

Contemporary fiction has also proven to be a potent ground to address and explore in more depth the problems related to women’s facial beauty standards. Referring to a variety of sociological and psychological theories, in this thesis, I analyze fiction from different cultural backgrounds, published in the years 1999-2020, which, at its core, explores the politics and poetics of the female face and its impact on personhood. Similarly to the tendencies in mainstream culture, the beauty standards regarding the female face remain underdiscussed in academia — especially in disciplines other than sociology and psychology. While concerns regarding differences in bodily shapes and sizes have been a subject of robust inquiry in the

field of literary studies, a significant gap remains in research about the face. However, the face should not be ignored because, as British political scientist Jenny Edkins claims in *Face Politics*, a work influential to my research:

the face remains of haunting significant and political consequence. In politics today, then, there seems to be a contradiction between what we might expect — that the face is disappearing, with a shift from the modern episteme to a world of digital images and the post-human, and what seems to be happening — that the face endures as an emblem of political personhood. (Edkins 2015: 3)

Edkins's theory, however, is not complicit in the dominance of the face, but attempts to undermine its importance. The scholar questions political activism that centers fostering acceptance, such as the previously discussed body positivity, considering it limiting. In her view, in adopting such a perspective “our focus on the face would remain” intact (Edkins 2015: 167). Instead, she proposes abandoning the face and its centrality for a reconceptualization of personhood (Edkins 2015: 171), which is a fascinating but radical position, with far-reaching consequences for the understanding of our being in the world.

My thesis therefore aims to analyze the representations of female literary characters' relationships with their faces and societal appearance norms, as well as techniques of beautification. I argue that the selected works of fiction offer a critical approach to facial beauty standards, showing their adversary and discriminatory nature, and questioning the importance of the face as central to female and human identity. In this thesis, I explore how the beauty industry shapes feminine appearance norms and how they affect Caucasian and Asian women. I also consider what kind of insecurities the beauty standards create in relation to personhood and whether the inability to comply with them can be considered in terms of stigma. Additionally, I analyze how facial disfigurement of female protagonists is portrayed in fiction and

what meanings it is assigned. I also inquire into the ways cosmetic surgery and makeup usage affect personhood and what kind of face politics emerges from the texts under consideration.

Among the corpus analyzed in this dissertation are three titles about Korean American and Korean characters: *The Fold* by An Na, *Slant* by Laura E. Williams, and *If I Had Your Face* by Frances Cha. My inclusion of these texts has been motivated by the growing presence and positive image of South Korean products, media, and entertainment. In recent years, Korean music (K-pop), television movies and shows (K-drama), comics (manhwa), and, most relevant to this thesis, cosmetics (K-beauty) have become an integral part of the global cultural landscape. Thus, contemporary South Korea can be seen as a country with global influence, including on beauty norms, making the inquiry into Korean appearance standards and their depiction in fiction particularly important. My decision to look at East Asian attractiveness ideals is also a result of my interest in the cultures of this region, particularly of Japan, Korea, and China. In my spare time, I frequently engage and stay up-to-date with East Asian film and literature (in English and Polish translation)³, Japanese television drama and comics, as well as the world of K-, J-, and C-beauty⁴ and skincare. I am also learning the Japanese language so that I can better understand Japanese media, albeit the fulfillment of these hopes remains in the distant future. As a doctoral student, I had the invaluable opportunity to visit libraries in Tokyo and Osaka, which aided my research. This enlightening and inspiring journey also allowed me to experience an East Asian culture first-hand, solidifying my academic and personal interest in this region. I hope that in the future I will be able to visit South

³ I have chronicled my experiences with these and other cultural texts online under the moniker *Pani Kiczcock* across various platforms; for example see: www.instagram.com/kiczcock/

⁴ The letters refer to the origin of the products: Korean, Japanese, and Chinese respectively.

Korea and China and study the beauty standards in the three countries, as well as their corresponding diasporic communities, also as depicted in fiction.

The most famous novel discussed in this dissertation is Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* (1999). The author, born in 1962 in Pasco, Washington, is known for his transgressive writing which "reveals the dark compulsions and actions of characters struggling to find fulfillment in a postmodern world" (Kuhn and Rubin 2009: 1). Palahniuk pursued a writing career after a string of jobs in various fields, and debuted with *Fight Club* (1996), which received the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award and the Oregon Book Award. This novel remains his most popular work (Ramsey 2024) partially thanks to the iconic film adaptation from 1999 that immortalized both the story and its author in the American contemporary cultural landscape (Kuhn and Rubin 2009: 1). The writer's work has been often misunderstood by the public, with, for instance, *Fight Club* being adopted by the misogynistic incel (involuntary celibate) subculture, despite its not "particularly gendered" critique of capitalism and consumerism. Palahniuk is also maligned by some critics who accuse him of shallowness and engagement in cheap provocation (Palahniuk in Beaumont-Thomas 2018; Clark 2023; Kuhn and Rubin 2009: 1-2). Despite this opposition, Palahniuk remains a cult figure with a dedicated fanbase of admirers (Kuhn and Rubin 2009: 2-3) with whom he engages on his social media and blog.

Jennifer Egan, the author of *Look at Me*, was born in the same year as Palahniuk in Chicago. While she published her first collection of short fiction, *Emerald City*, in 1993, it was not until the success of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), which won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, that her work garnered significant interest (Moran 2021: 1). Egan's fiction escapes simple

genre categorization and is characterized by “formal experiments and stylistic diversity,” which renders her an important figure in contemporary literature (Moran 2021: 2). In the course of her prolific career, she has published fiction and non-fiction, novels and short stories. What connects this diverse body of writing is “[a] concern with technological change” and “an interest in its implications for authenticity” (Moran 2021: 4), themes also explored in *Look at Me*.

In comparison with Palahniuk and Egan, the other four writers discussed in this dissertation are younger, and so far less famous and revered. As far as Leslie Margolis is concerned, *Fix* (2006) is the American author’s debut novel, which was followed by a large body of work, primarily focused on children’s literature, albeit also containing Young Adult titles (www.lesliemargolis.com). Ann Na, who was born in 1972 in Korea but grew up and is living in the United States, is an author of Young Adult novels, including *The Fold* (2008). Her first novel, *A Step from Heaven*, published in 2001, received several awards, including the Michael L. Printz Award, the International Reading Association Award, and ALA Best Books for Young Adults (www.anwriting.com). Laura E. Williams, in turn, is a Korean-born American author of children’s and Young Adult fiction. As for 2025, *Slant* (2008) remains Williams’s last full-length novel and penultimate work (leeandlow.com; goodreads.com). Finally, Frances Cha was born in Minnesota and was raised in the USA, Hong Kong, and South Korea. She worked as “a travel and culture editor for CNN” in the latter two countries, as a lecturer, and as an editor. *If I Had Your Face* is her debut adult novel, which garnered both popularity and acclaim, and was followed by two children’s books, *The Goblin Twins* (2023) and *The Goblin Twins: Too Hard To Scare* (2024) (francescha.com).

The thesis is divided into four chapters; the first one is dedicated to the discussion of the theoretical apparatus, whereas Chapters Two, Three, and Four focus on the analysis of the selected fiction. Chapter One begins with the exploration of the beauty industry as a force that influences and popularizes certain standards of female facial beauty and acts of beautification. I call special attention to its importance in contemporary society and its use of modern media, like the Internet, to promote certain standards. I also examine the beauty industry's influence in East Asia, as well as on young consumers, which today increasingly includes children. Next, I discuss the varying understandings of the term 'face,' not only as a body part, but also as a social phenomenon, once again taking into account cultural differences between Western societies, as in the works of Canadian-born American sociologist and psychologist Erving Goffman and East Asian cultures, with the concept of the Korean *chemyeon*, or face understood as reputation in society. I also consider the Lacanian 'mirror stage' and the importance of the face in the formation of individual identity and personhood. Alongside the face, I explore the concept of facelessness, as understood by Edkins in *Face Politics*. I then focus on the Foucauldian concept of norms, undoubtedly relevant to the issues of the face, and their application in the feminist inquiry into appearance standards, as argued by Sandra Lee Bartky. In this section, I compare the norms of female and male appearance and the differences between the beauty regimens in West and East Asia, where men are expected to put more work into their physicality, including their faces.

Finally, I examine the concepts of female beauty and ugliness, as well as various forms of gaze exerted upon women's faces. On the one hand, as I aver, facial attractiveness can be seen as a beneficial form of currency or capital, aiding women's social advancement, while on the other, not fulfilling the appearance standard has

negative consequences. It is a subject of Goffmanian stigma, associated with adverse traits. While some might willingly embrace ugliness or non-normative appearance, in mainstream society, ugliness is often a source of discrimination. Furthermore, I discuss the concepts related to gaze and looking: John Berger's *the surveyor and the surveyed*, Laura Mulvey's *male gaze*, Fredrickson and Roberts' *objectification theory*, and Alison Winch's *girlfriend gaze* and *looking talk*. These theories show that women's faces are constantly scrutinized not only by men but also by their female friends and by themselves. In my examination of various gazes, I also acknowledge how these phenomena operate in East Asian cultures, using the example of South Korea.

Chapter Two is dedicated to the analysis of three works of Young Adult fiction: *Fix* by Leslie Margolis, *The Fold* by An Na, and *Slant* by Laura E. Williams. As all of these texts focus on teenage protagonists who struggle with facial appearance standards and the formation of personal identities, the chapter begins by discussing the issues regarding appearance in young girls and women, such as the impact of relationships, media, and other factors on self-image. The problems of medical ethics, in relation to plastic surgery, as well as the question of whether beautification is motivated by personal choice or social pressure, are also underscored. The chapter focuses on such themes as facial appearance insecurities, the influence of family and friends on beauty-related choices, and ethical and personal issues related to plastic surgery.

Chapter Three discusses two novels about adult characters with disfigured faces: *Invisible Monsters* by Chuck Palahniuk and *Look at Me* by Jennifer Egan. I examine key issues regarding the notion of disfigurement, with a focus on acquired facial difference, the impact of disfigurement on self-esteem, psychological well-

being, and relationships with other people. The Lacanian mirror stage is also referred to in order to explain why facial disfigurement is often seen as a threat to one's established identity. By contrast with the prevailing negative view of facial difference, I offer a diverging perspective on facelessness, based on Edkins's thought. In this approach, the loss of face holds a revolutionary potential that can question traditional opinions about face and personhood. The chapter also explores popular themes and modes of depicting disfigurement in Western literary fiction. I call special attention to the notion of textual staring, which is prevalent in numerous works where protagonists with facial difference are present. Finally, I analyze the depictions of disfigurement in the selected novels through the lens of an interdisciplinary understanding of facial difference.

Chapter Four is, unlike the previous ones, dedicated to one text: Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*. My decision to discuss the novel in a non-comparative context was motivated by the text's singular nature; Cha's fiction is a unique example of an English-language work concerned with female facial beauty norms in South Korea. The chapter first outlines the nature of Korean standards of beauty for women's faces, together with their associated meaning, as well as their cultural and historical background. Later, it discusses the phenomenon of plastic surgery in South Korea, taking into consideration the reasons for its popularity and normalization within society. Furthermore, I introduce the notions of beauty work, such as makeup and aesthetic labor, a line of work where the employees' looks are their primary asset. Korean facial beauty standards, beautification, plastic surgery, and the aesthetic labor of hostessing work are particularly important themes that I explore in my interpretation of *If I Had Your Face*. By analyzing these issues in the novel, I explore how the norms of appearance shape women's lives in South Korea.

Chapter One

The Politics of Face

1.1. Beauty Industry

Contemporarily, on a global scale, the beauty industry, exemplified by makeup, skincare brands and beauty influencers, has a considerable impact on what faces are considered attractive. This high level of influence of the beauty industry on appearance norms in the West, as Geoffrey Jones argues in “Blonde and Blue-eyed? Globalizing Beauty, c.1945–c.1980,” has been present since the industry’s inception in the mid-19th century, due to the possibility of mass-production of beauty and hygiene products (Jones 2008: 126-127). The early 20th century saw the emergence of the first widely-accessible makeup products, such as lipstick and mascara. According to Jones, their popularity grew in the West after the appearance of magazines focused on female adornment, *Vogue*, *Queen*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*, as well as due to advertising on the radio. As a result, makeup gained significant acceptance and, with time, it has become socially expected. Jones claims that by the late 1940s “90 per cent of American women used lipstick, and two-thirds used rouge,” emphasizing the fast growth of makeup’s popularity (Jones 2008: 128-129). In the post-war period in North America, the belief that “turned beauty products into a ‘necessity’ rather than a ‘luxury’” further solidified a high standard of facial appearance (Jones 2008: 131-132).

In *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry*, Jones claims that whether beauty-related businesses and media producers “invent and dictate” the

appearance ideal directly is questionable (Jones 2010: 359). However, the aforementioned entities can be “seen as interpreters and reflectors of societal beliefs [about beauty]. Yet, as they turned such beliefs and norms into heavily advertised brands, they reinforced [beauty norms], gave them a self-perpetuating quality, and diffused them internationally” (Jones 2010: 359). Thus, while perhaps not entirely responsible for the creation of categories of attractiveness in the first place, the beauty industry legitimizes and promotes faces already favored in society. In *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and the National Body*, Meeta Rani Jha in turn argues that the beauty industry operates on the basis of both “production and consumption of feminine beauty,” and constructs attractiveness as a requirement of femininity. It positions the purchasing of cosmetics, skincare, or plastic surgery as ways of engagement in womanhood and increasing the potential of related benefits (Jha 2016: Introduction). She also emphasizes that US culture, and thus the North American beauty industry and its appearance ideals, have a global reach and some degree of influence on every populated continent. She argues that American movies, toys, and other products promote American standards of beauty worldwide (Jha 2016: Introduction).

However, the influence of the United States is not exactly as straightforward, and the process of the imposition of only one global beauty standard has not been successful (Jones 2008: 125). Despite the Americanization of global popular media and consumer markets, differences in the local standards of beauty remain. Certain regions, such as East Asia, exemplified by South Korea, whose appearance norms are discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Four, while prizing some of the same facial features like unwrinkled skin, promote others, which might surprise Westerners. A prime example of such an element of the face is the *aegyo sal*, “small, fatty deposits

located underneath the lids,” associated with youth and alertness (Heng 2023; Hong et al. 2025: 1-2). While the trend easily spread to Korea’s neighboring country, China, it has not gained significant popularity in the West due to cultural differences; in Western countries, a puffy under-eye area is usually seen negatively, as a sign of tiredness (seoulcosmeticsurgery.com). Jones suggests that the differences in beauty norms, despite globalization, can stem from the high level of popularity of domestic brands in Asian countries, which outperform their Western competitors (Jones 2008: 149). In South Korea, as indicated by the yearly bestseller lists published by the drugstore chain Olive Young, makeup and skincare by Korean companies tend to be the most popular in most product categories (themonodist.com).

Advertising of makeup and skincare products is a powerful medium that communicates how a perfect female face should look. The images in beauty commercials still tend to be dominated by the presence of youthful models and celebrities who conform to mainstream standards of beauty in a given culture. Giampaolo Viglia and his colleagues argue that while some strides have been made toward more inclusive advertising, certain minorities are still often excluded, or represented rarely or inaccurately (Viglia et al. 2023: 643). In their current state, mainstream commercials can thus be seen as still primarily representing a narrow and restrictive, Caucasian-centered ideal of the perfect female face. According to John Alan Cohan, advertising creates an unachievable standard with models characterized by “impossible youth, impossible perfection,” and flawless beauty. The attractiveness presented is not an inherent characteristic, but instead requires a significant amount of work: a model or a celebrity in a commercial is attended by a team of professional makeup artists and the product of their efforts is later digitally enhanced. Moreover, the possession of beauty is associated with certain benefits, such as joy and life

satisfaction, making striving for it particularly appealing (Cohan 2001: 327). Cohan believes that advertising and its image of facial and bodily beauty contribute to women's objectification: "a woman's face [is treated] as a mask, and her body as an object." Advertisements emphasize the importance of physicality, while obscuring women's personalities and features of character (Cohan 2001: 327).

This issue regarding advertising is also relevant to East Asia. In her analysis of women's photographs in makeup and skincare brands' promotional material, "The Female Beauty Myth Fostered by the Mass Media," Yoojin Chung indicates that they reflect and legitimize the South Korean norms of facial beauty (Chung 2012: 1589). Apart from portraying models whose facial features fit in with the Korean societal standard (Treviños-Rodríguez and Díaz-Soloaga 2023: 440), they also implicitly endorse certain beliefs about female beauty and character (Chung 2012: 1594-1596). Korean advertising arguably emphasizes the value of youth and sexual purity, and their association with facial beauty (Chung 2012: 1594-1595; Treviños-Rodríguez and Díaz-Soloaga 2023: 450). Some commercials also invoke European imagery, alluding for instance to Western antiquity, and thus suggesting to Korean women that certain Caucasian beauty ideals should be aspirational. In Chung's view, the images of women used by makeup and skincare brands also represent "immature concepts of female beauty which do not threaten male hegemony" under patriarchy (Chung 2012: 1595-1596). The scholar argues that the beauty myth perpetuated by beauty companies in Korea is unreachable to an average Korean woman, and thus serves as a tool to ensure women's perpetual spending on beautifying goods (Chung 2012: 1596-1597). Doris Treviños-Rodríguez and Paloma Díaz-Soloaga draw attention to the fact that advertising by various brands represents and promotes the socially acceptable goals of beautification: makeup should not be overly bold and colorful with

“uncolored or slightly pink cheeks and red-hued lips.” While some brands present a more diversified appearance standard, they remain in the minority (Treviños-Rodríguez and Díaz-Soloaga 2023: 449, 452).

Today, the Internet, a primary medium of communication and exchanging information, especially for younger generations, might have the most significant influence on societal facial appearance norms (Perloff 2014: 364). The online world has generated its own beauty ideals, embodied by influencers and Internet personalities. Beauty and fashion influencers centered on their attractive appearance are most relevant for the discussion of women’s faces. Viewing content created by such figures can arguably contribute to the internalization of presented appearance ideals and a lack of satisfaction with one’s looks (Peng and Hakimzadeh 2025: 48). As Jia Tolentino observed in her influential article, “The Age of Instagram Face: How Social Media, FaceTune, and Plastic Surgery Created a Single, Cyborgian Look,” female influencers often look strangely similar. The essayist has dubbed the phenomenon the titular *Instagram face*, which consists of “poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones, [...] catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; [...] a small, neat nose and full, lush lips.” This face is also youthful and, while Caucasian, possesses some degree of racial ambiguity (Tolentino 2019). A similar phenomenon, *TikTok pretty*, has been identified on the short-form video app TikTok. According to Veya Seekis and Grace Barker, the site’s algorithm favors those whose faces and bodies fulfill the current ideal of beauty and punishes those who do not have such attributes (Seekis and Barker 2022: 269).

Tolentino argues that faces seen as attractive online tend to lack diversity, which is only enhanced by the wide accessibility of easy-to-navigate photo-editing apps. The author believes that the usage of digital enhancement and cosmetic

procedures by popular influencers normalizes such methods, in addition to promoting the narrow beauty ideal exemplified by the Instagram face. She draws attention to the fact that, besides beauty influencers and models, “celebrity plastic surgeons” who show their work and encourage surgery consumption also attract large followings. In Tolentino’s opinion, the modern beauty standard of the face changes depending on what kind of look generates the most interest from viewers and followers (Tolentino 2019). The high level of trend-dependence suggests that modern facial appearance norms can fluctuate, possibly making the pursuit of beauty a never-ending quest. While English-language research on Internet beauty has primarily focused on both Western creators and consumers, it is also relevant to East Asia as apps like Instagram and TikTok are available globally and produce similar media due to the same algorithm, regardless of language. In “Is There An ‘Ideal Instagram Face’ for Caucasian Female Influencers? A Cross-Sectional Observational Study of Facial Proportions in 100 Top Beauty Influencers” Rafael Loucas et al. used the Instagram face theory to measure whether it is possible to find a unified standard of beauty embodied by influencers. Their study on Western female Internet personalities confirmed, indeed, most shared facial characteristics discussed by Tolentino. Additionally, their faces were noticeably “symmetrical, matching the golden ratios” and featured prominent jawlines (Loucas et al. 2024: 1).

It is worth noting that Internet facial beauty norms and trends do not only target teenagers and adult women, but also, quite disturbingly, children. In 2024, employees of drugstores and journalists called attention to the *#SephoraKids* phenomenon: tween children, especially girls, buying makeup and skincare intended for adult consumers (Khare, Popovich, and Franklin 2024: 66). Virginie Pioche Khare, Karen Popovich and Madison Franklin argue that their interest is motivated by early

childhood exposure to social media, especially TikTok, where they watch both adult influencers and their tween peers. The scholars argue that usage of the Internet causes young children “to experience mass comparison [...] and develop a lack of self-esteem.” As a result, tweens might feel compelled to mimic their favorite Internet personalities or participate in trends to conform to their age group. Certain modern beauty trends, such as creating “skin care smoothies” by mixing various products, are in line with children’s play instincts and, thus, might be highly enticing to this demographic group (Khare, Popovich, and Franklin 2024: 66-67). Laura Elisabeth Jonser and Nastassja Patricia Llop Slomma assert that content created by the *#SephoraKids* and their parents indicates that the children are aware of facial beauty standards, knowing which faces are deemed attractive or ugly (Jonser and Slomma 2025: 63-64). Additionally, the appearance of aging-prevention products in tween routines can cause anxiety about physical changes associated with growing older (Madhumita and Ponnarasu 2024: 248) and reinforce societal preference for youthfulness. By engaging in makeup and skincare, girls become acquainted with expectations of traditional womanhood and normalize facial beautification as a socially required, daily practice (Jonser and Slomma 2025: 63-64). Notably, the trend also carries health risks as many adult products are not formulated to be safe for children’s skin, causing various complications such as allergies, rashes and eczema (Khare, Popovich, and Franklin 2024: 67). The *#SephoraKids* phenomenon indicates that the pressures to have a beautiful face and engage in makeup or skincare are increasingly present even among members of very young age groups.

1.2. Faces

Posing a question about what a face is might seem perplexing. In everyday life, faces are taken for granted, as each individual sees them constantly: faces of other people in daily encounters, faces of celebrities in films and advertisements, faces of friends and strangers on social media, people's own faces in their mirror reflections, etc. Most commonly, the face is simply understood as a body part, which *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "The front part of the head, from the forehead to the chin; the visage, countenance" (1997: 1725). Ewa Bogdanowska-Jakubowska stresses that the face plays a special role in the human body. It is used in everyday life for communication and "gather[ing] information" (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 53-54), as it is the location of sight, smell, and speech. Moreover, "[t]he face is the center of our humanity" and serves as a base of identity for individuals (Kuczynski 2006: 117, Kalaga in Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 54; Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 54). The human face is generally considered to be distinct from the faces of non-mammalian animals, primarily due to its ability to express emotions (Bogdanowska-Jakubowska 2010: 56).

The face, however, can be understood more conceptually, going beyond the purely physical realm. It has attracted the interest of sociologists, such as Erving Goffman, who devoted much of his scholarly work to the face in social interaction. In "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," an early article published in the 1950s, Goffman claims that the face is

the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self [...] albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself. (Goffman 1955: 213)

In Goffman's theory, the face is not only a body part. Instead, it is something that emerges in encounters with people. He claims that humans strive to have a cohesive image through their actions and characteristics in the eyes of others. Additionally, a person's behaviors should be appropriate for a given situation. The scholar calls paying attention to the aforementioned aspects "*hav[ing] [...] or maintain[ing] face*" (Goffman 1955: 213; emphasis in the original). When establishing face is successful in an encounter, an individual can feel content or safe. Conversely, social trespassing, such as inappropriate behavior or unveiling of a characteristic that questions an individual's integrity, might undermine the face. Such a situation is usually associated with embarrassment and shame. Moreover, Goffman argues that because people can strongly identify with their face, the premise of losing it might be particularly distressing and seen as a threat to one's personhood (Goffman 1955: 213-214). Consequently, the scholar emphasizes that due to the face's social nature, it does not permanently belong to the person to whom it is attached. Instead, "it is only on loan to him from society" on the condition of fulfilling expectations in interpersonal interactions (Goffman 1955: 215). Anthony Synnott argues that the Goffmanian conceptualization of the face defines it as a mask. It does not reflect a person's inner life or even their true emotional state, but instead it presents what is socially accepted. This mask is only taken off in private, in solitude or in the group of people an individual feels comfortable with (Synnott 1990: 61-62).

In order to save one's face and the faces of others around them, Goffman states, a person can engage in what he calls *face-work* (Goffman 1955: 216). The term refers to various behaviors that can mitigate the effects of social failings. He highlights composure as a measure that can reduce the feeling of shame. Depending on a given group, the "repertoire of face-saving practices" might differ (Goffman

1955: 216). The scholar names two main methods to save face: avoidance, where one attempts to minimize the potential of an embarrassing situation, and correction, where the offense is deemed as an isolated accident and its consequences are alleviated (Goffman 1955: 217-220).

While Goffman uses face metaphorically, as an image of oneself that an individual projects to others, the physical appearance of the face can also be involved in the process of having or losing face (Metts and Cupach 2015: 330). For instance, at a workplace, an employee can notice that their coworker's lipstick has smudged on her face. They can then signal to their colleague what has happened, allowing her to remove the stain, and thus to avoid losing face in an important meeting. *Face-work* and working on one's physical face can therefore coalesce.

The sociological conceptualization of the face is especially important in understanding collectivist East Asian cultures, such as that of South Korea (Kim and Jang 2018: 103). The Korean *chemyeon* means "social face and represents the 'external expression of one's inner nature'" (Han 2024). According to Yungwook Kim and Youjin Jang, *chemyeon* is not identical to the Western concept of social face. It is unique as it is: primarily "a social self-concept" as opposed to a more personal identification. It is shaped by cultural expectations and "shared within a group," such as one's relatives, significant others, or colleagues, making it substantially less individualistic (Kim and Jang 2018: 103, 106). Due to these differences, indebted to Confucian thought, Korean people assign high value to maintaining good relations with others and perceive the face as a crucial "social skill" (Kim and Jang 2018: 106). Following proper etiquette and abstaining from confrontation are some of the steps Koreans might take in order to maintain their own face and those of others (Kim and Jang 2018: 106). In contemporary South Korea, *chemyeon* is often perceived as

something at least partially attainable through consumption, including the surgical beautification of the physical face (Han 2024).

According to Anthony Synnott, the face can also be viewed as an art form, which ties into Goffman's theory of the social face. Especially for women, many of whom tend to use cosmetics in their everyday life, the face is not shown to others in its natural, unchanged state. Instead, the author argues, it "must be 'put on', just like clothes" with makeup. He claims that "make-up is merely a stage make-up, supporting us in our various roles through life" (Synnott 1990: 62). When choosing a certain makeup look, a person thus makes a deliberate decision regarding their image. Since the usage of makeup requires a certain level of trained ability and is, at least to some extent, an act of creation, the face can be seen as art. Thus, Synnott compares a person applying cosmetics on their face to an artist putting paint on a prepared surface (Synnott 1990: 62-63). Synnott emphasizes the difference between the female and male experience regarding making-up the face. While men in Western cultures face little pressure to change their faces this way, the expectations placed on women in this regard are immense. Additionally, there is an unspoken requirement for women to be versatile in their appearance. While having a signature look for men is seen positively, women are expected to reinvent themselves continuously (Synnott 1990: 63). Synnott claims that approaching makeup, and thus the face, as an art underscores "the disparity between the physiological and the social faces" (Synnott 1990: 63). In contemporary society, the face in its unchanged state is often not welcome; instead it should be refined by the woman-artist and her (makeup) brush.

The importance of the face for human psychology and the formation of personhood was investigated by Jacques Lacan. His seminal theory of the mirror stage, describing "the formation of the ego through the identification with an image of the

self,” foregrounded in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” has been particularly influential (Homer 2013: 18). Lacan observes that in early infancy, despite low intelligence compared to non-human apes, children have the ability to “already recognize as such [their] own image in a mirror,” which points to the image’s immense role in identity formation. Lacan believed that the mirror stage begins when a child is half a year old. The philosopher describes a scene where an infant is placed in front of the mirror, usually in the hands of their caretaker or a baby walker, and gazes upon their reflection with visible interest (Lacan 2001: 1). During the mirror stage, the child learns to identify with the reflection they see and thus the phase describes “the transformation that takes place in the subject when [they] assum[e] an image” (Lacan 2001: 1-2). Elizabeth Wright further explains that this results in the person’s entrapment in “the imaginary dimension,” forever attracting them to “images instead of objects” (Wright 1991: 155). The image is the first foundation of personal identity, preceding the formation of “a clearer self-concept” shaped by the acquisition of language, especially personal pronouns, and “through mutual correction from others” (Wright 1991: 155). However, Calum Neill professes that the social element in the mirror stage should not be ignored. The aforementioned presence of another person, like a family member, is not incidental. The scholar asserts that Lacan’s example illustrates that acquiring identity is “socially mediated.” Additionally, it contributes to the realization and belief that one is separate from their caretaker and that what is seen in the mirror is a reflection of the self and not another physical person (Neill 2024: 139).

Importantly, in Lacan’s theory, the identification with the mirror image “is not an identification with what is” (Neill 2024: 140). When an image of oneself that is seen in the mirror, which frequently does not represent a person’s lived experience

accurately, is used for self-identification, it forms what Lacan calls “the Ideal-I” (Lacan 2001: 2; Neill 2024: 140-141). The notion refers to the fictionalized idea of oneself as whole and coherent (Neill 2024: 141; Homer 2013: 25). There are trappings to such a perception of identity as the mirror image is always flawed, yet it creates an illusion of stability and control over one’s body and face. Despite being something that is not a part of the individual, and in fact is not the individual, it affects them greatly “without [the person’s] understanding” (Wright 1991: 156). Lacan calls attention to the fact that people learn to see themselves as the same as their *Gestalt*⁵, which by itself is merely a physical mould, devoid of personal characteristics, inner life, or a soul. Calum Neill argues that people “project onto or into this form [their] sense of self, much in the same way as [they] might project characteristics onto” an artistic rendering of the human form (Neill 2024: 141). Wright emphasizes that the ego which emerges from the identification with the mirror image is “a fixed character- armour” requiring continuous support and reassurance (Wright 1991: 156). It is unsurprising therefore that humans believe that their bodies and faces should always remain the same, whereas changes, such as aging or disfigurement, are seen as disturbing. Additionally, due to the constructed nature of the Ideal-I, the individual’s sense of self can never truly “match up to [their] own being”; as a result, they experience “an organic insufficiency in [...] natural reality” (Wright 1991: 156; Lacan 2001: 3). Lacanian theory might therefore be used to understand women’s struggles with female facial beauty norms. They might construct an Ideal-I, a version of themselves that embodies the societal standard, which realistically cannot be achieved and thus creates frustration between their physical reality and their idealized vision of the self.

⁵ Ger. “figure [...], shape, form” (Prowe and Schneider 1997: 100).

Lacan's idea of the mirror stage belongs to a realm that the philosopher calls *the imaginary*. The theory is inextricably linked to the other two Lacanian realms of *the symbolic* and *the real* (Wolfreys 2004: 108). The imaginary describes the sphere of "perceived or imagined images in conscious and unconscious" life and the experience that they influence (Hendrix 2019: 1; Boothby in Wolfreys 2004: 108). It belongs to "the realm of the ego, [it is] a pre-linguistic realm of sense perception, identification and an illusory sense of unity" (Homer 2014: 31). Importantly, as Homer notes, the imaginary remains significant beyond the mirror stage, informing the way humans experience themselves and the world around them (Homer 2014: 31). In turn, "[t]he symbolic is the register of language and of linguistically mediated cognitions" (Boothby in Wolfreys 2004: 108-109). It encompasses the spheres of "the unconscious and the intellectual" (Hendrix 2019: 1). In comparison to the imaginary and the symbolic, the real is a significantly more elusive and ambiguous concept; it is "[something] which is beyond symbolisation," a state of being that is impossible to describe (Edkins 2015: 41). According to Martin Murray, the real "isn't so much 'reality' normally understood as the experience of being sunk in it without being able to understand it. 'The real' is how one experiences reality when it doesn't make sense" (Murray 2016: 111). In *Face Politics*, Jenny Edkins emphasizes that the real holds a transformative potential. The scholar claims that it can question and destroy "the social and symbolic universe," which promotes belief in the illusory human wholeness, exemplified by the mirror stage. The author stresses that such a process is highly traumatic for an individual who faces it (Edkins 2015: 41). As I discuss in Chapter Three using the example of facial disfigurement, a confrontation with the real can be life-changing and deeply affecting; however, abandoning the imaginary realm can prove extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Edkins also compellingly discusses the face. She argues that faces are indeed uniquely significant “because [of] social and culturally-specific practices” (Edkins 2015: 95). She emphasizes the almost artificial, constructed nature of the face, claiming that as a society “[w]e have produced the face [...] by prioritising it, or regarding it as special.” She refers to the ubiquity of facial photographs in a variety of contexts, ranging from social media profiles to instruments of institutionalized control, such as facial recognition software, which establish and maintain the face as the ultimate representation of a given individual (Edkins 2015: 102). She illustrates the phenomenon based on the example of Roland Barthes, who refers to a photograph depicting a person by means of their name or function: “Look, this is my brother” (Barthes in Edkins 2015: 102). Here, the portrayal in a picture and the person it shows become one. The scholar argues that facial images work similarly to the Lacanian mirror by strengthening the belief in one’s wholeness and autonomy, while making one realize that these qualities can be endangered in ways beyond their control (Edkins 2015: 108).

Taking the above into consideration, facelessness, according to Edkins, can be seen as a force that questions the importance of the face and the associated beliefs (Edkins 2015: 115, 121, 164-165). Persons without a face, “or rather, those with faces that appear unacceptable, dismantled, effaced,” can prompt a powerful reckoning of “[the] animality, vulnerability, and interconnectedness” of all people (Edkins 2015: 164). Edkins argues that being confronted with facelessness is disturbing, as a faceless person cannot be approached like other humans; the information that the face normally supplies is missing, and the fantasy that the face reveals truths about the person to whom it belongs crumbles (Edkins 2015: 165). Thus, the scholar proposes that “[a]n encounter with the faceless is (or, rather, can be) an encounter with the

[Lacanian] real.” She suggests that embracing facelessness could revolutionize the ways personhood is understood through “an acceptance of our inevitable monstrosity” and “our primary interconnectedness” (Edkins 2015: 165). It could help people understand that wholeness, independence, and individuality are not truths, but social conventions (Edkins 2015: 165-166)

Unfortunately, as Edkins acknowledges, the potential that facelessness holds tends not to be realized in society. On the contrary, humans generally want to fix faces they deem as broken. People also demonize the faceless and deny their humanity, calling them monsters. The author professes that such practices are necessary to maintain the convictions about faces as emblems of personhood and refute the idea of human fragility and incompleteness (Edkins 2015: 165). Edkins rejects solutions to the unjust treatment of the faceless that are based on the premises of social justice and equality as, in her opinion, they actively maintain the ‘facial status-quo,’ instead of questioning it. Instead, she proposes

dismantling the face [which] signals another politics [...] where we can no longer begin with separation or sustain the fantasy of individuality. This regime is not one where it is the disfigured that carry other people's fear — but one where we all accept our ‘disfigurement,’ our lack of face. Our face is not our face; we are not complete. (Edkins 2015: 167)

The author leaves the question open-ended as to whether embracing facelessness on a wide, societal scale is possible (Edkins 2015: 171). While a possibility always exists, the continuing face-related obsession in contemporary culture, especially on the Internet, where photographs and videos of faces reign supreme, suggests that humans are still far from achieving such a goal.

Emmanuel Levinas in turn proposes a divergent perspective on the human face as a source of ethics. In his view, when we encounter another individual, their face

demands an ethical treatment from us, despite its vulnerability: “The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill” (Levinas and Nemo 1985: 86). The philosopher supposes that humans are innately kind and that the existence of the face conditions us to behave in this way (Levinas and Nemo 1985: 89). While Levinasian thought on the face is fascinating, it also seems rather idealistic when confronted with the sociocultural reality of facial beauty standards and treatment of individuals who do not embody them. I would like to propose that, contrary to the philosopher’s belief, the face often does not motivate ethical treatment. Instead, the face that differs from mainstream expectations is solely a special target of hate and discrimination. Various facial features, such as a large, hooked nose for Jews (Alperin 2018: 27-28) or upturned, narrow eyes for Asians (Kaw 1994: 242), have historically been identified as a mark of negatively perceived difference and attacked on racist and xenophobic grounds. Consequently, it does not seem incidental that diverse forms of hateful mockery, such as blackface or yellowface, employed “to exclude unwanted racial groups” (Huang 2010: 200), have focused on the face specifically.

1.3. Norms

When discussing standards of face beauty, it is useful to inquire into the Foucauldian concept of norms and normalization. In the philosopher’s view, a norm is a standard that is relevant to a particular group to which individuals are compared. Those who fail to conform to the norm are therefore seen as lacking (McWhorter 2014: 317). Ladelle McWhorter explains that “[n]ormalizing disciplinary techniques” help evaluate people’s adherence to standards and constitute strategies that aim to make the individual conform to norms (McWhorter 2014: 317). Richard Shusterman stresses

the particular relevance of Michel Foucault's theory of the body, and thus also of the face, as a "malleable site for inscribing social power" (Shusterman 1999: 303). Shusterman argues that norms of appearance and behavior are particularly strict for women. Being feminine in a socially respected way requires discipline over one's looks, taking little space, and submissiveness in relationships with men. These norms, Shusterman claims, "while granting [women] full official liberty," contribute to and legitimize their oppression (Shusterman 1999: 304). For women globally, an example of a normative requirement would be to have a young-looking, symmetrical and attractive face. In contrast, a face that breaks these expectations is generally seen as ugly or even disturbing. The process of normalization deems such a face as undesirable; solutions, or "disciplinary mechanisms" (McWhorter 2014: 317), such as makeup and plastic surgery, are proposed to normalize it.

As Sara Mills contends, the face, similarly to the body, can be seen in Foucauldian terms as "'an historically and culturally specific entity' [...] which is viewed, treated and [...] experienced differently depending on the social context and the historical period." Instead of something "natural," it is "mediated through different social constructions" (Mills 2003: 83). Particularly relevant for norms of appearance of the face, and rituals and interventions such as makeup or plastic surgery, is the conceptualization of the docile body. In his analysis, Foucault employs the metaphor of the soldier: a man, in order to become a member of the army, has to conform to a set of regimens of bodily conduct and appearance, such as the desired posture and the direction of his gaze. According to the philosopher, these objectives are achieved through particular bodily practices and exercises until they become second nature for the person (Foucault 2020: 179-180). In this example, the thinker shows that one can be transformed; through certain practices a person needed for a

certain role “can be made [...] out of formless clay” (Foucault 2020: 179). However bizarre it might seem, one can draw a parallel between Foucault’s soldier and his body, and a woman and her face. In order to achieve the societal standard of femininity and be accepted as a woman, she has to subscribe to regimens required for her gender. Regularly engaging in beautification becomes habitual for women, and its necessity is rarely questioned. Foucault refers to the various practices which are forms of “subtle coercion” as *disciplines* (Foucault 2020: 181). They ensure that the body or face and “its forces” are under “subjection” “and impos[e] on them a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault 2020: 181). Mills further explains that “[a] disciplinary regime is one where one’s comportment is overseen and subjected to a series of rules and regulations relating to control of” various aspects of their being (Mills 2003: 93). In the case of women and their faces, such expectations can refer to wearing makeup or undergoing plastic surgery. Foucault stresses that while the disciplines might be beneficial for the individual in some ways, they do not empower them; instead, they make them docile (Foucault 2020: 182). For instance, in relation to female faces, applying certain skincare products can contribute to the health of the skin and give the individual pleasant sensory experiences. However, subscribing to such a care regimen can also legitimize face-related forms of discrimination against women, such as ageism or lookism. In this perspective, the beauty industry might appear a regimen of power that, through disciplinary techniques, shapes and controls women’s lives. Female beauty practices can thus be seen as an example of acting in accordance with the “machinery of power” that Foucault describes (Foucault 2020: 182).

Mills claims that Foucault’s ideas have been useful as a point of departure for feminist critics of beauty norms (Mills 2003: 93). Sandra Lee Bartky’s application of Foucauldian thought, foregrounded in “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization

of Patriarchal Power,” has been particularly influential. The author criticizes Foucault’s lack of attention to gendered differences. According to Bartky, women are more subjected to the disciplines that create docile bodies than men (Bartky 1988: 63-64). While the discussion about this topic often focuses on body shape or size, Bartky points out that the face is also subjected to such regimens. Some methods, such as exercises intended to improve the shape and appearance of the face, resemble other forms of physical activity. Others, however, such as the suppression of expressing emotions with one’s face to avoid wrinkling, seem significantly more problematic (Bartky 1988: 66). Bartky therefore claims that the Foucauldian disciplinary regimen affects the behaviors of female faces as well. Women are expected to avert their gaze and not stare, as well as smile more frequently than men (Bartky 1988: 67).

Additionally, the scholar claims that because “woman’s body [and face] is an ornamented surface,” in patriarchal cultures, disciplines regulate this aspect of her life (Bartky 1988: 68). The face, in addition to the aforementioned regimens, is seen as requiring carefully applied skincare, as well as facial hair removal. In order to legitimize and normalize these requirements, they are often portrayed as beneficial in terms of health. The beautifying strategies call for careful time planning; Bartky asserts that “[l]ike the schoolchild or prisoner, the woman mastering good skincare habits is put on a time-table” (Bartky 1988: 69-70). For the scholar, makeup is a continuation of the skincare regimen. She rejects the perception of makeup as a means of expressing one’s individuality and tastes. Instead, she stresses that women are given little choice regarding the makeup looks they wear, as the requirements of, for instance, workplaces, severely limit their options. Moreover, she asserts that wearing makeup serves as “a badge of acceptability in most social and professional contexts,” not awarded to those who refuse to wear it (Bartky 1988: 70-71). In short, Bartky

argues that while under Western patriarchy the male body and face are seen as complete and good in their natural state, save for basic hygiene practices, the female body and face are perceived as lacking and in need of improvement. Thus, women are encouraged to strive for the unachievable ideal and accept their appearance as something perpetually shameful (Bartky 1988: 71).

Mills explains that, in contrast to more institutionalized oppression, like that of the army, the disciplines of beauty are not imposed by a single individual or organization. She refers to Bartky, who highlights that this aspect makes questioning and fighting the appearance-related status quo so difficult: “The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky 1988: 70; Mills 2003: 93-94). Bartky argues that the lack of a particular agent to blame creates the illusion that “the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural.” The scholar questions this assumption and acknowledges that while women are not physically forced by anyone to participate in the pursuit of womanliness, it does not necessarily make the regimens of femininity less oppressive (Bartky 1988: 75). The author refers to the Foucauldian metaphor of the Panopticon in order to explain women’s internalization of “disciplinary power[s]” (Bartky 1988: 80), such as facial beauty standards. The Panopticon is a circular prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century, which allows warders to “see all of the inmates without the observer being seen, and without any of the prisoners having access to one another” (Mills 2003: 45). Foucault explains that such a type of building creates, “the total visibility of bodies,” a sense of being constantly watched (Foucault 1996: 226). As a result of, at least presumably, always being under observation, the prisoners internalize the guard’s gaze and watch themselves (Foucault 1996: 232-233). The metaphor is

helpful in understanding various powers and systems of control, including the expectation of facial beauty placed on women. Bartky argues that like in the Foucauldian Panopticon, “women themselves [...] practice this discipline [of femininity] on and against their own bodies.” A guard is not needed, as it exists within each woman who engages in acts of self-monitoring, like frequently reaching for the mirror to ensure that cosmetics are perfectly applied to her face. The scholar emphasizes that such behaviors are a sign of submission to the gendered order in patriarchal society. She proclaims that, unlike women, men in the West tend not to particularly worry about their looks, and their faces and bodies are not seen as primarily pleasant sights for others to enjoy (Bartky 1988: 80-81).

Despite the problematic aspects of facial beauty standards discussed above, rebelling against them and refusing to participate in the socially expected facial beautification, such as makeup, can prove difficult for many, if not most, women. Foucauldian feminists such as Bartky offer an explanation for why women themselves might not want to part with their adherence to the beauty standard. The scholar argues that “discipline can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity.” Questioning the validity of appearance norms and associated practices can be thus seen as threatening to women’s personhood (Bartky 1988: 77-78). The author believes that women can see certain feminine acts, like wearing makeup, as abilities and, like any other talent, their potential loss is met with resistance. She claims that, as a result, women tend not to question whether engaging in the cultivation of femininity is beneficial for their gender in the grander scheme (Bartky 1988: 77).

While this thesis is dedicated to female facial beauty standards, it is worth briefly considering the norms of male appearance as a point of comparison. While the

expectations regarding women's attractiveness are relatively similar globally in terms of what type of beauty work, namely makeup and skincare, is seen as normative, the same is not true for men. In the West, as Jones notes, male handsomeness is often associated with a certain stature: tall and appropriately muscular (Jones 2008: 145). It is unsurprising, therefore, as mentioned above, that in Western countries the attractiveness of the face tends to be seen as less important for men than for women. Jones also stresses that "[t]his emphasis on height, body shape, and size did not generate substantial market opportunities for the beauty industry" to target male consumers (Jones 2008: 145), explaining the low number of 'for men' skincare and cosmetics. While in the 21st century, the Western norms of gendered appearance have become more liberal, the usage of beauty products by men still receives some backlash. For instance, the interest in color makeup cosmetics tends to be associated with queerness (Hall, Gough and Seymour-Smith 2012: 210) and, as such, can be stigmatized and excluded from homosocial masculine acceptance (Connell 2005: 78).

In contrast to the West, male skincare and makeup is received more favorably in Asian countries. East Asia offers a view of manhood divergent from the Western model, as it "values cultural attainment over martial valor [like physical strength] and stresses intellect and knowledge" (Yang 2014: 392). This difference has perhaps made the Eastern ground more fertile for the development of what Hsing-Chen Yang calls "alternative masculinities," invested in facial beautification along with other pursuits. According to the scholar, in Asian countries, they "compete and coexist" with hegemonic masculinity, offering youth different modes of manhood to choose from (Yang 2014: 395-396).

Yang, as well as Ji Soo Han and Joo Hee Choi, identify the 1990s as a turning point in the accepted image of Asian male beauty (Yang 2014: 395; Han and Choi

2023: 575). During the time, “a sexy, soft, feminine, cool, and stylish male image” was introduced and popularized (Yang 2014: 395). The change is perhaps best illustrated by the famous series of lipstick commercials of the brand Kanebo⁶ featuring Takuya Kimura, a member of a Japanese boy band. While the advertisements were targeted at women (Li 2018), showing the star wearing the product while engaged in romantic scenarios with a female companion implicitly communicates that makeup is something heterosexual men also can, or perhaps even should, engage in (Tso 2022: 548). The primary focus on his face, rather than body shape or stature, also emphasizes the importance of facial beauty in this brand of masculinity. Since the eponymous 1996 commercials, many other East Asian male celebrities have followed in Kimura’s footsteps (Luo 2019; Lien, Chou and Chang 2012: 283). The associated “pretty-boy” style (Han and Choi 2023: 575), with regional variations such as the Korean *kkonminam* ([kor.] flower boy) (Elfvig-Hwang 2011: 2) or the Chinese *xiǎoxiānròu* ([chin.] little fresh meat) (Gao 2019), has since found a stable footing in contemporary East Asian culture and society.

Christopher Tso argues, using the example of Japan, that these trends have contributed to the emergence of pressure on East Asian men to beautify their faces through the use of cosmetics, like skincare and makeup. The pursuit of beauty is often portrayed as a change to better one’s prospects for success in romance by appealing to female tastes (Tso 2022: 548, 553), which is quite similar to worldwide women’s beauty practices intended to fulfill the expectations of the male gaze. Similarly, in South Korea, *kkonminam* masculinity is linked to the development of the men’s makeup market. While they currently do not constitute the majority, an increasing

⁶ In the advertisements Kimura is shown wearing the product. While in some imagery his face is adorned with warpaint-like strokes (Li 2018), evoking a more masculine image, other advertisements (youtube.com) show the long-haired heartthrob applying the lipstick on his lips and focus more on his beauty and seductiveness.

number of men tend to reach for color cosmetics, such as “base, foundation, eye-shadow, [and] lipstick.” Once again male beautification serves a similar role to female beautifying strategies, as “an asset for self-betterment and social advancement” (Han and Choi 2022: 574, 577). While there is still a significant divide between appearance norms in Western and Eastern manhood, the continuously growing interest in various forms of East Asian pop-culture, which features beautiful men presenting an alternative image of masculinity, such as K-pop, film and television drama, or Boys Love media from countries such as Japan, Korea, China and Thailand, could potentially impact the expectations placed globally on male faces, as well as our understanding of beauty standards, in the future.

1.4. Beauty and Ugliness

1.4.1. Beauty as Aesthetic Capital and Currency

In most societies, being considered an attractive person usually affects an individual positively. Physical beauty can translate into various social benefits and overall kinder treatment by others. Iida Kukkonen in “Physical Appearance as a Form of Capital: Key Problems and Tensions” states that many scholars have approached beauty through the lens of capital and currency. Their inquiry was inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, understood as worth, prestige and social esteem based on education and/or wealth, which is misrecognized as an inherent or natural quality, and thus maintains social hierarchies and legitimizes inequalities. In this approach, the metaphor of capital has provided a useful tool “for understanding the connections between inequality and the body,” thus illustrating the hidden mechanisms of social power, which differentiate between the ugly and the beautiful. It has created a vast landscape of terms, some partially overlapping in meaning, such as

physical, bodily, and particularly aesthetic capital (Kukkonen 2022: 23, 26). This last concept, introduced by Tammy L. Anderson et al. in “Aesthetic Capital: A Research Review on Beauty Perks and Penalties,” “refers to traits of beauty that are perceived as assets capable of yielding privilege, opportunity and wealth.” The scholars identify the face and body, as well as various aspects of personal styling, as examples of the characteristics that can be the sources of aesthetic capital (Anderson et al. 2010: 566). As Kukkonen stresses, the exact appearance of the traits is purposefully not described. Beauty standards, and the aesthetic capital they bring to a given individual, are a subject of continuous change as they depend on fashion at a current moment (Kukkonen 2022: 29-30).

Sylvia Holla and Giseline Kuipers expand upon the theory of aesthetic capital and discuss three ways through which the issue can be approached: as “human capital,” as “cultural capital,” and as “the aesthetization of economy and society” (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 291-294). First, beauty can be seen as a form of human capital due to its categorization as a characteristic, similar to personality or talents, which results in access to tangible benefits. The authors invoke the halo effect as an explanation of this view (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 291). In the field of psychology, among others, the halo effect refers to the favorable perception of beautiful people (Batres and Shiramizu 2023: 25515). The phenomenon is a form of “cognitive bias” leading to the belief that those who meet societal beauty standards possess good qualities of character, such as being smart, competent, and friendly (Gulati et al. 2024: 2). The halo effect refers particularly to the face (Batres and Shiramizu 2023: 25515), emphasizing its key role in the way a given person is evaluated. According to research by Carlota Batres and Victor Shiramizu, conducted in various regions of all populated continents, the favorable associations with attractive faces occur globally. While the

effect is strongly applicable to both genders tested, some traits like “intelligence [...] [and] responsibility” are more often associated with attractive women than men (Batres and Shiramizu 2023: 25516, 25518). Holla and Cuipers stress that in contrast to other types of capital, for instance learned skills, gaining aesthetic capital is significantly more difficult, if not impossible, in certain cases. While beauty work might lead to the increase of one’s aesthetic capital, most of it is determined by physical features an individual is born with (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 291). The scholars believe that the theory of beauty as human capital proves useful to show the societal benefits of attractiveness. However, it is not concerned with the creation of beauty ideals (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 292).

Second, the theory of beauty as cultural capital “starts from the assumption that standards for attractiveness are socially constructed” (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 292). This framework emphasizes that beauty ideals differ among societies and are significantly impacted by social hierarchies among them. Holla and Kuipers add that even though attractive appearance remains beneficial, what constitutes being beautiful tends to be defined by those in power. Moreover, there appears a noticeable divide between the aesthetic tastes of the poorer and more wealthy strata of society (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 292). In cases where the preferences overlap, like thinness, the ideal tends to be more attainable for the upper classes (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 293), likely due to better access to resources such as healthier, high quality food or personal trainers. Thus, as Holla and Kuipers claim, the ways beauty is defined favors the wealthy (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 293). A similar dynamic occurs in the established female appearance standards. The authors state that the norms “predominantly serve to uphold gender inequalities” and, while following them might be worthwhile for individuals, submitting to them disadvantages women on a larger scale as it

legitimizes the gendered status quo (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 293). In their discussion, the scholars acknowledge that not adhering to the appearance ideal, while devalued in society at large, can be cherished and assigned “social worth” in specific groups, such as minorities, subcultures, or fashion trendsetting communities. The authors believe that subcultures especially question the innate nature of beauty and its importance as cultural capital, and highlight individual, willful self-fashioning (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 293). The existence of alternative beauty models also points to what Umberto Eco calls “[the] unstoppable polytheism of Beauty.” In his view, in comparison with past eras, the 20th century created a more diverse landscape of available models of appearance. Whether they are all socially accepted and seen as equally respectable, as Eco professes, might be questionable (Eco 2004: 425, 428); however, they are at least tolerated in most contemporary societies.

The third approach to aesthetic capital is the inquiry into “the aesthetization of economy and society,” which indicates that “importance allotted to beauty and appearance in a given society” impacts the benefits that can be gained from possessing beauty (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 294). In this lens, Holla and Kuipers state that aesthetic capital is shaped in the process of negotiation between the adherence to appearance norms in society and the incorporation of one’s personal style. As a result, engaging in work on one’s appearance is highly encouraged socially. Additionally, the current domination of service jobs both in the West and the East places more importance on beauty than before due to its treatment as “a job qualification” (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 294). This phenomenon proves especially true in the sphere of aesthetic labor, discussed further in Chapter Four.

Furthermore, Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts suggest that physical beauty can be “a prime currency for women,” especially in the spheres of

relationships and finances. In order to be beneficial, one's attractiveness must appeal to men, which results in the belief that beauty is currency being especially popular among women who are Caucasian and wish to move higher in the social hierarchy. According to the scholars, women who possess the currency of beauty generally enjoy better circumstances in the workplace and on the heterosexual dating scene. The authors claim that both men and women express beliefs that female beauty should be rewarded by the male partner's kindness in a relationship (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 177-178). In this lens, attractiveness might be an important asset, at least for heterosexual women. Fredrickson and Roberts show that such a view of beauty negatively impacts marginalized women who do not conform to the appearance standard imposed by the male gaze, such as homosexual, non-white, and impoverished women (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 178).

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf also refers to Western women's beauty as "a currency system" (Wolf 1991: 12). The author believes that treating attractiveness as an asset imposes the stratification of women into groups dependent on their looks and their compliance with, or lack thereof, the beauty ideal. She claims that this supports the patriarchal order where "women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves." Wolf suggests that in the case of women, their abilities, intelligence or features of character are overshadowed by their physicality, unlike men, whose appearance is not given much importance (Wolf 1991: 12). While in the past beauty mostly served as a metaphorical currency in the marriage market, upon women's entering into the workforce on a massive scale, it started translating into literal currency. Wolf states that the valuation of beauty tends to be used in "legitimiz[ing] employment discrimination" of women who do not conform to the beauty standard (Wolf 1991: 20-21). It becomes clear that those women who possess

the looks that appeal to men can use them as currency, whereas those who do not are disadvantaged.

Beauty, including facial attractiveness, is seen as even more important capital in East Asia. While countries in the region can somewhat differ in their aesthetic preferences, scholars such as Jeaney Yip, Susan Ainsworth, and Miles Tycho Hugh in “Beyond Whiteness: Perspectives on the Rise of the Pan-Asian Beauty Ideal” speak of the emergence of a shared, Pan-Asian beauty standard. According to them, this contemporary ideal stresses the importance of facial beauty, “and a distinctly ‘Asian’ White skin tone with characteristic blending of Asian and European/Western features.” It strives to uniformize the desirable appearance by “homogeniz[ing] racial difference” present in East Asia (Yip, Ainsworth and Hugh 2019: 73-74). The scholars argue that the appearance of South Korean, Japanese, and Chinese people and their beauty standards have particularly strongly influenced the Pan-Asian ideal due to their robust economies. This advantage allowed the three nations to significantly impact the beauty industry and promote their appearance ideals in Asia (Yip, Ainsworth and Hugh 2019: 75). While struggling to achieve these standards shows how important beauty is as a currency in South Asia, engaging in beautification and following the facial aesthetic standard is also perceived as “[a] display [of] “respect” for others,” men and women alike, in countries such as Japan (Yip, Ainsworth and Hugh 2019: 79) and South Korea (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 277). It is notable that in comparison to the West, the East Asian standard seems narrower, and Asian beautifying strategies are more oriented to achieve a certain aspirational look. They highlight the choice of base makeup guided by the cultural preference for facial paleness, instead of mimicking the individual’s complexion (Yip, Ainsworth and Hugh 2019: 78) to avoid a mask-like look that a difference between the colors of the face and neck might create

(colorescience.com). Differences with their Western counterparts notwithstanding, the faces of East Asian women, as will be seen in the following chapters, are sources of significant aesthetic capital.

1.4.2. The Stigma of Ugliness

While adhering to beauty standards is generally associated with various perks, being considered unattractive or ugly can be detrimental to one's life situation. Ela Przybylo and Sara Rodrigues argue that "ugliness operates in the perpetuation and justification of social, political, and visual injustice." Similarly to beauty, it is a socially constructed category with a troublesome history, such as the systematic oppression of ugly persons (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018: 1-2). The scholars argue that, in patriarchal societies, ugliness, just like beauty, denotes the value of a given woman. Thus, for women, breaking the various norms of femininity, such as those regarding looks or conduct, results in being considered ugly by society (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018: 8). The authors indicate that ugliness is particularly weaponized against non-wealthy women, who often do not have the means to participate in normative femininity, women of color, as a result of the racist equation of whiteness with beauty in the West, and transgender women, who are expected to embody femininity perfectly to be accepted by the cisgender majority (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018: 9-11). Przybylo and Rodrigues stress that ugliness is often portrayed as the worst possible fate for women (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2018: 8).

Nonetheless, as Heather Laine Talley argues, many women, instead of solely striving for beauty as it is frequently assumed, simply desire not to be considered unattractive (Talley 2014: 191). The scholar believes that most people do not want to be extraordinary, positively through beauty or negatively through ugliness, but instead

would prefer to achieve normalcy and plainness. In this view, the goal of beautification is to be accepted by others. She claims that “the work of making the body not ugly attempts to mediate features that situate us precariously close to stigma or social death” (Talley 2014: 192). Tally acknowledges that while certain practices are explicitly aimed at becoming remarkably pretty, most are intended to make one not unpleasant to look at. She draws attention to the everyday rituals women perform on their faces as examples of trying to be “not ugly” (Talley 2014: 192-193). Various cosmetics are primarily intended to mask so-called imperfections; they “hid[e] pores, obscur[e] lines, and eve[n] skin tone.” The practices of female facial hair removal and brightening the appearance of teeth serve similar functions for most women (Talley 2014: 193). She compares the everyday practices of beautification, as a means to escape the possibility of ugliness, to the situation of the mythical Sisyphus. In Talley’s view, it is because “the specter of ugliness” threatens women that they engage in beauty-related rituals (Talley 2014: 193).

In light of the above, ugliness can be therefore seen as a type of stigma. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman defines stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman 1986: n.p.). The scholar explains that stigma occurs in relation to other people:

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind [...]. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. (Goffman 1986: 3)

According to Goffman, stigmatized people are denied their full humanity and are met with various types of injustices that negatively impact their lives. Those affected with stigma are perceived as inferior and ascribed additional negative qualities. The scholar

asserts that stigmatized individuals tend to internalize such negative beliefs held by the normative majority (Goffman 1986: 5). As a result, they might make attempts to conform to the societal standards by various means, such as cosmetic procedures (Goffman 1986: 9). However, Goffman warns, physically removing stigma does not necessarily solve the inner torment of an individual. He explains that a formerly stigmatized individual does not gain “fully normal status,” but instead becomes “someone with a record of having corrected” their stigma (Goffman 1986: 9).

The face tends to be one of the most commonly stigmatized physical features, as Rebecca M. Puhl and Jamie L. Gloor argue (2012: 592), and thus most studied through the lens of stigmatization. For instance, research by Richard P. Strauss et al. on teenagers affected by facial difference indicates that such persons are often met with various displays of hostility. A substantive group of the young subjects experienced staring and gossiping about their looks, whereas some even reported being bullied and marginalized as outcasts by others (Strauss et al. 2007: 96, 99). The facial stigmatization was stronger in the case of girls, who experienced the unkind behaviors more often than boys (Strauss et al. 2007: 99). This suggests that gender plays a role in the frequency of negative experiences associated with facial difference.

Persons whose faces and/or bodies are deemed ugly by societal standards of beauty experience specific forms of prejudice, which have been named *lookism*. In “Lookism as Epistemic Injustice” Thomas J. Spiegel argues that this type of discrimination has been largely ignored by the academic community in comparison to other types of injustice (Spiegel 2022: 47). According to Spiegel, lookism is less frequently discussed as it is considered a taboo. He believes that:

[U]n attractiveness in general (and the discrimination based on it) does not generate the same awareness as gender or race-based discrimination partially for

the reason that there is a different kind of discomfort associated with being identified as ugly. [...] [I]n stating that they face economic, social, and romantic discrimination in virtue of being unattractive, ugly people can be sometimes gaslit by the listener not accepting that interpretation, as overtly or covertly ascribing such negative aesthetic attributes goes against the taboo of ugly. (Spiegel 2022: 48)

Spiegel argues that lookism should be recognized as a separate category of prejudice, as hostility encountered by the ugly cannot always be fully explained by, for instance, gendered or racial injustice. The scholar asserts that appearance-based discrimination can affect even those otherwise socially privileged (Spiegel 2022: 48). He defends the view of the unattractive as a group that faces unique challenges. The author stresses that not treating lookism as a social issue “threatens to imply that their experiences are merely individual or subjective anomalies rather than recurring patterns of looks-based oppression” that should be addressed (Spiegel 2022: 51). Because of the social expectations concerning women in Western societies, lookism has often more tragic and far-reaching consequence in their case than in the case of men.

In East Asia, ugliness, or simply a lack of adherence to the strict requirements dictated by the beauty ideal, is also perceived negatively, or even more negatively than in the West. Societies of certain countries in the region, such as South Korea, deal with problems connected with institutionalized lookist discrimination. For instance, a wide range of paperwork, “from college to job applications and resumes,” lists the inclusion of a photograph as mandatory (Yoo 2020: 242), which suggests that the assessment of the candidate’s face plays a role in the recruitment decision long before they even have a chance to present their credentials. Moreover, as many East Asian societies consider appearance not only a matter of primarily personal aesthetics and self-presentation, but also an expression of proper manners and politeness (Yip, Ainsworth and Hugh 2019: 79; Elfving-Hwang 2021: 277), those deemed ugly or

unattractive might be seen as not only an unpleasant sight, but also as an uncultured and disrespectful individual. The noteworthy distance between the West and East Asia is that, in the latter part of the world, expectations and beliefs about looks tend to apply similarly to both women and men (Yoo 2020: 242). The fear of ugliness in Asia is thus not solely a female issue.

1.5. Women and the Gaze

While *lookism* is a form of discrimination which affects people considered ugly, women and men alike, in the contemporary, highly visual cultures of the West, women in particular are subjected to specific forms of gazing. Their looks are examined and evaluated by people around them, ranging from strangers to friends, but also by themselves. Some of the key concepts which aid the understanding of the experience of looking and being a subject of the gaze are John Berger's *surveyor* and *surveyed*, Laura Mulvey's *the male gaze*, Barbara L. Fredrickson's and Tomi-Ann Roberts' objectification theory, and Allison Winch's *the girlfriend gaze*.

1.5.1. The Surveyor and the Surveyed

In his groundbreaking work *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger lays the foundations for understanding the gaze and its effects on women. According to the critic, a significant difference exists between "the social presence" of men and women (Berger 2008: 45) in Western patriarchal societies. He argues that what women do, how they behave, and, most importantly, what they look like, constitutes a part of their selves. Thus, in society, women's presence tends to be defined by the visual aspect. As a result, Berger claims, "[a] woman must continually watch herself" and assume a view of an outside spectator. In order to understand this complex phenomenon, the author

proposes the notions of “the *surveyor* and the *surveyed*” which simultaneously reside inside women’s minds (Berger 2008: 46, emphasis in the original). He believes that women internalize the male perspective when assessing themselves, which results in female self-objectification. In their minds, women can turn themselves from persons into “sight[s]” (Berger 2008: 46-47). Berger stresses the disparity between genders that the (self-)surveying creates, as men in this framework are active agents. By contrast, women are delegated to a passive role (Berger 2008: 47). Berger notes that, in everyday life, men judge women’s looks, and the result of their assessment has a significant impact on their attitude to a given female individual. Therefore, women, aware that men’s critical look can have serious consequences, can feel compelled to conform to their expectations (Berger 2008: 46-47). In cultures shaped by patriarchy, this conformism can manifest in the daily usage of makeup or surgically altering the face to fit the standard of beauty.

1.5.2. The Male Gaze

The other seminal theory in the sphere of looking and the gaze is Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. Introduced in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the term describes the portrayal of women in Western film as the titular delightful sights constructed for the consumption of male viewers (Mulvey 1989: 25). The scholar argues that the male gaze in cinema reproduces the patriarchal views about women and positions them as “bearer[s], not maker[s], of meaning” (Mulvey 1989: 15, 16). Similarly to Berger, Mulvey argues that, through the lens of the male gaze, men are dominant and active, whereas women are submissive and passive. As a result of this dynamic, female characters and/or women performers are shown in ways that reinforce such perception and are pleasing for the male spectators. Additionally,

women are often depicted in fragmentation, which contributes to their objectification, for instance in film with the camera zooming into their faces and particular body parts (Mulvey 1989: 19-20).

Since its inception, the male gaze theory has not lost its importance. Its influence has expanded beyond film studies into various branches of the humanities (Kościelicka 2023: 70-71). Susanna Paasonen et al. demonstrate the ubiquity of Mulvey's concept by analyzing its multiple uses in academia which do not refer to its author, assuming a reader's familiarity with the framework (Paasonen et al. 2021: 28-29). The scholars conclude that, today, the male gaze is frequently "used to describe sexist and or sexualized representations of women's bodies" in Western culture and society (Paasonen et al. 2021: 29). The term has also inspired other theories of the gaze, understood as power imbalances between different races, sexualities, and other social categories (Kościelicka 2023: 70-71).

The male gaze arguably impacts the feminine beauty standard and can also impact women's behaviors, similarly to Berger's self-surveing. Kelly Oliver infers from Mulvey's analysis of Marilyn Monroe's performance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* that depictions of women in various forms of visual media, created for the male gaze, can impact "the visual vocabulary of what it means to be sexy or desirable" in society (Oliver 2017: 453). Perhaps then, an example from Monroe's life, namely calling a makeup artist into a hospital to look presentable during her discharge, is not too dissimilar from some contemporary women's opposition to be seen bare-faced by others (Mulvey 2015: 13-14; Whitefield-Madrano 2016: 5). Diane Ponterotto asserts that the male gaze creates a narrow female beauty ideal which lacks in diversity. According to this standard, an attractive woman has a beautiful face and flawless skin, is Caucasian, youthful, thin, and able-bodied. Persons who do not conform to the

appearance ideal are considered not only ugly but also unhealthy (Ponterotto 2016: 134-135).

It is worth noting that the concept of the male gaze has escaped the confinement of academia and entered mainstream consciousness, becoming a widely used term referring to the visual expectations heterosexual, hegemonic men have of women (Vanbuskirk 2024; Well 2017). An example of the awareness about the male gaze among the contemporary public can be found in the *A Woman Written by a Man* TikTok trend⁷, where women mock feminine stereotypes and the sexualized depictions of women in popular culture (Neal n.d.). The fact that the male gaze is criticized by women on popular online platforms does not seem incidental. Oliver argues that the Internet is yet another sphere where the male gaze is present (Oliver 2017: 453). She notes that particular popular websites, like Facebook, were initially created by men as places to judge the appearances of women. Additionally, the author mentions the phenomenon of creepshots, sexualized photographs of women taken and distributed without their permission, and pornographic videos depicting real-life rape as extreme examples of the male gaze online (Oliver 2017: 454-455).

1.5.3. Objectification Theory

Objectification is another concept intrinsically related to the issues of looking and the gaze. According to Paasonen et al., the term evades a uniform definition; however, in most fields, it is understood as a process in which a person is stripped of their humanity and thus perceived and treated “as a thing, instrument or object” (Paasonen et al. 2021: 3-4). The scholars stress that objectification does not always concern

⁷ The videos are usually filmed in slow motion and set to sultry triphop music, particularly *Glory Box* by the group Portishead, with women and girls performing actions like applying makeup, and undressing in a purposefully seductive, exaggerated way. For examples see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6waYjXu9Yw>

women in gendered heterosexual relations, as it can also refer to persons of any identity (Paasonen et al. 2021: 5). However, objectification as seen through a feminist lens is crucial for this thesis. Paasonen et al. explain that feminists understand it as “the reduction of women to their physical attributes and heterosexual attractiveness in ways that mitigate their individuality and agency” (Paasonen et al. 2021: 7). The authors add that feminist circles found the discourse on objectification useful as a tool to draw attention to the ways women are relegated to a more submissive and less valued position within society, as well as the differences between male and female representations in Western culture which strengthen the power imbalances between genders (Paasonen et al. 2021: 8).

In “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks,” Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts propose the titular pivotal theory to facilitate understanding objectification and its effects. The scholars are particularly concerned with the sexual type of objectification, which they define as being seen “*as a body* (or collection of body parts)” that primarily exists in order to serve as a tool satisfying the needs of onlookers (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 174-175, emphasis in the original). The authors claim that objectification most frequently occurs through the male gaze in everyday situations (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 175). Fredrickson and Roberts claim that women are more often the objects of the gaze and experience a heightened sense of awareness of it. Additionally, “men direct more nonreciprocated gaze” toward women and, quite often this gaze is supplemented with remarks that express judgment about women’s attractiveness. These phenomena are often replicated in various forms of media where the female body is more often shown in an objectifying way in comparison to the male body. Additionally, the objectification of non-white

women can be infused with racist stereotypes, like the harmful trope of a submissive Asian⁸ or a sexually animalistic Black woman (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 176). Even though, since the publication of the authors' article, the representation of women in media has improved quite significantly, women are unfortunately still objectified in some works, as well as in society at large.

As a result of objectification encountered in a given culture, girls and women might internalize such views. Fredrickson and Roberts assert that experiencing objectification can cause them to “treat *themselves* as objects to be looked at and evaluated,” which confirms Berger's conceptualization of female self-surveing (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 177, emphasis in the original). The scholars define as self-objectification the process of assuming the point of view of an onlooker in self-evaluation (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 177-180). They argue that self-objectification, and the resulting regular checking of one's looks, can be detrimental to the self-confidence of girls and women, and drain their mental resources (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 179-180). Yet Fredrickson and Roberts acknowledge that the ways a given person is impacted by objectification is individual and mediated through their personality and markers of identity (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 174).

Objectification has societal and personal repercussions on girls and women. Fredrickson and Roberts believe that objectification contributes to various injustices, such as “employment discrimination and sexual violence,” or disregarding achievements (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 174). It can increase the feelings of appearance-related shame and strengthen the conviction that not achieving the beauty ideal is a reflection of flawed morality. The anticipation of an objectifying gaze might

⁸ In Western cultures, women of Asian descent have been exoticized by means of such terms as the ‘China Doll’ (McGowan 2020: 4). Western stereotypes assign characteristics such as “subservience, obedience, passivity and domesticity” to Asian women (Uchida 1998: 162), which affects both how they are perceived and their own self-perception (McGowan 2020: 6).

also cause anxiety that motivates women to regularly make sure they look presentable (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 181-182). Additionally, objectification can negatively impact women's ability to fully invest themselves in activities and cause a struggle with concentration, which both lower life satisfaction (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 184). Last but not least, the effect of objectification is the sense of women's disconnection from their bodies. Fredrickson and Roberts speculate that being one's self-survevor makes an individual less attuned to their bodily sensations (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 185).

1.5.4. The Girlfriend Gaze and Looking Talk

While significant attention is paid to the notion of the male gaze and (self-)objectification in relation to female beauty and appearance standards, the similarly relevant notion of the girlfriend gaze often remains unmentioned. The term was coined by Alison Winch in her discussion of 'girlfriend media', the fictional representations of women's friendships (Winch 2013: 9). The scholar highlights that other women, especially friends, play an integral role in the formation of female identity, particularly concerning its acceptable standards. According to Winch, girls and women tend to look for female approval, and its presence or lack of thereof can be deeply affecting, both positively and negatively (Winch 2013: 10). As a result, friendships between girls or women "can be 'a school of correction'" in which the norms of femininity are continuously shaped and refined (Apter and Johnson in Winch 2013: 10). The site most often scrutinized by the girlfriend gaze is the body, and conforming to the standard of a friendship group can be seen as crucial,

particularly among young women. Conversely, lack of compliance and noticeable difference might be met with various forms of bullying and mockery, both overt and inconspicuous. However, regardless of their nature, they tend to be used as an instrument of control over the friend's looks (Winch 2013: 10-11). It is important to note that these behaviors, which scholars call 'normative cruelties', tend to be considered as a normal part of girlhood or womanhood, and its negative consequences are frequently ignored (Winch 2013: 11-12).

In "It's Just between Girls: Negotiating the Postfeminist Gaze in Women's 'Looking Talk'," Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans, and Alison Mackiewicz analyze the tendencies present in female-female looking and talking about appearance. According to the scholars, women tend to scrutinize each other's looks and make comparisons between themselves. The phenomenon usually occurs regardless of the level of closeness between women and, in some cases, even best friends are not safe from judgment. Thus, the authors consider the scrutinizing gaze as a "normative" part of the female experience, which proves difficult to avoid (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz 2015: 101-102). Riley and her colleagues argue that the judgmental gaze results in the desire to appease other women. Thus, the act of looking can motivate the engagement in "competitive, consumer-oriented beauty work" (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz 2015: 103-104). The scholars, similarly to Winch, accentuate that women's comments about appearance either legitimize or invalidate a given individual's femininity. Female peer evaluation also tends to be valued more highly than men's opinions due to the expectations of negative judgment from other women and their awareness that meeting feminine beauty standards is a difficult process requiring talent and resources (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz 2015: 104-105). Unfortunately, this legitimization of femininity based on appearance reinforces the already restrictive feminine appearance

standards, as not meeting them could result in being bullied or ignored (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz 2015: 106-107).

Unsurprisingly, the various regimens of the gaze and objectification are also present in East Asian cultures. In certain forms of Asian media and entertainment, such as the K-pop industry, as Gooyong Kim argues in *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls: Cultural Politics of Developmentalism, Patriarchy, and Neoliberalism in South Korea's Popular Music Industry*, the aspiring stars are trained to “[i]nternaliz[e] and reinforc[e] a subordinate [female] self-image that is contingent upon the male gaze and desire.” In her view, K-pop singers and dancers are often presented in objectifying ways foregrounding their sex-appeal (Kim G. 2019: 19). Kim asserts that the emphasis on acting and looking cute promotes “an infantilization of women,” as well as their sexual subservience (Kim G. 2019: 39). She argues that the image of women in such media is shaped by the tastes of men, who constitute the majority of owners of businesses in the entertainment industry and “the pre-dominant/residual culture of patriarchal sexism” in Korean society (Kim G. 2019: 19-20, 40). Additionally, the uniform beauty and perfection displayed by the South Asian idols reinforces the belief that only women who meet the appearance standard are worthy of recognition (Lin 2023: 91).

It is striking that while Korean media and society encourage striving to achieve the beauty ideal, as explored further in Chapter Four, it also shames women for their efforts. Hye Kyoung Kwon draws attention to the creation and popularization, primarily by male Internet users, of two tropes, the “Soybean-Paste Girl ([kor.] *doenjangyeo*)” and “Gangnam Beauty ([kor.] *gangnammiin*),” which ridicule women’s engagement in the consumption of expensive brands and undergoing facial plastic surgeries (Kwon 2019: 139, 165). The male gaze Korean women are subjected

to has appeared as a theme in Korean literature, too. For instance, in *The Vegetarian*, Nobel Prize winner Han Kang explores “how the structures of patriarchy use violence, objectification, and domination as strong modes of suppressing women’s agency” in Korea (Panta and Adhikari 2025: 33, 40). As will be seen in the following chapters, fiction proves an important vehicle that questions our expectations concerning beauty and ugliness, and reveals the harmful impact of the beauty industry, stigma, and gaze. The theoretical apparatus outlined above provides important tools to analyze the politics of face, as represented in the six fictional texts under consideration, and their effects on readers.

Chapter Two

Facial Beauty Norms and Teenage Facial Plastic Surgery

in *Fix* by Leslie Margolis, *The Fold* by An Na,

and *Slant* by Laura E. Williams

2.1. Adolescent Girls and Beauty Image

Adolescence is an important period of life during which a young person's sense of self and appearance undergoes quick, significant changes. Nichola Rumsey and Diana Harcourt state in *The Psychology of Appearance* that many young people believe that possessing looks that comply with widely accepted standards will make it possible for them to find friends and romantic partners. Moreover, not being seen as abnormal is a crucial factor in teenagers' self-satisfaction (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71). Teenage girls in particular are exposed to an array of factors that influence their relationship with their appearance and contribute to a lack of satisfaction regarding their bodies and faces. According to Eleanor H. Wertheim and Susan J. Paxton in "Body Image Development in Adolescent Girls," a substantial portion of appearance research proposes a "bio-psycho-social model" which includes four main types of influence factors. The scholars explain that those include: biology (a teenager's bodily features), psychology (her personality and characteristics), interpersonal relationships, and social impact (Wertheim and Paxton 2011: 78). Wertheim and Paxton point out that a major part of research on adolescent girls' image concerns has focused on "weight and shape," whereas other important areas, such as varieties of "skin appearance, nose size" (Wertheim and Paxton 2011: 82), tend to be overlooked. As

one can notice, facial appearance-related insecurities are under-researched and require more attention.

2.1.1. Interpersonal Relationships

As mentioned in the section above, teenagers tend to see their appearance as an important factor in their interpersonal relationships. Rumsey and Harcourt give examples of a 1993 study by Prokhorov et al. in which American adolescents assigned the role of “the most valued characteristic in their lives” to appearance. Looks were rated above a multitude of significant life factors such as academic achievements, finances, friendships, and others (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71). The authors suggest a close link between self-evaluation of appearance and general opinion about oneself. In a 2002 study by Emily Lovegrove, mentioned by Rumsey and Harcourt, 44% of the teenage respondents named appearance as a deciding factor of self-confidence or lack thereof). Moreover, 40% of subjects reported feeling increasingly self-assured if they felt their looks were more pleasing (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71). It is important to note that, as the scholars highlight, adolescent girls who subscribe to such views on appearance tend to have a potentially damaging relationship with their looks. Such young women, as shown by Susan Harter, are inclined to excessively think about their appearance and feel anxiety about how they are seen by others (Harter in Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71). Additionally, they evaluate their looks negatively, feel less self-confident and are more likely to show depressive symptoms as opposed to girls who are not as preoccupied with their appearance (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71-72).

Being a target of teasing and bullying is another factor commonly seen as contributing to appearance-related dissatisfaction in teenagers (Rumsey and Harcourt

2005: 72). This link has been revealed in numerous studies analyzed by Rumsey and Harcourt. Moreover, teasing and bullying are associated with disordered eating, low self-esteem, and depression. It is important to note which body parts are the most common objects of bullying. Research by Rieves and Cash indicates that the main target of teasing tends to be the appearance of the head and face. This type of teasing, which directly concerns the main topic of this thesis, had been experienced by 45% of the study subjects (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 72). Crozier and Dimmock say that the most frequent form of teasing or bullying tends to be “name-calling and nicknames” (Crozier and Dimmock in Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 72). As these behaviors can seem quite harmless, it is possible that they can go unnoticed and may be difficult to combat. However, they can significantly impact a young person’s academic performance. As shown by Lovegrove, teenagers might avoid speaking up in class or even not attend it altogether out of fear of being bullied, and the inability to fight the perpetrators (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 74). Another important factor when it comes to teasing and bullying is age. The scholars mention a study by Lovegrove, in which young teenagers appeared to be the most frequent victims of such behaviors. The problem decreases the older the adolescents are, with nineteen-year-olds experiencing teasing and bullying least frequently (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 73).

Family influence is another factor that can contribute to a girl’s self-image. However, as Rumsey and Harcourt observe, it is a significantly less researched one than peer influence. The authors emphasize that parents’ attitude towards a young person’s looks tends to vary. The parental attitude also depends on the child’s age. Lovegrove’s research conducted in the UK shows that mothers and fathers are usually more critical about their children around the age of seventeen and eighteen, with 27%

of parents not being satisfied with their child's appearance. Family members, however, were not shown to be the people with whom most teenagers discussed their appearance-related issues. In the case of female adolescents, 37% would discuss such problems with their mothers. Most teenagers, girls and boys alike, preferred talking about their looks and the ensuing concerns with their friends (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 73).

2.1.2. Teenage Girls' Appearance and Media

Girls are confronted with beauty standards from a very young age. According to Hilary Levey Friedman in "Girls and Beauty (Pageant) Culture," one of the main sources that shape their expectations regarding appearance are various forms of mass media (Friedman 2021: 350-351). Such a conclusion does not seem surprising as the power of media images on viewers' opinions and judgment about body appearance has been widely acknowledged by researchers, such as Hannah Lovell and Janet Banfield (2020: 42), S.L. Turner et al., (1997), and Lisa M. Groesz, Michael P. Levine, and Sarah K. Murnen (2001). Moreover, as Genesis M. Javellana states in "Influence of Media on Body Image Satisfaction among Adolescents," teenagers are an especially vulnerable group to various forms of media influence as their identities are in the formational stage (Javellana 2014: 95). Adolescents frequently seek examples on what they should look like, among other aspects, in an array of available media (Javellana 2014: 95).

Depending on the era, the outlets from which children and teenagers have learned what a desirable person should look like differ. However, as Friedman implies, traditional media outlets, ranging from print magazines to cinema and television programs, have similar effects on their recipients to modern social media. The

difference that the author points out is that today the exposure to appearance norms is more constant (Friedman 2021: 350-351). One of the reasons is that various social media apps, such as Instagram or TikTok, can be accessed instantly through the user's smartphone.

However, in the first decade of the 21st century, i.e. when the novels discussed in this chapter are set, print magazines tended to be one of the most influential media forms on what teenage girls should look like. According to Michael P. Levine and Kelsey Chapman in "Media Influence on Body Image," a significant amount of time spent reading magazines was often associated with a negative effect on female teenage recipients (Levine and Champan 2011: 103). Harter argues that magazines frequently use digitally edited photographs of bodies that have "unlikely combinations of features." Although they were hardly attainable, they were often shown as aspirational (Harter in Harcourt and Rumsey 2005: 74). Conversely, Levine and Chapman note that viewing beautiful female models in a magazine resulted in "an increase in state body satisfaction" in 20-30% of teenage girls and college-aged women (Levine and Chapman 2011: 104). Therefore, it can be noticed that the effect of magazine reading did not result in uniform effects on all recipients. Nowadays, print magazines seem to be one of the least consumed forms of media among teenagers. Genesis M. Javellana's hypothesis that, due to the popularity of the Internet and its normalization of fast-paced new content, print media has low appeal to the modern adolescent is probable (Javellana 2014: 99). Moreover, it is quite possible that young people who have a limited budget for personal expenses prefer to consume free, online content as opposed to paying for a magazine.

Television is yet another medium from which messages about appearance can be internalized. For example, as Levine and Chapman state, teenage girls'

contentment with their bodies is negatively affected by television advertisements (Levine and Champan 2011: 104). Moreover, studies by Charlotte N. Markey and Patrick M. Markey published in “A Correlational and Experimental Examination of Reality Television Viewing and Interest in Cosmetic Surgery” show that those viewers who rated reality television programs concerning cosmetic surgery positively were more likely to be interested in undergoing such procedures themselves. The researchers focused on young people in the United States; the average subject of the study was a white woman of a median age 19.77 (Markey and Markey 2010: 165). While newer forms of media have become more popular over the years, reality programs and magazines still impact girls’ self-image and serve as a source of appearance comparison (Peek 2018: 12). Moreover, according to a recent study, “Body Standard in Audio-visual Advertising Aimed at Teenagers: Detection and Influence” by Óscar Díaz-Chica, Mercedes Rodríguez Bermejo and Matías López-Iglesias, many advertisements addressed to adolescents, including those aired on television, still lack appearance diversity. As they remain influential on what body type teenage girls see as aspirational (Díaz-Chica, Rodríguez Bermejo and López-Iglesias 2024: 150), they can perpetuate a narrow view regarding what looks are desirable.

The public image of music stars has often contributed to how young girls perceive themselves. One of the most relevant contemporary examples can be found among South Korean pop, that is K-pop, fans. Over the last ten years, this music genre has garnered a considerable Western fandom. The rise of K-pop’s popularity is usually attributed to PSY, the singer of the international hit *Gangnam Style*, often regarded as “the heroic icon of globalizing K-pop and funky ambassador of Hallyu” (Choi 2015: 45), which means the Korean Wave. Korean girl groups can affect the

relationships their fans have with body image, as shown in “Celebrity Worship and Body Image among Young Girls Fans of K-pop Girl Groups” by Kadek Ayu Anatasya Divina Tresna, Monique Elizabeth Sukamto, and Marselius Sampe Tondok. The researchers point out that Korean groups might influence their young female fans, as shown in their study based on Indonesian girls and women aged between eighteen and twenty-two. However, whether the impact is positive or negative depends on the relationship the girl has with her favorite artists (Tresna, Sukamto and Tondok 2021: 100). According to Tresna, Sukamto, and Tondok, female fans who value entertainment provided by K-pop idols and social interactions with other fans generally display more positive appearance-related attitudes and are inspired by the group to improve the way they “dress and groom” (Tresna, Sukamto and Tondok 2021: 106). However, the girls who display a more obsessive, “borderline-pathological” (Tresna, Sukamto and Tondok 2021: 104) mindset are more prone to imitating the physical characteristics of their beloved idol, as well as to developing an overall negative self-image (Tresna, Sukamto and Tondok 2021: 107). Other researchers have identified such effects. For instance, Gooyoung Kim in “K-pop Female Idols: Culture Industry, Neoliberal Social Policy, and Governmentality in Korea” highlights that websites intended for K-pop fans often include make-up instructions that can help the fans emulate their favorite singer’s look. However, as Kim points out, some fans do not stop at such “unobtrusive measures” and end up seeking surgical intervention (Kim G. 2017: 532).

According to Levine and Chapman, media outlets should be generally regarded as one among many risk factors (Levine and Chapman 2011: 105), meaning that the teenagers’ self-image is influenced by various markers of identity, personal characteristics, circumstances, and life experiences (Kraemer and Offord 2000: 70-71).

Levine and Chapman enumerate selected variables that have an effect on the way the media affects its young recipients. The first of these is the way beauty ideals are presented. According to the scholars, “sexist, objectif[ying]” depictions have more negative effects, whereas desirable but more attainable to an average person types of appearance affect viewers more positively (Levine and Chapman 2011: 105). Another vital factor is ethnicity. Due to the fact that the body ideal in media is usually embodied by Caucasian and light-skinned people without significantly visible markers of ethnicity, recipients of media with similar characteristics are more likely to be affected by such depictions (Levine and Chapman 2011: 105-106). The last but not least factor identified by the authors are personal variables. Levine and Chapman point out that female adolescents who are either notably concerned with their looks or feel “self conscious about their body shape” are more likely to be negatively affected by different forms of media. These girls often engage in comparing themselves to other women, ranging from their friends to various celebrities and even inanimate objects such as vases (Levine and Chapman 2011: 106). The authors emphasize the importance of these three-factor groups in further research on appearance and media.

2.1.3. Medical Ethics of Teenage Plastic Surgery

It is rather apparent that teenagers in the modern world feel increasing pressure to look attractive. As a result, they suffer from many consequences, which have been discussed in the prior sections. It is not surprising, therefore, that in order to alleviate the suffering caused by those issues, teenagers might seek to undergo plastic surgery. Such wishes, however, should be approached with caution. Surgical procedures are invasive and carry a risk of medical complications. Moreover, surgical alteration of a person’s face is permanent, and reversing its effects, even to a small extent, might be

very difficult, or, in some cases, not possible at all (www.boulderplasticsurgery.com). Therefore, similarly to other medical procedures, the ethics of plastic surgery should be thought about thoroughly. This issue is crucial when making a decision about plastic surgery concerning a patient in their vulnerable, formative years. In “Cosmetic Surgery in the Adolescent Patient,” Kelsey Larson and Arun K. Gosain enumerate the most important factors that should be taken into consideration before making a decision whether a teenager can be operated on. The main areas the authors focus on are psychological aspects, procedure-specific considerations, and patient selection (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136).

When discussing the relationship between plastic surgery and psychology, Larson and Gosain stress the importance of the teenage years as a period marked by growth and change in different aspects, including the body. Moreover, the authors claim that during adolescence, a young person’s body image undergoes crucial stages of development (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136). This fact was used as an argument both in favor of and against performing plastic surgery on young people, as shown by the body of literature analyzed by Larson and Gosain. This difference in arguments results from certain inconsistencies in studies on the effects of youth plastic surgery. Majjaliisa Rauste-Von Wright’s 1989 study, used by the authors as an example, shows that regardless of being operated on, adolescents’ appearance-related issues improved as they grew older (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136). However, another study by Kunigonde Johanna Simis (2001) challenged this claim. Larson and Gosain’s findings focused on teenagers who underwent plastic surgery and experienced more positive changes than the control group. According to this research, plastic surgery caused “an overall gain in body satisfaction and relief of physical, social, and psychological concerns” (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136). Larson and Gosain also

emphasize a mental health characteristic crucial in considering surgery: the ability to perceive appearance in a realistic way. The authors claim that young patients who have already passed the assessment for plastic surgery tend to have a realistic image of their looks and flaws (Simis 2001). As proven by a study, the identified imperfections “correlated with [the teenager’s] primary reason for seeking surgery” (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136). Larson and Gosain also analyzed the difference in the effects of plastic surgery on female and male subjects. Teenage girls and boys seem to be affected similarly by these medical procedures, as both generally experience an “improvement in mood and self-confidence” (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136). What is more, male and female teenagers rarely expressed interest in undergoing another surgery (Kamburoğlu and Ozgür 2007: 742; Larson and Gosain 2012: 136).

Physical aspects connected to the nature of the procedure are another subset of factors identified by Larson and Gosain. They emphasize that when considering operating on the nose, for example, the physician should be mindful of the timeline of nasal development. Larson and Gosain claim this part of the face continues to grow until “the completion of facial growth (16 to 18 years old)” (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136). The authors state that, as a result, operating on the nasomaxillary complex in patients below this age bracket is generally discouraged (Larson and Gosain 2012: 137). However, a significantly more popular type of surgery, aesthetic rhinoplasty, can be safely done on younger people. According to Larson and Gosain, “over 90 percent of [nasal] growth and development” is completed by the age of thirteen/fourteen in the case of girls (Larson and Gosain 2012: 137). Subsequently, this surgery type is usually seen as more acceptable.

Evaluating whether a teenager should be allowed to have plastic surgery is another issue discussed by scholars and physicians. Chauhan, J. Warner, and P.A.

Adamson's 2010 study is cited as one of the most important on the topic due to its highly scientific approach and recommendations for patient evaluation. Those criteria "includ[e] at least 1 year after menarche for women, stable growth for a minimum of 1 year, psychological readiness, and strong parental support" (Larson and Gosain 2012: 137). Similar recommendations for all surgery types are proposed by Niti Khunger and Hema Pant, with the addition of, among others, awareness of possible dangers, understanding what results the surgery is most likely to have, and undergoing a "psychiatric evaluation [...] to rule out body dysmorphic disorders" (Khunger and Pant 2021: 12). An individual affected by the aforementioned mental health disorders usually worries excessively about their imperfections which are often not significantly visible to others (www.nhs.uk). Khunger and Pant assert the magnitude of informed consent, which the teenage patient can give when they are aware of all "benefits, limitations, and risks involved" in undergoing plastic surgery (Khunger and Pant 2021: 12). Moreover, in Larson and Gosain's view, it should be essential that the desire for the procedure be initiated by the adolescent and not by another person, such as their parent. The authors state that it is generally believed that teenagers who are interested in having surgery for the sake of their own satisfaction with their appearance tend to be more satisfied with the results. Meanwhile, young people who decide to undergo the procedure in order to heighten their potential to form new friendships and romantic relationships or avoid appearance-based bullying should be approached with more caution by the doctors (Larson and Gosain 2012: 138-139).

2.1.4. Personal Choices and Societal Ills

When teenagers are able to undergo plastic surgery from the point of view of medical ethics, dilemmas can still arise when considering the morality of the issue. In "The

Adolescent and the Plastic Surgeon: The Moral Unease and the Facts about Appearance-related Surgery on Adolescents” Kunigonde J. Simis raises, among other topics, the quite often overlooked questions regarding societal issues and cosmetic procedures (Simis 2001: 126). The author acknowledges that experiencing issues related to looks may hamper a teenager’s “psychological and social development” and that, as a result, a young person can pursue plastic surgery in order to alleviate these problems (Simis 2001: 128). Generally such procedures have a positive effect on the adolescent patients’ well-being (Simis 2001: 129).

Simis claims that while relieving teenage patients of burdens such as appearance-related suffering is a crucial concern, the source of those feelings in the adolescent should be investigated (Simis 2001: 130). The author states, as discussed at length earlier in this chapter, that the perception of one’s looks might be influenced by media or, as frequently suggested by feminist scholars, by the male gaze (Simis 2001: 135). The latter is relevant to women of any age. Simis emphasizes that these factors suggest that the suffering caused by looks might be socially imposed on the teenager. The author evokes a 1998 study conducted by Erik Parens, according to which “work[ing] on our bodies instead of our environments” can cause people to overlook social problems that are the direct cause of appearance-related suffering (Simis et al. 2001: 135). Simis also points out that access to plastic surgery can be seen as a class issue. Teenagers belonging to families from lower social strata might often not be able to obtain the procedure that could alleviate their suffering. The author explains that this, in turn, can result in widening the gap of available opportunities to young people with different access to financial resources (Simis 2001: 135). Moreover, the scholar notes that seeking plastic surgery can be seen as a possible reappraisal of “unjust norms.” According to Simis, many beauty standards can be seen as rooted in various

forms of bigotry, such as racism or sexism (Simis et al. 2001: 135-136). The scholar's claim seems convincing as beauty norms in predominantly white countries tend to skew towards Caucasian features as opposed to distinctly ethnic features. Additionally, as mentioned before, in most countries, appearance ideals appear to be more strict and restrictive for women than for men.

While scholars tend to question the need for undergoing plastic surgery due to the societal issues discussed above, these concerns are usually not used to discourage patients from seeking the procedure in order to be relieved of their, usually psychological, pain. Simis stresses the importance of "societal responsibility" regarding the issue and the need for open, public discussion about beauty standards (Simis 2001: 142). She also points out that societies should strive towards making the desired appearance they promote more inclusive, encompassing more diverse types of looks (Simis 2001: 126, 142). The scholar concludes that until beauty standards become less oppressive, plastic surgery can be considered a valid choice in order to make the everyday reality of a young person who is suffering due to their appearance less painful (Simis 2001: 143).

2.2. Caucasian American Teenage Girls and Plastic Surgery in *Fix* by Leslie Margolis

Fix is a Young Adult novel published in 2006 by Leslie Margolis, who explores, among other themes, the effects of beauty standards and related practices, such as rhinoplasty, on a young person's life, motivations for undergoing plastic surgery, and different attitudes young people have to such procedures. By presenting two characters with disparate viewpoints who make contrasting decisions regarding their bodies, the author is able to explore the relationship teenage girls can have with

appearance norms and plastic surgery. The book tells the story of two teenage sisters, Cameron and Allie, living in California in contemporary times. The novel's plot follows the girls and their attitudes to plastic surgery. The older sister, Cameron, has already undergone rhinoplasty and is dealing with its effects on her life. Later in the novel, she is considering breast augmentation. The younger one, Allie, is pondering whether she should choose to have rhinoplasty performed after encouragement from her mother, Julie. In the end, Cameron decides to follow up with the breast size enhancement procedure, whereas the main character, Allie, declines to have her nose operated on.

2.2.1. Cameron: The Stigma of Ugliness

One of the core themes in *Fix* is that of stigma, a phenomenon where a person is not fully accepted by others, as explained in Chapter One, usually experienced by individuals who are considered to be unattractive. Erving Goffman defines stigma as evidence of a “disgrace” and difference, usually in the form of having a negatively perceived feature. Due to the possession of such a trait, the individual is relegated to a category of inferior people. Such persons are sometimes seen as “bad, [...] dangerous, or weak” (Goffman: 1986: 1-3). In *Fix* Margolis explores this issue through the character of Cameron; the trait that causes the girl's social exclusion is her nose, described as large, “long and hooked, [...] pointed to the left” (Margolis 2006: 1). Its unusual appearance invites ridicule, such as numerous cruel jokes from classmates in her previous school, La Jolla, as well as a nickname: ‘Beakface’ (Margolis 2006: 1-2). In accordance with Goffman's theory (1986: 3), the character's identity is seriously affected when her peers signal that they see her as an inferior individual, replacing her name with an offensive nickname (Margolis 2006: 1).

The novel's plot is set after the protagonist has already undergone rhinoplasty and has transferred to her new place of education, Bel Air (Margolis 2006: 1-2). With her new, beautiful looks and the cause of the previous stigma removed, the character notices she is receiving significantly kinder treatment from her new friends. Popular teenagers now recognize Cameron as a person who belongs in the same category of attractiveness as them (Margolis 2006: 4-6). This change of attitude suggests that people whose looks comply with beauty standards might be more easily accepted and have an easier time making new friendships than persons with a less conventionally attractive appearance (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71, 74) who are stigmatized (Goffman 1986: 5).

By highlighting Cameron's popularity and kinder attitudes towards her after the surgery, Margolis explores the notion of beauty as social currency, as discussed in Chapter One. The character's journey reflects Rhoda K. Unger's theory, according to which girls and women who are deemed attractive enjoy various interpersonal perks (Unger in Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 178). Cameron is aware of how beauty has granted her a higher social status among her peers, which the protagonist views as a newfound source of happiness. For her popularity becomes the most valuable quality that ensures a satisfying, fulfilling life. In her view, the admiration of other people is "the ultimate high" (Margolis 2006: 9) and something she could never get tired of. Cameron expresses that "being popular was even better than winning the lottery" (Margolis 2006: 9), comparing privileges granted by beauty with money. In this fragment, the notion of beauty as a form of capital for the character, and for women in general, becomes apparent.

Margolis portrays Cameron as a protagonist for whom plastic surgery is a means to achieve acceptance, change her social position among peers, and alleviate

suffering resulting from stigmatization. Within the novel, the character does not change her appearance for shallow or selfish reasons. Instead, the surgery is portrayed as a strategy of coping with unjust treatment, which unattractive people can face daily (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 178). This notion is especially noticeable in the scene where Cameron's boyfriend criticizes the idea of plastic surgery. The protagonist stands up for herself and explains how painful life was when she was considered ugly: "[y]ou don't know how awful it is to look in the mirror and hate what you see. You don't know what it's like for people to tease you, to despise you, all because of what you look like" (Margolis 2006: 117-118). Margolis underscores how victims of appearance-based stigmatization and bullying feel when they are considered not to deserve respect and fair treatment, which accords with Goffman's views on stigma and humiliation (Goffman 1986: 3, 5). *Fix* also depicts the loneliness and alienation of such persons when other people do not understand and sympathize with their struggles. In this scene, Cameron defends her decision about plastic surgery by pointing out that in modern society, looks are one of the factors by which people are judged. Therefore, she refuses to be shamed and apologize for surgically correcting her nose shape: "it wasn't her fault that the world was a shallow place" (Margolis 2006: 119). In *Fix*, Cameron's initial objective is not to be seen as extraordinarily attractive but instead to be considered normal, which is the most common appearance-related goal for adolescents (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005, 71). The depiction of this phenomenon can be noticed in the scene describing the protagonist's first day in the new school. After having the surgery performed and completing the healing process, Cameron enjoys her new anonymity among other teenagers, together with a sense of freedom (Margolis 2006: 2). It is clear that the author shows cosmetic surgery as

essential for Cameron's mental well-being and not as something done for shallow and superficial reasons.

While becoming beautiful and popular is a source of happiness and relief for the protagonist, as discussed above, it is also connected with a sense of anxiety and feeling like an impostor. These affects seem to be significantly caused by the character's past experiences with being bullied. At her new school, for instance, the girl appears to think that when classmates quietly talk while passing her, it must mean she is being ridiculed by them. She starts worrying that her peers may already hate her, although they have not properly interacted with her yet. Cameron suddenly remembers traumatic memories from La Jolla and has to regain control of herself in order not to break into tears (Margolis 2006: 2-3). As Alan K. Goodbody, Matthew M. Martin, and Zachary W. Goldman have observed, fear of being bullied again in a new place of education can occur in former victims (Goodbody, Martin and Goldman 2016: 72). Afterwards, the protagonist over-analyzes her looks in the bathroom mirror, trying to find flaws that others might notice. Cameron's anxiety regarding her looks is characteristic of persons affected by bullying (see Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 72). The protagonist, shaped by her negative past experiences, finds it extremely surprising when she is treated kindly by attractive peers, as she is not used to such treatment: "No one so beautiful had ever talked to Cameron for this long without insulting her" (Margolis 2006: 6). Despite experiencing friendliness from others, the character worries that her new friends' approval might be a joke (Margolis 2006: 6). Once again, while describing her protagonist's anxieties, Margolis emphasizes how determinant bullying can be to one's self-esteem and general well-being. Moreover, this scene depicts the fear of being exposed, which is often faced by formerly bullied and stigmatized individuals. Despite not finding any faults with her appearance in the

mirror, Cameron still worries other people will learn that she is a person formerly thought to be ugly (Margolis 2006: 3). As Goffman has argued, when a victim removes their stigma, like in the case of *Fix*'s protagonist, they often do not perceive themselves to be a fully normal person but instead a person "with a record of" having an unacceptable trait (Goffman 1986: 9).

Dieter Wolke and Suzet Tanya Lereya (2015: 879) argue that bullying often has long-lasting effects on the victim and can impact their mental health for a long period of time. In *Fix*, despite the passage of three years, Cameron still seems surprised that she can enjoy a higher social status and better treatment from her peers than in the past (Margolis 2006: 15). Upon accidentally seeing former bullies during a vacation, the character displays signs of high anxiety, such as dizziness and feeling sick, as she is reminded of her difficult past (Margolis 2006: 21). Moreover, even though Cameron speculates the boys would not be able to recognize her, she still feels that she would want to hide from them if there existed such a possibility (Margolis 2006: 21). When an attractive boy shows interests in her, the protagonist is surprised. She thinks that he is joking ["This isn't real" (Margolis 2006: 21)], despite being aware that she is now perceived as beautiful. This illustrates that Cameron, like many real-life stigmatized individuals (Goffman 1986: 7), has internalized her past abusers' stigmatizing views about herself.

In her book, Margolis shows that common facial surgeries, such as rhinoplasty, as confirmed by studies, for instance "Effects of Social Media Use on Desire for Cosmetic Surgery Among Young Women" by Candice E. Walker et al. (2019: 3357), conducted mostly on American and British subjects, are rather widely accepted socially. These attitudes are showcased in the scenes after Cameron is recognized by her old female classmates (Margolis 2006: 44-45). When the character's secret about

the procedure is revealed, her first reaction is to feel like an impostor and to wonder whether her current social situation is based on a lie. However, the protagonist's new friends judge her old peers negatively for using her old, offensive nickname (Margolis 2006: 47-48). Cameron's decision is met with support and interest, while the girls praise the surgery's effects (Margolis 2006: 62-64). The characters even follow with lists of surgeries that they would like to have done on themselves (Margolis 2006: 64-65). Candice E. Walker et al. argue that talking about looks with one's friends can result in a more positive view of cosmetic procedures (Walker et al. 2019: 3357). The girls appear to succumb to peer pressure: when one of the characters, Hadley, explains why she is interested in rhinoplasty, another girl, Taylor, immediately follows with her idea for her own surgery. As Cameron observes: "[j]ust because Hadley wanted plastic surgery, Taylor had to invent some reason to want it too" (Margolis 2006: 66). This scene illustrates how facial cosmetic surgery can be encouraged among peer groups.

Within the world of Margolis' novel, there is a difference between the attitudes towards facial plastic surgery and procedures performed on the rest of the body. The author contrasts the reactions to the two types of procedures based on the example of Cameron. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist has already had a rhinoplasty, which, as discussed above, is shown as socially acceptable. However, when, later in the novel, she decides to undergo breast augmentation, this type of surgery is met with much resistance and judgment, both from Cameron's peers and her parents, who try to discourage her (Margolis 2006: 98-99, 148). According to Mary H. McGrath and Sanjay Mukerji, rhinoplasty at the beginning of the 21st century was a more common procedure than breast enlargement (McGrath and Mukerji 2000: 105), which might be the reason why this type of surgery is portrayed as less

controversial. By including the difference in attitudes towards the two surgeries, Margolis highlights the double standards regarding various cosmetic procedures. In the novel, procedures done on the face are more widely accepted than on the rest of the body.

2.2.2. Julie: Parental Influence on Teenage Plastic Surgery

Parental influence on a child's plastic surgery is one of the key themes of Leslie Margolis' novel. The author discusses this issue through both of the novel's main characters: Cameron and Allie. In the case of the former, the parents suggest rhinoplasty after witnessing their daughter crying because of bullying and realizing the extent of the teasing she has had to deal with as a young teenager. The daughter accepts the offer to have the surgery done after her fifteenth birthday (Margolis 2006: 67) and, throughout the book, is generally happy with the outcome, apart from anxieties and the fear of being exposed, as explored in the section above. In this protagonist's story, the parental influence is depicted as positive, and the procedure itself generally improves the girl's well-being.

The more problematic side of parental impact is showcased through Allie, whose character contrasts with that of Cameron. Unlike her older sister, Allie does not understand common concerns with beauty, fashion, and makeup (Margolis 2006: 51). She also enjoys sports and generally can be described as more of a tomboy, by contrast to her more traditionally feminine sister. It is important to note that Allie does not experience stigma and appearance-based bullying despite looking similar to pre-surgery Cameron. The difference in treatment by peers most likely stems from the difference in their interests and the social circles to which they aspire.

In the novel, the most influential figure regarding views on appearance and plastic surgery is the protagonist's mother, Julie, a formerly successful actress. In the course of the novel, Julie plans to restart her acting career and auditions for roles. In order to be able to achieve success and popularity once again, the woman decides to undergo a facelift (Margolis 2006: 137). The forty-five-year-old explains to her daughters that she is "competing with women who are half [her] age" (Margolis 2006: 138). The mother suggests that Allie should undergo rhinoplasty (Margolis 2006: 24), similarly to Cameron, who also had the procedure performed following her suggestion (Margolis 2006: 96). Her openness to plastic surgery is therefore based on her experience. Moreover, Margolis' choice to portray the mother as such is not surprising considering that, as argued by Pamela K. Stone, the female parent usually tends to ensure that her daughters follow the expected beauty regimen of a given culture and era (Stone 2020: 52). In the scene Allie and her mother visit a plastic surgeon, Julie expresses her satisfaction about Cameron's surgery. The character hopes that having the rhinoplasty done will make Allie equally happy as Cameron, who is now considered to be, in the doctor's words, "smart *and* beautiful" (Margolis 2006: 25; emphasis in the original). These parallels seem to reinforce the impression that the mother does not consider her daughters' individual needs, wants, and characteristics. The author suggests that, despite being well-intentioned, the mother is too preoccupied with making her daughters comply with the beauty standards (see Stone 2020: 53).

Based on the example of Allie's mother, Margolis emphasizes the dangers of parents misusing their authority in relation to their child's looks. It is highlighted that "no one has asked [Allie] if she wanted a nose job" (Margolis 2006: 50). Instead, the decision about the surgery has been made by others without consulting the protagonist,

which goes against the rule of informed consent (Khunger and Pant 2021: 12). In the novel, one can notice the mother speaking over her daughter and deciding what is best for her without seeking the protagonist's opinion. A stark example of this behavior can be found in the scene where the female characters visit the plastic surgeon together (Margolis 2006: 24). Allie appears to be withdrawn throughout, while the doctor and the parent take an active part in the conversation (Margolis 2006: 26). Moreover, in the scene of meeting with the plastic surgeon it becomes noticeable that the mother views appearance as more important than her daughter's ability to enjoy her favorite hobby, sports, and an active lifestyle. When Allie finally speaks up, the mother dismisses her concerns. She ignores the daughter's worries about post-surgical pain and her disappointment when she learns that going through with the procedure would mean having to miss a significant portion of the soccer camp, which she has eagerly anticipated (Margolis 2006: 27). It is rather clear here that the mother wants to control her daughter's body so it can comply with the norms of facial beauty, and expects her to accept the pain and limitations caused by striving to achieve them. As Stone has observed, mothers commonly "shape" their daughters' bodies through various practices, control their appearance, and teach them that pain should be expected and acceptable in the sphere of beautification (Stone 2020: 53, 40).

The portrayal of Cameron and Allie's mother seems to serve a cautionary function about the misuse of parental authority regarding a child's looks, resulting in the erosion of their agency. The issue of abuse of parental authority is further emphasized by the language the mother uses. Julie tends to assume that Allie agrees with her and uses plural grammatical forms when expressing her personal opinions that the girl most likely does not share. When the mother explains to the surgeon what her expectations of the outcomes of the procedure are (Margolis 2006: 24-25), she

says: “[t]hat’s why *we* came...,” “*we*’re hoping you can do the same for [Allie]” (Margolis 2006: 25; my emphases). She also answers questions for Allie, instead of letting her speak for herself (Margolis 2006: 28). As a result, throughout the meeting, the protagonist is ignored by the adults: “[h]er opinion of the doctor did not matter [...] since no one has asked her for it” (Margolis 2006: 24). It becomes apparent that Julie did not seek to learn her daughter’s views regarding plastic surgery in general, nor this particular physician and clinic. After the visit, the protagonist is highly distressed, which results in her causing a car collision (Margolis 2006: 33-34). The consultation with the surgeon is an almost traumatic event, as the image of an uncanny-looking “too smooth and smiling Dr. Glass” remains in her mind (Margolis 2006: 50).

Fix centers on female characters and their struggles with the sexist nature of beauty standards, which tend to overwhelmingly target women. As mentioned in Chapter One, women are expected to appeal to the male gaze (Berger 2008: 46), while the reverse cannot be said about the representatives of the male gender. This issue is addressed directly in the text, perhaps due to the author’s didactic ambitions and her book’s intended young audience. The girls’ father occupies a mostly passive but complicit role in the novel. As revealed in his conversation with Allie, he assumes his daughter is not happy with her appearance and that she wants to go through with the procedure (Margolis 2006: 150). When the protagonist expresses her discomfort over the upcoming surgery and explains that she is sad because she will have to miss her sports camp, her father is surprised. The man explains that he and Julie assumed that Allie was unhappy with her nose, which motivated the parents to make arrangements for the rhinoplasty in the first place (Margolis 2006: 150). In the scene where Allie and her father discuss her upcoming surgery, the girl asks him why he will not undergo rhinoplasty as well. The father expresses understanding of his daughter’s

concerns: “[w]e live in a superficial world, and it’s much harder for women. The double standard isn’t fair or right, but that’s how it is” (Margolis 2006: 156). He also admits that while he wishes he were better looking, his looks have not had a significant impact on his life. The father’s words possibly show both awareness of his male privilege and his complicity in it, as he does not question the status quo.

2.2.3. Allie: Rejection of Beauty Expectations

Through the character of Allie, Margolis also depicts the importance of one’s unique looks for a person’s identity and how an individual can reject social beauty expectations. As has already been discussed, Allie is introduced in the novel as the younger, tomboyish sister, disinterested in beauty and fashion. However, as the novel progresses, the protagonist experiences an internal turmoil that forces her to reconsider her attitudes to these matters. As Rebecca Bellew argues, the relationship between a child and their parents, and the appearance-related comments expressed by them, plays an important role in a person’s self-perception (Bellew 2012: 240-241). In the scene when Julie and Allie return home from the doctor, the protagonist examines her face closely in the biggest mirror in the house, which is something she apparently has not done before. While overall Allie appears to be satisfied with what she sees, this simple act suggests that some sense of uncertainty is growing in her mind (Margolis 2006: 55). Throughout the novel, the protagonist keeps thinking about plastic surgery. When familiarizing herself with the computer-generated images of the expected outcomes of the procedure, she admits to herself that she finds them attractive. While she is uneasy with her realization (Margolis 2006: 142), it is noticeable that her attitude towards surgery is in flux. Allie’s mixed feelings are not surprising, considering she has most likely partially internalized her parents’

suggestions. According to Bellew, such messages about beauty are especially adopted when they are perceived by the child “as a pressure to change” one’s looks (Bellew 2012: 241), just as in the case of this character. Moreover, the topic of surgery makes Allie aware of how other people perceive her face, which used not to concern her. Upon learning from her father that both parents assumed she did not like the appearance of her nose, she is surprised that she possesses a feature seen as ugly (Margolis 2006: 150).

In the novel, the subject of surgery causes the protagonist a significant amount of anxiety. The character views it as embarrassing and avoids telling her friends about it. Instead, she hopes they will not notice that she has undergone rhinoplasty (Margolis 2006: 91). It is possible that this perception stems from Allie’s social circle. While Cameron’s friends see cosmetic procedures as aspirational, the younger sister’s sporty peers might regard them as strange. Over time, the pending surgery causes an increasing amount of stress for the protagonist (Margolis 2006: 103-104). The girl tries to cope with her anxieties and make peace with the rhinoplasty planned for her. She seeks comfort in looking at photographs of “new improved [by plastic surgery] mother and daughters” (Margolis 2006: 136). Knowing she is not alone in getting surgical treatment together with her mother and sister is a source of relief, but, at the same time, furthers anxiety. Allie doubts whether it will provide enough improvement and whether she will be satisfied with the results at all (Margolis 2006: 137).

The upcoming plastic surgery prompts the protagonist to think about personal identity in relation to her looks. Allie wonders if the surgery would transform her into a doppelganger of Cameron. She worries whether, with the alteration of looks, her personality traits could become different, too (Margolis 2006: 60). Allie’s main concern is that the cosmetic surgery would take away her uniqueness, making her

almost a copy of her sister or perhaps even one of her friends (Margolis 2006: 105). Indeed, the issue of losing individuality due to plastic surgery has been highlighted by scholars. In the past, as Foad Nahai claims, many surgeons would, and some still do, subscribe to a generic approach regarding rhinoplasty. Those practitioners upheld one type of nose as the most beautiful one and operated on patients to achieve it. Nahai stresses that the physicians' openness to more diverse beauty types has grown over the years (Nahai 2021: 444), yet, as Tolentino (2019) notes, the societal beauty standard has remained homogeneous. In *Fix*, considering that the surgery is not the protagonist's own idea, that it is inspired by her sister's successful procedure, and is to be done by the same physician (Margolis 2006: 24-25), it could endanger her own sense of uniqueness. Later in the novel, Allie's anxiety is interestingly juxtaposed with that of Cameron. While the younger sister worries about looking too similar and losing her individual character, the older one does not want them to end up looking too different. Cameron proposes "find[ing] the same surgeon so [they]'ll still look like sisters" when they undergo face-lifts in the future (Margolis 2006: 140). As one can notice, in both protagonists, plastic surgery provokes worries about identity, although very different ones.

In depicting Allie's final decision to reject rhinoplasty, Margolis ultimately emphasizes the importance of the teenager's agency regarding their looks. On the day of the procedure, the protagonist is depicted as nervous and unhappy about what is about to happen to her face (Margolis 2006: 236-237) and still refuses to admit her true feelings. She tries to accept her fate, seemingly in fear of parental disappointment because the surgery is "important to them" (Margolis 2006: 237). The decisive moment of the novel comes when the protagonist sits in the doctor's waiting room, anticipating her procedure. While browsing various fashion and beauty magazines,

she comes to the realization that she is not interested in striving to achieve the unrealistic beauty ideal (Margolis 2006: 238-240). Allie understands that she values her hobbies more than appealing to the male gaze, which she familiarizes herself with through an article about men's female beauty preferences. The girl runs out of the waiting room (Margolis 2006: 240) with the narrator emphasizing the point of the scene: "Allie wasn't all that worried about what she looked like in the world. [...] [S]he was much more interested in what she would do in the world" (Margolis 2006: 241). This conclusion suggests that rather than treating it as a decorative object, the protagonist appreciates her body as a vessel that allows her to experience life. This idea seems to align with Viren Swami's notion of *body neutrality*: an alternative to body positivity, it aims to shift attention from overthinking about one's appearance to letting the body exist without value judgment. Moreover, the idea brings into focus appreciating what the body is able to do and what experiences it allows the embodied self to gain (Swami 2022). While Margolis' novel was published in 2006 and the concept of body neutrality is believed to have emerged around 2015, *Fix* can be seen as illustrating a body-neutral mindset. With this scene being the novel's ending, it can be assumed that the author intends to ultimately stress the importance of deciding about one's own face and body.

In Margolis' novel, all of the protagonists are depicted rather sympathetically by the author, and the reasoning behind their actions is quite clearly stated. Therefore, it is easy for the readers, including the young ones for whom the novel is originally intended, to understand the characters. As a result, Margolis shows that all strategies regarding coping with beauty expectations are valid as long as they are compliant with a particular person's desires and morals. However, the decision to make Allie, the character who refuses to undergo plastic surgery, the protagonist of *Fix* suggests

that the main message of the novel is one of self-acceptance. Margolis' intention is to underscore the importance of being appreciative of one's face and body regardless of whether they fit the mainstream beauty standard or not. The author emphasizes the importance of the opportunities given by one's body, such as the ability to do different things in one's life (Margolis 2006: 241), instead of focusing on appearance. In this way, the novel seems to promote the mindset of body neutrality.

2.3. Korean American Experience with Facial Beauty Standards in *The Fold* by An Na

The Fold, by the Korean American author An Na, is a work of Young Adult fiction published in 2008. The novel's protagonist is Joyce, a Korean American high school student. The character is offered eyelid surgery by her aunt, Gomo, who has won money in a lottery. *The Fold* chronicles Joyce's decision whether to accept Gomo's gift. Ultimately, Joyce, inspired by her lesbian sister's coming out, as well as other events, decides to reject the procedure. Since the time of its publication, *The Fold* has received modest scholarly attention. In "'What Defines Me?' - Performativity, Gender and Ethnicity in Korean American YA Fiction," Sung-Ae Lee and John Stephens discuss the issues of "gender and ethnic performativities" (Lee and Stephens 2017: 76) in the novel, as well as situate the book among An Na's other works. Ashraf Taha Mohamed Kouta (2023) analyzes *The Fold* through the lens of Foucauldian theory in "The Making of the Docile Female Body in Korean American Young Adult Literature: A Feminist Foucauldian Reading of An Na's *The Fold* (2008)." In "Beauty Is in the Eye of the West: An Analysis of An Na's *The Fold*" (2015), Joanne H. Yi, in turn, praises the novel for offering a realistic portrayal of beauty-related struggles within the Korean American community, exploring Na's representation of various

aspects of appearance, such as eye shape, height, and weight. The following subchapter intends to expand on existing scholarship by focusing on Na's depiction of facial beauty standards. *The Fold* depicts various issues connected with insecurities regarding one's looks, pressures from family members to alter one's appearance, achieving beauty as a means to enhance romantic prospects and social position, rejection of appearance norms by queer women, beautifying alternatives to plastic surgery, and the role of beauty rituals in female bonding. Following Yi, who stresses the importance of the awareness of differences between beauty standards among members of the Korean American diaspora and among the citizens of their ancestral countries (Yi 2015: 50), this analysis of *The Fold* focuses mainly on the beauty standards in the West and among Asian Americans in the United States.

2.3.1. Joyce: Plastic Surgery and Alternative Beautifying Strategies

Joyce, Na's protagonist, is portrayed as an average Korean American teenage girl who is, however, deeply insecure about her looks. The protagonist is first introduced while trying to get rid of a zit with various methods she has learned throughout the years. Joyce holds strongly negative feelings towards the small, red blemish, which she calls a variety of names, such as "alien seed," "[a] Thanksgiving cranberry," and a slice of salami on a pizza (Na 2017: 1-3). The protagonist's view of the zit communicates that she pays close attention to her face's appearance. In the opening scene, the character concludes she looks like "Quasimodo on [one] side. Plain Korean girl on [the other] side" (Na 2017: 3). Similarly to many real-life young people (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71), the character wants to look normal, which she feels is impossible with imperfections.

In *The Fold*, social comparison is highlighted as an important factor influencing one's view of the self. The protagonist's insecurity appears to stem largely from comparisons made between Joyce and her older sister, Helen (Na 2017: 49). Such comparisons, as Helena K. Schutz, Susan J. Paxton and Eleanor H. Wertheim argue, are an under-discussed issue. Scholars explain that even though a girl is most likely to compare her appearance with her sister, significantly more research has focused on the mother-daughter comparison and the mother's influence on her daughter's self-image (Schutz, Paxton and Wertheim 2002: 1923, 1927). The two characters are depicted as significantly different from each other, which is noticed by Joyce but also by other people (Na 2017: 27). As a result, the younger girl is characterized by negative self-perception and "hate[s] being the ugly sister" (Na 2017: 117). The protagonist lacks self-esteem and views herself as inherently inferior to Helen, whom she considers "the deluxe version to [her] standard model." Joyce also feels jealous of Helen's qualities, including both physical beauty and academic prowess. The protagonist wishes she were better than Helen in at least one of the aforementioned spheres of life and expresses her disappointment at this perceived lack of justice (Na 2017: 49).

The protagonist and her sister differ above all in the look and shape of their eyes, which becomes the main source of conflict in the novel. Joyce, unlike Helen, does not possess the titular *fold*, a feature that is seen as particularly beautiful among some Asian Americans (Kawamura and Rice 2009: 541). However, it is important to note that, at first, Joyce does not consider her lack of the fold as a negative characteristic, which is depicted in the scene of Gomo's visit. When, after winning the lottery, the aunt declares that she will fund the protagonist's surgery, Joyce is confused, unable to correctly guess which part of her appearance the aunt wants to

alter. This further emphasizes that she does not notice her supposed imperfection (Na 2017: 40, 68-69). Gomo emphasizes the gravity of this flaw and proclaims she “know[s] [Joyce] want[s] to be beautiful like Helen.” She also indicates that the protagonist will never be as attractive as the other girl (Na 2017: 69-70). In this scene, Joyce can be considered a victim of body shaming, which is defined as any derogatory comment about another person’s appearance (Schlüter, Kraag and Schmidt 2023: 26). The intent behind such expressions is debatable. Some researchers argue that body-shaming remarks are often expressed without malice (Schlüter, Kraag and Schmidt 2023: 26), whereas others think they always serve as a tool to make an individual strive to achieve the beauty standard (Brown 2020: 46).

Gomo’s gift of surgery is depicted as having a significant impact on Joyce. While earlier the protagonist did not pay much attention to her eyes, after her aunt’s proposition, she starts to think about them more frequently. This change becomes apparent when Joyce accompanies her friend, Gina, during a drugstore visit. The character starts to notice women pictured in various advertisements and admires the models’ colorful eye makeup with fascination (Na 2017: 74). The eyelid shape becomes almost an obsession: “Now that Joyce’s attention had been drawn to this detail, she couldn’t stop staring at the fold or lack of a fold in all the women she knew and met” (Na 2017: 75). The protagonist proceeds to analyze the looks of other female characters, namely Gina and her mother (Uhmma), in search of this characteristic (Na 2017: 75).

Na shows in *The Fold* that body shaming negatively impacts Joyce’s self-confidence and impairs her mood, which, according to Costanze Schlüter, Gerda Kraag and Jennifer Schmidt, is a common result of such practices (Schlüter, Kraag and Schmidt 2023: 32). While, as discussed before, at first the protagonist did not feel

insecure about her eyes, her view of herself changes quite drastically. The character expresses disbelief about not having been aware of her imperfections earlier. Moreover, she almost immediately remembers a racial slur, “slant-eyes,” while comparing her reflection in the mirror with models in the advertisements (Na 2017: 76). While the protagonist’s reaction might seem extreme, it can be explained by her realization of possessing an often maligned feature. Eugenia Kaw argues that, in North America, monolids are often associated with “‘dullness’, ‘passivity’ and ‘lack of emotion’” (Kaw 1993: 86). As Ashraf Taha Mohamed Kouta points out, the models pictured are most likely to be Caucasian, contributing to Joyce’s alienation from the mainstream (white) American beauty standard (Kouta 2023: 1013). Overall, the scene shows how, once considered neutral, a feature has become a source of insecurity as a result of body shaming and the realization of its negative connotations.

In the protagonist’s eyes, looking attractive is tied to hopes for success within the sphere of romance. Joyce is attracted to John Ford Kang, a popular boy of mixed, Korean and Caucasian, parentage, and believes becoming more beautiful will increase her chances to date him: “with her clear complexion, stylish new haircut [...] John would fall to his knees” (Na 2017: 6). Through this plotline, Na seems to depict a phenomenon, discussed by Rumsey and Harcourt, of teenagers thinking that physical beauty can increase their chances of finding a romantic partner (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71). During interactions with the boy, the protagonist is usually hypervigilant. For instance, she tries to hide her acne with her hair and ponders whether she looks good enough to approach John (Na 2017: 23, 109-110). It is important to note that this type of behavior can be identified as self-monitoring, which is considered a sign of internalization of other people’s views (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 179-180). Once again, when she sees her sister interact with the boy whom she admires, the

protagonist compares herself with Helen (Na 2017: 116-117). Despite Helen's assurance of her romantic disinterest in John, Joyce still feels that her chances for love are threatened (Na 2017: 128-129). At times, comparisons with Helen undermine the protagonist's beliefs regarding the transformative potential of the upcoming surgery. In one scene the character feels discouraged, doubting the eyelid procedure can make a real difference to her self-esteem and the way John perceives her. However, Joyce's pessimistic outlook is criticized by Gina, her friend, who claims the protagonist should accept the free surgery, and gives examples of people they both know whose lives have been changed by it (Na 2017: 137-139). Here, Gina points to the notion of beauty as social currency, which implies that attractive appearance can have a positive impact on a person's life, especially in regard to social opportunities.

The hopes of increasing romantic prospects, discussed above, appear to be the main factor of change in Joyce's perception of plastic surgery. At the beginning of the novel, the idea of surgery seems rather peculiar and scary to the protagonist (Na 2017: 70-71). Later, however, her view changes gradually. The scene in Joyce's family's restaurant illustrates this transformation. Upon learning that John is visiting the place, Joyce despairs at the fact that she has washed off her makeup. The protagonist realizes how self-assured she felt while wearing it and, for the first time, wonders if "getting her eyes done would make her look better" (Na 2017: 110). It becomes clear that to Joyce, the surgery becomes a means through which her chances for romance could be enhanced. Moreover, as Kouta argues, this scene implies that the protagonist has internalized the male gaze through which she now sees herself (Kouta 2023: 1020). Joyce's view of surgery as a means to gain social currency is further reinforced by Lisa, an attractive girl who has undergone blepharoplasty. The character claims that the procedure is relatively uncomplicated and the associated pain is worth the

final results. Moreover, Lisa contrasts her past unpopular, self-conscious self with her new, beautiful, and socially successful persona (Na 2017: 147-148). Once again, the link between beauty and romantic prospects is reinforced by the girl saying: “I finally had the confidence to start flirting with this really cute boy” (Na 2017: 148). Lisa also boldly asserts that undergoing plastic surgery was an overwhelmingly positive, life-changing decision. After this conversation, the protagonist starts to see the procedure as a key to her future happiness. Joyce expresses a desire to feel transformed, dress in a more feminine way, be liked by boys, and date John: “I want to be a part of the fold” (Na 2017: 150). This remark highlights her hope that adhering to the beauty standard will change her social position and result in belonging to the group of popular and beautiful teenagers.

As the novel progresses, Joyce’s desire to appeal to the male gaze and heighten her chance for romance increases. While the protagonist flirts at the beach with John, having applied glue on her eyelid to create an artificial fold, she is told by Lisa that one of her eyes has gone back to normal due to the eyelid glue dissolving. The character immediately decides to leave, feeling unready to be seen by her sweetheart in a condition she deems imperfect (Na 2017: 191-192, 194). As long as she is convinced that her eyes look beautiful, the protagonist feels comfortable and safe, managing to establish and maintain the Goffmanian social face (Goffman 1955: 213). However, through the mishap with the glue, she fears losing face in John’s eyes; in this optic, running away seems to her the only face-saving solution. Joyce’s decision to withdraw from a social situation due to what she perceives as an unpresentable appearance suggests that she has internalized a self-objectifying view of herself. Like many young women in such circumstances (see Fredrickson and

Robers, 1997: 173-174), she sees her face and body as objects that should look attractive to others, especially her potential male lover.

In her novel, Na points to the importance of young people's informed consent regarding undergoing plastic surgery, which scholars see as essential in making a conscious decision (Khunger and Pant 2021: 12). The gravity of this issue is showcased in the scene where the protagonist visits Dr. Reiner. Despite initial excitement about the surgery, Joyce appears anxious in the doctor's office (Na 2017: 160-162). When asked for the reason for her visit, she is surprised and answers that she thinks her aunt has already given the surgeon all the necessary details. The protagonist's attitude suggests that she has accepted Gomo's will and assumes she has to agree with her instructions. Dr. Reiner, however, explains: "what your aunt wants and what you want might be two separate things" (Na 2017: 162). The physician draws attention to the consensus that the idea of undergoing an invasive aesthetic procedure should originate from the adolescent and not from another person, for instance a family member. During the visit, the surgeon makes Joyce aware of how the procedure is performed and which dangers are associated with it to help the protagonist make a responsible decision (Na 2017: 163-165).

In *The Fold*, makeup is portrayed as an alternative strategy to achieve beauty and higher self-esteem. Dr. Reiner wonders whether "self-confidence, exercise, and a lesson at the makeup counter" could help the teenagers seeking procedures (Na 2017: 164). He suggests that the protagonist should try out if she likes having the fold by using a special kind of glue, comparing the method to applying false lashes. The surgeon also explains, to Joyce's surprise, that such cosmetics are popular in Asia (Na 2017: 169). In her article, Yi confirms that "tape[s] or glue[s]" are used by Asians to make a non-permanent eyelid crease. According to Yi, such products are seen as an

alternative to undergoing a permanent appearance alteration and an easy way to make one's face more attractive (Yi 2015: 52). The use of tape for the same purpose is depicted later in the novel, where Gina glues Joyce's folds using this product (Na 2017: 221-225). The protagonist is amazed by the noticeable result of these techniques, describing the experience as "looking at someone she knew but didn't know. Someone familiar but different" and the result as "perfect" (Na 2017: 170, 225). The makeup trick shown by Dr. Reiner inspires self-confidence, changing the way Joyce perceives her face, even regarding the parts of it that are unchanged, such as her skin (Na 2017: 171-172), which shows a positive side of using cosmetics. At the end of the novel, when Joyce refuses to be operated on, she touches her pocket where she keeps the eyelid glue. While the protagonist is unsure whether she will actually use it, she acknowledges the substance as an alternative to surgery: "Who knows when she might need a shot of adventure? There was no harm in having a little fun" (Na 2017: 274). As noted by Natalie Beausoleil, if makeup is often worn out of a sense of duty and can induce negative emotions in many girls and women, it can also be an enjoyable experience for others (Beausoleil 1992: 32-34, 41-42). In this scene of *The Fold*, makeup is no longer portrayed as something necessary but, instead, as casual and pleasurable.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist decides against undergoing plastic surgery. The ultimate reason for Joyce's rejection of the procedure is the importance of preserving her personal identity. While trying out the fold with the help of glue satisfies the protagonist, making her feel beautiful and self-confident, her excitement is decreased by her aunt's remark (Na 2017: 170-172). Gomo tells the girl that she did not know "it would make [Joyce] look so much like Helen" (Na 2017: 172). Hearing the aunt's comment, the protagonist cups her face and attempts to gain some distance,

observing it. The protagonist's reaction suggests disappointment at Gomo's opinion and a wounded sense of self-confidence. Throughout the novel, Joyce wants to escape unfair comparisons to Helen (Na 2017: 49, 117). However, as she learns in this scene, this task is more difficult than she initially expected.

A similar incident happens later in the novel when the protagonist is mistaken for her older sister by John (Na 2017: 187-188). Moreover, Joyce remembers that the boy previously mistook her for yet another Korean girl, Lynn, who is considered ugly by various characters (Na 2017: 25, 36). However, the reason for John's mistake is revealed to be different from the one assumed by the protagonist. The boy does not see Joyce as unattractive, but instead, made a mistake due to the protagonist's hair obscuring her face at the time (Na 2017: 23, 189). While during the flirtatious conversation with the boy, Joyce is happy with having the glued eye folds (Na 2017: 188-189), the aforementioned discovery could contribute to her increasing doubts regarding the surgery. Another important aspect of this interaction is noted by Yi, who emphasizes that John does not notice which element of the protagonist's appearance has changed. The boy wrongly assumes that the character has gotten a new haircut (Yi 2015: 52). John's mistake could add to Joyce's hesitancy, as it shows that the fold itself is not as important as the character assumed.

Joyce's final decision regarding plastic surgery appears to be mostly inspired by Helen's coming out, which symbolizes both girls' decision to stay true to themselves. The older sister explains her situation, describing her past love for Su Yon coming out to the parents (Na 2017: 198, 201). During this conversation, Helen calls beauty standards into question, explaining to Joyce that adhering to them does not necessarily make a person happy. She affirms the importance of listening to oneself instead of following trends and the wishes of other people: "You have to

know what is true to you. Know who you are and what matters the most to you” (Na 2017: 203). The older sister also explains that by fulfilling the expectations of others, it is not possible to truly become a person who is authentic and satisfied with their life (2017: 203-204). This is a pivotal scene in the novel, serving as a moment where the protagonist can realize the surgery is not her own decision and that it would not give her a key to happiness. Instead, the surgery is entangled in various social hopes and obligations — considered for the sake of love and popularity, and due to the fear of disappointing Gomo.

Joyce’s realization, inspired by the aforementioned interactions with Dr. Reiner, Gomo, Helen, John, and her friends, that undergoing plastic surgery could endanger her unique sense of self and cause a loss of relationships, makes her question the procedure. During a meeting with her friend Sam, Joyce wonders whether undergoing plastic surgery is a good decision; she fears that the surgery will not satisfy her or that its positive aspects will only be temporary, resulting in her seeking further enhancement (Na 2017: 216). Sam explains to Joyce his self-esteem issues caused by struggles with acne, for which he takes medication, and his struggles are juxtaposed with the protagonist’s situation. As the protagonist says: “the whole thing didn’t even cross my mind until my Gomo offered the surgery” (Na 2017: 2017). This utterance demonstrates that Joyce was significantly influenced by the relative’s body-shaming comments. Another factor that has a significant impact on the protagonist’s decision is the possible loss of friendship. During their conversation, Sam explains that Gina is afraid that she might change and their friendly bond might dissolve as a result of plastic surgery. In this scene, Joyce finally recognizes that her pursuit of beauty has resulted in her mistreatment of friends, causing her overall well-being to suffer (Na 2017: 215-216).

At the end of *The Fold*, when Joyce tries to find Helen, who is gossiped about at the church, she faces John without the taped-back eyelids. In this scene, the protagonist finally understands she does not need the folds to enhance her romantic prospects and feels more comfortable while keeping her natural look. The character understands that the boy did not know she was not wearing the eyelid glue. Joyce also concludes that now “[she] felt like herself around him instead of some coy cheerleader type character” (Na 2017: 238). The comparison to a cheerleader is apt, since this figure is seen as representing “restrictive gender roles” and “heterosexuality” (Lilja Englund 2014: 7). By evoking this image, Na highlights that striving to appeal to the male gaze in the hope of romance often means ignoring one’s preferences and, instead, trying to embody a certain archetype.

In the novel’s final chapter, Joyce is depicted waiting in Dr Reiner’s waiting room. At first, the protagonist thinks it is “the final moment before she would enter her cocoon to emerge as a gorgeous new butterfly” (Na 2017: 243). However, these positive thoughts are soon replaced by feelings of regret and anxiety. The character worries about the pain that the surgery will bring to the point of becoming nauseous. She is also unhappy about the necessary social withdrawal during the recovery process, which could cause her to miss shopping with her family members and negatively affect her budding relationship with John (Na 2017: 243-244). The protagonist perceives this as if “life was moving forward without her” (Na 2017: 244). Joyce’s fears and perception of the situation reflect that, as acknowledged by Tung, striving for beauty often means being limited in regard to activities that one can engage in, at least temporarily (Tung 2020: 255). These realizations cause the protagonist to finally question whether plastic surgery and beauty enhancement are worth the pain, long recovery, and social limitations. In this scene, the protagonist is

unsure of the right course of action and wonders whether she will regret whichever decision she takes. Joyce's doubtful thoughts seem to focus on whether the shape of her eyes should define her. Moreover, she is aware that she does not know what her desires truly are.

Finally, the character decides to step out of the doctor's office and announces to her mother and aunt that she will not undergo the procedure (Na 2017: 245). The protagonist explains that she does not want to constantly worry about her appearance anymore. While Joyce most likely does not see herself as extraordinarily beautiful, she explains that she feels at peace with her appearance. While affirming her final decision, she expresses gratitude for her gift to Gomo, who at first is slightly disappointed. During the final scene, the activities the protagonist would like to do are portrayed as more important than her looks. Such an attitude counters the validity of limiting one's life choices for the sake of beauty and puts importance on being an active participant in life, which the pursuit of attractiveness often discourages (Tung 2020: 255).

2.3.2. Helen: Queer Women and the Critique of Beauty Norms

Na uses the character of the protagonist's older sister, Helen, to show concerns regarding the validity of appearance standards. It is important to note that Helen is the only prominent queer character in the novel. The character is depicted as somebody who questions beauty norms and the idea of surgical enhancements. When Helen discovers Joyce is seriously considering eyelid surgery, she expresses disbelief. She asks whether the protagonist wants to "defile her face" (Na 2017: 153), making it clear that, in her view, aesthetic surgery is almost a form of mutilation. The older sister attempts to make Joyce aware that the appearance norms in the United States

are based primarily on Caucasian women (Na 2017: 153). Moreover, Helen tries to show Joyce that her eyes look normal, exactly how they “are supposed to” (Na 2017: 153). Here, Helen opposes Joyce’s wishes to change her eyelids and the mainstream American beauty standards that have most likely influenced her younger sister. The protagonist’s criticism is somewhat similar to that of Eugenia Kaw (Kaw 1993: 86), who claims that Asian American women partaking in certain surgical enhancements are significantly motivated by internalized “gender and racial ideologies,” such as negative mainstream beliefs about Asians (Kaw 1993: 86). Helen, unlike other women in *The Fold*, for whom attaining the beauty standards is aspirational, rejects such attempts.

Helen’s queer identity can be seen as a possible reason for her critical stance regarding beauty standards, which she expresses throughout the novel. While queer women’s experiences with beauty differ individually, Jeanine C. Cogan and Joanie M. Erickson indicate that lesbians’ perceptions of attractiveness are significantly more inclusive in comparison with the mainstream, heterosexual standards. The scholars show that lesbian women pay attention to many varied features, such as one’s attitude, qualities of character, and choice of clothing and accessories. Although some physical traits are considered beautiful by lesbians, their role is equal to, and not more important than, the aforementioned aspects (Cogan and Erickson 1991: 1-2). Moreover, lesbians are allowed “to experiment with beauty,” unlike many of their heterosexual counterparts (Cogan and Erickson 1991: 3). Accordingly, considering Helen’s sexuality in *The Fold*, it is not surprising that she does not express interest in beautification and other attempts to appeal to the male gaze, as opposed to other female characters in the novel.

The figure of Helen also serves to show that being perceived as beautiful is not always a source of happiness and fulfillment. When the protagonist is first introduced in the book, she is still closeted. A successful college student and a real beauty (Na 2017: 49, 52, 98), Helen is considered the stereotypical perfect daughter for whom her family, especially her aunt (Na 2017: 202), has numerous hopes and plans. Gomo gifts her a match-making service to find an ideal husband for her (Na 2017: 65). Helen is, unsurprisingly, unhappy with such an offer and suffers in silence, afraid to tell her relatives the truth (Na 2017: 200-202). Na thus shows that, although traditionally beauty is a form of currency for women, it can also be harmful. In Helen's case, it is primarily a source of stress; Gomo's expectations arising from her perception of Helen's physical beauty are the reason why the character has felt inadequate and stayed closeted for a long time. Ultimately, Helen decides to come out to her sister, with which the author highlights the importance of being true to oneself (Na 2017: 198, 200-202).

2.3.3. Gomo: Beauty as a Social Currency and a Coping Strategy

Gomo, Joyce's aunt, is a first-generation Korean American, who is first introduced as an extravagant character and thus seems to represent the *ajumma* stereotype. According to Jae-Eun Park, in South Korea *ajumma* refers to middle-aged women who are perceived as selfish, insistent, "loud," and, quite often, have a lavish appearance (Park J-E. 2024: 24). Moreover, the character freely comments on other people's looks – as the novel's narrator points out, "you could always count on [her] to be brutally honest" (Na 2017: 70). Such behavior is generally seen as impolite in the West, whereas, according to Choi Yujin and Min Seong-Jae, it is widely accepted in South Korea (Yujin in Hu 2023: 298; Min 2023).

The aunt is the novel's primary plot catalyst. When the character wins a lottery, she gives her family members various gifts and services that she hopes will improve them (Na 2017: 42, 44). The most important of those presents in *The Fold* is the blepharoplasty for Joyce, which Gomo sees as "a very simple procedure" (Na 2017: 69). The aunt's attempts to ensure that the protagonist fulfills the dominant beauty standard are not surprising considering that, as Pamela K. Stone argues, women frequently "police the bodies of" other women (Stone 2020: 53). While this task is most often taken on by a girl's mother (Stone 2020: 52), as noticed in the analysis of *Fix* by Leslie Margolis, in Na's fiction the aunt plays the same role. Moreover, the idea of offering plastic surgery as a gift and treating an invasive procedure in a rather light-hearted manner can be seen as a reflection of cultural norms among "both first and second generation Koreans" in America, as well as Koreans in their home country (Lee 2012: 5). As Sharon Heijin Lee explains, gifting cosmetic surgeries to relatives, especially those in their late teenage years, is seen as normal in Korea and among the Korean diaspora. Frequently, in Korean communities, plastic surgery is seen as a part of a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood (Lee 2012: 5). Through the figure of the aunt, Na thus illustrates aesthetic practices that link the protagonist's family to their country of origin. Gomo's intention is not to offend, but to improve her beloved niece's existence by offering her a procedure which, she believes, is a wonderful gift that will radically change the girl's life.

Upon her first introduction, Gomo seems characterized by vanity and shallow pursuit of beauty, but as the plot moves forward Na adds more depth to this character. Joyce and her brother Andy humorously refer to the aunt as 'Michael' (Jackson) due to her numerous appearance enhancements in order to conform to Western standards of beauty. Gomo has undergone eight surgical procedures and wears heavy makeup

(Na 2017: 46, 62). As a result, the character's face is compared to a mask that cannot fully move. Joyce sees the aunt's attempts to achieve beauty as odd and, to a large extent, futile, since she notices the strange movement of her face and the unnatural look of her makeup (Na 2017: 62, 123). As it turns out, however, beauty has been a form of currency for Joyce's aunt, and her adaptation to the Western appearance standard can be considered a form of survival strategy. It is revealed that in her youth in South Korea Gomo was considered an unusually attractive woman. Her beautiful face attracted the attention of others, including her future husband, a US Army soldier who provided her family with food, an important resource during the Korean War (Na 2017: 158). This plotline mimics a real-life phenomenon observed by scholars: usually, women who are attractive have better marriage prospects (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 178). Here, it becomes clear that the aunt's beauty was a currency – in a literal sense since Gomo's looks helped her find a good husband who ensured his wife's well-being.

Nevertheless, as Meeta Rani Jha emphasizes, Asian American women can feel the need to hide their ethnicity in order to escape unfavorable, racist treatment (Jha 2016: 88), and Gomo's decisions can be seen as made with such a goal in mind. The treatment she is used to, as a beautiful woman in South Korea, is contrasted with the reactions she is faced with in North America. Unlike the people in her native country, her husband's family considers her unattractive. The family questions their son's choice, refuses to communicate with his new wife, and calls her racist slurs, such as “[a] slanted-eyed gook” (Na 2017: 158). Confronted with such treatment, Gomo becomes aware that she has lost her previous status of a beautiful woman that is well-treated by others. The character explains that by seeking surgical procedures, “[she] only wanted what [she] had lost when [she] moved to” the United States (Na 2017:

159). Therefore, it becomes rather clear that the aunt's surgeries were never motivated by vanity but instead by the desire to regain her former social status. As mentioned above, according to Rhoda K. Unger, in order to gain social currency, women need to appeal to the mainstream beauty standards (Unger in Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 178). It is not surprising, therefore, that the character is willing to have various procedures performed. Moreover, plastic surgery might be Gomo's strategy to avoid being a target of racism, such as that she experienced from her husband's family (Na 2017: 158).

It is interesting to note that Gomo accepts altering her appearance as a part of her assimilation into North American society. She claims she has undergone surgery for herself instead of for others. Importantly, she likens her transformation to that of other United States citizens who wish to be as American as possible (Na 2017: 159). Furthermore, the aunt does not seem to question the validity of beauty standards, which, as Kaw claims, is an attitude commonly seen among Asian American women (Kaw 1993: 87). Instead, the status quo in the form of "racial stereotypes" often remains unquestioned, and participating in plastic surgery is seen as a form of an individual choice motivated by a desire for self-improvement (Kaw 1993: 87). Being a member of the Korean American diaspora, Gomo undoubtedly faces pressure to be beautiful from different sources. According to Nikki Kanna, on the one hand are appearance norms within the diaspora, which, despite similarities to some white features, do not intend to mimic a Caucasian appearance. On the other hand, there is the mainstream American culture, whose beauty standards are significantly influenced by whiteness, with the exclusion of other ethnicities (Khanna 2020: 21-23). While Gomo's motivation and the details of her self-image are not directly discussed in the novel, her immigrant status, as well as her experiences of racism, might imply so. The

novel thus approaches in an ambiguous way the stereotype of the submissive Asian, mentioned in Chapter One, as Goto both complies with the normative expectations, yet, at the same time, acquires agency by choosing to escape the stereotypical Asian looks and Asian female docility.

While the character's domineering personality can be difficult for the reader to sympathize with, as well as her lack of consideration for her family's wishes regarding their appearance, her backstory discussed above provides an explanation for her conduct. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Gomo "looked just like Joyce" before her surgical transformation (Na 2017: 46). This, in turn, suggests that the aunt's idea to sponsor the teenager's plastic surgery most likely stemmed from a place of care. It is likely that the aunt's past negative experiences, such as racist discrimination and a loss of beauty-based social capital, have motivated her decision. Gomo, not wanting Joyce to endure similarly unjust treatment from others, has probably suggested this strategy as it has worked for her.

2.3.4. Beauty Rituals as a Source of Female Bonding

While Na criticizes the toxic aspects of facial beauty-related issues, such as problems with self-esteem, the oppressive nature of appearance standards, and risks associated with various procedures, the author also highlights the more positive aspects connected to striving for beauty. In the novel's world, doing makeup, exchanging beauty tips, and shopping for cosmetics are depicted as opportunities for female bonding. Kate Fox characterizes bonding between women as simple and informal, often taking place in mundane situations and places (Fox 5), which is reflected in *The Fold*.

Throughout the book, Joyce and her best friend, Gina, share many moments where they bond over appearance-related activities. Early in the novel, Gina advises Joyce to limit her chocolate consumption to avoid acne and suggests that both of them use summer holidays to improve their appearance (Na 2017: 11, 35-37). Later in the novel, the characters visit a mall where Joyce is supposed to buy Gina makeup as payback for borrowed money. Gina, however, decides to use this occasion to make Joyce also try eye makeup (Na 2017: 73-74). It is at this moment that the protagonist expresses her anxieties regarding the upcoming plastic surgery. As Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen and Pasi Mäenpää claim, the act of shopping facilitates a relaxing atmosphere where the products are “a mediating force” between people engaged in conversation (Lehtonen and Mäenpää 1997: 151), making the scene’s shopping center setting apt for this confession. While Gina does not seem to understand Joyce’s worries and shows jealousy over the opportunity she has been offered, the moment still serves an important function for the protagonist as she is able to express herself out loud (Na 2017: 74-77). It is important to note that this is the first time Joyce explicitly discusses her concerns with anybody.

Furthermore, Joyce and Gina bond over doing makeup numerous times throughout the novel. Such instances can be found in Gina preparing Joyce for the beach hangout with John and the church service, where the protagonist can see her sweetheart (Na 2017: 177, 221). The moments are joyous and exciting for the girls, providing an opportunity for reconciliation after a breakup in their friendship (Na 2017: 221). While applying makeup and offering each other understanding and emotional support, the characters can have an honest conversation. The moment is precious for the protagonist, who hugs her friend and wants to “savor the feeling of

closeness” (Na 2017: 221-222, 227). Once again, it becomes clear that beautifying rituals can offer girls and women a chance to deepen their bonds with each other.

Deborah L. Rhode argues that beauty salons are places where female bonding often takes place (Rhode 2016: 705). Moreover, according to Eileen Otis, such environments foster sharing both “the ‘secrets of beauty’” and also other private matters (Otis 2021: 339). This function of a beautifying ritual’s site is portrayed in the next scene, where Joyce is having her makeup done by one of the store’s employees, Arlene, a fellow Asian woman. The moment is portrayed as quite relaxing and intimate, with the protagonist perceiving the care provided by the shopkeeper as pleasant. Arlene gives Joyce beauty advice regarding acne while also highlighting how makeup enhances the look of her skin (Na 2017: 80). The woman points out that the protagonist does not have creased eyelids and explains the limitations that this facial feature has on applying makeup: “Most Asians can’t wear more than two or three shades [of eyeshadow at the same time] because of the size of their fold” (Na 2017: 83). During the makeup application, Joyce starts to wonder whether Arlene has undergone plastic surgery and, after a while, questions her about it. At first, the shop assistant’s reaction is hostile, as she most likely assumes that the intent behind the protagonist’s queries is malicious. However, Arlene’s attitude changes when she learns that Joyce has been offered eye surgery as a gift by her aunt. She explains that decisions about such procedures should not be made hastily and tries to make the protagonist aware of various possible complications (Na 2017: 83-84). With the shop employee’s strong reaction, the author stresses the importance of informed consent regarding plastic surgery. This scene illustrates, moreover, how places where beauty-related rituals take place can be a site of honest conversation prompted by the products tested and used (Lehtonen and Mäenpää 1997: 151; Otis 2021: 339).

Beautification also allows Joyce to temporarily befriend Lisa, a very attractive Korean girl in her church community who has had eyelid surgery (Na 2017: 134-135). While the protagonist would likely not approach a popular person, due to their belonging to different social circles, the topic of the procedure bridges the gap between the two characters, similarly to the aforementioned phenomenon identified by Lehtonen and Mäenpää in the shopping experience. At first, Joyce seems anxious during the conversation; Lisa, however, gladly engages in the talk and encourages the protagonist to examine her eyes closely. Moreover, the attractive girl voluntarily relates her feelings about the procedure, describes the healing process, and reveals that the surgery was also performed as a birthday gift (Na 2017: 147). While the new friendship between the two characters does not endure, Joyce's excitement "to show Lisa [her] new eyes" shows that beauty rituals can be an opportunity for female bonding (Na 2017: 182-183, 179).

As depicted in Na's novel, engaging in beautifying strategies and visiting places where beauty products are sold can serve as worthwhile occasions for girls to interact with each other, make new acquaintances, and solidify existing friendships. However, the phenomenon arguably also has a problematic dimension. The association of female bonding with purchasing beauty enhancers can reinforce the link, observed by scholars, between femininity and consumerism (Dimulescu 2015: 508). Angela McRobbie points out that in the 21st century, the role of consumption has expanded "in the formation of the categories of youthful femininity" of tweens and teens. The scholar warns against the enthusiastic embrace of this change (McRobbie 2008: 532, 545).

2.4. A Korean American Adoptee's Desires for Plastic Surgery in *Slant* by Laura E. Williams

Slant is a Young Adult novella by the Korean-born American author Laura E. Williams, which was released in 2008. It tells the story of Lauren, a Korean American girl adopted by a white couple and raised by her adoptive father, Martin, after his wife's death. The novella's simple plot concerns Lauren's wishes to undergo plastic surgery for her eyelids. The character voices her desire to her adoptive Grandma, Ann, who agrees they visit a surgeon secretly. However, Martin finds out about the surgery and forbids it. Afterward, Lauren learns that her adoptive mother committed suicide and, filled with pity, her adoptive father changes his mind regarding the cosmetic procedure. However, on the way to the surgeon's office, the protagonist realizes that surgery will not make her happy, and she tells her father to change the route and drive her to school instead.

Slant offers an important account of the experience of a Korean American adoptee in a white family, which, as Kim Ja Park Nelson points out, is rarely paid attention to, as opposed to the perspectives of adoptive parents (Park Nelson 2009: 298). Despite presenting this valuable point of view, the novella is only briefly discussed in “‘What Defines Me?’ - Performativity, Gender and Ethnicity in Korean American YA Fiction” (2017) by Sung-Ae Lee and John Stephens. This subchapter intends to elaborate on the existing research and discuss the novella's themes in more detail. In *Slant*, Williams pays attention to issues such as the experience of the stigmatization of ethnic features, racist appearance-based bullying, the otherness of an Asian American adoptee among a majority Caucasian community, and the reason why young people of such backgrounds can desire plastic surgery. It is important to note that, perhaps due to the conciseness of the novella and its intended young audience,

Williams does not give details of Lauren's, as well as her Chinese adoptive sister Maia's, adoption. The reasons why the Caucasian parents chose these particular children, and the circumstances under which the characters became available for adoption, remain obscure in the story.

2.4.1. Stigma, Otherness, and Bullying over Ethnic Features

Lauren, the thirteen-year-old protagonist of the novella, is a victim of stigmatization, similarly to Cameron from the previously discussed novel *Fix*. The protagonist is also seen as the Other and is aware of this status, to which Lee and Stephens point in their article (Lee and Stephens 2017: 79). As the book's title indicates, the protagonist's peers frequently address her not with her name, but instead with various racist nicknames, such as "slant," "gook, and chink" (Williams 2008: 19, 33, 48, 79, 105, 145). It can be noticed that two of the slurs used to humiliate Lauren refer to the character's eyes, which become the mark of stigma. The possession of this feature results in other characters not seeing the protagonist as an equal, "whole and usual person" (Goffman 1986: 3). Instead, Lauren is perceived and referred to as a racial stereotype, as indicated by the aforementioned nicknames. This point is further emphasized by Caucasian characters in Lauren's and her Chinese sister Maia's community; they are convinced that the two girls look the same despite coming from different ethnic backgrounds (Williams 2008: 4). Moreover, the other teenagers make incorrect assumptions based on the stereotypes regarding the protagonist's looks and race. One of Lauren's bullies, Matt, repeatedly asks the girl to allow him to copy her math homework (Williams 2008: 145-146), reflecting the mainstream cultural belief that all Asian people are highly intelligent and talented in the sphere of mathematics

(Wu and Battey 2021). Each of these instances suggests that Lauren is a victim of appearance-based stigmatization and othering at the hands of her peers.

The bad treatment Lauren experiences can also be conceptualized through the lens of the white gaze. According to this theory, as Nora Tsou explains, Caucasians see non-white people as inferior. Persons of color are not perceived as unique individuals with different strengths and weaknesses but instead “as constructions of White imagery” (Tsou 2019: 27). Tsou explains that such beliefs are harmful to Asian Americans, whose achievements and struggles can go unnoticed or be questioned by the white majority, especially when they do not fit the preconceived cultural notions about this minority (Tsou 2019: 27). What is important to remember is that, as Tsou claims, Caucasians can often be unaware of their negative racial biases and of discriminatory actions that they perform (Tsou 2019: 17). In *Slant* the white gaze can be found in the racial slurs that the protagonist’s peers use to call her (Williams 2008: 19, 33, 48, 79, 105, 145). The derogatory nicknames are generic, since they refer to Asian Americans as a homogeneous group; they indicate that Lauren is not seen as her own person by other characters but instead as a racialized, stereotypical figure. The titular “slant,” but also the frequently used “chinko,” show that, in other teenagers’ views, the protagonist is reduced to her monolid eyes; whereas “gook”⁹ highlights that they refuse to consider Lauren as anybody else beyond her Asian American identity. The protagonist is aware that others look at her through the white gaze, which is exemplified in the scene where she is asked for her math homework: “Maybe [Matt] thinks slanty eyes can see the numbers better” (Williams 2008: 19), reflecting

9 The exact origins of the slur and its possible time of emergence is debated (Roediger 1992). Douglas Harper notes that the word has evolved throughout the years starting with referring to Filipinos, and then “Nicaraguans [...], Pacific Islander[s] [...], Koreans [...], Vietnamese and Any Asian[s]” (Harper n.d.: Gook). Lan Cao and Himilce Novas suggest the word could have originated from the Korean word for ‘country’ (Cao and Novas 1996: 262). In contemporary usage, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as a derogatory term for people of color of (South) East Asian descent (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989 Vol 6: 683).

that, as Tsou explains, white people often approach people of color with various preconceived notions (Tsou 2019: 17). Despite experiencing the negative effects of the white gaze, for most of the novel Lauren chooses the easiest course of action and refuses to protest against the racist attacks (Williams 2008: 18-19, 33). One of the coping strategies adopted by Lauren is trying to explain as simple rudeness her classmates' racist behaviors (Williams 2008: 17).

Lauren experiences various types of teasing and bullying over her eye shape, which results in psychological distress. One such instance can be found in the scene where Lauren sees the meals prepared for a party at her friend Julie's house. When the protagonist notices toothpicks used to hold food together, she immediately remembers mockery received from two of her bullies, Matt and Greg: "I can't help hearing [them] telling me to use toothpicks to keep my slanty eyes open" (Williams 2008: 63). Seeing this mundane object triggers the unpleasant memory, which results in Lauren breaking one of them. Subsequently, the two characters remove all toothpicks, perhaps in the hope of forgetting this experience (Williams 2008: 63-64). The novella also contains brief depictions of self-monitoring, as defined by Fredrickson and Roberts (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 179-180), which reveal Lauren's wish to be treated better by her peers. When called "slant" by Matt in the presence of popular classmates, the protagonist tries to produce a neutral expression and widen her eyes as much as possible. While Lauren knows that such attempts to transform her appearance will not make a significant change, she still feels compelled to control her face (Williams 2008: 33). The protagonist experiences another particularly upsetting moment when, having spent some time with her, Sean, her Caucasian sweetheart, calls her "slant" (Williams 2008: 48). In Lauren's mind, the happy memories become

tainted by this moment and she questions afterward if she actually feels attracted to the young man (Williams 2008: 49-51).

Similarly to Margolis in *Fix*, Williams shows that bullying can contribute to one's negative self-perception. As a result of the constant teasing by other teenagers at her school, Lauren struggles with insecurity regarding her looks. When assigned a task at school, involving the protagonist and her friend Julie taking photographs of each other, the character is mortified. In her mind, she concludes that she always looks unflattering in pictures and lists all the features she dislikes about her appearance: "my nose looks flatter than ever [and] my eyes are slits" (Williams 2008: 21-22). It can be noticed that the facial features Lauren finds ugly are the ethnic Korean ones. With this depiction, the writer points out that the protagonist struggles with internalized racism, especially regarding her looks. Albert Memmi describes this phenomenon as a process in which a person belonging to a racial minority internalizes the racist views of their oppressors (Memmi in David, Schroeder and Fernandez 2019: 4). Moreover, the individual can struggle with seeing themselves as inferior and not desirable in comparison to others (David, Schroeder and Fernandez. 2019: 4). Lauren's internalization of negative views on the ethnic features of her appearance are not only highlighted by the dislike of her "slanty eyes" (Williams 2008: 12) but also by the comparison with her friend. Julie, a Caucasian character from a wealthy family, is envied by Lauren for her white features, including taller stature, natural "wavy blonde hair," and, most importantly, her blue eyes (Williams 2008: 15, 28). The protagonist admires the appearance and movement of Julie's eyes, noticing that her friend is able to move her eyes in a different way than she does, a difference she evaluates as negative on her side (Williams 2008: 28). Once again, it becomes clear that the protagonist sees Caucasian features as superior to Asian ones.

2.4.2. Appearance and the Korean American Adoptee Experience

Lauren's experience as a Korean American adoptee is characterized, as Lee and Stephens point out, by "cultural isolation" (Lee and Stephens 2017: 79). The protagonist is depicted as the only Korean within her circle of family and close friends, with her adoptive parents and grandparents being Caucasian and her adoptive sister being Chinese. When she indulges in reminiscences on her childhood and experiences in early school education, she remembers being the only child of Korean descent in her kindergarten. The protagonist identifies her visible difference from the rest of the children by saying that she was "the only one with slanty eyes and hair as black as a crow's wing" (Williams 2008: 37). As Lee and Stephens argue, Lauren is not provided with "apt body image models or a background of cultural and racial/ethnic context" (Lee and Stephens 2008: 79). She is not portrayed consuming any Korean American or Korean media, and does not have any Korean American friends, which supports the scholars' claim.

As discussed in the previous section, Lauren's visible physical differences and estrangement from Korean American culture most likely contribute to her outsider status. Furthermore, these factors might also affect the character's self-perception. Sueyoung L. Song states that young girls who see "aspects of [their] race and culture" shown in an affirmative manner tend to be less affected by discriminatory remarks. While these findings arise from the study of non-transracial families, the scholar suggests the same measures can be beneficial for Koreans adopted into Caucasian families (Song 2009: 5). Unfortunately, the protagonist's father and grandmother do not encourage her contact with Korean American culture and primarily avoid commenting on the racial aspects of her appearance, apart from asserting that her eyes

are “pretty” and “beautiful” (Williams 2008: 79, 125). It is not surprising, therefore, in light of Song’s claims, that the character perceives her appearance in a negative light.

Throughout *Slant*, the protagonist is depicted as wishing to undergo plastic surgery in order to look like other teenagers around her (Williams 2008: 55) and, presumably, like her adoptive family members. The latter is suggested when Lauren thinks about the difference between her appearance and that of her father and grandmother. She wonders what her father thinks about her looks, knowing he “can[not] say, *she has my ears and Grandpa’s nose*” (Williams 2008: 131; emphasis in the original). Among other factors discussed earlier in this chapter, the desire to look like others around her points to Lauren’s unique position as an Asian adoptee in a white family. Song states that children of color adopted by white parents can be more at risk of experiencing negative feelings toward their bodies. The scholar argues that such negative effects can be caused by having to navigate between Caucasian and Korean appearance norms as in the case of the novella’s protagonist. This, in turn, can result in adopting the white beauty standards and subsequently striving to achieve them (Song 2009: 5-6). In the context of Lauren’s wish to look similar to white teens, her dislike of her ethnic features, as well as her desire for plastic surgery, suggest that she has internalized the Caucasian appearance ideal (Williams 2008: 55, 79).

Lauren’s relationship with the members of her adoptive family, especially her father, contributes to her struggles with appearance issues. In the novella, Martin communicates with his daughters primarily through handwritten notes (Williams 2008: 59). It is likely that, due to this lack of in-person communication, the protagonist feels she cannot tell him about her insecurities. Upon explaining her surgery wishes to Grandma Ann, she says: “He won’t understand. [...] He’ll never agree” (Williams

2008: 79). The protagonist also tells her grandmother that Martin did not allow ear piercing until Lauren's thirteenth birthday, suggesting that the father is a strict parent (Williams 2007: 79). The girl's turning to her grandmother can also suggest the lack of a maternal role-model in her life. While, as Rumsey and Harcourt argue, teenagers often avoid talking with their parents about their appearance, the parent that is engaged in such conversations, if they occur, is usually the mother (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 73). Perhaps Lauren does not feel comfortable discussing matters of appearance with her father and assumes he will not understand her problems due to his gender.

2.4.3. Teenage Decision to Undergo Plastic Surgery

Slant's plotline primarily focuses on Lauren's desire to undergo blepharoplasty, which would change the look of her eyes. From the novella's beginning, the surgery is depicted as the protagonist's biggest wish. The character keeps the desire secret from her family and her best friend, makes a wish on every possible occasion, and prays to God for its eventual fulfillment. Moreover, she also collects money for the surgery, intending to finance it herself (Williams 2008: 13-14, 55). Lauren's actions suggest that she truly hopes that eyelid surgery would change her life for the better.

In their analysis of the novella, Lee and Stephens highlight that the main motivation behind Lauren's actions is wanting to escape racial stereotypization and othering, apparent in her classmates' name-calling, such as the titular 'slant' (Lee and Stephens 2017: 79). The intent behind the protagonist's wish is stated directly in the novella: "I'll look more like everyone else, and less like a chinko" (Williams 2008: 55). Later, this goal is reiterated when Lauren finally decides to reveal her wish to Grandma Ann. Initially, the elderly woman does not understand why the protagonist

wants to undergo an eye operation and wonders what eyesight impairment a thirteen-year-old girl could have (Williams 2008: 78-79). To Grandma Ann's surprise, Lauren explains that she does not like the look of her eyelids, claiming that she "[has] *chink* eyes" (Williams 2008: 79; emphasis in the original) and giving examples of how her eye shape attracts peer ridicule. She explains to her grandmother how she hopes that the surgery will prevent further bullying from other teenagers. Lauren is depicted as rather emotional during the conversation, her body becoming tense and her heart stinging (Williams 2008: 79). Similarly to the protagonist of *The Fold*, Lauren believes the procedure will improve her well-being. When her grandmother agrees to visit a plastic surgeon with her, the girl proclaims: "This operation will make me the happiest girl in the world, I promise!" (Williams 2008: 80). Considering the racist bullying the protagonist has endured, it is not surprising she associates the prospect of being able to escape it with happiness. It is important to note that she does not seem particularly interested in looking beautiful or exceptional. Instead, Lauren wants to conform to the white appearance ideal within her community and be considered normal (Williams 2008: 55). Lauren's desire to be seen as ordinary reflects a common phenomenon among teenagers. As Rumsey and Harcourt suggest, being perceived in such a way has a positive effect on one's well-being (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 71).

Slant not only differs from *Fix* and *The Fold* by showing how teenage girls' experiences with beauty can differ in traditional and adoptive families. Unlike Joyce and Allie from the two previous novels, plastic surgery in Williams's work is the young protagonist's idea, rather than her family's. Lauren is portrayed as certain about her decision, with the aforementioned praying, wishing, and, perhaps most importantly, diligent money collecting for the operation (Williams 2008: 14, 55, 60). As mentioned before, from the point of medical ethics, it is important that it should be

the teenage patient's wish to undergo plastic surgery and not their family's or other persons' (Larson and Gosain 2012: 138-139).

In *Slant*, the protagonist is depicted as aware of and willing to withstand the pain that undergoing her desired eyelid surgery would require. An example of her attitude towards the painful aspect of beautification can be found in the scene taking place the morning after Lauren has her ears pierced. The experience is uncomfortable for the protagonist and requires her to alter her preferred sleep position (Williams 2008: 65). While for a brief moment Lauren questions whether earrings "are [...] worth the agony," she quickly dismisses these concerns. She reminds herself that she has to accept that becoming beautiful will cost her pain, evoking rather gruesome imagery of "slicing and stitching" of the skin (Williams 2008: 65). The protagonist's attitude reflects the societal belief that this is what beautification should look like (Sheridan and Gregoricka 2020: 11). As a result, Lauren is not as much afraid of pain as she is of her father refusing to give her permission to undergo the plastic surgery (Williams 2008: 65).

At the same time, the protagonist's awareness of the pain involved in the procedure can also indicate, in accordance with Kathy Davis's theory on plastic surgery, her agency regarding the procedure (Davis 1991: 34). In "Remaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty," the scholar proposes to approach potential surgery patients not as mere victims who succumb to cultural pressures (Davis 1991: 34), such as beauty standards. Instead, she acknowledges that they frequently make conscious choices about altering their appearance. According to Davis, those who choose to undergo cosmetic procedures often have a history of strongly unpleasant experiences stemming from their looks. As a result of this painful past, the surgery and its result can be seen as an improvement of their life situation

(Davis 1991: 34). The main protagonist of Williams's novel perceives the procedure as potentially life-changing. It is not surprising that Lauren thinks surgery will "make her the happiest girl in the world," taking into consideration that she has endured teasing, presumably, for most of her young life (Williams 2008: 80). Perspectives regarding plastic surgery such as Davis's are undoubtedly valuable. However, it is important to note that they were based on adult women and not teenage girls, and thus can perhaps better explain Gomo's attitude in Na's *The Fold* rather than Williams's protagonist's.

In the novella, the protagonist's adoptive mother has an impact on the teenage girl's considerations regarding plastic surgery, although in a rather unusual manner. While in *Fix* the mother tries to directly pressure her daughter into undergoing a cosmetic procedure, Lauren's deceased mother serves as a partial inspiration and a figure that strengthens her belief in plastic surgery as a means to achieve happiness. When Grandma Ann visits the protagonist to celebrate her birthday, she gifts her a photo album containing pictures of her deceased adoptive mother, Charlene. The protagonist quickly notices that the woman looks different from how she appeared when they lived together. Finally, Lauren looks at the last photos in the album and realizes her mother's nose was not the same in her youth (Williams 2008: 76-77). Grandmother Ann, most likely noticing that the protagonist wonders what has happened, explains that Charlene underwent rhinoplasty. While the procedure was initially intended to be purely medical, the women agreed to an aesthetic reduction as well. The relative also tells Lauren that the mother "always hated her nose" and reveals that the surgery was done when she was thirteen (Na 2008: 77). This fact significantly impacts the protagonist as she appears to be both shocked and excited. Following this experience, she makes a rather interesting observation. While she does

not perceive her mother's former nose shape as particularly large or ugly, she still proclaims it significantly improved after the surgery. Lauren admires her new "cute, stubby nose" (Williams 2008: 78).

In the scene where Lauren and her grandmother talk about the surgery, the eyelid procedure is presented as a way to diminish the character's persecution by her peers, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The protagonist explains the distress she experiences due to looking different from other (Caucasian) teenagers, which elicits sympathy from her grandmother. Inspired by the revelation regarding her mother's past, the protagonist asks Grandma Ann to accompany her to a plastic surgeon. As the elderly woman finally agrees to her granddaughter's request, she says: "I want you to be happy. No one deserves to be unhappy" (Williams 2008: 80). The grandmother's view of surgery is somewhat similar to Davis's further conceptualization of plastic surgery as an issue of justice discussed in the article mentioned above. Accordingly, cosmetic procedures can be considered a way to limit suffering, of external and/or internal nature, which an individual endures due to her looks. While Davis acknowledges that plastic surgery carries many problems that should not be ignored, such as the merits of altering medically "healthy bodies" among other issues, she also highlights that in some cases, such an operation can be seen as giving an individual a happier life without suffering, and looks that are perceived as normal (Davis 1991: 38). Davis does not promote surgery as a universal "fix" to women's problems; however, she acknowledges it still might be the right, or the only available, solution for some women (Davis 1991: 39). Considering that Grandma Ann most likely does not know how to alleviate her granddaughter's suffering and that her own daughter underwent plastic surgery for a maligned facial feature, she can see it as the best course of action. As she does not want her beloved Lauren to endure unpleasant

experiences and dislike her appearance, her consent to visit a surgeon together does not seem surprising (Williams 2008: 77-80).

2.4.4. Towards Self-Acceptance

However, as the novella progresses, doubts emerge in Lauren's mind. A similar, though slower and more gradual change, could be noticed in Joyce, the protagonist of *The Fold*, as well. During the ride to Doctor Sung's office, Williams's protagonist stays quiet, both out of stress and anticipation. Finally, upon reaching the destination, Lauren excitedly proclaims to Ann that she is sure of her decision (Williams 2008: 108-109). The protagonist looks around the clinic's waiting room, wondering if its staff have undergone surgery. To her surprise, upon seeing a woman with a half-scarred face, she perceives the stranger as beautiful despite the disfigurement. Perhaps the discomfort accompanying this encounter makes her realize that one does not need to be perfect to appear attractive to others, which, in turn, provokes her doubts regarding the surgery (Williams 2008: 109-110).

The novella depicts the visit in quite a realistic manner. Dr. Sung is portrayed as rather friendly, albeit the protagonist is surprised by his looks, resembling "an expensive car salesman" as opposed to an ordinary physician (Williams 2008: 110). The practitioner acknowledges his patient's young age (Williams 2008: 111), which, as Larson and Gosain claim, is a time when individuals might particularly struggle with their looks. This, as mentioned before, makes operating on a teenage person controversial (Larson and Gosain 2012: 136). Nonetheless, the doctor inquires what motivates Lauren to seek plastic surgery. He tries to gauge whether the surgery is her decision and if it is the right solution for her struggles. During this moment, the protagonist feels embarrassed, finding it hard to voice her reasons out loud to

somebody other than her grandmother: “I have so many great reasons, at least they seemed perfect until he asked me to say them” (Williams 2008: 111). Finally, however, she simply states she is not happy with the appearance of her eyes (Williams 2008: 111).

Similarly to the practitioner in *The Fold*, Dr. Sung does not encourage the protagonist to undergo plastic surgery and offers alternative coping strategies for the perceived flaw. Upon hearing about Lauren’s dislike of her eye shape, he makes a flattering comment about it and points to the fact that his eyes look similar, as he and the protagonist share the same ethnicity. The girl then reveals that what constitutes her problem is not the eyes themselves but rather the teasing and ridicule they attract (Williams 2008: 111). The doctor expresses sympathy for Lauren’s situation and tells her he endured similar struggles during his youth. He explains that “the teasing will go away as you get older, or [...] it won’t hurt that much,” and suggests the protagonist should try to make peace with her ethnicity and eye shape (Williams 2008: 112). However, his overall stance is similar to that of Grandmother Ann, discussed earlier in this subchapter. Dr. Sung highlights that he is aware of how painful the experience of appearance-based bullying can be and claims that if Lauren’s parent agrees, he will not refuse to operate on her. Once again, Williams depicts the cosmetic procedure as a possible way to address a suffering individual’s problem, which confirms Davis’s approach to plastic surgery discussed above (Davis 1991: 38). Here, the relationship between the surgery and the vision of the protagonist’s future happiness seems to be solidified: “my future happiness is in this hand — the hand that will hold the scalpel” (Williams 2008: 113). Lauren is elated by the doctor’s agreement, almost to the point of crying, and likens her happiness to that of a lucky boy in one of Roald Dahl’s novels (Williams 2008: 112-114).

Lauren's conviction that surgery is a factor that makes one's life better is, however, quickly called into question when the previously obscure details of her mother's death are revealed. The protagonist's father receives a letter from the clinic and expresses anger at Lauren and her grandmother, assuming that the surgery was Ann's idea. The protagonist attempts to describe the reasons behind her wishes and mentions that her eyes are considered "slanty" (Williams 2008: 125). As Lauren expected, Martin does not let her explain her concerns and instead resorts to screaming and name-calling. He strongly opposes the surgery, which the grandmother attempts to defend. Ann mentions Lauren's sadness and asserts that "[t]he operation will make her happy" (Williams 2008: 125-126). As a result of the grandmother's words, Martin impulsively discloses how this was not the case for his deceased wife. It is revealed that Lauren's adopted mother passed away from suicide and not from an accident, as the family had told the protagonist. While it is not stated explicitly, the woman likely struggled with depression. This revelation shocks the protagonist (Williams 2008: 126-127) and is the reason why she eventually gives up on the idea of plastic surgery. The mother's experience of mental health problems, despite surgical improvement of her maligned nose, undermines Lauren's idea that a cosmetic procedure will improve her well-being and make her happier. Perhaps this knowledge can allow the protagonist to look at the effects of surgery more realistically instead of perceiving them in terms of a radical transformation. Lauren's initial perception of the planned makeover as possessing almost magical effects is not surprising, taking into account that, as Angela Clair Dancey explains, such narratives permeate pop culture in media, from fairy tales to popular films (Dancey 2005: 238).

At the end of *Slant*, the protagonist decides to forego undergoing the procedure. Despite his initial strongly negative reaction, Martin permits his daughter

to be operated on, explaining that his first decision was motivated by his lack of experience of being perceived as physically different or unattractive (Williams 2008: 135). The father's permission, however, prompts the girl to think more critically about the surgery. Lauren looks back at the photos of her mother, paying attention to the change in her nose shape. She wonders whether others will notice she has altered her appearance (Williams 2008: 136-137). While Allie in *Fix* found this idea embarrassing (Margolis 2006: 91), Williams's protagonist struggles with an opposite worry — whether the change will be noticeable enough (Williams 2008: 136-137). If that were not the case, the protagonist could consider the surgery a failure, as it would likely not stop her classmates' teasing. On the day of the scheduled surgery, Lauren feels disappointed ("I thought I'd feel more excited"), which she tries to blame on stress (Williams 2008: 138). Her feelings seem to imply that her belief that the procedure would be a happy and life-changing experience has diminished. When the protagonist and her father drive to the clinic, she reconsiders her assumptions about the surgery. For the first time, Lauren looks kindly at her eyes, admiring how their color resembles "dark chocolate wafers, [her] favorite"; she is also pleased to see how sunlight illuminates their color (Williams 2008: 138). This observation is significant as it marks a change in the character's self-perception. The negative attitude towards her eyes, influenced by the othering, stigmatization, and white gaze of her peers, is replaced by a pleasant association. Despite perceived flaws, the protagonist notices that her eyes express positive emotions: "My eyes are slanted, but they are always happy" (Williams 2008: 139). Lauren compares her looks to the sad appearance of her mother, which further solidifies her view that plastic surgery is not a solution to a lack of contentment in life.

Slant thus highlights the protagonist's journey towards self-acceptance achieved without surgical enhancement. Eventually, Lauren tells her father that she does not want to undergo surgery anymore. She explains that she previously lacked the courage to stand up to appearance-based teasing but has realized that the procedure would not necessarily "make [her] braver" (Williams 2008: 139). Whereas earlier she was easy prey to bullying by her peers and her self-image suffered in social interactions with them, now she is able "to maintain face" in the Goffmanian sense (Goffman 1955: 213) and develop appropriate defense mechanisms that allow her to object to verbal violence. The novella ends with Lauren confronting her bully, Matt (Williams 2008: 145-146), as she tells him she will not react to his racist nicknames anymore. She also mentions that she is not good at mathematics, refuting the popular racial stereotype about Asians held by the boy. In spite of her isolated condition as an Asian adoptee in a predominantly white environment, by accepting her face, she achieves a condition of self-respect and self-approval which allows her to resist racism, bullying and internalized othering. Although she is the most vulnerable among the three teenage protagonists analyzed in this chapter, and confronting the most adverse circumstances, Lauren's decision to reject the surgery seems the most thoughtful and mature. The social face Lauren ultimately wears in interaction with others displays moral fortitude, which renders Williams's protagonist an important role model for racialized young adult readers struggling with similar stigmatization.

Chapter Three

Women and Acquired Facial Disfigurement

in Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* and Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*

3.1. Disfigurement and Its Effects

Defining what can be considered a disfigurement is often challenging. As Nicola Rumsey and Diana Harcourt explain, the disfigured individual and others around them can view the visible difference in diverse ways, affected by various factors such as their experiences, personal opinions, or the culture and social environment that has shaped them. However, for the purpose of research, disfigurement is usually described as a noticeable characteristic of the body that diverges “from a culturally defined norm” (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 88). Rumsey and Harcourt state that an unusual bodily feature must be visible to other people for two reasons: to avoid confusion with the mental health condition of “body dysmorphic disorder,” where an individual either imagines or overemphasizes a flaw in their appearance, as well as to emphasize that disfigurement can affect one’s functioning within society. The authors invoke Frances Cooke MacGregor’s argument, stating that a visible difference can impact not only how a person behaves and views themselves, but also how they are treated by other individuals (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 88).

Facial disfigurement is divided into two types: congenital and acquired. The former refers to visible difference with which a person is born. Disfigurements of this type can be apparent since the first moments of life or become more pronounced as the individual ages. As Rumsey and Harcourt explain, disfigurement is considered congenital when an individual has no recollection of living without the visible

difference. The latter type of disfigurement concerns appearance differences that are acquired later in life. Scholars name numerous examples of how such disfigurement may emerge: physical injury, surgery (both health-related and cosmetic), “the absence of normal developmental processes,” as well as various illnesses and medical conditions (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 90). Julie Wisely and Sarah Gaskell call attention to the fact that an acquired disfigurement is often associated with “a traumatic, life-threatening situation” which usually occurs in one’s life unexpectedly. The uncomfortable feelings experienced by the affected person, in the spheres of both body and mind, can be further aggravated by the equally unpleasant physical recovery process (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 372).

3.1.1. Living with Facial Disfigurement

Living with disfigurement can pose a challenge to the affected individual. Rumsey and Harcourt explain that people with visible differences constitute a remarkably diverse group with various markers of identity, life and social circumstances, and kinds of disfigurement. As a result, the ways their condition affects them can differ significantly. Nonetheless, the main problems that disfigured persons struggle with are surprisingly uniform. Similar issues are often noticed regardless of whether given researchers employ either sociocultural or psychological perspectives. Accordingly, the most common and important problems experienced by the disfigured are: detrimental feelings, including anxiety and severe depression, struggles with social interaction which can cause withdrawal and social anxiety, as well as a negative view of oneself (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 90). The latter two are usually considered to be the issues of the utmost concern in disfigured adults (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 99). As both novels analyzed in this chapter focus on adult characters, the following

section discusses the effects of visible difference on people belonging to this demographic.

According to Rumsey and Harcourt, a significant portion of this group suffers from increased “levels of generalized anxiety,” regardless of the type of visible difference (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 99). A study conducted on mostly Caucasian British adults with different types of disfigurement showed that 48% of participants “had ‘borderline case’ or ‘case’ levels of anxiety” (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 99). The same research indicated that 27.5% of the surveyed disfigured people had experienced depression. The authors assert that while this issue does not concern every disfigured person, it should not be ignored by the medical community while dealing with visibly different patients. Rumsey and Harcourt invoke research by Herskind (1993) and Rapp (1997), which indicates that disfigured individuals might be at risk of experiencing suicidal ideation (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 99). While the scholars’ research focuses on persons with cleft palates (Herskind) and psoriasis (Rapp), it is possible for people with other disfigurements to be endangered as well.

In the chapter “Trauma — With Special Reference to Burn Injury,” Wisely and Gaskell discuss adverse feelings in persons with acquired disfigurement by burns. Various available studies indicate that between 25% and 65% of the affected individuals experienced anxiety and depression in the period of twelve months after this type of physical trauma. The authors point out that such feelings are often prevalent over a long period, referring to research by West and Spinks (1988), who found that over one fourth of the disfigured struggled with negative feelings twenty-four months after leaving the hospital. Wisely and Gaskell highlight that a patient’s mental health recovery process can be lengthy and complicated, with its specifics varying between each person. However, it is important to remember that these

struggles are temporary for many burns patients. Wisely and Gaskell claim that a large number of such individuals are able to successfully adapt to their new life as a person with disfigurement (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 378).

Disfigurement can also impact how a given person feels about themselves, influencing their sense of self, self-confidence, and the perception of their own body. According to Rumsey and Harcourt, both the disfigured person's perception of themselves and others' reactions to them influence the aforementioned aspects in a negative way. However, the difference "in psychological adjustment" in disfigured persons also depends on the gravity they attach to their looks (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 99). Moreover, such individuals tend to interpret ambiguous social encounters in relation to their unusual appearance. The scholars present the following example: when disfigured people who worry excessively about their appearance are stared at in public, they assume this is maliciously motivated (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 100). Wisely and Gaskell argue, based on the example of burns, that the time when a disfigurement is acquired can also influence the way one's image of the self is affected. People in the stage of early adulthood, as well as teenagers, may be particularly vulnerable to the adverse psychological effects of disfigurement. The reason for this phenomenon is the importance of appearance for "their sense of self-esteem" and the belief in its considerable influence on other people's opinions (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 380).

Disfigurement may therefore pose a threat to one's identity as its acquisition is often associated with the perceived loss of the person's previous self (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 100; Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 379). As Wisely and Gaskell argue, the sudden change in appearance and its stigmatizing effect can pose difficulties in adaptation to one's current situation and make certain disfigurements particularly

traumatizing (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 379). Rumsey and Harcourt state that disfigurement stemming from trauma and radical surgery, after which a person does not recognize their reflection in the mirror, can be especially threatening to an individual's sense of self (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 100). Sania Manjali's study "Looking Inside the Face: Experiences of Living with an Accidentally Acquired Facial Disfigurement and its Perceived Impact on Identity; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis on a Group of British Women" also stresses the split of one's identity into "the old self" and the "new," disfigured self (Manjali 2020: 6, 48-49, 72). The process of adjustment after acquiring a disfigurement has been compared to the experience of grief, which consists "of denial, anger, distress, anxiety, and depression" until the eventual adaptation to one's situation (Bradbury et al. in Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 379). Importantly, as the British organization for those with visible differences *Changing Faces* emphasizes, the process might not be gradual, and various emotions regarding disfigurement can be experienced in a different order or at the same time (changingfaces.org.uk).

Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage', discussed in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I*," facilitates further understanding of acquired disfigurement as a disturbance to a person's sense of self. It is part of what Lacan refers to as the Imaginary Order, in which identification with a specular image plays an important part. According to Lacan, the mirror phase occurs in early childhood, usually when the infant is a half year old (Lacan 2001: 1). When looking in the mirror, the child notices that their reflection and their body match in terms of movement, (Wright 1991: 155). The resulting identification of the child with their mirror image is how the concept of self is initially formed, preceding learning the language to name oneself, such as personal pronouns, and refinement "through mutual correction" from

the people around them (Wright 1991: 155). The latter refers to the phenomena in which one's sense of self can only exist juxtaposed with other people's selves (Homer 2005: 23). The mirror stage thus serves as the beginning of a person's integration into the world and society around them (Neill 2024: 147). Moreover, the mirror stage plays a crucial role in the development of the view of self as a "complete" and separate person (Homer 2005: 25). During the mirror phase, the individual assigns their identity to the physical form they see in the mirror and constructs a fictionalized "ideal-I" (Neill 2024: 141-142). Calum Neill explains that such a self-concept is "an idealised but fabricated idea" and does not accurately represent "the bodily experience." The mirror image always warps the reflected person in a certain way and only shows their outer appearance, while erasing personal non-bodily characteristics (Neill 2024: 140). As a result of the preoccupation with the fictitious version of oneself, in Elizabeth Wright's words, one's ego is "a fixed character-armour" that requires constant reassurance (Wright 1991: 156). Disfigurement thus challenges the fantasy of a complete self and shakes the foundations of identity acquired in the mirror phase.

The way others will perceive them is a frequent subject of worry among the disfigured (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 101). Social interactions, especially those involving meeting new acquaintances and establishing friendships, often pose a challenge to persons with visible differences (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 380). Rumsey and Harcourt argue that concerns about being perceived by others can lead to social withdrawal, which can manifest in different contexts. The disfigured can avoid situations in which they are forced to meet new people or speak in public, events where they can be captured in a photograph or a video, as well as public locations where others can easily see them (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 101). As one can

notice, the distress experienced by the disfigured person can significantly limit the activities they can participate in comfortably. According to Wisely and Gaskell, a disfigured person can feel anxious anticipating strangers' reactions, wondering whether they will accept or discriminate against them (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 380). Indeed, the ways in which ordinary-looking people treat individuals who visibly differ from them can vary and include hurtful behaviors such as "ignoring [...], staring or bullying" (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 380). Expecting others to respond negatively to an encounter, a disfigured person can assume a timid or hostile demeanor, which, in turn, may attract a similar behavior from people with a normative appearance (Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 381).

While staring can often be a particularly unpleasant or even traumatizing experience, Jenny Edkins's observations on this phenomenon counter viewing it in a solely negative light. In *Face Politics*, following Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's arguments, she demonstrates that visible difference is often met with curiosity. As a result, staring has a certain "potential of engagement" between the disfigured and non-disfigured. Persons with disfigured faces, especially those who accept their difference and do not avoid being seen, can be perceived as living examples of human diversity and call into question normative-looking people's assumptions and expectations (Edkins 2015: 149). While many disfigured women feel negatively about the change, Edkins shows that not everybody does. Some women stressed that they felt stronger and more capable after becoming disfigured as a result of an attack. The scholar quotes one of them who said: "[n]ow I have nothing to lose" (Edkins 2015: 157), thus highlighting her newly acquired courage and empowered sense of self.

3.1.2. Loss of Face

As mentioned before, the face is perhaps the most important part of a person's body in constructing their identity and aiding social interaction. Klecker and Grabher point out that humans use each other's faces for communication, including non-verbal messages conveyed by facial expressions and identification. Faces also help others to learn somebody's age, sex, race, as well as other markers of identity. However, in order to facilitate these functions, it is essential for a face to be visible (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 1). A face being covered or disfigured in a way that stifles the ability to communicate with others, as well as being recognized by them, could render it invisible. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a 'loss of face' due to injury can be particularly difficult for both the affected individual and others around them. Moreover, it is worth noting that facial disfigurement differs from other types of bodily disfigurement. As shown by Suzannah Biernoff in her discussion of disfigured soldiers in "The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain," the loss of face was, and often still is, considered to be the worst type of disfigurement. The scholar explains that during the first global conflict, which caused an unprecedented number of injuries to the face, even members of medical staff reported feelings of discomfort upon encountering facially disfigured men (Biernoff 2011: 668-670). The majority of the disfigured suffered from depression and frequently avoided meeting friends and loved ones. By contrast, the same distress was not reported by those who had lost their limbs, as they generally displayed a cheerful demeanor despite their disfigurement (Biernoff 2011: 668, 674). Moreover, while war amputees were hailed as "wounded heroes," the facially disfigured were largely ignored and almost erased from public consciousness (Biernoff 2011: 667-669).

As Biernoff further argues in "Picturing Pain," distinctions between the face and the body as two separate sites have often been made throughout history. While in

art and various iconography, especially related to Christianity, the body was commonly shown in states of pain and disfigurement, the face remained calm and beautiful. The author quotes the 18th century thinker Gotthold Lessing, who explained that in order to feel sympathy for the depicted sufferer, the recipient must perceive them as physically attractive (Biernoff 2021: 197-198). While Biernoff's prime examples refer to early 20th century soldiers and representations of pain in art, the divide between the body and the face seems to remain important in contemporary culture (Biernoff 2021: 202). Susan Sontag, briefly quoted by Biernoff, asserts that in modern times, despite being less detrimental to overall health and safety, facial disfigurement still inspires significantly more fear. According to the author of *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, disfigurements that appear to indicate "mutation, decomposition [...] [and] something organic" are perceived as especially gruesome (Sontag 1990: 128-129). Moreover, the face has an impact on various norms of behavior, "aesthetic sensibility" or sexuality (Sontag 1990: 127-128). In light of Biernoff's and Sontag's arguments, it is possible to see that the loss of face could affect many aspects of a disfigured person's life, especially those related to social interaction and functioning. Both scholars highlight that the disfigurement of the face and the disfigurement of the body should be viewed as separate phenomena, due to their diverging impact on the individual and others around them.

The face is generally seen as a set of evocative images, such as "[a] window on the soul, mirror of our thoughts, feelings and experiences," as well as a tool through which one is "identified, controlled, and pinned down". However, the "dismantling of the face," following surgery, attack, or injury, deconstructs not only the face itself but also the established perception of reality (Edkins 2015: 154). The mentioned metaphors of window and mirror are called into question, often no longer

useful for the disfigured person and others who perceive them. Edkins explains that living after the loss of face can be a gruesome experience for the affected, reminding the disfigured of their body's "mortality and animality." Consequently, it is unsurprising that seeing one's face gravely injured, especially when flesh and bones previously hidden under the skin are visible, dismantles one's integrity and sense of individuality (Edkins 2015: 160) or even humanity (Sokołowska-Paryż 2018: 92).

Edkins argues that others who see the disfigured can experience the same uncomfortable realizations. As a protective measure to ward off disturbing thoughts, such as those about one's fragility and the possibility of becoming disfigured someday as well, people often dehumanize those with visible differences. By categorizing disfigured persons as the Others, the non-disfigured ensure their own mental comfort (Edkins 2015: 165). Edkins claims that a normative-looking face supports the illusion that each person is a unique, complete, and separate, self-sufficient individual. While looking at the face of an ordinary person, humans recognize themselves in it easily, which reassures them of their humanity and separability. However, those with disfigured faces subvert such a view by showing that "the face functions as a mask that conceals the inseparability of being-together" (Edkins 2015: 165-166). As Biernoff rather radically points out, underneath faces all humans are simply flesh (Biernoff 2011: 669). Edkins further explains that loss of face questions the belief that each human being is a separate, distinctive individual; instead, the similarity between people as flesh is brought to light. When seeing a disfigured face, people might be forced to recognize themselves in it, just like in a normative-looking face. However, since this realization tends to be very disturbing for the onlookers, in order to ward off unpleasant thoughts about their fragility, people often distance themselves from the disfigured and categorize them as monsters (Edkins 2015: 165-166).

For Edkins, there are two approaches that can be employed to deal with the question of the disfigured face. The first one encapsulates the efforts to hide or remove the visible difference. Edkins claims that this strategy does not question the status quo but instead relies on upholding the divide "between us as the natural state of things." It relies on ethics as well as other social agreements that highlight that each person should be treated with due importance and dignity as a unique individual. In contrast, the second approach calls the existing reality into question. Edkins explains that it requires society to reconsider how it thinks about people as individual, separate, and self-sufficient subjects, as well as humanity in general. The author states that adopting this perspective compels people to accept their "inevitable monstrosity," the flesh hidden behind the mask of the face, and to realize that they are all connected with each other and dependent on others. Instead of viewing visibly different people as inhuman, these realizations should encourage "a revision in our conceptions of subjectivity" (Edkins 2015: 165). The scholar thus suggests that adopting such an approach to the face can radically undermine its importance, opening up new possibilities for how personhood is viewed (Edkins 2015: 166).

3.2. Depicting Facial Disfigurement

Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun M. Grabher point out that to depict disfigurement, literature often employs ambiguous descriptions to make the reader imagine what exactly the visible difference in question looks like. This interaction between the author's text and its reader, during which gruesome images are created in the reader's mind, has been named *textual staring* (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 6). Patricia Skinner, who coined the term, explains that a text can be considered as such if "the author, or reader, or both, are expected to share some pleasure in consuming the scene being

described” (Skinner 2017: 161). The scholar claims that, on the reader’s part, reading texts detailing gruesome events or sights, which elicit strong reactions through the written word, can be classified as staring. On the part of the writer, textual staring can consist of creating rich and lengthy descriptions of various atrocities, which are not essential to understanding the gist of the story (Skinner 2017: 161). Klecker and Grabher also argue that “verbal documentations” on the topic of visible difference often do not allow the disfigured person to speak for themselves. Instead, the impressions of the non-disfigured witnesses are favored, which unfortunately frequently emphasize their disgust and perpetuate various negative biases (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 6).

While considering some of the most popular examples of disfigured literary characters, one can notice that frequently they are not the novels’ or stories’ main protagonists. In her study of depictions of disability, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland Thompson argues that such characters, rather than being fully realized and multi-faceted, occupy the roles of “uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens” (Garland Thompson 2017: 9). The scholar criticizes discussing visibly different characters solely as a metaphor or a characteristic of a literary convention such as the Gothic or the grotesque, and advocates for maintaining “political awareness” while analyzing them. For Garland Thompson, literature can influence societal approaches to real-life disabled people, particularly individuals who do not have many previous experiences in interactions with disabled or disfigured persons. According to the author, literary works rarely represent disability in an accurate and complex way (Garland Thompson 2017: 9-10). The scholar’s arguments seem to signal that visibly different bodies

should be depicted with caution and awareness of the possible influence of literature on the character's real-life counterparts.

According to Klecker and Grabher in "The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television: Introduction," the visibly different face has been frequently used as a motif in various cultural texts since antiquity. The authors argue that characters whose bodies constituted a mix of human and monstrous features, such as the mythological Minotaur and Homer's Scylla, can be seen as early examples of the assumed correlation between visible difference and one's evil nature. A similar example can be found in *Beowulf*, where Grendel possesses "a grotesque body" and a hateful, dangerous character (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 4). Such depictions of disfigured characters in literary classics seem to reflect the perception of people with disfigurement in the times of their creation. Klecker and Grabher acknowledge that before visible difference became a subject of scientific inquiry, individuals who possessed it were seen as "ill omens and signs of warning." In their community, the disfigured were more often objects of gossip and speculation concerning various aspects of their difference rather than of sympathy or compassion. Disfigured individuals were often called various names such as "[m]onsters, freaks, and curiosities." Such perceptions of the disfigured denote their societal status as the Other (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 3).

As Klecker and Grabher argue, in classics of European literature, disfigured characters are often depicted as tragic figures. They give examples of works by Victor Hugo (*The Man Who Laughs* [1869] and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* [1831]) where they "seek to be saved by love" (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 4). The titular character of Gaston Laroux's *Phantom of the Opera* (1909-1910) also suffers a tragic fate (Grabher 2019: n. p.). Another example of the doomed disfigured can be found in

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), where the monster's disfigured body and negative character are not the creature's fault, but that of Victor Frankenstein, who gave him life. Similarly to the aforementioned European examples, in American literature disfigurement is often associated with a variety of negative character features, and/or of tragedy. Klecker and Grabher mention the short story by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), where the protagonist, having lost his sanity due to an encounter with a man with a "vulture-like eye," kills the disfigured man. The authors suggest that the protagonist's violent action stems from not wanting to identify with a disfigured person. In *Moby Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville, facial and bodily disfigurement, both a result of his whale hunt, are also used to indicate a character's madness (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 4-5). Disfigurement as a result of trauma is depicted in Stephen Crane's *The Monster* (1898), which tells the story of a black man who saves a child during a fire. Klecker and Grabher explain that when others assume the rescuer has died, they regard him as brave and heroic. However, as soon as they learn the truth and see his disfigured face, they dehumanize the man and call him "[a] monster... with no mind" (Crane in Klecker and Grabher 2022: 5). Once again, a visibly different character does not attract sympathy but, instead, hostility.

While the aforementioned examples focus on disfigured male characters, visibly different women can also be found in American literature. Klecker and Grabher showcase an example of such depiction in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843), where a scientist, Aylmer, aims to remove a birthmark from his wife Georgiana's cheek (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 4), for he interprets it as "the symbol of his wife's liability, sorrow, decay, and death" (Hawthorne 1970: 266). Another story about disfigured female characters is *The Profile* (1907) by Willa Cather. The tale's protagonist, Dunlap, a profile painter, meets and marries Virginia, a

woman with a beautiful side-profile who is disfigured on one side of her face, which he likens to a “grotesque mask” (Cather 1965: 128). As Klecker and Grabher point out, over time, the scar becomes something unacceptable to the husband (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 5), mostly due to the association made between disfigurement and immorality: “the burn had gone deeper than the flesh” (Cather 1965: 131). In the short story, the husband’s attitude towards the wife suggests that visible difference is often equated with wickedness and should be a source of shame.

Literary representations of disfigurement have evolved since the time of the conception of the classic tales discussed above. Klecker and Grabher partially credit this change to the publishing of non-fiction authored by people with visible difference. These first-person narratives allow the reader to learn about a disfigured person’s life directly, often in a way that emphasizes the negative experiences in interactions with non-disabled people (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 5). The authors call attention to two formative works of this genre: *Road Song* (1990) by Natalie Kusz and *Autobiography of a Face* (1994) by Lucy Grealy. Both are autobiographies of women with facial disfigurement, the former resulting from physical trauma and the latter resulting from an illness. The two discuss similar struggles, especially experiencing hostility and ridicule from other people around them (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 5). Klecker and Grabher argue that modern writers, as well as other artists, are becoming more aware of the harm of popular tropes and stereotypes often employed in the past. Moreover, the scholars note an improvement in approaching the subject of disfigurement in a more balanced, compassionate way (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 15).

It is important to note that most studies on disfigurement of the face, for example Suzannah Biernoff’s groundbreaking works such as “Flesh Poems: Henry Tonks and the Art of Surgery” (2010), “The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World

War Britain” (2011) or “Picturing Pain” (2021), have focused on men, especially in the context of the First World War, a turning point in facial injuries due to industrialized warfare and the resulting surgeries of the face. This perspective is often reflected in contemporary fiction: novels set during this time period focus on empathetic depictions of the loss of face as a result of trauma and injury. In “The Shock of the Great War: Individual Trauma, Cultural Trauma and the Representation of *Gueules Cassées* in Recent British and French Fiction” (2018a), Anna Branach-Kallas focuses on the figures of facially disfigured soldiers in works such as Pat Barker’s *Toby’s Room* (2012) and Louisa Young’s *My Dear I Wanted to Tell You* (2011), among others. According to the scholar, facial wounds of soldiers can be seen as both a depiction of physical injury experienced by many, but also metaphorically as a visual representation of wartime trauma. The face changed by disfigurement acquired in combat shows that a soldier is permanently impacted by the experience of war, which then stifles his reintegration into society (Branach-Kallas 2018a: 24).

While most of the writers discussed by Branach-Kallas are solely interested in male disfigurement, Louisa Young’s novels, *My Dear I Wanted to Tell You* in particular, are exceptional in their representation of disfigurement of both men and women (Branach-Kallas 2018b; Whitehead 2015). Young’s work is split between two protagonists who experience facial disfigurement: Corporal Riley Purefoy, a young soldier fighting in Europe, and Julia Locke, the privileged wife of an officer. Riley is injured on the battlefield; as a result, he is taken to a hospital in England to undergo reconstructive surgery of the face. The novel chronicles his experience of disfigurement, as well as his recovery journey. As to Julia, at the beginning of the novel the female protagonist is a healthy, ordinary upper-class woman. However, seemingly as a result of anxiety over her husband’s fate and her helplessness in the

face of war, the protagonist develops an obsession with beautification. Unfortunately, despite multiple visits to a beauty parlor and trying out various treatments, Julia is not satisfied with her looks and begins to entertain thoughts about plastic surgery. Frustrated with the unavailability of quick procedures that would enable her to become more beautiful, the woman decides to steal acids for peels. The haphazardly used chemicals leave Julia disfigured with deep burns to the face.

The novel depicts the struggles to achieve an attractive appearance as a means to maintain upper-class women's social status and satisfy (the male gaze of) their husbands. However, Julia's facial disfigurement can be interpreted, as Branach-Kallas and Whitehead show, to be a metaphor for women's trauma experienced during the war (Branach-Kallas 2018b: 72-74; Whitehead 2015: 231). Importantly, the loss of face might be seen as a root of negative and positive changes in a woman's life. On the one hand, it can endanger a woman's previously established high social status, which stems from her adherence to the aesthetic norms of femininity and beauty. However, on the other hand, it can serve as a possible means of escape from patriarchal norms. Previously, the protagonist's role as an attractive, healthy, and privileged woman seemed clearly defined and was associated with many societal expectations. Initially, she appeared to embody the archetype of *the angel of the house*, popular in Victorian times (Kuhl 2016: 171). By contrast, her new identity as a disfigured person is significantly more ambiguous and escapes simple categorizations. While Julia's circumstances are tragic, her injury might help her to become recognized by others as a valuable human being instead of merely a beautiful object¹⁰.

¹⁰ Young's portrayal of the female protagonist's self-objectification and appearance-based self-surveillance calls attention to important topics in a rarely discussed time and setting. The novel also offers a valuable depiction of other beauty-related issues, such as the appearance standards and available beautifying strategies in the early 20th century. I discuss these aspects in detail in my article "Is Pain Beauty? — The Strife for the Feminine Appearance Ideal and its Consequences in Louisa Young's *My Dear I Wanted to Tell You*" (2023).

The book is unique in its depiction of facial injury as a result of beautification, especially considering its World War I setting, which is usually focused on male warfare trauma. In both Riley's and Julia's cases, loss of face is traumatizing, and they both struggle to reconstruct their lives anew.

3.3. Facial Disfigurement and Monstrosity in Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*

Invisible Monsters, a contemporary American novel by Chuck Palahniuk, uses elements of various literary conventions, such as crime, horror, and satire (Steinhoff 2015: 86). It was originally published in 1999 and later re-released in 2012 as *Invisible Monster Remix*, with revisions implemented by the author. However, taking into account that the original version remains more popular than its successor and is widely available in print, the analysis in this chapter is based on the earlier version of the text. The novel is one of the most prominent works of fiction about a facially disfigured female character and has garnered scholarly attention since its publication. These works include but are not limited to: "Destruction and the Discourse of Deformity: Invisible Monsters" by Andrew Ng, who focuses on how monstrosity, acquired through bodily alterations, affects the protagonists' identities (Ng 2009: 33-34); "Chuck Palahniuk and the Violence of Beauty" by Elisabeth Bronfen (2009), where the scholar juxtaposes the analysis of alluring photographs of women with Palahniuk's novel to highlight the abject nature of the body and the trappings of "living an image" (Bronfen 2009: 111; Detsi-Diamanti, Kitsi-Mitakou and Yiannopoulou 2009: 10); and "We Are All Living in the World that Is Brandy Alexander: Hyperreality, Beauty and Monstrosity in *Invisible Monsters*" by Bruna

Miskinis Salgado (2023), in which the author employs the tools of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. The following sub-chapter aims to contribute to the discussion of the novel by offering an analysis of disfigurement through the lens of Edkin's face politics, especially the notions of the loss of face and monstrosity, as well as the phenomena of textual staring and disfigurement. As the identity of some of the supporting characters is purposely ambiguous, the sub-chapter focuses mainly on the female protagonist, Shannon.

The plot of *Invisible Monsters* concerns the life of Shannon McFarland¹¹, a former model who tells her story in a non-linear fashion. The protagonist has suffered a serious facial injury caused by a gunshot. In the aftermath of her disfigurement, while recovering from surgery in the hospital, Shannon meets a transgender woman called Brandy Alexander, whom she later identifies as her allegedly deceased brother, Shane. Shortly after her discharge, the protagonist, having found out that her best friend Evie cheated on her with her boyfriend Manus, burns Evie's house. Afterwards, the protagonist, Manus, and Brandy embark on a cross-country journey during which they live a life of crime. Toward the end of the novel, the three come to Evie's house to get their final revenge. When Brandy is shot by Evie, each character's secrets resurface, and Shannon reveals she is aware of Brandy's former male identity; Brandy, in turn, acknowledges she has known that the disfigured Shannon is her sister since the beginning. Brandy explains that, rather than to express her true gender identity, she has transitioned to escape categories prescribed to her previous male self, Shane. Shannon in turn reveals that she harmed her own face for a similar reason, as she wanted to stop being pigeonholed by her beauty. At the end, the protagonist gives all her identifying documents to Brandy, who will now live under Shannon's name.

¹¹ Throughout the novel most of the characters are referred to by various aliases. In order to ensure the clarity of the analysis, only names mentioned in this summary shall be used.

3.3.1. Textual Staring in *Invisible Monsters*

In “Monstrous Makeovers: Somatechnics of Resistance in Postmodern Consumer Culture – Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters*,” Heike Steinhoff explains that Palahniuk’s novels represent transgressive fiction. While this label usually refers to the themes and characters’ actions as such, the visceral descriptions and vulgar language employed by Palahniuk can also be seen as crossing the boundaries of what is often considered acceptable in fiction (Steinhoff 2015: 89). The choice of facial disfigurement does not seem incidental and serves to emphasize the transgressive nature of the writer’s work. In light of the arguments discussed above, loss of face is widely regarded as the most terrifying type of injury. *Invisible Monsters* provides multiple graphic and detailed descriptions of Shannon’s disfigured face. In numerous scenes, Palahniuk stimulates the reader’s imagination, engaging them in the act of textual staring (Kleckler and Grabher 2022: 6) in order to conjure this horrifying sight:

The way my face is without a jaw, my throat just ends in sort of a hole with my tongue hanging out. Around the hole, the skin is all scar tissue: dark red lumps and shiny [...]. If I let my tongue hang down, you can see the root of my mouth [...], and hanging down around the roof is the white vertebrae horseshoe of the upper teeth I have left. (Palahniuk 2003: 136)

Similarly to many others in the book, the above description is both detailed and abstract. While imagining how exactly Shannon’s face might look can prove difficult and confusing, the language and comparisons used by the author elicit curiosity, disturbance and disgust. As Skinner argues, readers engaging with texts that intend to cause such a reaction can also be considered to practice textual staring. The readers of *Invisible Monsters* fulfill the criteria of being textual starers as they can perceive the

gruesome depiction of disfigurement as entertaining or even amusing (Skinner 2017: 161).

Palahniuk does not shy away from evoking unpleasant feelings, often referring to the abject aspects of the protagonist's disfigured face. An instance of such depiction can be found early in the novel, where Shannon is hiding behind a veil. The character's first-person narration draws attention to the dampness of the fabric that has come in contact with her face, implying that the wounds are releasing bodily fluids, such as pus. The protagonist's face is also described as being continuously wet with blood, evoking images of rot and decay (Palahniuk 2003: 31, 49). It is important to note that the detailed descriptions, rich in horrifying and disgusting imagery, are not crucial for comprehending the book's plotlines. Therefore, following Skinner's arguments, *Invisible Monsters* can be seen as a novel in which the author is guilty of textual staring as well (see Skinner 2017: 161).

However, it should be mentioned that the novel's use of first-person narrative breaks with the conventions of textual staring in narratives about the loss of face. As mentioned above, many texts about disfigurement are written from the perspective of the normative-appearing onlooker (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 6). By contrast, in Palahniuk's novel, it is the disfigured Shannon who narrates the story. Although *Invisible Monsters* is not a work of literary realism but one of literary transgression, giving insight into the protagonist's emotions and physical sensations caused by her disfigurement is nonetheless valuable. As discussed above, depictions of women with disfigured faces remain relatively rare, especially in fiction with more modern settings, which highlights the importance of Palahniuk's novel.

3.3.2. From a Glamorous Model to an Invisible Woman

In *Invisible Monsters* the protagonist's self-perception seems to reflect the tendency of disfigured women to divide their past and present selves, observed by researchers such as Manjali (Manjali 2020: 6, 48-49). Shannon is a former fashion model who was previously employed in television commercials and fashion magazine photoshoots along with her friend Evie. She often reminisces about her past, drawing a clear line between her former beautiful self and her new disfigured one. The sections describing Shannon's life as a model and as a disfigured runaway are arranged in a non-linear and non-chronological fashion, but in most instances, the division between them is rather clearly marked. When the protagonist thinks about the past, she frequently uses expressions that emphasize the differences between the two periods in her life. In an early scene, where Shannon and her new friend and confidante, Brandy, have a conversation, with the mute protagonist using writing to communicate, she stresses how significantly her situation has changed. The woman explains that, with the injury, she lost her previous life and various aspects it used to entail: a successful career, a home, as well as the positive attention from other people (Palahniuk 2003: 59-60). In this scene, the protagonist's acute sense of loss of her old identity confirms the psychological processes pointed out by Rumsey and Harcourt, as well as Wisely and Gaskell in their studies of facially injured patients (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 100; Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 379).

Another moment where this loss is emphasized can be found in a scene where, while flipping through television channels, Shannon comes across an infomercial that she filmed with Evie and Manus. The protagonist notices her old self, an attractive woman with a wide smile, and starts thinking about how she did not realize the other two models were in a secret relationship. However, she quickly remembers that she was only concerned with her own attractiveness. While watching herself in the

commercial, Shannon remarks: “the first girl, the one on stage, [...] she’s me” (Palahniuk 2003: 119-120). Her reaction to the advertisement highlights the paradox of being aware that both selves are the same person while still dividing them into two distinct identities. The protagonist’s identification with her depiction in the commercial is reminiscent of the mirror stage. Even though, in her current situation, the image does not represent the woman’s lived reality, she still feels an affinity with it. The relationship between herself and the mirror image, here represented by the video, remains strong.

Throughout *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon frequently marks past events by the presence of her intact face, even in scenes where her appearance is not directly correlated to the described events. For instance, the beginning of a family Christmas dinner sequence begins with the reminder that it takes place “when [Shannon] still had a face” (Palahniuk 2003: 89). While the scene concerns the exaggerated and absurd worries of the protagonist’s parents regarding her sexual safety after her brother’s alleged death, it is significant that Shannon mentions her face before relating the incident. This preoccupation also emphasizes that, for the protagonist, similarly to most people, the face is the center of her identity. It is not surprising that Shannon cannot separate the memories of various experiences from how she, and particularly her face, looked when she went through them.

While Shannon expresses views that her old life has ended, emphasizing the division between the two parts of her life, it can be noticed that she is still significantly influenced by her past. The protagonist’s modeling career, a time when only her physical appearance mattered, has permanently altered the way she perceives herself. Shannon acknowledges this early in the book, remarking that a significant portion of her time was spent in various photographers’ studios where every move

and expression of hers was directed by others (Palahniuk 2003: 13). Seemingly due to these experiences, in many scenes in *Invisible Monsters*, the character imagines herself through the photographic gaze. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains, the gaze of the camera is not neutral. Instead, it is rich in meaning: the photographic gaze reflects and upholds various unequal “sexual and social relations”. As a result, photography often reinforces the objectification of women by turning them into “bearers of meaning rather than makers of it” (Solomon-Godeau in Mackie 2002: 3). While Solomon-Godeau discusses this phenomenon when looking at actual photographs, similar effects of photography can be found in literary descriptions. In Palahniuk’s novel, despite speaking as a first-person narrator, the protagonist often assumes an outside point of view of the imaginary photographer and his camera (Palahniuk 2003: 43). She gives herself directions, internalizing the point of view of the photographer: “Give me courage. Flash. Give me heart. Flash” (Palahniuk 2003: 173; see also 3, 19, 43, 49, 69, 79, 90, 93, 101, 109, 111, 149-152, 158, 173, 176, 181, 267, 291). It can be noticed that Shannon thinks of herself in terms of the photographic gaze most frequently in moments when she is aware that others expect, or would expect, if they were present, certain reactions. The protagonist seems to see herself as an actress who has to fulfill a given role, or a decorative object that should fit perfectly in a given scene. This self-perfection reflects the objectification inherent to the photographic gaze, which Shannon has apparently internalized.

The protagonist’s imagining herself from the point of view of the camera also highlights another aspect of disfigurement, namely the impairment of her communication abilities, which, as Klecker and Grabher (2022: 1) explain, are one of the most vital functions of the face. In the novel, it is not made explicitly clear how and if Shannon’s ability to emote is stifled. However, the complete destruction of her

jaw, which results in her not being able to produce speech, as well as wearing a disguise made of draped fabric, suggests that the identifying and communicative aspects that the face normally facilitates are significantly impaired (Palahniuk 2003: 41, 14). As a result, Shannon considers herself to be “the invisible woman” (Palahniuk 2003: 34), reflecting the view that others cannot see her as a person as long as her face remains disfigured or hidden (Goble 2011: 8).

While Shannon’s invisibility stems from her disfigurement, Palahniuk suggests that this issue might eventually affect most, if not all, women. According to the protagonist, the factor that, sooner or later, renders all women invisible is aging. Shannon’s view of growing older can be seen as shocking as she compares this natural process to “end[ing] up mutilated” (Palahniuk 2003: 32). However, such negative views of aging are not rare, especially considering how recently even women in their twenties are increasingly inclined to reach for preventive botox injections (Valenti, Atkins and Noble 2023). Moreover, according to Susan Sontag in “The Double Standard of Ageing,” fear of and negative beliefs about becoming older tend to be especially common in younger women who are not affected by age (Sontag 1997: 19). Similar thoughts form in the protagonist’s mind when browsing the house of an elderly woman with her travel companions. She imagines the owner, as well as other women in a similar situation and point in life, as somebody who deserves pity: increasingly “ignored [...], older and more invisible” as time passes. The protagonist then remembers various societal expectations that concern aging women such as avoiding flashy makeup, partying and visiting trendy places (Palahniuk 2003: 31). Here, the image of aging is associated with lack of happiness and excitement in life. In her essay, Sontag brings attention to this issue: in her view, in Western societies, reaching a certain age, especially a menopausal one, is seen as the symbolic end of a

woman's life. Growing older tends to be associated with the loss of attractiveness, particularly that of a sexual nature (Sontag 1997: 20-21). While in the aforementioned scene Palahniuk does not directly refer to the sphere of sexuality, the link between the loss of facial beauty and aging is clear. The lost activities Shannon imagines are certainly social: for instance, she thinks with nostalgia about going to parties (Palahniuk 2003: 31), where a person could enjoy flirtation or meet a potential partner.

The protagonist's disfigurement can also be seen as a force through which she becomes valueless. Previously, her attractive face was seen as an important asset, one that made it possible for her to have a successful career and earn money. However, as Sontag points out, disfigurement often significantly impacts a woman's perceived value (Sontag 1997: 23). Shannon is aware that others will not value her as highly as they did before: "[n]obody will ever look at me like I've won a big prize" (Palahniuk 2003: 49). The gendered differences between the loss of value associated with the loss of face are also discussed by Sontag. While other scholars, such as Biernoff, point out that regardless of gender, the loss of face is particularly tragic in comparison to other types of disfigurement (Biernoff 2011: 669-670), Sontag argues that it might be even more devastating for women (Sontag 1997: 23). Men with facial differences, such as scars, are looked at in a more understanding manner; such blemishes are seen as "signs of 'character'" or evidence of life experience. While these marks might not be considered particularly beautiful, they are assigned an overall positive meaning. By contrast, as Sontag claims, the same grace is not given to women, whose acquired imperfections make them less valuable in the eyes of others. As a result, women experience a greater amount of psychological distress in response to disfigurement (Sontag 1997: 23). This is the case of the protagonist of *Invisible Monsters*; early in

the novel, the reader understands that the loss of face can be associated with the loss of one's previous value in the eyes of others.

3.3.3. Self-inflicted Disfigurement as Rebellion against Beauty and Objectification

In *Invisible Monsters*, it appears that Shannon is both the subject of objectification by others, as well as of self-objectification. Both phenomena can be noticed in the aforementioned scenes, where the protagonist remembers her previous life as a model. Early in the text, the character explains that a significant portion of her life was spent in photography studios, where she modeled while dressed up in clothing and makeup carefully selected by other people. She refers to the presence of popular photographers "telling [her] how to feel" (Palahniuk 2003: 13), once again highlighting the objectifying gaze of the camera discussed above.

According to Fredrickson and Roberts, girls and women, when thinking about their appearance, often assume the view of a potential spectator who examines and judges their bodies and faces (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 177). In Palahniuk's novel, this occurs in a literal way through the imaginary photographic gaze (Palahniuk 2003: 43). While the imaginary photographer's gender is not explicitly stated, the gaze can be presumed to be male. Such an approach reflects the power dynamics discussed by Laura Mulvey, who claims that the gaze, and the gratification stemming from it, assigns the "active/male and passive/female" roles to those involved (Mulvey 1989: 19). The imaginary photographer and Shannon, the model, seem to occupy these exact positions in both the protagonist's old life and currently in the world of her imagination. Moreover, most likely as a result of her experiences as a model, as well as the influence of Brandy Alexander, the protagonist sees herself as a "produc[t]"

(Palahniuk 2003: 12). After the injury, Shannon's view of herself remains the same, or even slightly exacerbated. When she touches her tongue, she remembers her doctors' offers to restore her face. Once again, the protagonist refers to herself as a "human product," certain less viable parts of which can be used to create the missing vital pieces of her body. The language of "build[ing]" (Palahniuk 2003: 218) the body from various parts is disturbing, as it echoes the terminology that normally would be used to describe an inanimate object, such as an electrical appliance, instead of a human being. Shannon's adoption of a self-objectifying view thus becomes apparent once again.

Importantly, self-mutilation functions, therefore, in *Invisible Monsters* as the protagonist's means of escape from (self-)objectification and dependence on her appearance. In the novel's penultimate chapter, Shannon reveals the motivations that drove her to this action. The protagonist confesses she was "addict[ed] to being beautiful" and that breaking this strong dependence required an extreme approach. The woman elaborates on how she considered other methods of becoming less attractive, such as gaining weight, cropping her hair, or waiting to age. However, she concludes that such attempts could either fail, with her remaining beautiful despite imperfections, or require too much time. She also expresses fear of giving in to her addictive urges and going back to her former attractive and popular self. As a result of these desires and anxieties, Shannon wanted an immediate change that would be completely irreversible (Palahniuk 2003: 285-286). As Andrew Ng argues, by disfiguring her face, Shannon attempts to regain her lost sense of self, which was previously taken away by "the beauty industry" (Ng 2009: 26). The scholar evokes Vicky Kirby's claims, according to whom the body is both one's possession but also something that owns them (Kirby in Ng 2009: 27). This argument is particularly

relevant in light of Shannon's relationship to her beautiful face in this scene. The protagonist's comparison between addiction and her looks shows that, when she was beautiful, the balance between owning and being owned by her body was distorted. Perhaps the protagonist's act of self-disfigurement was an attempt not to be overly controlled by her attractive physicality.

Furthermore, Shannon's self-inflicted mutilation can be seen, somehow controversially, as a form of self-fashioning. While certainly more extreme than the practices of piercing and tattooing, the protagonist's disfigurement appears to serve a similar function to those body-altering strategies. As Ross Farnell explains, many of the more popular body modifications have become rather widely accepted and represented in the last twenty-five years (Farnell 2014: 408). According to Victoria Pitts, quoted by Farnell, changing one's body through various practices shows its potential "as a site of exploration" and a place which "need[s] to be reclaimed from culture" (Pitts in Farnell 2014: 408). Palahniuk's protagonist directly addresses these effects of disfigurement by proclaiming that her transformation is radical and truly goes against all facial and bodily beauty expectations, as opposed to frequently encountered "lame [...]and] safe" modifications. Therefore, she takes pride in the fact that, unlike various mainstream forms of body art, her disfigurement will never become a part of the beauty status quo (Palahniuk 2003: 287).

While Shannon criticizes body modification trends, her approach is not dissimilar to many women who partake in such practices. Pitts explains that the opinion that modifying the body is a form of rebellion is quite common among those who pursue "subcultural body art" (Pitts 2003: 49). In this perspective, undergoing modification in the form of body art can be seen as an attempt "of 'reclaiming' the female body" (Pitts 2003: 49). Shannon's self-disfigurement appears to be such an act,

considering her confession at the end of the novel, where she relates her frustration as a glamorous model with a beautiful face, especially as regards being a victim of stereotypization and discrimination. The protagonist felt unchallenged and unmotivated to change or educate herself, for her beauty was treated by others as her only asset. She laments that, despite not doing anything noteworthy or impressive in her previous life as a beauty, she was admired and praised by others. Consequently, she perceives self-disfigurement as a way to break out of the shackles that her appearance put her in (Palahniuk 2003: 286). For Pitts, many women who pursue body modification view it as a way to free their bodies and themselves “from [...] victimization and objectification in patriarchal culture” (Pitts 2003: 49). Shannon’s extreme way of changing her face reflects this approach.

This aspect of self-disfigurement also shows that while beauty can be a form of currency for women, and such a promise often motivates beautification, as seen in the analysis of the character of Gomo from An Na’s *The Fold* in the previous chapter, it can also be limiting or even dehumanizing. Importantly, if in the novels discussed earlier in this dissertation, the protagonists, or their families, often believe becoming more attractive would change their lives for the better, Shannon hopes the opposite is true. She envies unattractive women, including those with disabilities and disfigurements, for, in her view, they are more frequently permitted to be dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and are able to enjoy their lives without worrying if their looks are worsening (Palahniuk 2003: 286). While the protagonist is seemingly unaware of the problems of unattractive women, such as stigma, bullying, and teasing, as well as the resulting forms of discrimination (see Pitts 2003: 50), her observation points to issues confronted by attractive women. Their worth as human beings, in the eyes of others, can be diminished to mere physicality. Moreover, the looks of women

who are attractive or can strive to become such are often a subject of policing by others and by themselves (Stone 2020: 40). In order to remain or become beautiful, they also have to adhere to a set of rules which often limit, permanently or temporarily, their abilities, and which can cause pain, physical or psychological (Tung 2020: 255). This is also supported by Lacanian theory of the obsession with one's mirror image, where a person attempts to live up to an unrealistic and constricting idea of oneself (Wright 1991: 156). While Palahniuk does not give a more detailed insight into Shannon's pre-disfigurement life, it can be assumed that, as a model, she had to avoid certain activities and follow a strict diet and exercise plan, as well as maintain a consistent public image, in order to maintain her career. Such a life routine could probably contribute to the protagonist's resentment of her beautiful face and the desire to disfigure it.

3.3.4. Becoming a Monster

Palahniuk depicts Shannon's loss of face as an event through which she becomes monstrous. In the hospital, after the injury, the protagonist is treated in a manner that is not dissimilar to the World War One soldiers discussed by Biernoff (Biernoff 2011: 668): the sight of her disfigured face inspires unease. The medical staff promptly removes from the patient's room almost all objects with reflective surfaces, eager to protect Shannon's fragile post-injury psyche. As one of the nurses says: "The doctor thinks you've suffered enough" (Palahniuk 2003: 35). This view is once again upheld by police officers when the protagonist has her photos taken as investigative evidence. Despite Shannon's curiosity, she is refused a chance to see the photographs (Palahniuk 2003: 36-37). While the hospital and police staff may have good intentions and want to diminish Shannon's psychological suffering, their actions nonetheless

seem to confirm Biernoff's claim that acquired facial disfigurement is regarded as particularly tragic and terrifying (Biernoff 2011: 669-670).

Unlike the workers who meet Shannon, the protagonist's ex-fiancé, Manus, instead of offering sympathy upon seeing her face, reacts with shock and disgust (Palahniuk 2003: 39). His lack of empathy reflects the often-held opinion, explained by Biernoff, that sufferers who are deemed unattractive, which post-disfigurement Shannon most likely is, often are not treated with the same grace as disfigured people who remain beautiful (Biernoff 2021: 197-198). On another occasion, he refuses to give the photographs to the protagonist; he apparently thinks that being the bearer of bad news regarding the woman's facial appearance could permanently damage their relationship (Palahniuk 2003: 41). Moreover, when visiting Shannon, the man cannot look her in the face. Instead, he talks to the protagonist while staring into the photographic prints (Palahniuk 2003: 40). The male character's attitude suggests that he considers the protagonist unsightly and, possibly, even scary. As Shannon's disfigurement is often described by Palahniuk in ways associated with rot, decay, and dampness (Palahniuk 2003: 31, 49), Manus likely views her face in such a way. As mentioned above, visible differences that evoke such comparisons are frequently seen as particularly terrifying and unpleasant to witness (Sontag 1990: 128-129). Therefore, the man's unsympathetic reaction reflects commonly felt fears upon encountering certain types of disfigurement.

What is more, the lack of empathy displayed by Manus in relation to Shannon's disfigurement suggests that he is trying to comfort himself in light of unpleasant realizations that the protagonist's new face brings to the surface. It is possible that seeing the woman's damaged visage reminds the attractive male character that he might someday become ugly and disfigured as well. As signaled

before, encountering facial disfigurement can often evoke such disturbing thoughts. Like Shannon and Evie, Manus has worked as a model, and it is likely that his face plays an important role in his self-schemata and perception of himself as unique. However, since, as Edkins claims (2015: 165-166), witnessing a person affected by the loss of face calls the issue of being a unique and separate person into question, it is not surprising that Manus's reactions are strongly negative. Dehumanization, which the character arguably engages in through his avoidance of Shannon and refusal to look at her face, tends to be a common reaction to the discomfort caused by an encounter with the disfigured.

While in the situations mentioned above, Shannon is treated in a dehumanizing way, the novel also contains a scene where she is called a monster directly. Early in the plot, during the hospital stay, the protagonist decides to go out and explore a nearby supermarket. While Shannon enjoys her stroll at first, her mood quickly deteriorates once she notices how strangers perceive her. She notes that the people around turn their heads away and share rather loud remarks of surprise and shock with one another. One of them compares the protagonist's face to a scary mask; another one asks his companions if they "[saw] *that*" (Palahniuk 2003: 54; emphasis in the original). Once again, the disfigured protagonist becomes the object of dehumanization by people who perceive her as terrifying. Afterward, Shannon decides to commit a random act of shoplifting, perhaps to see whether others will finally dare to look at her. However, the strangers do not change their attitude and continue to avoid the protagonist's sight. The only person in the store who eventually reacts is a child who screams: "look over there! That monster's stealing food!" (Palahniuk 2003: 55). If the boy receives punishment from his caretaker, the other people's reaction of embarrassment and continued lack of acknowledgement of

Shannon's existence appear to confirm their agreement with the child's words. In order to ensure their individuality and belief that they themselves are not vulnerable and prone to disfigurement, people tend not to sympathize with the disfigured as they would with somebody they consider a fellow human (Edkins 2015: 165). Instead, Shannon is labeled as monstrous and, as a result, is seen as unworthy of acknowledgment and empathy.

The protagonist's own perception of disfigurement changes in the course of *Invisible Monsters*. Her strategies for dealing with the loss of face appear to mirror the two approaches proposed by Edkins of either hiding or embracing disfigurement (Edkins 2015: 165). For most of the novel, Shannon chooses to hide behind elaborate veils made of many meters of fabric. She revels in the elegance of her disguise and the fact that her face is a mystery to others (Palahniuk 2003: 14). The person who inspires this choice is Brandy, who, similarly to Shannon, chose to obscure her old identity, with the help of glamorous fashion. Brandy explains to her sister that, by means of veils, the protagonist can reinvent herself into whoever she wants. She highlights that if Shannon hides her disfigurement, she will be able to live a life rich with various possibilities, similarly to anybody else (Palahniuk 2003: 107-108). The protagonist herself is depicted as appreciative of the veils, because, due to the disguise they provide, other people cannot access her true feelings. As a result, similarly to her parents, they can assume that she is content with her life (Palahniuk 2003: 102). The way Shannon and Brandy perceive veils as a way to achieve normalcy in the eyes of others bears similarities to those who seek plastic surgery, like Cameron in Margolis' *Fix* and Lauren in Williams's *Slant*, as analyzed in Chapter Two. Similarly to the women who undergo cosmetic procedures, Shannon hopes that veiling her face will help her to, once again, escape categorization and avoid discrimination (Davis 1991:

38). Without the disguise, the protagonist's "being a monster" is on full display to be judged by others (Palahniuk 2003: 168). In light of Edkins's theory, the approach chosen by Shannon for most of *Invisible Monsters* appears to uphold the importance of the face within society and its role in the perception of humans as unique, separate entities. By hiding her face and, therefore, meeting the standards of social respectability, Shannon seems to endorse the belief that each person's "dignity and worth" should be respected appropriately (Edkins 2015: 165).

Nonetheless, at the end of the novel, the protagonist's approach to handling her facial disfigurement changes drastically. During the dramatic events at Evie's house, Shannon wonders whether she should forego the veil and reveal the truth about her life and identity. When considering this step, she is worried about "just being a monster, a less than perfect, mutilated victim," and somebody who is easily defined and marginalized by others (Palahniuk 2003: 279). As discussed above, one can notice here the remnants of Shannon's old attitude toward her face. However, after Brandy is shot, she decides to reveal the secrets about her past and thus to break the illusion that her veils have created (Palahniuk 2003: 281-282). When Shannon arrives at the hospital and visits the unconscious Brandy's room, she finally takes off her veil, having come to the conclusion that she does not need a disguise anymore. For her, unveiling marks a moment of self-acceptance. As she finally flips through her post-disfigurement photographs, she assumes a non-judgmental stance: "They aren't good or bad, ugly or beautiful. They're just the way I look" (Palahniuk 2003: 296). At this moment, Shannon seemingly adopts the second way of approaching the face proposed by Edkins. She radically questions the importance of the face, accepting her disfigurement and our shared "inevitable monstrosity" (Edkins 2015: 165) that her facelessness emphasizes.

The protagonist's act of unveiling appears even more radical if we consider that, by removing her veil, she also abandons her former identity altogether. Because Shannon is disappointed that her transformation only affected her looks and not her overall attitude toward herself, and thus did not bring sufficient change to her life, she decides to take the final step. She leaves all her documents and identity markers, such as her name and surname, to Brandy (Palahniuk 2003: 296-297). By doing this, the protagonist becomes not only somebody without a face but also one without an identity or a past. She thus proves that the self is unstable, flexible, malleable, and exchangeable. Palahniuk thus rejects the illusion of an inherent, ordered, and contained identity, exposing the basic messiness of the self. His novel shows that, as Edkins contends, loss of face can question assumptions about our individuality and separability, and inspire different ways of thinking about these issues (Edkins 2015: 165). Moreover, abandoning an identity enmeshed with her attractive appearance allows Shannon to create herself anew, without her previous beauty addiction and reliance on stereotyping, which prevented her from enjoying new experiences (Bronfen 2009: 113). The end of the novel is optimistic as it allows the protagonist to start a new life in which she is not held back either by the standards of facial beauty or the notions of disfigurement.

3.4. Facial Disfigurement in Jennifer Egan's *Look At Me*

Initially, Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* was rather overlooked by critics, perhaps due to its publication in 2001 shortly after the 9/11 attacks, as Susan Potgieter speculates (Potgieter 2015). According to Adam Kelly, Egan's oeuvre can be classified as representing the *genre turn* in American literature as it interweaves realistic literary fiction with genre fiction (Kelly 2021: 151), such as mystery and thriller. Her prose is

described by Emily Horton as belonging to the ‘New Sincerity’ movement and simultaneously representing and subverting the conventions of postmodernism (Horton 2021: 228-229)¹². In 2011, another of Egan’s novels, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, among other honors; as a result, her earlier fiction garnered more attention as well. While *Look At Me* has enjoyed more academic interest in recent years than in the past, the research on the novel remains relatively sparse compared to the author’s aforementioned famous book. Most scholars have focused on the presence and impact of modern, digital media in the novel. Such analyses include Susan Potgieter’s “The Generation of Self: Fictions of Web 2.0” (2015), Emily Horton’s “‘What’s Real?’: Digital Technology and Negative Affect in Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me* and *The Keep*” (2021), and Millicent E. Lovelock’s “‘Why were we all writing like this now?’ Social Media Feminism, Genre, and Contemporary Women’s Fiction and Television” (2024). The following sub-chapter intends to contribute to this academic discussion by addressing the issues regarding facial disfigurement as explored by Egan through her protagonist with visible difference, Charlotte.

Look at Me is a dense novel with a large tapestry of characters and plotlines. It centers on Charlotte Swenson, a fashion model from New York who has had her face injured in a car crash. After the accident, the protagonist undergoes facial reconstruction surgery, the effects of which are explained vaguely in the novel. During the recovery process, Charlotte travels to her hometown, Rockford, in Illinois, and, later, returns to New York hoping to revive her modeling career. However, she does not find success and declines an offer of a controversial photoshoot, finding

¹² Martin Paul Eve argues that authors representing New Sincerity continue some of the postmodernists’ interests, such as those in literary “complexity [and] fragmentation,” as well as the lack of belief in the existence of “an authentic self.” However, contrary to postmodernists, they distance themselves from the implementation of “postmodern irony” (Eve 2019: 39).

herself unemployed. During this time, she meets a private detective, Anthony, who is looking for her former lover, an alleged terrorist, Z, and Irene, who claims to be a journalist interested in writing about Charlotte's story. The protagonist becomes involved in an affair with the investigator. Later, she meets Thomas, the owner of a website, which is a mixture of a "Big Brother" television program and a modern (video)blogging platform. Enticed by the prospects of fame and financial gain, Charlotte agrees to broadcast her life on Extra/Ordinary.com, and she employs Irene to write her blog entries. Finally, the protagonist visits Rockford for a heavily fictionalized recreation of her accident for the website. In the novel's epilogue, *The Afterlife*, Charlotte explains that the website was a massive success, propelling her to become famous. The protagonist has become a brand, selling the rights to her image, which is used to make holograms and photographs.

3.4.1. Depicting the Disfigured Face in *Look at Me*

While the depiction of facial disfigurement in Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* could be characterized by shock and excess, the portrayal of facial injury in *Look at Me* represents the opposite side of the spectrum. Even though Egan's prose appears almost excessive in its meticulous descriptions, representations of Charlotte's post-accident and post-surgery face tend to be sparse and vague. This purposeful ambiguity can be seen partially in line with the concept of textual staring, as, throughout the novel, readers are stimulated to conceptualize on their own how exactly Charlotte is disfigured (see Klecker and Grabher 2022: 6). It is never made clear what Charlotte looks like after the healing process is completed. The effects of the facial surgeries the protagonist goes through are only mentioned in passing. While Egan touches briefly upon the fact that Charlotte does not look how she used to, the exact nature of the

change is not specified (Egan 2017: 160). When other characters speak of the protagonist, they usually resort to metaphors, such as a photographer suggesting that her visage now consists of only “the very bare essentials” (Egan 2017: 175). The intentional ambiguity can appeal to the reader, who might revel in the mystery and try to guess how unusual Charlotte’s new face looks now. As Skinner explains, the act of textual staring must involve an element of delight or gratification (Skinner 2017: 161); the attempts to solve the questions regarding Charlotte’s new visage can certainly be exciting and intellectually stimulating for the reader-starer.

However, similarly to Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters*, Egan uses the first-person perspective in the parts of the novel where the subject of facial injury and disfigurement is discussed. This undermines the convention of textual staring, which usually involves the point of view of an onlooker or an omnipresent third-person narrator (Klecker and Grabher 2022: 6). Such a vantage point provides insight into the protagonist’s personal experience of disfigurement. Through Charlotte’s narration, Egan touches upon various aspects of living with acquired visible difference: bodily, such as pain and physical vulnerability; psychological, like the loss of identity and depression; social, such as isolation and lack of empathy from others. Thus, the author’s choices humanize the disfigured protagonist, unlike some third-person narratives, which choose to make characters with visible differences into mere spectacles unworthy of readers’ sympathy.

While Egan’s description of the protagonist’s facial appearance, the accident, and the specifics of facial reconstruction are certainly less gratuitous than Palahniuk’s, *Look at Me* is not free from passages stressing their gross and terrifying nature. This can be especially seen at the beginning of the novel, where Charlotte refers to her disfigured facial structure requiring “eighty titanium screws” to fix, which is repeated

several times (Egan 2015: 5, 13). She also describes the specifics of surgery and recovery, evoking the imagery of violence and negative emotions: with her skin “sliced,” her face experiences an “angry healing phase” and is peppered with excessive, dark bruising; meanwhile, the color of her eyes turns to an unnatural crimson (Egan 2015: 5-6). Later, Charlotte refers to her face as resembling a monster’s, again emphasizing its swelling and soreness (Egan 2015: 35). Even though Egan’s writing appears to be more sensitive and much less intent on the shock effect, some descriptions in the novel arguably breach the threshold of simply making the protagonist’s experiences understandable for the reader (see Skinner 2017: 161).

3.4.2. When a Model Loses Her Face

In *Look at Me*, the moment of the accident marks the separation between the protagonist’s old identity, characterized by beauty and relative success in the fashion industry, and her new one, as a person with an injured face who is not welcomed in the modeling world anymore. At the beginning of the novel, Charlotte is in her mid-30s, and her career as a model is fading away. She points out that in recent years, she has not been able to earn any significant sum for her employer (Egan 2017: 9). In the aftermath of her accident, the protagonist experiences many symptoms typical of persons with disfigurement. Charlotte is depressed, physically enfeebled, and humiliated by her stay at the hospital, which she perceives as a place for the pitiful (Egan 2017: 6). During the recovery period, the character withdraws socially, similarly to many visibly different women (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 90, 101) She opts to remain in her sister Grace’s house for a whole month. The only people the protagonist comes in contact with are her family members and medical professionals (Egan 2017: 8). When Charlotte returns to her apartment in New York and starts

recovering from another procedure, she remains in isolation. Although her face most likely looks more attractive and normative after the surgery, as indicated by a description of a visit to a successful surgeon, the protagonist remains depressed. She spends her days alone, wasting time on joyless, mundane activities, such as watching television (Egan 2017: 37-38). This shows the grave psychological impact of facial disfigurement; as Rumsey and Harcourt contend, the anxiety around being seen and assessed negatively in such cases often results in social alienation. Similarly to Egan's protagonist, people affected by acquired visible difference often avoid contact with others, as well as showing themselves in public where their looks could draw attention (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 90, 99, 101).

Charlotte's isolation from her former friends is exacerbated by the fact that she believes that others will judge her harshly based on her looks and lack of strength (Egan 2017: 37). While, as Wisely and Gaskell (2012: 380) note, this phenomenon is most often observed in teenagers and people in their early twenties, it is not surprising that the protagonist, working in a field that highly values youthfulness and is populated mainly by young people, experiences it as well. Like Charlotte, many real-life disfigured persons are frequently aware that in other people's eyes, their unusual looks lessen their value (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 101). Therefore, it is unsurprising that Charlotte decides against contacting her colleagues, proclaiming that once she is seen in a state that she deems unsightly and humiliating, other people will never forget such impressions of her. Later, when she begins to leave her house in the hope of re-establishing her career, she is still impacted by the experience of disfigurement. After an unsuccessful photoshoot, which she turns down, the protagonist comments that, before the accident, in such circumstances, she would

relax by attending a party. However, now she experiences weariness and prefers to spend time alone (Egan 2017: 97).

Charlotte's negative view of her post-disfigurement self reflects the phenomenon observed by Rumsey and Harcourt (2005: 99), namely that acquiring visible difference tends to be more debilitating and more difficult to accept for persons who place their beauty at the center of their identity and ascribe high levels of importance to their appearance. This is the case of Egan's protagonist, a fashion model for whom the face is "[a] too[l] of [her] trade" (Egan 2017: 36). Consequently, it is not surprising that she associates visible difference with something strongly negative and shameful. When she finally decides to step outside of her sister's place of residence, she does so while wearing large sunglasses that obscure her face (Egan 2017: 8). This highlights that the accident has significantly impacted her self-confidence. Throughout the first part of the novel, suggestively entitled *Double Life*, the sunglasses as well as a thick layer of makeup and various cloth accessories, such as scarves or even ski masks, become Charlotte's "standard uniform" (Egan 2017: 29, 37, 83). She perceives her appearance as unacceptable and too shameful to show to others.

The difference between Charlotte's face before and after the accident is not only accentuated by herself, but also by other characters around her, especially those working in the fashion industry, for whom commenting on others' looks is a normal part of their professional everyday life. The protagonist is depicted as aware of these judgments, displaying anxiety by fidgeting with "her hair and face" when she notices her former colleagues looking at her (Egan 2017: 41-42). The fact that she quickly averts her gaze can indicate that, similarly to many disfigured women (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 100), Charlotte almost automatically interprets other people's

reactions as clearly hostile. During the long-delayed appointment with her agent Oscar, the man reveals, unprompted, that although her looks are not frightening as expected, they differ noticeably from those she possessed pre-accident (Egan 2017: 43). After the protagonist's inquiry for clarification, Oscar proceeds to analyze her face carefully. Charlotte compares this analysis to a mathematical equation that tells one "their worth" in the eye of the beholder (Egan 2017: 43).

The importance that the protagonist ascribes to her agent's judgment may suggest that she internalizes both the male gaze and the photographic gaze (Mulvey 1989: 19; Solomon-Godeau in Mackie 2002: 3). This occurs most likely due to her line of work, in which appealing to mainstream tastes, significantly influenced by what men find aesthetically and sexually attractive, is often seen as important. Fulfilling the expectations of the male gaze can thus translate into more popularity and a larger number of professional opportunities. This point is further emphasized by the fact that Charlotte used to be employed primarily as a commercial model, not a high fashion one (Egan 2017: 14). In this type of modeling, women are generally expected to appeal to the popular standard of beauty (themodelbuilders.co.uk). The nature of the protagonist's job in print media, as well as television commercials, has possibly contributed to her also internalizing the ever-present camera's gaze, for which she must look beautiful. It is worth noting that, as already discussed in the analysis of *Invisible Monsters*, the camera's gaze is not objective and often reflects gendered stereotypes. For instance, photographs can frequently emphasize the societal view of women as submissive through the choice of angles: they are often portrayed "from above," which highlights the signifiers of being young, beautiful, and powerless (Makhanova, McNulty and Maner 2017: 2). The novel's protagonist might

have learned to view herself in these categories as a result of posing for and viewing her photographic representations.

The scene also showcases the ageism of the fashion industry. During her conversation with Oscar, Charlotte suggests that she could restart her career since she lost her previous face and looks completely different, yet still young. However, the agent refuses to comply with her wish, calling her “an old dog” and citing her age as the reason for turning her down. He explains that a new career in modeling is only available to those who have not reached their mid-twenties yet, emphasizing that Charlotte is at least ten years too old for such an opportunity (Egan 2017: 46). As mentioned in the analysis of *Invisible Monsters*, this attitude reflects beliefs widely held in society, as observed by Sontag (1997: 20-21), regarding aging as marking the end of a woman’s life. Growing older is often widely associated with an array of negative changes, such as the loss of new chances, lack of sexual appeal, and societal expectations to become a person whose everyday reality is joyless and unexciting. During this interaction, the protagonist is upset and almost desperate, hoping that the man will help her. Meanwhile, the agent remains calm and accepting of the status quo, which withholds opportunities from aging models (Egan 2017: 46). Oscar’s attitude reflects the acceptance of unjust standards; as Laura Hurd explains in “The Politics of Looking Old: Older Adults and the Aging Body” (Hurd 2021: 359), like many real-life people, he sees such an order of things as unquestionable and normal. While the man finally agrees to consider Charlotte’s plea, he seems dismissive, which suggests that his line of thinking remains unchallenged (Egan 2016: 46).

3.4.3. Adapting to New Life after Losing Face

In *Part One: Double Life*, Egan's protagonist endures various emotions and develops coping strategies usually associated with grief, which are experienced by many disfigured people. Eileen Bradbury claims that the loss of face can be seen as a personal catastrophe, which can pose similar challenges and reactions to bereavements caused by other factors. As a result, many persons with acquired difference will possibly experience "denial, anger, distress, mourning and yearning, anxiety and depression," as well as longing for their past selves (Bradbury 1997: 181). While at the beginning, Charlotte has overwhelmingly negative feelings concerning her accident, disfigurement, and the new look of her face, she slowly makes attempts to adapt to her new life situation. However, while it is often believed that grieving tends to progress in one predictable way (Bradbury 1997: 181), the discussion on the website of the charity *Changing Faces*, dedicated to helping those affected by visible difference, counters this claim (changingfaces.org.uk). Similarly to many disfigured people, the protagonist's process of adaptation is not linear. Instead, her feelings caused by and regarding her disfigurement fluctuate in the first section of the novel, as discussed above.

In the aftermath of facial injury, Charlotte experiences a separation in her identity, which, as mentioned before, is a common struggle in persons with such experiences. This division between pre- and post-disfigurement in the protagonist's mind bears a resemblance to that of real-life women, discussed by Manjali. The scholar points out that her research participants viewed their identity as "shattered" and experienced grief for their old lives (Manjali 2020: 6, 67). Many of the subjects noticed transformations in their personalities. While some women attributed positive changes to disfigurement, such as increased compassion and decreased stress levels, other women reported feeling less joyful and assuming a timid demeanor (Manjali

2020: 68-69). Regardless of whether the attitude towards one's disfigurement is positive or negative, the loss of face is associated with breaking a woman's self into two distinctive parts.

Charlotte's turmoil regarding her identity after becoming disfigured has some similarities to the portrait of Shannon in Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*. However, the processes of coping with disfigurement, as well as final feelings regarding visible difference differ between the two characters. In Charlotte's case, the realization that her selfhood is divided into two selves is not immediate but more gradual. Initially, she clings to her old life as a fashion model who was perceived as beautiful by others. On the one hand, she notices that she is not the same as the "Glamorous Aunt Charlotte," who was admired by her family and friends and who exuded charm and self-confidence as immortalized in the commercials. However, on the other hand, the protagonist believes she can become the woman from the advertisements again. In fact, Charlotte fights the notion that her disfigured face represents her self now (Egan 2017: 13-14). This lack of acceptance regarding her changed appearance suggests that her beautiful face and her attractiveness were central to the protagonist's entire identity. Charlotte is hopeful when a surgeon claims his procedure will "make [her] look like [herself]" again. When her doctor warns her that the result might not be ideal, her attitude is dismissive: she wittily proclaims that she was not ideal before and would not mind if the physician made her look even better. Charlotte lacks realistic expectations as she believes that surgery will make it possible to resume her previous life as if nothing had happened (Egan 2017: 37). Later, the practitioner's warning is revealed to be accurate — the facial restoration surgery does not succeed in bringing back her old face accurately. This failure significantly impacts Charlotte's already fragile mental health (Egan 2017: 160).

In *Look at Me*, the loss of face is correlated with a painful loss of one's identity. Scholars note that the inability to recognize oneself in their face can be particularly distressing (Rumsey and Harcourt 2005: 100; Wisely and Gaskell 2012: 379). An example of the protagonist's negative feelings about her change can be found in the scene where she stalks around Ellen's house. While Charlotte initially worries about being caught, she quickly realizes that nobody would know who she is as she does not resemble any known person anymore: "this isn't me," she thinks, which highlights the disconnect between her inner sense of self and her new face (Egan 2017: 29). The refusal of identification with her new face suggests that, like the Lacanian child, the protagonist is still strongly attached to the image she was used to seeing in the mirror (see Neill 2024: 141, 142). Thus, it is unsurprising that the loss of facial beauty and the subsequent radical change of appearance prove too challenging for the woman to accept.

In Charlotte's pre-accident life, her face was her greatest and most important asset. Reminiscing about her past, she remembers the times when she worked as a model and her face represented a "sign" or a greeting that fulfilled a pragmatic function. She explains that her visage was the only thing she could "offer to the [fashion] world" that she belonged to and still desires to be a part of. She has relied on her facial attractiveness from a young age; her looks attracted attention, which was a potential "energy source" and could be used as a source of "power" (Egan 2017: 29-30). As in most of the novels discussed in this dissertation, in *Look at Me*, an attractive face is therefore approached as a form of currency a woman can possess. The benefits her beautiful face previously granted Charlotte pertained to both social and economic spheres, as enumerated by Unger (in Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 178). The former translated to her belonging to the world of the popular and famous,

whereas the latter ensured work opportunities and finances that afforded her a comfortable life filled with luxury. When disfigurement impacts the protagonist's crucial asset, her circumstances change drastically and become similar to those of women perceived as less attractive. This can be especially noticeable in the sphere of employment as Charlotte, who is now aged and changed, is no longer seen as a good candidate for modeling (Egan 2017: 43, 46).

A decisive moment regarding the division of Charlotte's life into the attractive previous self and the disfigured present self occurs during and following the scene of her last attempt at a fashion photoshoot. Despite her qualms about the choice of photographer, a former paparazzo, she agrees to participate in the session. The offer is treated very seriously by both Charlotte and her agent, who stresses that the woman should be thankful and try to make the best of this opportunity. (Egan 2017: 161-162). At the site of the photoshoot, the protagonist's visible difference is seen as a novelty by the photographer, Spiro, who is fascinated by pain and the fleshiness of bodies (Egan 2017: 166). At first, Charlotte feels uncomfortable during the photoshoot, given other people's interest in her disfigurement. Nevertheless, gradually, she starts to feel elated because the session enables her to re-live a valuable experience from her former life that she still cherishes. Perceiving her reflection as "a stranger in beautiful makeup," she reminisces about happy memories from the beginning of her career (Egan 2017: 172). Those include the aforementioned privileges granted to her on the basis of her beauty, such as contact details of prestigious persons, international travel, and free meals (Egan 2017: 173). However, while sitting in the makeup artist's chair, Charlotte's emotions are not only positive. She is regretful of not being able to ensure herself a comfortable life after the end of her career by fully using her beauty as social currency, similarly to other women in her field. The protagonist realizes that the car

crash has excluded her from the fight to reach the highest level of fame (Egan 2017: 173-174).

Despite her conflicting feelings, Charlotte still longs to participate in something that she hopes will make her existence relevant again and, implicitly, return her to her old life. After having her makeup and hair done, she awaits the start of the photoshoot. When others look admiringly at her, she feels elated, comparing herself to an engine being ignited and imagining “sparks raining from [her] hair and eyes” (Egan 2017: 177-178). However, the triumphant feelings quickly fade when the makeup artist touches the protagonist’s face and pulls out a razor blade. The confused Charlotte then learns that the photographer likes to cut the models’ skin and take photographs of them bleeding, which he deems authentic. Charlotte’s reaction, unsurprisingly, is very negative, and when her offer to buy fake blood is rejected, she leaves the studio (Egan 2017: 179-182). This dramatic event prompts the protagonist to finally recognize the difference between her old and new life: “It’s over [...] my life. My life before the accident” (Egan 2017: 186). After this incident, the protagonist gives up on her dream of working as a fashion model again and falls into depression (Egan 2017: 189).

As a result of her mental breakdown caused by the loss of face and the loss of life from before the car accident, Charlotte attempts to commit suicide (Egan 2017: 208). This action seems to reflect the inner struggles experienced by visibly different people. As Anne-Marie Martindale notes in “A Life Lived: Experiencing an Acquired Facial ‘Disfigurement’ and Identity Shift,” some persons affected by facial disfigurement express thoughts of suicidal ideation (Martindale 2014: 49). However, to her disbelief, the protagonist survives the jump from the balcony and feels significantly better afterwards. She imagines that, unlike her, the depression “has

passed away” (Egan 2017: 208-209, 212). Her reaction can seem somewhat perplexing, but it remains in line with her overall emotional detachment. According to Emily Horton, it is especially noticeable in relation to the protagonist’s overall approach to the accident, in relation to which “Charlotte [...] fails to express anything nearing the accordant emotional response.” Horton stresses the woman’s frequently stilted reactions, as well as her superficial indifference and dismissal of the traumatic event and her following transformation throughout the novel (Horton 2021: 230). The symbolic death of despair caused by disfigurement during the suicide attempt could mark the moment when Charlotte would become ready to try to renegotiate her relationship with her face and adapt to its different look. This interpretation is further confirmed by the fact that the incident occurs at the closure of the narrative concerning the protagonist in the first part of the novel. Moreover, from this moment onward, the woman’s face is rather rarely mentioned or thought of by both herself and other characters. However, while the protagonist’s preoccupation with her disfigurement somewhat wanes, the same cannot be said about her desire for fame.

3.4.4. Disfigurement as an Attempt to Escape Beauty and Gain Agency

Although the car crash causes a radical break in her life, it is noticeable that Charlotte’s attitude both before and after the accident was characterized by passivity: instead of actively fighting for opportunities, Charlotte waited for others to pay attention to her and offer her work (Egan 2017: 174-175). The protagonist recollects being approached by an agent during her high school years. She remembers the excitement and notes her lack of surprise about the fact that her most significant achievement did not involve action on her side (Egan 2017: 164-165). Instead, it was caused by being seen and deemed attractive by another person, thus serving, to refer

to Mulvey (1989: 19), as an object of gaze. Her passivity can suggest that she has internalized her role in the dynamic of the male gaze, which tends to have a particular impact on fashion models. Instead of being an active agent in her life, the protagonist has assumed the role of a passive object. Visual media, such as the photographic and video advertisements in which Charlotte took part, frequently impose the view of women as submissive “element[s] of spectacle” at which others look (Mulvey 1989: 19), and it is likely that embodying this role has impacted her early self-perception. Initially, being admired for her physicality was a source of fulfillment and happiness, much more appealing than other activities. It becomes relatively clear, however, that, later in life the protagonist’s feelings about these matters changed radically.

Similarly to Shannon in *Invisible Monsters*, Charlotte deliberately causes the accident which results in her facial disfigurement. As revealed later in the novel, during a road trip with Z, she became increasingly frustrated by various circumstances (Egan 2017: 500-501), particularly the monotony and superficiality of her life as a model (Horton 2021: 233). Charlotte explains that she, therefore, hoped the accident would serve as an “escape. From [her] wrong decisions [...] [and] lost time” (Egan 2017: 501). This suggests that she wanted to take a more active role in her life and act in accordance with her wants and needs. Unfortunately, in opposition to Palahniuk’s protagonist, who eventually manages to find empowerment, confidence, and liberation through disfigurement, Egan’s Charlotte does not achieve the same results as she keeps on pursuing popularity.

In light of Edkins’s thoughts (Edkins 2015: 165), the protagonist of *Look At Me* approaches facial disfigurement as something that needs to be hidden or fixed. She associates visible difference with embarrassment and repeatedly emphasizes that she does not want to be looked at by other people. As mentioned above, such feelings

are not unusual for facially disfigured people who are aware that facial wounds are particularly shocking and horrifying for onlookers (Biernoff 2011: 668; Sontag 1990: 128-129). After the accident, Charlotte seeks multiple restorative plastic surgeries for her face in the hope of looking the same as before (Egan 2017: 37, 160). During the recovery process, Charlotte is portrayed as wearing a disguise, which is intended to mask and draw attention from her visible difference. The devices she uses range from ordinary items such as sunglasses and scarves to a ski mask, which is more unusual in a cityscape (Egan 2017: 8, 29, 83). The protagonist also attempts to obscure her disfigurement by using excessive makeup, as a result of which she describes her face as resembling a “pancake” (Egan 2017: 35).

All of these attempts to compensate for the acquired disfigurement can be interpreted as legitimizing and reinforcing “the facial status quo.” While in *Invisible Monsters*, after experiencing inner turmoil, Shannon was able to embrace her disfigurement and thus question the role of the face, the same cannot be said about Charlotte in Egan’s novel. The protagonist’s identity is fragile after the accident, and her “imaginary self” remains closely tied to her previous appearance. As Edkins contends, loss of face might be an enlightening experience that serves as “an encounter with the real,” a reflection inspired by Lacan’s psychoanalytic perspective (Edkins 2015: 165). The scholar understands this as being confronted with the idea of “the impossibility of wholeness” (Edkins 2015: 34). Thus, facing the real can counter the perceptions that emerge in childhood during the Lacanian mirror stage, discussed earlier in this chapter, such as the view of oneself as fully realized, separate, and accurately represented by the image in the mirror (Homer 2005: 25; Neill 2024: 140-142). In this sense, the confrontation with the real involves trauma, shattering the fantasies of human existence as coherent, complete, and unique, an experience

profoundly distressing to the self yet also deeply transformative, as seen on the example of Palahniuk's Shannon. Unfortunately, Charlotte does not come to such conclusions after becoming disfigured. Instead of interrogating the role of the face and its connection with personhood, Egan's protagonist clings to her old beliefs about her identity and the face.

Through the lens of her relationship with the face, Charlotte appears to be a complicated figure. Her brave decision to cause the car accident and the resulting disfigurement seems to have been motivated by her desire to escape facial appearance standards, the control of the male gaze in the modeling industry, as well as the lack of agency stemming from such a line of work. Nevertheless, this act of self-injury does not bring the desired results. As Horton argues, Charlotte attempts to navigate between her strong ambition for a satisfying career in modeling and fighting this desire to be able to "redefine her aspirations" (Horton 2021: 230). Instead of turning away from seeking fame, the protagonist switches her goals to become an online personality. Moreover, as Horton suggests, Charlotte's personal journey, which could have the aforementioned transformative potential, ends up being a simplistic "make-over" narrative constructed for the website *Extra/Ordinary.com* (Horton 2021: 232). Therefore, facial disfigurement not only does not prompt the character's personal growth but, in light of her increased appetite for popularity, makes her embrace a self that she used to, at least to some degree, be critical of (Egan 2017: 172-174, 253; Horton 2021: 232). Instead of illuminating change, the accident causes regression; ultimately, Charlotte is not closer to empowerment and questioning her relationship with her face, but farther from it.

At the end of the novel, after becoming a famous celebrity through her online platform, the protagonist sells her entire identity, including her name, face, and

overall appearance, to the Extra/Ordinary.com's owners, who are now free to generate and reproduce content based on it. Instead of accepting disfigurement and thus "unthinking" the importance of the face, Charlotte allows her face, presumably enhanced with makeup and photo-editing software, to become forever attached to her name in the public consciousness (Egan 2017: 513-514). The protagonist's perfected image, her "ideal-I" (Neill 2024: 141, 142), has apparently triumphed over her actual appearance and experiences. As Horton suggests, her identity has become an object that can be sold and bought (Horton 2021: 234). Charlotte's conclusions are ambiguous: while she does not see disfigurement as something to be proudly displayed in public, which would question the widely upheld beliefs about the face, she enjoys certain perks of the approach she chose. Freed of her duties as a model, Charlotte is pleased to be able to live anonymously, as she understands that living in the spotlight is not sustainable for her. She thus describes "the mirrored room," which can be understood as the highest strata of popularity, as populated with unachievable standards that Charlotte – the product – represents. Throughout the novel, the protagonist longs for this ideal, thinking it is something that could be reached by a person of flesh and blood. However, now she realizes that what the room of mirrors represents is purely imaginary. The place seems to be filled with Lacanian idealized mirror images, detached from the reality of the people they supposedly reflect (Neill 2024: 140-141). Instead of the real Charlotte, the woman's hologram, a persona created for consumption, is who the media shows and the public admires (Egan 2017: 513-514). This happens at the expense of the protagonist once again breaking her self, this time into a *public* and *private* self, a process that Horton describes as "self-alienation" (Horton 2021: 235).

In the end, Charlotte's approach to facial disfigurement and navigating fame does not question the societal beliefs regarding the face or the existing beauty standards. However, while being burdened by the aforementioned costs, it at least helps her recognize the positive aspects of her newly acquired circumstances. She especially values her financial and personal freedom, which she previously thought could be achieved only in the world of beauty. The ending of *Look at Me* shows that the world of fame and the expectations that are prevalent within it are difficult to escape. Despite experiencing significant turmoil caused by facial disfigurement, throughout the novel, Charlotte is not able to defy the importance placed on the face within society and embrace facelessness. While the loss of face can serve as "the encounter with the real" (Edkins 2015: 165), the novel shows that this ontological condition might be beyond the reach of most people. Instead, the view of the face as central to one's individuality prevails. With this conclusion, Egan seems to criticize the preoccupation with the face specific to Western culture¹³ Considering the expansion of online celebrities (influencers) in the 21st century, who tend to be primarily recognized by their faces and often turn their entire existence into a brand, bearing a resemblance to Charlotte in the novel, the author's diagnosis is particularly relevant.

¹³ In *Look at Me* Egan refers to various modern ailments and seems to be rather critical of Western culture. An example can be found in the novel's second primary plotline, which tells the story of Z, hired by Islamic terrorists. Dorothy Butchard praises Egan's attunement to contemporary issues, stressing that many events and phenomena discussed in the novel later materialized in real life (Butchard 2019: 360).

Chapter Four

South Korean Women and Facial Beauty Standards

in Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*

4.1. Facial Beauty Standards in South Korea: What Makes a Beauty?

The norms of feminine appearance within South Korean society and culture seem distinct even to an untrained eye. In *Flawless: Lessons in Looks and Culture from the K-Beauty Capital*, Elise Hu characterizes the beauty standards portrayed in South Korean media as particularly uniform and lacking diversity. She describes the faces of South Korean women shown in large-scale advertisements as representing one model of appearance with only very slight variations (Hu 2023: 2). The fact that the face is featured particularly often in such advertisements does not seem incidental. According to Seung-Hee Lee, Nancy A. Rudd, and Jae Sook Kim, South Korean women ascribe the utmost importance to the attractiveness of the face as opposed to other parts of the body, unlike their American counterparts (Lee, Rudd and Kim 2001: 974).

The rigorous standard of perfect facial appearance in South Korea can be clearly defined. For a woman to be perceived as beautiful, her face should have “large, double-lidded eyes” (Dunbar 2023), full lips, a slender jawline and nose (asiamediacentre.org.nz; Hu 2023: 89). This beauty type can be seen among many k-drama and K-pop stars, such as the BLACKPINK singer Kim Ji-Soo (Siu 2021). Another prized quality of the face is pale and bright skin without any marks, such as pimples, freckles, or wrinkles (Hu 2023: 79, 84. 90). Hu points out that the beauty ideal in Korea is distinct for its “skinfirst philosophy,” which emphasizes care for the

skin through expansive skincare and procedures that constitute a part of one's everyday routine (Hu 2023: 76-77). This approach seems in line with Koreans assigning particular value to the possession of a "natural look" (Lee, Rudd and Kim 2001: 972). While easily noticeable cosmetic augmentation is generally seen as acceptable in Western countries, as exemplified by the popularity of various procedures like visible lip filler, South Koreans appreciate more subtle-looking beautification. The ultimate goal of beautifying strategies is to emulate what is called "non-made beauty" ([kor.] ssaeng'ol)" which is seen as highly valuable (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 62). It is worth noting that, as Joanna Elfving-Hwang explains in "The Body, Cosmetic Surgery and the Discourse of 'Westernization of Korean Bodies'," in Korean society expected appearance is strongly dependent on identity aspects such as one's class and age (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 277). Accordingly, the standards of beauty described in this section are most relevant for young and middle-aged women.

In the West, as Sharon Heijin Lee observes, coverage of Korean beauty standards and, especially, plastic surgery in both popular media and academia frequently assumes that South Korean women desire to look more like Caucasians. Some journalists and scholars speculate that through various means of beautification, Koreans try to erase ethnic characteristics by striving for a more 'Westernized' look (Lee 2016: 3). Such beliefs do not seem surprising considering that some of the prized physical features, such as big eyes and pale skin, can be associated with whiteness. However, as Ruth Holliday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang point out, these proclamations oversimplify the complex factors that influence the current Korean feminine beauty standard. These include the identity of Korea as a nation, notions of attractiveness stemming from both Korean and Western spheres, as well as various traditions,

including spiritual ones, some of which originated in Korea, whereas others were imported from foreign countries. Moreover, the notions of self-care, striving for success, as well as the symbolic rites of passage of adulthood also play a crucial role in shaping the appearance norms (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 59). By highlighting what criteria are taken into account in appearance-enhancing practices which are deemed unsuccessful, the scholars support their claim that beautification does not result from the interest in looking more Western. In Korea, an overly Caucasian-looking face is considered abnormal, and it counters the goal of subtle, invisible plastic surgery. When opting for invasive types of procedures, most Koreans want to augment their “*Korean* features,” rather than change them into Western ones (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 62; emphasis in the original).

4.1.1. Shaping Modern Korean Beauty Standards

Before analyzing the issues surrounding plastic surgery in Korea, it is worth investigating the factors influencing the Korean norms of beauty, as well as the country’s “infatuation with aesthetics” (Gelézeau 2015: 4). The noticeable preoccupation with the face among Koreans might partially stem from the role of physiognomy in the tradition of divination. According to Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, traditional fortune-telling in Korea attempts to read the person’s character as well as their future from the features of their face (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 69-70), similarly to the practice of palm reading known more widely in the West. These beliefs seem to be still enduring in modern times, as over half of Korean people think they are able to learn about someone’s personality features from their appearance. In light of such convictions, beautification is seen as a potential means of altering one’s unfavorable fate or character. These beliefs are reinforced by folk

legends, such as the one about the mother of a future president, who supposedly changed her appearance to grant her unborn son a glorious future (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 70). As a result, physiognomy is often interwoven in the process of seeking plastic surgery, with both potential patients and doctors reaching out to fortune-tellers for advice. Scholars acknowledge that even though the belief in divination is not held by all Koreans, most of them are aware of the associations between certain features and good luck. As a result, particular types of faces are generally seen as more advantageous than others (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 70). For instance, the prized “high nose bridge” is often associated with financial affluence (Kwak 2021: 002). Elfving-Hwang notes that in order to understand the importance of notions such as physiognomy, one should be aware that Koreans highly value the “initial impression ([kor.] insang)” a person gives (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 275). Therefore, it is not surprising that features which communicate positive associations are particularly sought after.

It is worth noting that the interpretation and valuation of certain types of physicality have changed over the years. Holliday and Elfving-Hwang argue that the modern beauty standard in South Korea reflects the transformations of women’s position within society. While in the past, a big and round face was perceived as a positive symbol of maternity, today such a face shape is seen as unattractive and frequently corrected with plastic surgery. This shift suggests that by distancing themselves “from [the] maternal body” and championing signifiers “of overt sexuality,” Korean women turn away from the traditional notions of modesty and respectability imposed by patriarchy (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 72).

The partial revival of the practice of physiognomy is connected to another important factor that impacted Korean beauty standards, namely the period of

Japanese colonization (1910-1945) (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 68-69). According to Valérie Gelézeau, after Korea regained independence, efforts were made in order to depart from Japan's aesthetic preferences, including those pertaining to the body and face (Gelézeau 2015: 9). As Holliday and Elfving-Hwang explain, Korean nationalists "mobilized the West" in order to disapprove of the Japanese influence. In the writings from the 1960s, the scholars notice the favorable comparisons made between the appearance of Koreans and Westerners, suggesting self-identification with the West instead of the neighboring Asian countries. As the authors explain, "the Western body" served as an important tool in the rejection of beauty norms previously imposed by the Japanese. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Korean officials postulated the return to the values of the gentry of the pre-colonial Joseon dynasty (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 68-69). This return to the ideals of earlier times suggests that Korea did not aim to simply imitate the West in terms of beauty, but used elements of its traditional appearance ideals in re-establishing its own identity as an independent nation.

However, as Jasmine Kwak argues, today, Western ideals can still partially influence the beauty standards in Korea. The scholar points to advertisements of Korean beauty brands that use photographs of white models fairly frequently. Similarly, Western brands often promote their products in Korea by using non-Koreans. Kwak claims that the ubiquitous presence of Caucasian faces on display suggests to Asian women that their facial features are not as attractive as those of Westerners (Kwak 2021: 002). Kwak's arguments seem relevant in light of the media's influence on beauty in Korea in the 21st century. According to Elfving-Hwang, digitally-enhanced images of models have negative effects on how women self-perceive themselves, and television programs focusing on improving appearance

promote the view of features that do not fit the beauty standard as “deformities” (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 274-275).

Gelézeau points out the significant influence throughout Korean history of the higher social strata on the entire nation’s appearance norms and bodily improvement rituals. She claims that, approximately in the period spanning between the 1650s and 1850s, various methods of improvement of looks and health were adopted, first among the gentry and later among the general population. Similarly to other members of the aristocracy around the world, Koreans favored a specific aesthetics. The fair shade of skin, still desirable in Korea today, was one of such preferred features due to its association with wealth, a high social position, and lack of involvement in physical labor. As Gelézeau notes, female court members attempted skin lightening as an important part of their beauty-enhancing rituals. In the present day, social class and the desire to better one’s societal position still seem to impact the Korean beauty standard. According to Gelézeau, especially those belonging to the middle class attempt to project an image suggesting that they have a higher social status than they actually possess. Such efforts are undertaken in the hope of either ensuring that they remain middle class or move to a higher class (Gelézeau 2015: 7-8). Thus, an attractive appearance, achieved by such means of beautification as subtle plastic surgery, becomes, as Holliday and Elfving-Hwang claim, a class signifier suggesting the possession of wealth and a favorable position in society (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 62). As a result, in Korea, a nation that is characterized by high levels of social competitiveness, bettering one’s appearance is seen as a pro-active move toward enhancing one’s prospects (Lee 2016: 20).

Maintaining social respectability through appearance is another important aspect shaping beauty expectations. As Elfving-Hwang argues, in Korea, looking

presentable is an aspect “of social etiquette” instead of an individualized decision. Therefore, beautifying oneself should be seen as “a process of considered presentation of the self,” rather than the result of a vain desire to be perceived as particularly beautiful or glamorous. As mentioned before, the expected looks are influenced by various identity markers, among others, the role or position a person occupies in society (Elfvig-Hwang 2021: 277).

4.1.2. Plastic Surgery in South Korea

In South Korea, undergoing both non-invasive and invasive cosmetic procedures is rather common. The country is claimed to lead in the number of such operations per capita (Gelézeau 2015: 4). According to Holliday and Elvig-Hwang, estimating how many Koreans have had plastic surgery proves difficult due to the lack of proper regulation and reporting. The scholars cite sources claiming that at least 20% of the general population have had a cosmetic procedure (Holliday and Elfvig-Hwang 2012: 59). In “A Look at South Korean Plastic Surgery” Annie Jin and Ian Whittall state that presently most South Koreans seeking plastic surgery belong to the younger generations, between the ages of twenty and forty. The majority of patients have their first operation in the lower end of this age bracket (Jin and Whittall 2022: 22). While men in South Korea also undergo beautifying procedures, the practice remains more popular among women (Holliday and Elfvig-Hwang 2012: 58-59). Jin and Whittall highlight that among young female college students, the number of those who have had cosmetic work done is over 45% (Jin and Whittall 2022: 22). These numbers show that plastic surgery is especially popular among some demographic groups.

Studies identify some of the most popular types of surgery in South Korea. In a recent survey of over 3000 respondents from an array of East Asian countries,

“Experiences and Attitudes Toward Aesthetic Procedures in East Asia: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Five Geographical Regions,” nose procedures were proven to be the leading type of cosmetic work done on Koreans¹⁴. Facial contouring and double eyelid crease surgery, respectively, took the second and third places in terms of popularity. Non-invasive methods such as laser therapy and injections were chosen by Korean people less often than by other Asians. The researchers also note that surgical procedures performed on the rest of the body were less prevalent in all studied countries, as opposed to the West (Kwon et al. 2021: 663).

Plastic surgery is relatively normalized among South Koreans. As an example of such normalization, Gelézeau cites the phenomenon of treating cosmetic procedures as an appropriate congratulatory gift. Not infrequently, young women are offered the opportunity to have surgery at the expense of their relatives, after successfully applying for university (Gelézeau 2015: 5) or completing a certain level of education (Lee 2016: 17). Such social practices might reinforce the view of beautifying oneself as being a necessary part of “initiation into society” (Gelézeau 2015: 5) and growing up. The ease of access is another factor that contributes to the normalization of surgery. For instance, establishments conducting cosmetic procedures are often placed in shopping centers. Some offer enhancement to customers without pre-booked appointments (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 59). Plastic surgery is also widely promoted in mass media, such as advertising and television. Elfving-Hwang points out that it is not infrequent for businesses that offer plastic surgeries to finance programs and advertisements that glamorize the processes and mask their dangers (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 274-275). Importantly, the South Korean government has also contributed to the proliferation of cosmetic procedures

¹⁴ 592 South Koreans took part in the study. 63.9% of the respondents from Korea were female (Kwon et al. 2021: 662).

among Koreans and tourists. According to Sharon Heijin Lee, in the mid-2000s, South Korea identified “medical tourism” as one of its key business areas and has worked in order to expand its reach (Lee 2016: 20). Moreover, the government has largely ignored predatory and dishonest advertising practices of plastic surgery clinics (Elfvig-Hwang 2021: 276).

In Korea, invasive cosmetic procedures are generally met with positive attitudes and a lack of judgment, as noted by Holliday and Elfvig-Hwang. Most people do not see undergoing plastic surgery as an expression of superficiality. Instead, surgical beautification is usually seen as a good form of personal “investment.” The scholars point to a study that indicates that plastic cosmetic surgeries are accepted by some 70% of South Koreans (Holliday and Elfvig-Hwang 2012: 62). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the ubiquity of plastic surgery in South Korea is generally met with little resistance. However, Sharon Heijin Lee points to the existence of organizations that caution against an uncritical acceptance of beautifying procedures. Womenlink, for example, contests surgical beautifying interventions, draws attention to social problems such as lookist discrimination, and promotes body-positivity (Lee 2016: 3, 12-13). The scholar, however, criticizes their efforts as quite unsuccessful due to their focus on offering “self-esteem as [an] alternativ[e] to surgeries,” as well as to an array of complex issues within the Korean society (Lee 2016: 21).

4.1.3. Cultural Factors Behind Surgery

Similarly to the factors that have shaped the nature of mainstream South Korean beauty standards for women, the influences and reasons for undergoing plastic surgery are complex and dependent on a given person’s identity and circumstances.

However, in order to facilitate a general understanding of the phenomenon, it is worth paying attention to some of the motivations most frequently enumerated by scholars, which include fulfilling the expectations of “social etiquette” (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 273), as well as economic factors, the premise of social mobility and improved chances of employment (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 59, 73).

Sharon Heijin Lee shows that in contemporary South Korea, the improvement of the body is often motivated by and portrayed as a means for social advancement (Lee 2016: 16). Ensuring that one’s looks give a positive impression upon meeting others is generally seen as a crucial point in both finding and sustaining a job. Korean women who do not meet strict beauty standards might have difficulties in personal spheres, such as finding romance. Moreover, some women in Korea who are deemed unattractive, for instance as a result of an unsuccessful cosmetic procedure or changing body size, can be subjected to overt types of lookist discrimination, and even open humiliation (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 275). Perhaps in the hope of coping with societal problems and in order to avoid punishment for looking unattractive, Korean women often “internalize neoliberal mandates” that postulate plastic surgery and other types of beautification (Lee 2016: 16). Neoliberalism, as Michelle Leve, Lisa Rubin, and Adrea Pusic explain, emphasizes “individualism [and] consumerism.” In this framework, certain actions, like opting for cosmetic procedures, are often championed as effective means to better one’s everyday reality. The scholars argue that under neoliberalism the responsibility for one’s choices and situation is wholly ascribed to a person (Leve, Rubin and Pusic. 2011: 124). As a result, it might obscure forms of beauty-related systematic oppression. As Lee argues, undergoing surgery to better one’s life circumstances can be troubling, as it can undermine the potential patient’s agency. Forms of discrimination on the basis of appearance “discipline

women's behaviors and relationships to their own bodies" and lack of compliance with the system, as explained previously, has negative consequences. Through this lens, striving for beauty can be seen as an obligation rather than an optional choice (Lee 2016: 16-17).

Elfvig-Hwang, however, highlights a positive aspect of plastic surgery chosen for economic and social reasons. The author claims that widespread accessibility of cosmetic procedures can be seen as "democratizing" because it grants higher and middle-class signifiers, such as physical beauty, to those from less affluent backgrounds. She argues that attractiveness achieved through beautification can be a gateway to economic and social success. While Elfvig-Hwang's perspective on plastic surgery is more favorable than Lee's, she also acknowledges that the decision to have a cosmetic procedure is not always a matter of free choice. In some types of employment, discussed later in this chapter, enhancement of appearance may be mandatory (Elfvig-Hwang 2021: 278).

The Korean notion of *yewi* or etiquette might also be a reason for seeking plastic surgery among Korean people. These norms entail ensuring that one's looks meet societal expectations, especially in regard to one's social standing (Gelézeau 2015). In Korea, it is believed that one should be aware of what appearance a person should have in a given social group and context (Elfvig-Hwang 2021: 277). Therefore, striving to achieve the right look is seen as an expression of holding other people in high regard. For instance, makeup applied in a flattering way can communicate that one is making an "effort" (Elfvig-Hwang 2016: 14). Similarly to non-invasive forms of beautification, plastic surgery can be sought in order to fulfil social duties.

It is also worth investigating South Koreans' self-reported reasons for undergoing surgery and cosmetic treatments. According to Kwon et al., over 90% of Korean women and men cited internal motivations as opposed to various types of external influences, like hopes for employment and peer or family pressure. The latter marks the most striking difference between South Korea and other countries. Especially in Japan and Taiwan, suggestions from others played a crucial role in the decision to seek cosmetic enhancement, whereas in South Korea, less than 1% of respondents cited them as a source of motivation (Kwon 2021: 664). Nevertheless, in a study on participants from the younger generation by Rachel H. Park, Paige L. Myers, and Howard N. Langstein, 65% of surveyed women cited being unhappy with their appearance as a reason for either undergoing or being interested in plastic surgery. Among this group, "parental and peer influence" impacted 30% of those surveyed, which suggests that the perception of others was considered relatively important (Park, Myers and Langstein 2019: 613, 615).

4.1.4. Beauty Work and Aesthetic Labor

Beauty work and aesthetic labor are two notions that seem relevant to the subject of female beauty, especially in relation to appearance enhancement which is motivated by economic and interpersonal factors. According to Samatha Kwan and Mary Nell Trautner in "Beauty Work: Individual and Institutional Rewards, the Reproduction of Gender, and Questions of Agency," beauty work refers to any kind of beautification, non-invasive or invasive, that an individual does, or employs somebody to do, on their own body. Moreover, to be categorized as beauty work, a strategy has to be intentional and chosen with the goal of achieving perks "within a specific social hierarchy" (Kwan and Trautner 2009: 50, 54). Kwan and Trautner, as well as Susie

Orbach in another study, highlight that within society, women's natural looks are generally considered unattractive and lacking (Kwan and Trautner 2009: 55; Orbach 2017: IX). In contrast, work on appearance, such as makeup, is widely normalized and even expected. Its usage is generally associated with various positive traits, such as alertness, good health, professionalism, and expertise (Kwan and Trautner 2009: 57). It is worth emphasizing that beauty work should not be confused with the notion of beauty labor, which is a type of employment. This type of labor encompasses the beautification a person does on the bodies of other people. Beauty laborers include aestheticians, makeup artists, plastic surgeons, and other similar positions (Kwan and Trautner 2009: 50; Mears 2014: 1332).

Engaging in beauty work, such as wearing makeup, styling one's hair, and following fashion, is widely accepted as a part of the female life experience. However, diligent attention to one's appearance is considered to be crucial among persons who pursue a line of work described by scholars as aesthetic labor. According to Ashley Mears, this type of employment is usually defined as jobs where a worker's physical beauty and friendly character play a critical role (Mears 2011: 74). Importantly, these factors must be the main elements for which the employee is rewarded, financially or otherwise (Mears 2014: 1332). The landscape of aesthetic labor is vast and includes various professions in "the interactive service sector" (Mears 2011: 74). A salesperson, a model, a bar hostess, and an actress serve as examples of female aesthetic laborers.

Aesthetic labor should be distinguished from other types of labor because it makes the worker herself "becom[e] an integral part of the product" (Mears 2011: 75). While the employee's skills matter to some extent, how they appear and what impression they make while performing their assigned tasks is usually seen as more important. Attractive workers are usually considered to be a part of a brand's or

establishment's marketing strategy and are treated as living advertisements. As a result, companies tend to choose job candidates who "loo[k] good and soun[d] right," fitting a desired image (Warhurst and Nickson in Mears 2014: 1331; Mears 2014: 1330-1331; Nickson and Warhurst 2005: 196).

Mears notes that the appearance of aesthetic workers required by a business is shaped by various influences, such as the preferred public perception and customers' aesthetic tastes (Mears 2014: 1331-1337; Mears 2011: 118). Sylvia Holla and Giseline Kuipers emphasize that trying to appeal to their targeted customers' appearance preferences is considered an important element of providing a satisfactory experience. The scholars stress that the appearance ideal in a given place is highly "context-dependent" (Holla and Kuipers 2016: 295-296). Supervisors of aesthetic laborers tend to use various methods to ensure that workers follow the prescribed beauty norms. The control tactics can range from giving instruction regarding beautification to punishing lack of compliance through different means, such as temporary dismissal and permanent termination of employment. The customers can also play a direct role in disciplining the aesthetic laborers through commentary and observation of the workers (Mears 2014: 1335).

Jobs considered to represent the aesthetic labor type are generally precarious, similar to the fleeting nature of beauty itself. Based on the example of fashion models, Mears explains that the workers whose looks constitute an important part of their jobs cannot rely on the same type of employment forever (Mears 2011: 255). Other scholars show that various types of beauty laborers in North America and Asia face similar challenges. Among bar hostesses, the precarity of work results from the expectations regarding very youthful looks (Allison 1994: 62), whereas beauticians, who are at the same time beauty workers and aesthetic laborers, lack stable contracts

and adequate wages (Oulette 2017: 190). Overall, those who engage in aesthetic labor tend to experience insecure employment.

In the face of precarity and heightened pressures regarding adherence to strict beauty ideals in order to become and remain employed as an aesthetic laborer, the choice to pursue such a line of work might seem perplexing. However, aesthetic labor can attract workers through associations with “a sense of belonging” in a sphere of prestige and glamour (Mears 2014: 1332). Businesses in these fields can also emphasize the enjoyable aspects and associations with a given job, while masking its unpleasant dimensions during the hiring process. Moreover, workers might seek employment with certain brands and establishments due to the identification with, or the desire to belong to, the same group as their customers. Williams and Connell point out that due to these factors, aesthetic laborers often agree to unfavorable working conditions (Williams and Connell 2015: 268-269).

4.2. *If I Had Your Face* and Korean American Fiction

Frances Cha’s *If I Had Your Face* was published in 2020 and was warmly received by readers and critics, who praised the author’s initiative to bring women’s issues in Korean society to global attention, as well as her skill and sensitivity regarding complex topics. *Publishers Weekly* describes the novel as “insightful [and] powerful,” accentuating its moving content and the realistic depiction of its characters and their life circumstances (“If I Had Your Face” 2020: 38). The author’s writing style seems worthy of the received acclaim, as she successfully gives each of the novel’s protagonists a distinct voice and a believable personality. *If I Had Your Face* expertly weaves beautiful prose with insight into the lives of ordinary young Korean women. The latter is a testament to the author’s admitted goal of portraying Korean culture in

an accessible way without sacrificing its authenticity (Russo 2020). Frances Cha offers an insight into the beauty-related aspects of South Korean women's lives — a valuable, unique and rare perspective in Anglophone fiction. In an interview with Mia Russo, Cha confirms that depictions of contemporary South Korea in novels in English remain scarce. She explains that the literary image of the country in the West remains tied to the Korean War, whereas its contemporary reality is often ignored. The writer explains that *If I Had Your Face* was conceived as a response to this outdated perception of Korea. Moreover, she also suggests that the novel was inspired by the lack of Korean characters in the Western fiction that she consumed throughout her childhood and adolescence (Cha in Russo 2020:). To date, the work remains Cha's only piece of adult fiction.

If I Had Your Face has received some attention from scholars, who have discussed, in varying degrees, Cha's representation of beauty standards. Accordingly, Sahar Javaid and Ghulam Murtaza analyze the novel through the lens of xenofeminism¹⁵ in "Commodification of Asian Femininities in Cha's *If I Had Your Face*" (2023). Rosmawati Waruwu uses Naomi Wolf's theory in "Exploring the Beauty Myth: A Study of Representation in Frances Cha's 'If I Had Your Face'" (2020). Min Ah Park, in turn, in *Diversity in "the Korean Way": Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Diasporic Korean Literature and Media in North America*, discusses the themes of class position and mobility with some references to physical beauty (2022). The novel's other themes, for instance the complex issues of morality,

¹⁵ Xenofeminism is a branch of feminism described as "technomaterialist, anti-naturalist, and gender abolitionist." As Helen Hester explains, it recognizes the transformative potential of technology to change "socio-biological conditions" that cause oppression (Hester 2018: 6-7). Xenofeminism is characterized by inclusivity, especially of transgender and queer people. It postulates the questioning of traditional gender identities and norms (Kay 2019: 306-307), as well as any other categories that are usually seen as natural (Laboria Cuboniks 10).

have been highlighted by Vanila Munafionika in “An Analysis of Moral Values in *If I Had Your Face*” (2022).

In order to place Frances Cha’s novel in context, it is worth foregrounding the main preoccupations of Korean American literature. Josephine Nock-Hee Park, in “Korean American Literature,” discusses four key themes that emerge from her analysis of important literary works by members of the Korean diaspora in the United States. The first refers to narratives about experiences of early migration, usually set in the 20th century (Park J. 2018: 107). The Korean American ‘pioneers’, as Park calls them, appear in novels such as *East Goes West* (1937) by Younghill Kang and *Clay Walls* (1987) by Ronyoung Kim (Park J. 2018: 108-111). Park explains that the works in this category, due to their setting during the Japanese colonization of Korea, frequently feature elements pertaining to Korean nationalism. Additionally, she notes that some of these texts’ protagonists are “refreshingly not nice” and thus defy the stereotype of the quiet and polite Asian (Park J. 2018: 109, 111-112).

The second major theme named by Park is reckoning with various aspects of Korean history, such as the Korean War, like in *The Martyred* (1964) by Richard E. Kim (Park J. 2018: 112). The scholar notes that while she groups different novels grappling with Korea’s past together, “discern[ing] a literary lineage through” most of them is challenging. Instead of drawing upon their predecessors, many works can be seen as singular (Park J. 2018: 114). However, she finds an exception in *Dictée* (1982), an experimental work by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, that serves as a lasting influence “for avant-garde writing and visual art” in the Korean American diaspora (Park J. 2018: 116-117). Despite the diversity inherent in literature, the novel highlights the need of Korean writers for the study of their native country’s history (Park J. 2018: 118).

The third category that Park discusses includes more intimate stories, especially those showing experiences of work, such as *Native Speaker* (1995) by Chang-rae Lee and *The Interpreter* (2003) by Suki Kim. These texts often contain “narratives of becoming,” as well as themes of disillusionment with the traditional ideal of success in America (Park J. 2018: 118-120). Park’s final type of Korean American literature pertains to the theme of parentlessness, understood broadly as either being orphaned or estranged (Park J. 2018: 120-121). The scholars employ such works as *The Language of Blood* (2003) by Jane Jeong Trenka and *Miles from Nowhere* (2008) by Nami Moon to show the grave impact of “missing familial, cultural, and political ties” on orphaned, abandoned, or adopted Korean Americans (Park J. 2018: 121-123)¹⁶.

In “An Overview of Korean American Women’s Writing: ‘Skin upon Skin,’” Elaine H. Kim stresses that the history of Korean American literature was male dominated until the last thirty years. Female characters usually occupied stereotypical roles, such as seductresses, vigilantes, “prostitutes and victims,” and experienced violent and tragic events. The scholar argues that some portrayals of women were misogynistic, with the men in the story expressing condemnation for the women protagonists (Kim E.H. 2017: 255). According to Kim, the number of published works by Korean American women writers finally expanded in the 1980s and 1990s (Kim E.H. 2017: 257-259). Heinz Insu Fenkl argues that the feminist *Dictée* (1982) marks the beginning of a transition between the masculinized early days of Korean American literature and its later, significantly more varied state (Fenkl 2004: 20). From this important period, Kim also mentions *Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid* (1985) by Willyce Kim, where a lesbian protagonist “creates a woman-centered

¹⁶ Laura E. Williams’s novella *Slant* analyzed in Chapter Two could be placed in this category.

world,” the aforementioned *Clay Walls* (1987) by Ronyoung Kim, which explores female autonomy and patriotism, as well as *Comfort Woman* (1997) by Nora Okja Keller, where familial and platonic relationships between women are applauded (Kim E.H. 2017: 256-258). In this period, Korean American female authors also touched upon various experiences, such as the Korean War and living in America as a transracial adoptee (Kim E.H. 2017: 257-259).

Currently, the landscape of available fictional works by Korean American women is quite vast and spans a variety of genres and modes of writing, such as adult, Young Adult, and children’s fiction and non-fiction. Kim credits this interest in Korean American female authors and their increased activity to the global rise of “South Korean ‘soft power,’” as well as the increased flow of people around the world (Kim E.H. 2017: 259). While the stories told by Korean American women are diverse and address different age and interest groups, Kim argues that they primarily depict their fellow “Korean or Korean American women [...] struggling for voice and visibility” (Kim E.H. 2017: 259). Additionally, due to the young age of most writers, Korean American fiction written by women often focuses on correspondingly young protagonists and their problems. As a result, themes such as romance, relationships between sisters and friends, as well as various problems regarding “gender and culture” are frequently explored at length (Kim E.H. 2017: 259-260).

Frances Cha’s *If I Had Your Face* seems to fit within the canon of Korean American women’s writing. Similarly to her predecessors, the author chooses young Korean women as her characters and focuses on their everyday struggles, especially regarding expectations placed on women. Like other authors before her, the writer brings attention to issues that are often ignored by the mainstream public, such as parentlessness and female alienation. Given the critic-appointed moniker “The Great

Korean Plastic Surgery Novel,” *If I Had Your Face* illustrates the enduring importance of such an approach (Marshall 2020). Additionally, her protagonists are not stereotypically docile and overly polite; instead they possess rather strong personalities and a desire for a better future, similarly to many other Korean-American protagonists.

4.3. *If I Had Your Face*: In Search of the Korean Beauty Ideal

If I Had Your Face is told through multiple first-person narratives of four young Korean women who live in the same block of flats in Seoul: Ara, a hairdresser; Kyuri, a room salon girl; Miho, an artist; and Wanna, a housewife. The novel also has a fifth protagonist, Sujin, who wishes to become a hostess like Kyuri, about whom the reader learns through the narratives of the other characters. The story is set in contemporary Seoul, South Korea, in a residential building where all of the women live. *If I Had Your Face* relates the everyday reality of the characters through a complex web of plotlines. In this chapter, special attention is paid to Kyuri’s experiences as an aesthetic laborer and Sujin’s journey to become beautiful through plastic surgery in order to gain employment in a room salon. The circumstances of Ara, a beauty worker and a quiet observer of other women’s beautification, as well as Miho, who, unlike the rest of the characters, defies the beauty standards, are also discussed. As Wanna’s story concerns her unsatisfying marriage and does not focus on themes about appearance norms in Korea, it shall be omitted from the analysis¹⁷.

4.3.1. Kyuri: A Beauty Doing Aesthetic Labor

¹⁷ The chapter expands on my article “Prettier Faces, Better Lives? The Impact of South Korean Facial Beauty Standards and Plastic Surgery on Women’s Lives in Frances Cha’s *If I Had Your Face*” (2024).

Kyuri is one of the protagonists whose story is discussed in detail in Cha's novel. The character works as a room salon girl, a type of hostessing work that belongs to the category of aesthetic labor. Similar to the more widely known Japanese hostess clubs, Korean room salons are a type of establishment where men can spend time with beautiful female employees. The women serve alcoholic drinks and entertain the guests, for example, with conversation. Rooms salons tend to be popular among businessmen (Charlesworth 2020), possibly due to the considerable cost of visiting and their luxury status (Knopwood 2023). Through Kyuri, the author demystifies the seemingly glamorous world of aesthetic labor.

From the beginning of *If I Had Your Face*, the protagonist is identified as the character who embodies the feminine beauty standard in South Korean society. While Kyuri is one of the novel's narrators, she is first introduced in Ara's segment. This choice highlights the magnitude of Kyuri's physical attractiveness and the admiration her physicality inspires. The protagonist is described as extraordinarily pretty, with Ara praising the look of her face. All elements essential to be considered a Korean beauty seem to be present in Kyuri's visage: prominent cheekbones of the desired shape, a "v-line" jawline, and a tall and pointy nose (Cha 2020: 4; asiamediacentre.org.nz; Hu 2023: 89). Moreover, the character has subtle eyelid creases which are also perceived as aesthetically pleasing by Koreans (Dunbar 2023). The look of the protagonist's face has been achieved by various means of beautification, most prominently by means of plastic surgery. Her surgical alterations seem to be perceived positively by Ara as she admires the natural look her friend has achieved (Cha 2020: 4), showcasing that in Korea, the ultimate goal of cosmetic procedures tends to be the lack of artifice (Lee, Rudd and Kim 2001: 972; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 62). The protagonist's clear, glowing skin is also admired,

emphasizing its key role in the perception of beauty (Cha 2020: 57; Hu 2023: 79, 84. 90). Her surgically altered face is revealed to have been based on a popular K-pop singer, Candy. In one of the novel's flashbacks, Kyuri goes to the same surgeon as the beautiful star and gives him her photos, asking for the same type of look. The protagonist's decision to mimic a famous person's appearance through surgery suggests the high impact of the narrow definition of beauty represented by K-media stars on women (Siu 2021).

Korean physiognomy has also played a role in Kyuri's decision regarding facial plastic surgery. The protagonist mentions visiting a medium who has told her to change her face in order to change her predicted, unfavorable life course (Cha 2020: 30, 259-260). Throughout the novel, Kyuri's looks are generally met with favorable reactions from both women and men. One of the novel's characters, Sujin, discussed in detail in the next section, is enchanted with Kyuri's glamorous appearance and seemingly pleasant life, and even begins to idolize her. Other characters' perceptions of the protagonist seem to stress that she serves as a perfect example of what is considered to be the standard of feminine attractiveness in contemporary South Korea.

In the world of *If I Had Your Face*, being an attractive woman is not a stable and effortless condition. Contrarily, beauty work must be regularly performed to be deemed aesthetically pleasing by others and to uphold this evaluation. The figure of Kyuri serves to show that beauty requires investing a significant amount of resources, such as money and time. As mentioned above, the protagonist has undergone a considerable number of plastic surgeries in order to ensure her face meets the Korean beauty standard (Cha 2020: 4, 27, 92). In addition to cosmetic procedures, she regularly engages in various beautifying strategies. Perhaps one of the most striking examples is Kyuri's diligent skincare routine, which is performed in the morning and

at night. The appearance-enhancing ritual for the face involves ten steps and a variety of beauty products from the protagonist's expansive collection (Cha 2020: 57). Kyuri also regularly receives professional beautifying treatments, such as light therapy (Cha 2020: 4, 56), and goes to regular hairdressing appointments in a salon, the venue where another of Cha's protagonists, Ara, works. She details that Kyuri, similarly to other employees of room salons, comes daily to have her hair styled and makeup applied by professionals. As a result of their high spending and frequent visits, these women are treated as important customers (Cha 2020: 5). The novelist suggests that the cost and time Kyuri spends on achieving the beauty standard is rather substantial. This high investment is not surprising; as Lee Joo Hyun explains, South Korea is one of the leading countries regarding time spent on beautification, with the average woman taking care of her looks for over twenty minutes daily¹⁸ (Lee 2019: 44-45). Considering that beauty work is one of Kyuri's duties as an aesthetic laborer, the protagonist most likely invests significantly more time in appearance upkeep than the national average.

Cha illustrates the unpleasant realities of cosmetic procedures, such as the painful recovery process and potential complications. The description of Kyuri's post-surgery condition is a striking example. When the anesthesia wears off, the protagonist suffers horrible pain and wants to scream, but finds herself unable to do so. She experiences "persistent agony," which drives her to ponder suicide. The character seeks means to end her life, such as sharp objects, before giving up (Cha 2020: 30). In this scene, the author underscores that plastic surgery is not something glamorous and

¹⁸ It is important to note that Lee acknowledges the limitations of existing studies. The scholar argues that the presented average might be significantly underreported due to the lack of consideration for various factors such as engaging in active and passive beauty-related pastimes, such as making purchases or expanding appearance-enhancement knowledge, the overlap between beautification and hygiene, and "beauty investment as secondary activity," like makeup or hair fixes in public, applying cosmetics and skincare while watching television, etc. (Lee 2019: 47-48).

frivolous, but instead is a serious medical procedure. During the recovery, Kyuri struggles with various ailments, such as difficulties with eating food, her jaw making unusual sounds, as well as a lack of sensation in the face. The protagonist confesses that the latter ability has never fully recovered. In her current state, the character has to use a mirror to see if her jaw is clean. She has seemingly grown accustomed to frequently checking her reflection (Cha 2020: 251). Kyuri's experiences with plastic surgery and its aftermath show that female beautification is often associated with accepting pain and discomfort as part of one's everyday life (Stone 2020: 39).

Moreover, the procedure is a source of some psychological tension for the protagonist. She perceives the way she looked in the past as something shameful. When her friend from a previous workplace, Nami, asks Kyuri whether she has kept any photographs of her old face, she is repulsed by the idea. The character boldly proclaims: "I would kill someone and rot in jail before I'd let them see what I looked like" (Cha 2020: 93). Her strong reaction is not dissimilar to stigmatized individuals, discussed by Goffman, who have fixed a particular flaw. According to the scholar, such persons do not start viewing themselves as "fully normal" but instead as people who used to have an unwanted trait (Goffman 1986: 9). It is not unlikely that this perception is the reason behind Kyuri's fear of photographs depicting her old, disgraceful face.

In *If I Had Your Face*, Kyuri's physical beauty represents a form of social currency, improving her life circumstances. While the protagonist experiences various hardships, she also enjoys certain perks compared to other women. The character is employed by a salon belonging to the prestigious 10 percent, a type of hostess club advertising itself as having the most beautiful female employees (Cha 2020: 28). Kyuri's salon is located in Nonhyeon, a part of the famed Gangnam district known for

its associations with lavish lifestyles, expensive stores and restaurants, as well as its cosmopolitan character. Notably, this area of Seoul is also positively associated with class advancement (Shin 2022: 175), to which Kyuri arguably aspires. The location of the protagonist's current employment starkly contrasts with her previous workplace, which was situated in a stigmatized "red-light district" (Cha 2020: 90). In her narration, Kyuri emphasizes that the main advantage of belonging to an exclusive establishment, in comparison to her old job, is the absence of pressure to do sex work. Therefore, the character perceives her room salon as "more civilized" than those in less glamorous Seoul districts (Cha 2020: 28).

Based on the example of Kyuri and her experiences with room salon work, Frances Cha shows that the work of an aesthetic laborer in South Korea is marked by precarity. The lack of security is caused not only by the ever-changing nature of beauty, discussed earlier, but also by unstable financial circumstances. The protagonist's living situation can be seen as an example of economic struggle. While Kyuri might seem to strangers to be a woman who enjoys a comfortable life, as she possesses its signifiers like physical beauty and designer clothing, her real life differs significantly from this impression. Similarly to many real-life aesthetic laborers (Cha 2020: 34, 53; Mears 2017: 155), the protagonist cannot afford to live alone and, instead, shares a flat in an officetel building with a friend, Miho.

As a result of loans she has accumulated in order to pay for surgery which allowed her to start working in room salons, Kyuri struggles with debt (Cha 2020: 27). The protagonist explains that opting for a plastic surgery in order to better one's circumstances, not uncommon among Korean people (Åberg 2015: 5), is not a simple solution and has a high price (Cha 2020: 91). In an early part of the novel, Kyuri wistfully mentions that she is not able to collect enough savings (Cha 2020: 11). Later,

she shows her journey which started with “accepting loans from madams and pimps and bloodsucking moneylenders” to be able to undergo a cosmetic procedure (Cha 2020: 91). She remembers perceiving this process quite flippantly, assuming the surgery, and perhaps the pace of paying off her loans, would be swift. Unfortunately, Kyuri’s actions turn out to have grave consequences. The protagonist accumulates debt quickly as the loans taken from predatory people turn out to have extremely high interest rates. As a result, the woman feels trapped in the room salon working system. She stresses that even changing employers and places of residence would not enable her to break the debt cycle and separate her from the room salon environment. Her actions even after receiving legal and financial help from a faithful customer seem to confirm her hypothesis. Kyuri once again accumulates debt with additional “touch-up” cosmetic procedures, repeating the same choices despite knowing their repercussions (Cha 2020: 92).

According to Kyuri, only two types of fate await the hostess club employees. She thinks that a room salon girl can either kill herself or be fired when she is not perceived as beneficial for the business anymore. The protagonist’s comparison of a discarded worker to “a used dishrag” highlights the industry’s penchant for youthful women, where each worker comes with a metaphorical expiry date (Allison 1994: 62; Mears 2011: 255), to which Kyuri refers explicitly later in the novel (Cha 2020: 185). The protagonist’s story exemplifies difficult aspects of doing aesthetic labor, such as the lack of financial safety, inadequate wages, and a predatory environment, which do not allow for financial freedom and stability of employment.

If I Had Your Face also raises questions regarding the lack of agency that aesthetic laborers have over their looks. In a scene where Kyuri goes to the hair salon where Ara works, she explains that the management of her hostess club “assign [the

workers] a look for the season” (Cha 2020: 12). Thus, it becomes clear that the way the women in room salons look is primarily not a result of their free choices. Instead, they must comply with their employer’s instructions. Such explicit requirements are common in the sphere of aesthetic labor, where looking and acting in accordance with a given standard is a worker’s duty (Warhurst and Nickson in Mears 2014:1331; Mears 2014: 1330-1331, 1335). Moreover, in her exchange with Ara, Kyuri shows her relief at being assigned wavy hair, which is believed to be popular among the visitors of the club. She also reveals that during her work, she surveys the men she meets about their tastes. The protagonist learns that her hair type is indeed seen as beautiful by men and feels relief that the assumption was right (Cha 2020: 12-13). The short remark suggests that the appearance of aesthetic laborers is shaped by the preferences of a given business customer base (Mears 2014: 1223-1335).

In this brief scene, the protagonist adds that the room salon requires its employees to represent a variety of looks. Only a limited number of employees are allowed to look similar at the same time, ensuring the establishment’s staff represents a variety of appearances (Cha 2020: 12). In this regard, the women seem to be treated almost akin to a drink menu which must offer many different beverage flavors, or in this case, kinds of feminine beauty, to its customers. Here it becomes clear that, characteristically for aesthetic labor, the workers of the hostess club are treated as products (Mears 2011: 75). Kyuri’s short explanation indicates that the aesthetic choices she makes are not an expression of her personal tastes and are not made freely. Instead, the way she looks is primarily shaped by her employer’s requirements and male expectations. The resulting beauty work Kyuri does, or pays others to do, on her body is therefore strictly dictated by her job as an aesthetic laborer.

Another factor that calls the protagonist's agency regarding beautification into question is her social status. Kyuri is a young woman from a non-wealthy background who struggles financially working in a position that is generally not particularly respected. Therefore, she can be described as a person belonging to the working or lower class. According to Heather Widdows, women in these social strata tend to have less ability to make choices regarding their appearance (Widdows 2021: 8). Indeed, throughout *If I Had Your Face*, Kyuri is contrasted with significantly wealthier women, such as the salon's madam and a young female visitor, both of whom, although they do not meet the Korean beauty standard, do not feel the pressure to alter their faces through either invasive or non-invasive methods (Cha 2020: 13, 19). Unlike those women, the protagonist cannot afford to do anything else but strive to be beautiful as her employment and, therefore, livelihood depend on her physicality.

In *If I Had Your Face*, Kyuri judges other women's appearances in a particularly harsh way. Considering her vast array of negative experiences with striving for beauty, such as debt, the precarity of aesthetic labor, and the physical pain of recovery, one could expect the character to feel empathy for her female peers. However, Kyuri is a protagonist who continuously exerts the judgmental "girlfriend gaze" upon women that she encounters. As mentioned in Chapter One, this type of gaze can describe both women looking for female approval and women assessing their friends and acquaintances' adherence to the norms of femininity (Winch 2013: 10). An early scene in the room salon offers an example of mutual girlfriend gaze, when Kyuri and her frequent client, Bruce, are unexpectedly joined by the man's female friend, Ji. The protagonist immediately proceeds to judge the stranger's appearance, looking with disgust at her natural features that do not meet the Korean standard, namely her eyes lacking eyelid creases and a non-protruding nose. However,

she quickly infers from the woman's behavior that she belongs to a higher class. Kyuri rather bitterly acknowledges that Ji's lack of care for her looks likely results from her favorable position in society. As explained earlier in this chapter, in South Korea, plastic surgery is often associated with striving for social mobility among people belonging to lower and middle classes. This class divide seems to be highlighted with Ji gazing back at Kyuri. The protagonist explains that the rare female visitors tend to look at the hostesses with contempt, judging them as greedy and immoral (Cha 2020: 19).

As to Kyuri's disapproval of unattractive women who do not pursue plastic surgery, it is also exemplified by her opinions regarding her manager. She compares the appearance of the salon's madam to a toad and refers to her as "the ugliest creature [she] has ever seen" (Cha 2020: 20, 13). When the protagonist scathingly describes the looks of the older woman to her friend Ara, she visibly signals her distaste by shuddering. Kyuri's negative reaction to the madam's lack of interest in beautification, and therefore in the norms of Korean femininity, are characteristic of the girlfriend gaze, which aims to ensure compliance with cultural feminine expectations (Cha 2020: 13; Winch 2013: 10-11). The protagonist's merciless judgment of facial appearance can also indicate her views of beauty as a mark of morality. Kyuri's internalization of such messaging is not surprising, as it permeates global culture. For instance, as Marcia R. Lieberman explains, in various fairy tales¹⁹, beautiful women are portrayed as noble and deserving of sympathy, whereas ugly women are depicted as evil and cunning. According to the scholar, these stories negatively shape the mutual perceptions between women (Lieberman 1972: 385).

¹⁹ This type of storytelling is a particularly relevant point of reference, as in the novel one of the characters likens another, Sujin, to Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (Cha 2020: 16). Both Cha's and Andersen's protagonists suffer physically to fulfill a dream — in the case of Sujin, beauty and a glamorous life, and in the case of the Mermaid, a human body and love.

Kyuri's assessment of her employer's face clearly reflects such beliefs. She cannot fathom why an unattractive woman who possesses enough money would not seek plastic surgery. Unable to understand her manager, the protagonist assumes that the madam must lack intelligence and morals, which reveals her belief regarding ugliness as a mark of an evil character.

The novel's titular phrase, which reads in full: "I would live your life so much better than you, *if I had your face*" (Cha 2020: 31, my emphasis), also provides an example of Kyuri's engaging in the girlfriend gaze. In a doctor's office, the protagonist accidentally sees a celebrity, Candy, whose appearance she envies and admires. Yet, even Kyuri's beloved K-pop star is not spared from her scrutiny. The character points out Candy's pimples and bloodshot eyes in her mind. Then, she proceeds to ponder the singer's improper conduct in the idol group, as well as her messy affair with her new partner. Kyuri is depicted as staring intensely at Candy; she might be aiming to express her disappointment with what she perceives as the woman's mistakes (Cha 2020: 31; see Winch 2013: 10-11). The celebrity quickly becomes aware of the fan's disapproving gaze and shows signs of discomfort, such as fidgeting with her fingers and trying to obscure her face. The novel's title seems to express both Kyuri's jealousy of the singer's beauty, as well as her contempt for Candy not using her assets to their fullest potential.

Kyuri's girlfriend gaze also manifests in less harsh, though not less impactful ways. The protagonist once again shakes her body in disapproval at the sight of her roommate Miho's "freckles and general lack of skincare" (Cha 2020: 57). Her exaggerated reaction is an attempt to make her friend correct behaviors and looks she considers improper. Additionally, Kyuri shares knowledge about beauty products and procedures with her friend, possibly in order to entice her to start using them (Cha

2020: 56-57). Her actions appear to be connected to the girlfriend gaze, aiming to teach others around her the acceptable and desirable ways of being a woman (see Apter and Johnson in Winch 2013: 10).

It is worth noting that Kyuri's reactions, which many people could describe as mean-spirited, such as shuddering at the sight of those she deems ugly, are not met with particularly strong reactions from her friends. Even when other women, such as Miho, do not follow the protagonist's advice, they tend to agree with her assessment and not perceive her statements negatively. These reactions might show that the "normative cruelties" of the girlfriend gaze are a part of women's everyday reality (Winch 2013: 11-12). Moreover, Kyuri's open expression of her opinions about other people's looks exemplifies a larger tendency within Korean culture, briefly mentioned in the analysis of Na's *The Fold* in Chapter Two. While in Europe or North America, commenting and reacting to others' appearances is considered impolite, in South Korea such behaviors are an ordinary part of everyday life (Dunbar 2023), with people frequently making appearance-related remarks upon a first-time encounter (Hu 2023: 97).

4.3.2. Sujin: Working to Be Beautiful, Becoming Beautiful to Work

Sujin is a protagonist whose attempts to achieve the Korean facial beauty standard and become an aesthetic laborer are depicted throughout *If I Had Your Face*. The character works as a nail technician and wants to undergo plastic surgery in order to become employed as a room salon girl in the hope of improving her life situation. In opposition to the other protagonists of *If I Had Your Face*, Sujin is not a first-person narrator. Instead, the reader learns about her from other characters' narratives. It is possible that through this choice, the author intended to differentiate between Kyuri,

who already belongs to the room salon world and knows its harsh reality, and Sujin, who aspires to become its part in the future and perceives it through a romanticized lens.

Sujin can be considered a protagonist affected by social exclusion. Alan and Carol Walker define this phenomenon as “the dynamic process of being shut out [...] from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems” that would allow a person to live as a fully-accepted member of a given society (Walker and Walker in Taket et al. 2009a: 7). Sujin is a person who struggles with unfavorable circumstances in various areas of life and is socially excluded due to an array of complex factors that intersect with each other. In her childhood she was surrendered to an orphanage, most likely by a young mother, as her friend Ara speculates. In her community the establishment was associated with “the disabled and deformed” (Cha 2020: 8), which could possibly contribute to the stigmatization of all its residents, including Sujin, thereby “disqualif[ying] them from full social acceptance” (Goffman 1986: n.p.). Additionally, Sujin does not possess education which could aid her social and economic advancement through non-beauty-related means. Most importantly, the protagonist does not meet the Korean standards of beauty as she possesses a wide, protruding jawline and angled eyelid creases which lack symmetry. The latter feature is a lifelong source of insecurity for Sujin, most probably due to an unsuccessful surgical intervention, a decision that she regrets in the novel’s now (Cha 2020: 4-5). While not stated, it is possible that the artificial effect of the protagonist’s past surgery is clearly visible to others, thus breaking the principle of natural-looking procedures valued in South Korea.

In light of the protagonist’s social disadvantages, stigmatization, and the resulting social exclusion, it is not surprising that she perceives altering her facial

appearance and becoming an aesthetic laborer as a means to change her circumstances to more favorable ones (Cha 2020: 8, 11). Similarly to other stigmatized people, discussed by Goffman, Sujin seems to be aware that others may perceive her as a lesser being and, as a result, she internalizes such beliefs and wants to change her face in accordance with them (Goffman 1986: 7, 9). Such a solution to escape social exclusion on an individual level is commonly resorted to, as Ann Taket et al. explain. It is worth noting, however, that this approach unfortunately does not counter discriminatory systems and norms, which are the root of exclusion in the first place (Taket et al. 2009a: 10). The protagonist's reasons for seeking facial plastic surgery also seem to reflect the views of actual Koreans who perceive beauty as a factor that positively affects one's life. In a study by An Hyeon-kyeong²⁰, over 80% and 70% of the surveyed Korean people, respectively, answered they either agree or strongly agree that one's looks impact their social and work lives (Hyeon-kyeong 2017: 54). According to Taeyon Kim, these presumptions often prove to be true as beautiful Korean women tend to enjoy more favorable treatment, as well as have more ease in finding employment and partners (Kim T. 2003: 108).

Sujin is very determined to become a room salon girl, most likely inspired by Kyuri, whom she perceives as charming and glamorous, almost to the point of idolization (Cha 2020: 3). Her primary motivation is the prospect of earning substantial sums of money, which would ensure a better quality of life for herself and her friend Ara, whom she perceives as someone in need of help (Cha 2020: 4, 90). Despite Kyuri's warnings, the protagonist quite naively thinks the aesthetic labor industry is a lucrative one (Cha 2020: 11). While the way Sujin idealizes working in room salons and ignores her friend's apprehension might seem puzzling, it is not

²⁰ The research involved 300 male and female subjects from South Korea (Hyeon-kyeong 2017).

unusual for those who seek employment in the sphere of aesthetic labor. Employment in such spheres is often presented as something appealing and enjoyable (Mears 2014: 1332). The protagonist apparently believes these messages as she imagines that working as a hostess will bring her quick and easy profits: “I could pay for two surgeries with what most room salon girls spend on alcohol in one night” (Cha 2020: 11). From her proclamations, it becomes quite clear that she perceives working as a hostess as an ideal job without any problems. After finally undergoing plastic surgery and recovering, Sujin does not find full-time employment, but instead works in room salons as a gig worker (Cha 2020: 252). However, despite these unfavorable working conditions, the protagonist expresses happiness about her new job and beautiful looks (Cha 2020: 254). Her experience mirrors that of some people early in their careers as aesthetic laborers, who still romanticize the world they have joined and its associated prestige (see Williams and Connell 2015: 269).

Sujin perceives beauty as a form of capital that she hopes will translate into a favorable position in society and, more importantly, a good financial situation. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist lacks this capital and thus is unable to achieve the perks associated with attractiveness, being excluded from the world that she would like to belong to. Despite her naivete, Sujin is aware that in order to work as a room salon girl, she has to meet the Korean facial beauty standard (Cha 2020: 4, 10), reflecting that beauty can only be a source of power if it appeals to the male gaze. As Fredrickson and Roberts argue, a keen interest in striving for beauty is characteristic of women “seeking upward social mobility” (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 178). It is noticeable that most of the protagonist’s interactions with other characters focus on beauty-related matters. Sujin is shown asking Kyuri for advice and information about clinics, as well as watching makeover TV programs and talking about surgery with

Ara, which highlights the important role she ascribes to appearance, especially of her face (Cha 2020: 4, 9-11, 13, 145). To be considered beautiful by others and become employed in her dream job, Sujin decides to undergo extensive plastic surgery.

By depicting Sujin's adventure with surgical enhancement of facial appearance, Cha calls attention to various problems associated with this means of beautification in South Korea. Inspired by the breathtaking Kyuri, Sujin decides to undergo surgery in an expensive hospital (Cha 2020: 9-10). The establishment's name, the "Cinderella Clinic," is quite suggestive. It likens the cosmetic transformation to a fairytale scenario wherein an ignored and humble girl can finally step into the spotlight and be admired. The name plays into the Korean cultural beliefs about surgery as an aspirational act of "tak[ing] control of one's fate" (Elfvig-Hwang 2021: 275), to which Sujin certainly subscribes. The clinic is also revealed to be commonly dubbed by the press as the "Pretty Factory." While the reason for this nickname is not elaborated upon specifically, it might serve as a reference to the uniform look it offers its clients. Kyuri praises its celebrity doctor for his successful prediction of what appearance type will be considered to be in fashion next (Cha 2020: 9). Therefore, it is likely that the establishment's clients are operated on in order to look similar to each other, reflecting a narrow beauty standard (Hu 2023: 2), and, thus, giving an impression of something mass-produced in a factory.

Sujin's experience when she visits a plastic surgeon exposes the exploitation that can happen in the doctor-patient relationship, which reflects the problems of the beauty industry as a whole. According to Widdows, the industry often pathologizes common physical features, such as visible "large pores," in order to sell various remedies for these artificially created problems. The scholar describes the process as predatory, as its only goal is bringing more profits to various beauty companies and

clinics (Widdows 2021: 9). Elfving-Hwang emphasizes that this issue is apparent in South Korea, especially in the districts of Seoul, where a high number of establishments offering surgery are located. In order to attract new clientele and stand out among the competition, clinicians keep coming up with procedure ideas (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 275). Initially, Sujin is interested only in undergoing surgery for the eyelid creases and the jawline, two features she is particularly unhappy about (Cha 2020: 5, 10). However, during the meeting with the surgeon, the protagonist is recommended a much longer list of interventions. The practitioner claims that the young woman should undergo blepharoplasty, not one but two jaw procedures, as well as “cheekbone reduction and [...] liposuction” (Cha 2020: 15). He uses persuasive language, associating some of the protagonist’s features with negative connotations, such as describing the lower part of her face as “masculine”. The problem, discussed by Widdows, regarding turning ordinary elements of appearance into something in need of fixing, as well as pointing out additional flaws in order to exploit the patient financially, is quite noticeable in this scene (Widdows 2021: 9). The surgeon’s dubious ethics are also exemplified by his unwillingness to explain how much time the recovery process might take; he is only willing to give a vague estimate of half a year. His prediction is contrasted with the reality of Kyuri’s relative, who started to “look normal” after twelve months (Cha 2020: 15), which suggests that the practitioner might be dishonest in order not to deter his client.

Similarly to Kyuri, Sujin serves in the novel to illustrate the difficulties encountered in recovering from plastic surgery. While the direct aftermath of the procedure is not depicted, Cha shows Sujin’s physical ailments a couple of months afterward. The woman deals with facial swelling, which is physically unpleasant; she also has significant difficulties with moving her mouth and, thus, speaking (Cha 2020:

90). Additionally, Sujin finds eating challenging due to orthodontic problems resulting from the surgery (Cha 2020: 174-175, 251). Noticeably, the character's motivation to become a room salon girl is not waning, as she seeks her friend's job-related advice and tries to adapt to her current life situation. Just like Kyuri and many real-life women (Stone 2020: 39), the protagonist accepts pain as the necessary evil of beautification. During recovery, Sujin feels shame about her temporary ugliness, preferring to wear scarves or sunglasses, or to avoid social interaction (Cha 2020: 87, 148, 174). Similarly to the protagonists of *Invisible Monsters* and *Look at Me*, she treats looking unattractive as something that should be hidden from other people's sight. The long-lasting physical issues that the character experiences, as well as the social reluctance during the recovery, point to another problem of permanent beautification. Similarly to the foot-bound and corseted women of the past, Sujin has her basic abilities, such as eating food comfortably, limited by the effects of the surgery (Cha 2020: 175, 251; also see Stone 2020: 52; Tung 2020: 255).

4.3.3. Ara and Miho: Observing Beauty

4.3.3.1. Ara

In *If I Had Your Face*, Ara appears to serve the role of an observer of and commentator on other characters' efforts to achieve beauty. Cha seems to indicate the protagonist's outsider status through her speech disability and usage of alternative means of communication, as well as her type of employment. Ara works as a hairdresser, which is considered to be a type of beauty labor (Cha 2020: 5; Kwan and Trautner 2009: 50; Mears 2014: 1332). Due to the nature of her job, in which she aids women, including room salon girls, to achieve a beautiful appearance, the protagonist

stays in proximity to the world of beauty to which Kyuri and, later, Sujin belong (Cha 2020: 5).

Similarly to Kyuri, Ara is a protagonist who engages in the girlfriend gaze, although to a much more limited extent. She introduces the characters of Kyuri and Sujin primarily through their looks. Ara's description of Kyuri is a very favorable one, stressing that her features are exemplary of the Korean facial beauty standard (Cha 2020: 4). The protagonist's approving perception of Kyuri legitimizes her femininity, a process which the girlfriend gaze often involves (Winch 2013: 10). By contrast, Ara quite harshly criticizes Sujin's face. She looks down upon her old, unsuccessful blepharoplasty and the resulting "sly, slanted" appearance of her friend's eyes. She also notices Sujin's other flaws, such as her wide face shape that, in her view, makes it impossible for the young woman to ever fully embody the Korean beauty standard. After Sujin's surgery, while Ara generally tries to be supportive, she still notices her "toothless" appearance which results from the swelling of her face (Cha 2020: 145). Her reactions suggest that judging other women's looks is ingrained in Ara's psyche.

In the novel, Cha uses Ara's character to occasionally inform the reader about Korean cultural norms regarding beauty. In one scene, Ara mentions regularly watching a TV program about plastic surgery with Sujin, which emphasizes the popularity of this form of entertainment in the country (Cha 2020: 13-14; Elfving-Hwang 2021: 275). In the show, the participants are "severely deformed (or [...] really ugly)" and their fates are decided by the viewers' televotes. The programs portray surgery as very dramatic and life-changing, with the participants and their families displaying intense emotions (Cha 2020: 13-14). The show described by Ara reflects the negative impacts of their real-life equivalents, which arguably, as Elfving-Hwang explains, "pathologiz[e] and medicaliz[e]" visible difference in Korean society

(Elfving-Hwang 2021: 275). As a result, plastic surgery emerges not as a free and individual choice, but instead as “a moral duty” and a logical decision (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 275).

Through Ara, Cha showcases the popularity of cosmetic procedures in the country. In a conversation scene between Sujin and Kyuri about plastic surgery, Ara recalls how around 50% of girls at her school had undergone blepharoplasty. The protagonist explains that the procedures were encouraged by their teacher, whose husband was a surgeon. Ara suggests that the procedure was pursued by everybody who could afford the already lowered price. Seemingly, those who did not get blepharoplasty did so due to the lack of funds and not due to the lack of interest (Cha 2020: 5). This aspect points to the potential divide between those for whom cosmetic procedures are affordable and those for whom such expenses are unattainable. As Gelézeau explains, unattractive people can be perceived as representing “a cosmetic underclass.” According to the scholar, belonging to this category can have negative consequences in the social sphere (Gelézeau 2015: 3). Widdows similarly argues that in societies where beauty standards are particularly strict, such as South Korea, failing to conform to the norms of appearance might result in stigmatization and other unjust treatment (Widdows 2021: 3).

By showing Ara’s perception of plastic surgery as something rather trivial, Cha highlights its commonality and normalization in Korea. Especially among young women, getting a cosmetic procedure can be treated as a coming-of-age ritual (Gelézeau 2015: 5), which may be true for Ara’s old friends. The author also gives an example of how commenting on other people’s looks is accepted in society (Hu 2023: 97). When Ara encounters her mother’s friends for the first time in years, the women remark on her new hair color and weight change. Noticeably, the protagonist does not

react to these comments and does not think about them, either positively or negatively (Cha 2020: 157-158). The way Ara is unaffected by the women's behavior suggests that appearance-related remarks are embedded in everyday life in Korea.

Two factors differentiate Ara from the three protagonists discussed in this chapter: her muteness and lack of attention paid to her physical appearance. It is suggested that her looks do not meet the beauty standard as she is unable to undergo a plastic surgery as a teenager due to purely financial reasons (Cha 2020: 5). Ara's inability to produce audible speech and her lack of beauty, which could serve as capital, contribute to an image of a protagonist who may struggle with feelings of exclusion. As José Antonio Gómez Monedero, Concepción Unanue Cuestab and Beatriz Núñez Angulo (2014: 118) explain, disabled women are particularly vulnerable to social injustice in ableist and misogynistic societies. Such women frequently work in precarious types of employment, as reflected by Ara's job as a beauty laborer. Additionally, the position was secured thanks to Sujin's continuous pleas to the hairdressing salon's owner to employ her friend, who found herself in a difficult situation (Cha 2020: 79). Ara, like many disabled women (Gómez Monedero, Cuestab and Angulo 2014: 118), also has a limited social circle, and she seems to feel fully comfortable only with Sujin. Her other acquaintances, like Kyuri, are undoubtedly more casual, while her colleagues at the salon tend to treat her unkindly (Cha 2020: 83).

Ara's presumably imperfect looks and the lack of attention paid to them by others can also contribute to her exclusion. Firstly, her lack of plastic surgery might position her as a member of the "cosmetic underclass" within Korean society, as discussed earlier. Secondly, the other narrators' reluctance to speak about the protagonist's facial appearance is also meaningful. On the one hand, the lack of

scrutiny in the eyes of other women, especially Kyuri, who exerts the girlfriend gaze upon other women frequently, could be seen as an act of kindness. On the other hand, however, it has a second, less positive underlying meaning. As explained earlier, the girlfriend gaze can be either approving, communicating successful belonging to a female peer group, or punishing, suggesting the woman should correct the way she expresses her femininity in order to be accepted (Winch 2013: 10-11). The lack of other women's reactions to Ara's appearance, and thus the lack of either positive or negative girlfriend gaze, might suggest that the protagonist, as a mute woman, is partially excluded from the common rituals of womanhood experienced by the other characters in the novel.

4.3.3.2. Miho

In *If I Had Your Face*, Miho is a character who functions in juxtaposition to the other female figures depicted by Cha. She tends to be positioned as an outsider due to her life circumstances differing from those of most people around her. The protagonist has not grown up in a traditional family but at her uncle's house and, later, in an orphanage. Moreover, Miho has spent a significant amount of time living in the United States, which has contributed to her behavior and lifestyle after her return to Korea. Her profession is also detached from the realm of either aesthetic labor or beauty labor, as opposed to Kyuri, Sujin, and Ara, because this protagonist works as a visual artist.

Throughout *If I Had Your Face*, Miho is portrayed as not interested in beautification, and generally she does not strive to achieve the Korean beauty ideal. Cha uses this character to show the difference between the role of facial beauty in Korea and the West, as exemplified by the United States. The way Miho approaches

the topic of appearance seems to resemble the Western approach, as informed by her previous residence in this part of the world. As discussed previously, South Koreans tend to see adhering to appearance standards as the duty of a respectable individual. This protagonist, however, perceives enhancing one's appearance as a voluntary option instead of an obligation, similarly to Westerners (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 273-277). Miho highlights her difference from the other women in her building, who engage in various means of beautification. Unlike them, the protagonist refuses to use makeup products and keeps her natural hair color and texture. She is aware of Ara and Sujin's disapproval of her apprehension toward body work, as well as of Kyuri's criticism regarding "[her] freckles" and refusal to use skincare products. However, she disregards their meaningful glances and does not change under peer pressure (Cha 2020: 50-51, 57). This, as mentioned above, contrasts with the attitudes of a substantial number of real-life young women in Korea (Park, Myers and Langstein 2019: 613, 615).

In the novel, Miho often shows disdain for the beautification others engage in, while occasionally positioning herself as more free in the realm of appearance. The protagonist describes Kyuri as "[her] painfully plastic roommate" and refers to Sujin's plastic surgery as a "terrifying transformation." Moreover, she criticizes television show entertainers who have undergone similar procedures (Cha 2020: 54-55, 57, 194)²¹. In addition to her disapproval of surgical procedures, Miho does not understand Kyuri's and Sujin's lengthy conversations about beauty procedures and admiration of the sizeable collection of cosmetics the former has accumulated. While

²¹Additionally, as Min Ah Park suggests, this could be indicative of her views of room salon work, a profession often carrying sexual connotations, and being associated with a lack of morals (Park M.A. 2022: 132). Albeit this idea is not particularly explored, Miho's proclamation that people who care about their reputations would not associate with her roommate is suggestive of such a line of thinking. Yet, it is worth noting that despite the protagonist's qualms, she admires Kyuri's resourcefulness and frugality (Cha 2020: 54).

the character admits to a certain degree of fascination with Kyuri's dedication to body work, her interest tends to resemble the captivation of a simultaneously curious and bewildered observer, rather than somebody willing to participate in beauty rituals. Despite her enchantment with her friend's perfect appearance, she rejects her offer to visit a beautician. The protagonist remains a person who does not engage in significant beauty work beyond basic hygiene and maintenance (Cha 2020: 57). Once again, Miho's stance seems extraordinary given Korean standards; her individualism might have been influenced by her stay in North America, where following one's judgment, opinions and desires regarding appearance is more valued²² (Lee, Rudd and Kim 2001: 149).

Additionally, the protagonist's attitudes seem to be influenced by her perception of beautification in regard to class in South Korea. Miho grew up in unfortunate circumstances, where she lacked both economic and social advantages. The orphanage, which became her home, was associated with stupidity, and its name was used as a slur to bully its inhabitants (Cha 2020: 138-139). After being granted a scholarship abroad, the character finds herself among Korean youth from higher social classes, such as her best friend and object of admiration, Ruby (Cha 2020: 68, 128-129). As Elfving-Hwang explains, wealthy Koreans perceive certain visible appearance enhancements as markers of a lower social status. Therefore, rich Koreans not infrequently showcase their status by not undergoing surgery (Elfving-Hwang 2021: 278). Indeed, while Ruby is a glamorous woman with a rather lavish lifestyle, she does not use any other cosmetics apart from lip products. Moreover, the only

²²While women in the United States are certainly subjected to rigid beauty norms and objectification, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, they seem to enjoy more freedom in the spectrum of available choices regarding their appearance in comparison to Korean women. As Taeyon Kim argues, in Korea the level of expected conformity in terms of looks is comparatively higher than in America. The scholar speculates that the difference results from the difference between more collectivist values in Korea and the culture of individualism in the United States (Kim T. 2003: 105-106).

semi-invasive procedure she has gone through is permanent eyeliner (Cha 2020: 67). By rejecting makeup and other enhancements, Miho attempts to emulate the aesthetic values of the higher class to which she has gained partial access due to the association with Ruby, as well as her rich boyfriend, Hanbin.

However, despite Miho's rejection of some beauty expectations, she still upholds certain elements of the Korean beauty ideal. The protagonist takes pride in being born with an attractive face, which does not need any surgical intervention. She seems to be aware of how highly society regards “‘non-made beauty’ ([kor.] ssaeng'ol)” (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 62) and displays feelings of superiority over other women who do not possess this desirable trait (Cha 2020: 55). Therefore, Miho's rejection of beautifying strategies proves not to be as rebellious as one could initially assume. While likely inspired by the aforementioned American individualism regarding looks, she refuses to perform beauty work because she is aware that not following appearance-related regimens would not affect her status as a beautiful woman.

Similarly to other literary heroines with attractive faces mentioned in this dissertation, such as Palahniuk's Shannon in *Invisible Monsters* and Egan's Charlotte in *Look at Me*, Miho's beauty becomes a source of objectification. Even though the protagonist is an artist, a profession where her looks should not matter, the people around her seem to be more interested in her physicality than in her works of art. The male gaze in the journalistic coverage the protagonist receives is quite apparent as it favors her pretty face and body over her artistic skills and achievements. Miho remembers newspaper articles and opinion pieces calling her “the naturally beautiful artist-in-residence” (Cha 2020: 55). Thus, the woman is relegated to the role of a beautiful object rather than a talented artist. Through such objectifying treatment,

Miho's abilities are rendered almost trivial and unimportant, which is the unfortunate reality for many women (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 174, 176).

In the course of the plot, it becomes increasingly clear that the protagonist's male superiors give her favorable treatment and representative roles at social functions due to her attractiveness. Miho has access to a higher number of networking and exhibition opportunities, which shows that beauty can be beneficial. The perks are especially noticeable in comparison with another artist mentioned briefly in the novel, Mari, who is refused the same privileges due to her being "invisible in the eyes of Korean men of every generation" (Cha 2020: 199). However, Miho pays for her visibility and other benefits by being objectified. Her looks are controlled by her department director, stripping her of agency regarding her appearance, similarly to Kyuri. The point is emphasized further by the fact that, when interacting with the director, she becomes a Bergerian self-surveyor, who pays attention to how she is perceived (Berger 2008: 46). As mentioned in Chapter One, in *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that, in a patriarchal society, every visible aspect of a woman's existence, including her physical appearance but also her mannerisms and behavior among other elements, is under male scrutiny. The author claims that as these judgments can impact their lives, women often feel they must carefully control and mold themselves in order to meet the standard imposed by men (Berger 2008: 46). During the conversation, Miho feels the need to carefully control her facial expression in order to show her engagement; to achieve this effect, she uses methods learned from Kyuri (Cha 2020: 198). Moreover, in reality, instead of a respected artist, she is viewed more as a "mascot" as the director calls her (Cha 2020: 55, 199). The superior also makes the protagonist appear on a poster promoting an art showcase. His usage of Miho's beautiful face for promotional purposes, and the reminder that she will be

contacted regarding how to prepare for the photoshoot, once again emphasizes that men in the art sphere do not treat her seriously. In the world of *If I Had Your Face*, similarly to many Korean women's lived experiences, beauty is paradoxical: both possessing and lacking facial attractiveness come with an array of drawbacks.

4.4. Beautifully Together: Beautification, Female Bonding and *Han*

Even though *If I Had Your Face* exposes various difficult aspects of Korean women's facial beautification, as well as of living with or without a perfect face, the novel also portrays striving for beauty as an opportunity for female bonding. Widdows argues that engaging in beautification together can be important for women, as such situations may foster a sense of community (Widdows 2021: 4). In Cha's fiction, going to a hair salon, applying cosmetics, and exchanging information about skincare creates a sphere where women's friendships flourish and become even stronger.

Locations such as hair salons are frequently places where women can enjoy one another's company (Rhode 2016: 705), which is the case in Ara's workplace. Throughout the novel, the salon is one of the main sites where Cha's characters interact. Kyuri is depicted as a frequent visitor to the establishment. Her everyday appointments seem to contribute to the growing feeling of closeness between her, Ara, and Sujin (Cha 2020: 5). Due to Ara's busy working hours limiting her amount of free time, the salon serves as a valuable opportunity to socialize while performing labor (Cha 2020: 13). After work, the protagonists meet in their apartments. While their conversations are often dominated by subjects concerning plastic surgery or makeup (Cha 2020: 9, 14, 56-57, 145), they provide an opportunity for bonding, sharing their feelings and struggles (Widdows 2021: 4; Otis 2021: 339). For Ara and Sujin, attending a place of beautification is also a personal tradition. The hairdresser

explains that during significant holidays, she and her roommate always visit a bathhouse. Spending the day in a relaxing environment, as well as applying skincare and haircare together at night after returning home, are depicted as a source of happiness for the two friends (Cha 2020: 146), showing that beautification can be associated with the beneficial feeling of togetherness (Widdows 2021: 5).

Even the apprehensive Miho, who does not actively try to attain the appearance ideal, is involved in female bonding related to beautifying oneself. In one instance, she attracts Ara's and Sujin's concern regarding her "raw" hair (Cha 2020: 51). However, Ara's note assessing the state of the hair might not necessarily be meant as a sign of impoliteness or cruelty. Instead, it can serve as "a way to signal care" for her friend (Widdows 2021: 5). In another scene, Miho asks Kyuri for advice regarding how to dress for a meeting with her fiancé's mother. Even though the main topic of the conversation is appearance, it makes it possible for Miho to articulate her worries and for Kyuri to show her support to another woman. By giving advice and offering to get a facial treatment together, Kyuri seems to express her care for Miho's overall well-being.

Although the appearance of their face is of the utmost importance to Cha's protagonists, it should be emphasized that throughout *If I Had Your Face*, an undercurrent of disagreement and defiance arises in the face of injustices, particularly those connected with the restrictive Korean beauty standards. The novel seems to be characterized by sorrow, which, as Stephen Joyce argues, is a unique feature of Korean and Korean American fiction. The scholar links these tendencies to the traditional Korean notion of *han* (Joyce 2015: 11-12). This concept is particularly relevant in Cha's novel and the writer even references it directly in Miho's narration: "my grandmother had died of anger. She had choked to death on han" (Cha 2020:

210). Colin Marshall argues that while the protagonists' lives in *If I Had Your Face* are not as marked by trauma as their ancestors', their everyday existence is still infused with sorrow (Marshall 2020). Thus, it can be said that Cha's characters experience *han*.

Han is a complex term that evades simple categorization. Tamara Czerkies and Kim Yongdeog explain that while dictionary definitions tend to approach *han* only as a negative emotion, such as "a grudge and sorrow," the term is more ambiguous. According to the authors, *han* also encompasses the transformation of negative affect into "a feeling of peace and an acceptance of one's fate," as well as a sense of empathy for others (Czerkies and Kim 2014: 278-279; my translation). Additionally, it includes resilience in the face of adversity and the strength to fight against it (Czerkies and Kim 2014: 279). Thus, experiencing painful feelings, called the "dark *han*," is not solely negative, but instead serves as a source of inner strength (Czerkies and Kim 2014: 279; my translation). The scholars call attention to the *han* of women, which stems from their subordinate position in society. According to Czerkies and Kim, since the early days of Korean literature, women have often expressed their particularly sorrowful experiences in various forms of writing (Czerkies and Kim 2014: 284-285).

Cha's protagonists, especially Sujin and Kyuri, seem to embody the qualities of *han* in Cha's novel. Although they face many adversities, the women do not give up on their dreams and make efforts to achieve the lives they desire, similarly to female figures in several Korean works of literature discussed by Czerkies and Kim (2014: 294). Sujin strives to become beautiful so that she can enjoy the social capital connected with beauty. Despite the difficulties regarding the unpleasant realities of recovery after a surgery and the fact that her first job as an aesthetic laborer is not

exactly what she wanted, she remains hopeful and optimistic (Cha 2020: 252, 254). Kyuri, despite her precarious situation, lack of finances, and a feeling of being stuck in a demanding, unfulfilling industry, also stays strong. Toward the end of the story, when she is given an opportunity to have a job interview at a prestigious clinic, she decides to fight to obtain it (Cha 2020: 256-258, 263). It is noticeable that the protagonist remains realistic while assessing her chances as she thinks: “I know I will not get this job” (Cha 2020: 263). The way she still admires her own efforts and remains calm, at the same time accepting any possible outcome of the situation, reflects the spirit of *han*.

The novel’s ending seems to represent *han* in all its characters. In the last scene, Cha’s protagonists: Kyuri, Sujin, Ara, Miho, and Wonna are all portrayed together for the first time. The women meet randomly at the officetel’s front stairs, and instead of rushing and ignoring each other, make conversation, expressing interest in one another’s lives. Despite their individual sorrows and anxieties, they finally show mutual sympathy and care for the entire group. Their agreement to share a meal, on the last page of the novel, indicates a change each of them has undergone (Cha 2020: 264-268). Perhaps, in accordance with *han*, the protagonists have learned empathy and become stronger because of their difficult experience while striving for beauty and experiencing beauty-related perks and drawbacks. Whereas the novel’s ending is not exactly optimistic, the suggestion that the women are now stronger than before brings a glimmer of hope in the face of the trials and tribulations that likely await Cha’s characters.

Conclusion

The goal of my thesis was an analysis of selected contemporary fiction written in the late 20th and early 21st century concerning beauty standards regarding women's faces. The main question of my research project concerned the relationships women have with facial beauty norms and beautifying procedures, such as plastic surgery and makeup. I selected the analyzed fiction in order to show a cross-sectional representation of women's experiences. The characters belong to different groups of women, such as Caucasian women, East Asian women, teenage girls, adult women, and women with visible facial difference resulting from physical trauma. I researched relationships between the mainstream, normative facial beauty standards prevalent in the society they live in and the characters' personality and identity. The above analyses demonstrate that some of the motivations for particular critiques of facial beauty norms in the selected fiction are dependent on social and cultural contexts, as well as the depicted characters' markers of identity.

From the Young Adult fiction analyzed in Chapter Two, *Fix* by Leslie Margolis, *The Fold* by An Na, and *Slant* by Laura E. Williams, emerges a non-judgmental but non-encouraging picture of teenage plastic surgery. All the authors seem to promote body neutrality, understood as an acceptance and appreciation of one's body, by having their protagonists refuse to undergo a cosmetic procedure. However, while acknowledging the double standard of beauty for men and women in the West (*Fix*) and the potential erasure of ethnic features in the Korean American diasporic context (*The Fold* and *Slant*), they do not overly criticize plastic surgery,

perhaps in order to offer understanding to young readers who are interested in such a procedure.

In *Fix* by Leslie Margolis two sisters, Cameron and Allie, are constructed in opposition to each other and represent divergent approaches to dealing with appearance norms regarding the female face. The figure of Cameron serves to portray the stigma of being perceived as ugly and the subsequent effects of appearance-related bullying. Through this protagonist, Margolis also shows how undergoing plastic surgery can be a means of escaping stigma and how beauty is a form of social currency for girls and women. Allie, in turn, is a character who shows that external pressure to change one's looks can affect an individual's view of herself, but also that such encouragement can be resisted and ultimately rejected, just like facial beauty norms in general. This protagonist's story also places emphasis on the importance of one's unique facial features for self-identity. By portraying the difficult relationship of the girls with their mother, the author calls attention to parental influence over children's views of beauty, as well as the dangers of misuse of parental authority when encouraging teenage plastic surgery. Moreover, through Julie, Margolis accentuates the ageist standards of Hollywood, where, regardless of age, women have to strive to achieve the same beauty ideal. It is important to note that the parents are not portrayed in the novel as one-dimensional, negative characters. Instead, the author calls attention to the problem of well-meaning decisions that ultimately cause more harm than good.

The juxtaposition of the two adolescent protagonists serves to represent two different attitudes toward the mainstream standards of beauty. Allie displays a more rebellious approach, which aligns with her rejection of plastic surgery. Meanwhile, Cameron accepts the standard and decides to strive to be seen as beautiful within its

constraints. That, however, does not mean the older character is not aware of the oppressive nature of the beauty norms. In the scene where Cameron thinks about the work of the body artist Orlan, it is stated that awareness of “the horror and futility of achieving perfection” (Margolis 2006: 220) and the desire to reach the beauty standard can both coexist within the same person. The novel illustrates quite well that women can have complex relationships with beauty and the standards pertaining to it.

The setting of An Na’s *The Fold* in the Korean American diaspora offers a unique insight into the impact of beauty standards on persons belonging to this community. Through Joyce, Na depicts the problems young people can encounter while trying to navigate the appearance expectations of the mainstream culture and of their families. The protagonist is depicted as an ordinary Asian American girl who struggles with small imperfections, as well as social comparison to her older sister, whom other people see as more beautiful. The novel’s main storyline, concerning the protagonist’s decision whether to accept her aunt’s offer of eyelid surgery, shows what problems such a suggestion can pose to a young person. As a result of the aunt’s suggestion and comments, a form of body shaming that decreases the protagonist’s self-esteem, Joyce starts to see faults in her appearance and internalizes a negative view of herself. However, as the novel ends with Joyce rejecting the aunt’s offer of surgery, it seems that Na’s intention is to affirm that teenage girls should not conform to the wishes of others and decide for themselves if they want to subscribe to following the societal beauty ideal and, if so, which methods they should resort to. Na also seems to assert that important decisions, such as undergoing plastic surgery, should only be made when a young individual is fully confident in their decision and is aware of any possible risks – an important message, given the Young Adult target readers of the novel. Despite the fact that her sister Helen questions the American

beauty standards and their possible racist implications, the novel's protagonist herself largely dismisses such concerns. At the end of the novel, Joyce realizes her looks should not define her and that adhering to the wishes of others will not result in personal contentment.

However, *The Fold* shows that beauty rituals, such as buying and doing makeup, are an opportunity for female bonding. During such activities, as shown by Joyce's and Gina's interactions, girls and women can have honest conversations about topics not limited to the pursuit of beauty. Consequently, Na does not radically reject the legitimacy of beauty standards. Perhaps the author's choice is motivated by her desire to avoid didacticism and thus alienate her young readers who use such makeup practices.

Through Helen, Joyce's lesbian sister, Na shows the differences between heterosexual and queer women's relationships to beauty. Compared to Joyce, Helen is portrayed as a character who openly rejects the mainstream views regarding beauty. The older sister does not understand the protagonist's struggles and strongly criticizes her initial willingness to undergo plastic surgery. Helen's stance is not surprising, considering that lesbian girls and women usually do not need to appeal to the male gaze (Cogan and Erickson 1991: 3). In the novel, Helen is also used to voice disapproval of white-centric, North American facial beauty standards. The character disagrees with the view that Asian features are less attractive and inferior to those of Caucasian women. While Kouta argues that Helen's rejection of beauty standards makes her a marginalized "outsider" (Kouta 2023: 1022), it is worth noticing that this status grants Helen freedom, as she can see the risks of conforming to the male gaze and has the ability to criticize it.

The novel also depicts that striving to achieve beauty by means of plastic surgery and makeup can be motivated by wanting to escape racist treatment and assimilate into a given society. These themes are explored through the character of Gomo, Joyce and Helen's aunt, who immigrated to the United States from South Korea as a young woman. Upon encountering prejudice, she decides to change her looks to avoid such injustices. Moreover, through Gomo Na shows that beautification in a new country can be done in order to regain the social status that one enjoyed in their native country. This aspect of the novel highlights that beauty is a form of social currency for women — one which can be lost but also regained. By giving the aunt a complex back-story, the author seems to underscore that even though Gomo's body shaming comments are harmful, they are most likely motivated by good intentions. Gomo possibly wants Joyce not to replicate her sorrowful experiences and proposes a solution that was successful for her.

Laura E. Williams's *Slant*, despite its brevity and simple plot, explores in a fascinating way the rarely represented experience with facial appearance norms of an Asian adopted into a white American family. The novella's protagonist, Lauren, is used to show how teenagers of Asian descent, especially those raised in Caucasian communities, can struggle with various appearance-based problems, such as stigmatization, bullying and teasing, as well as othering by their white peers. These experiences negatively affect the protagonist, causing her to harbor negative feelings towards her eye shape that attracts ridicule and racist name-calling. *Slant* also depicts how an experience of transracial adoption can further exacerbate appearance-based insecurities and feelings of alienation. In the novella, the protagonist lacks a connection to the Korean and Korean American community or media, which results in her cultural isolation and negative self-perception. Moreover, through Lauren's father,

the book shows how Caucasian members of adoptive families can fail to properly address the appearance-based struggles of their Korean American adoptee child. This becomes apparent when Martin thinks calling his daughter “beautiful” (Williams 2008: 125) will suffice to mitigate the effects of teasing she experiences daily.

The protagonist’s decision to undergo a cosmetic procedure to change the look of her eyes is depicted as mainly motivated by the desire to stop the racist treatment to which she is exposed at school. Lauren’s primary wish is not to look particularly beautiful but rather ordinary and inconspicuous. The way the character sees plastic surgery seems to reflect Davis’s theory of cosmetic operations as a solution, albeit not an unproblematic one, that allows an individual to live a happier life without discrimination, a life in which they are perceived as normal (Davis 1991: 38). Later in the novella, however, this view is called into question as the unexpected revelation about the past of Lauren’s mother suggests that plastic surgery did not bring her happiness. The novella’s ending emphasizes that plastic surgery is not something one should strive for. Instead, similarly to Margolis in *Fix* and Na in *The Fold*, Williams seems to advocate for self-acceptance. The writer highlights that once a Korean American girl embraces her looks, she is finally able to address her bullies and stop their harmful actions.

While in Chapter Two I demonstrate how teenage protagonists move towards the acceptance of their face with its imperfections, in Chapter Three I engage with the complex relation between face and facelessness. In contrast to Margolis, Na and Williams, who depict adolescent characters struggling for society’s approval, Palahniuk and Egan focus on young women who interrogate the need for such approval when confronted with the loss of face. The two writers look at facial disfigurement as something potentially freeing from appearance-related expectations

placed on women and from the societal importance of the face in general. Interestingly, the only text written by a man in my corpus, *Invisible Monsters* stands out among other works of fiction that touch on the subject of female facial beauty. Palahniuk's novel is unique in its examination of disfigurement as desirable and self-inflicted. *Invisible Monsters* depicts the protagonist's transition from being an objectified fashion model on display to a disfigured woman who is invisible to others. Shannon often emphasizes the distinction between her two selves, before and after facial injury, a phenomenon frequently observed in those who have experienced the loss of face. The protagonist finds it difficult to accept that she in the present and she in the past are the same person. Her identity seems to be broken in half, which emphasizes that disfigurement is often associated with loss of identity as well as loss of previously available assets, such as popularity, money, and career prospects. The novel also calls attention to other problems that disfigured women can encounter, namely, stifled communication abilities, such as speech and facial expressions.

Palahniuk draws a parallel between acquired disfigurement and aging as forces that contribute to women's invisibility. The protagonist sees the changes associated with growing old as a form of mutilation, showcasing their undesirability. Such a view seems to reflect the negative views surrounding women's aging prevalent within Western societies, which result in increasingly younger women seeking preventive methods against wrinkles and other markers of age (see Valenti, Atkins and Noble 2023). *Invisible Monsters* also highlights that losing facial beauty is frequently associated with the loss of a woman's value. Shannon is aware that she is no longer perceived as visible, valuable, and desirable, as she used to be.

Palahniuk's novel, however, seems to counter the widely held beliefs that disfigurement is universally tragic and disabling, encouraging more abstract reflection

about face, beauty and social expectations. Shannon's narrative often emphasizes the dark sides of her earlier life as a conventionally attractive model. In *Invisible Monsters*, it becomes rather clear that spending a significant amount of time in front of the camera made the protagonist view herself through an objectifying photographic gaze. As a result, both normative-looking and disfigured Shannon cannot stop thinking about her attractiveness in the eyes of others. Moreover, even the ways she wants to act out her emotions are influenced by the internalization of the gaze of the camera, which further emphasizes her self-objectification. In order to fight being seen and treated as an object by others and by herself, the protagonist chooses to disfigure her face. Moreover, this choice is undertaken to permanently stop her dependence on physical beauty and to reclaim her body. Disfigurement, in the world of the novel, liberates the protagonist from various types of societal oppression and personal distress. Yet, at the same time, becoming disfigured is equated with becoming monstrous. After injuring herself, the protagonist is considered unsightly: people both avoid looking at her face and try to protect Shannon from catching sight of herself. The actions of various characters emphasize the conviction that facial disfigurement is gruesome, and those affected by it are treated either with pity, lack of empathy, or disgust.

Shannon's changing self-perception is similar to attitudes toward facial disfigurement discussed by Edkins, which consist of either hiding or embracing visible difference. By hiding her face from view, the protagonist hopes that she will be allowed to live an ordinary life that is not defined by her disfigurement and monstrosity. She initially wants to keep her feelings private and relish anonymity, which onlookers can interpret however they see fit. This approach also ensures that the "facial status quo," according to which each individual is a separate and unique

being, remains unquestioned and the associated personal “dignity and worth” are properly respected (Edkins 2015: 165). However, the novel culminates in the protagonist changing her approach and deciding to embrace her disfigurement. Taking off the veils symbolizes accepting oneself fully for Shannon, who stops judging her non-normative appearance. This echoes Edkins’s thought as Shannon’s acceptance of being disfigured and monstrous openly defies the importance placed on the face within society and the view that the self is orderly, uniform, and fully separate from others. This instability and uncertainty of identity are further emphasized by the protagonist leaving her name and identifying documents to Brandy. At the end of Palahniuk’s novel, Shannon is somebody not only without a face, but also without a past and any marker of her previous identity, an “invisible monster” that defies all existential, social and aesthetic expectations. By questioning the norms that regulate our being in the world, on both the existential and social levels, Palahniuk exposes the fundamental monstrosity of all of us, which we tend to ignore and render invisible in our everyday interactions.

Similarly to Palahniuk in *Invisible Monsters*, in *Look at Me*, Egan imagines a former model with a disfigured face. In *Look at Me*, comparably to *Invisible Monsters*, the loss of face is not only associated with breaking one’s life into two distinct parts but also with the disturbance of one’s identity, as well as invisibility. After the accident, Charlotte feels miserable, physically weak, and stripped of dignity due to her hospital stay. She sees her visibly different face as something shameful that has to be hidden from others, for instance, by wearing a mask or wearing heavy makeup. The adverse mental and physical feelings cause Charlotte to isolate herself from others, which, as demonstrated in my analysis, resembles the behavior of real-life disfigured persons who can consider their appearance unsightly, feel anxiety when

being looked at, and be afraid of judgment. However, unlike Palahniuk's protagonist, Charlotte's experience with disfigurement is not as empowering and triumphant. Her view of disfigurement as tragic seems to be exacerbated by her former modeling profession, which values youth and beauty. As a result of working in front of the camera in a profession adhering to the mainstream beauty standard, usually shaped by heterosexual men's tastes, the protagonist has internalized both the male and the photographic gaze. Additionally, it is likely that viewing herself in photographs, which tend to prioritize the depiction of their female subjects as submissive, attractive and young, has caused the protagonist to perceive herself in such categories.

As a result of her disfigurement, Charlotte embarks on a journey of adaptation to her new circumstances. The process proves to be particularly challenging and follows a non-linear trajectory akin to the other kinds of loss among real-life disfigured people. The protagonist's longing for her old life and face alternates with coping with acquired difference. After the accident, Charlotte refuses to identify with her new appearance, which suggests that her looks played a central role in her self-concept. Later, the protagonist attempts to restart her career. When these efforts are unsuccessful, Charlotte finally fully realizes that disfigurement has divided her life into two halves. This painful revelation results in the protagonist considering her old, glamorous life to be finished. Subsequently, the woman falls into an even deeper depression, culminating in a failed suicide attempt. Surprisingly, however, the event seems to finalize Charlotte's grieving process. The protagonist imagines that her depression "dies" as a result of the suicidal jump, while she herself survives and reshapes her life, pursuing her hunger for fame.

The act of causing a disfiguring event in both *Invisible Monsters* and *Look at Me* is portrayed as an attempt to gain agency. Throughout Egan's novel, it is

suggested that Charlotte's life as a model was characterized by passivity. The protagonist's adult life trajectory was mainly shaped by her being discovered because of her beauty, and the resulting modeling career. In her job, the woman was most likely serving as a passive object of the male gaze. Thus, Charlotte's self-inflicted disfigurement seems to be motivated by a desire to change her life circumstances, to become an agent in control of her life, escape the objectification of the male gaze, as well as her unexciting everyday reality. However, unlike Shannon in Palahniuk's novel, the protagonist of *Look at Me* fails to embrace her disfigured visage. Instead, Charlotte legitimizes and upholds the "facial status quo" by continuously viewing her disfigured face as shameful and compensating for its conventionally unattractive appearance by employing strategies such as masking. The protagonist's loss of face could have caused a radical reevaluation of the importance of the face, culminating in an ontological confrontation with the Lacanian real, a realization that the self is not as stable as it is often assumed. However, Charlotte is unable to achieve such goals. Instead, she strives for fame, this time as a reality star on the Internet, clinging to her old identity and face. Ultimately, the protagonist decides to sell her face as a product for mass consumption in the media, thus immortalizing her looks and reaffirming the importance of facial beauty. While this decision has certain perks, such as increased anonymity and the possibility of avoiding photoshoots, it results in another identity break into a public and a private one. Egan's *Look at Me* thus shows that escaping fame and Western culture's preoccupation with the face can be particularly difficult, the desire, encapsulated in the novel's title proving futile, as the other's look stops at the face, and does not move beyond the surface of being.

Both *Invisible Monsters* and *Look at Me* employ and undermine the notion of textual staring, as defined by Klecker and Grabher (2022: 6). Palahniuk uses

disturbing descriptions of his protagonist's facial trauma, taking pleasure in engaging in literary transgression, rather than avoiding taboo or controversial aspects of disfigurement. In his novel emphasis is placed on the fleshiness and moisture of the protagonist's face, which invites comparisons with processes of rot and decay. The language and metaphors used by Palahniuk evoke disgust in the reader, highlighting the societal perception of the loss of face as something especially tragic and disgusting. By contrast, Egan's depiction of disfigurement is mostly characterized by ambiguity. In *Look at Me*, there is a noticeable lack of detailed descriptions regarding how the protagonist looks after her car accident. The mentions of disfigurement tend to be rather unspecific and leave the appearance of Charlotte's face open to the reader's interpretation and imagination. Egan's choice to vaguely describe the protagonist's visible difference contrasts with that of Palahniuk, who instead opts for a high level of detail. In *Look at Me* hideous specifics are quite limited, yet the novel still evokes the imagery of disfigurement as something gruesome and scary. The limited and ambiguous descriptions of Charlotte's face turn her appearance into one of the novel's central mysteries. However, the vague depictions of the protagonist's disfigurement can stimulate the reader to imagine it and, thus, engage them in an act of textual staring. Attempting to solve this mystery can be particularly exciting, fulfilling an important aspect of being a literary starrer. Yet, like Palahniuk, Egan also subverts the typical representations of disfigurement, which engage textual staring through a first-person narration. Due to this choice, the novel's protagonist is not merely used as a shocking device or a dehumanized being for whom the reader is not supposed to feel empathy. On the contrary, Charlotte's story is personal and moving. By choosing a first-person perspective, both writers illuminate the struggles of visibly different people in various spheres – physical, psychological, and social.

The novel analyzed in the last chapter, Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*, offers a unique insight into the impact of beauty standards on young women in contemporary South Korea, bringing together many of the themes analyzed in Chapters Two and Three. By opting for multiple narrator-protagonists, Cha approaches the discussed issues in a complex, compelling way. The figure of Kyuri, positioned as an exemplar of South Korean beauty standards after numerous plastic surgeries, serves to highlight the narrow standards of female appearance in Korea. Moreover, based on the example of Kyuri, the writer shows that women's beauty is usually not regarded as a stable condition. Instead, prettiness requires regular, diligent maintenance through makeup, skincare, and additional procedures. In the novel, plastic surgery is depicted not as a simple, effortless transformation, but as a long and painful process. The realistic portrayal suggests that female beautification frequently entails consent to physical discomfort. Undergoing plastic surgery can also be difficult from a psychological standpoint. Like formerly stigmatized people discussed by Goffman (1986: 9), Kyuri feels tension regarding a potential exposure of her former looks. The protagonist's beauty serves as a form of social currency, as Kyuri is able to work in a more prestigious room salon and enjoy more favorable working conditions, as opposed to her less attractive colleagues from her previous job.

While the world of South Korean room salons, filled with glamorous hostesses and wealthy, important clients, might seem enticing, Cha shows darker aspects of aesthetic labor. In *If I Had Your Face*, this line of work is depicted as precarious. While Kyuri apparently lives more comfortably than others, she struggles with growing debt from her plastic surgeries. Her profession lacks stability and chances for long-term employment, since room salons are only interested in workers under a certain age. In addition to precarious employment conditions, Kyuri, as an aesthetic

laborer, is stripped of agency regarding her appearance. The worker's looks are chosen by the salon's madam, who strives to offer a variety of female faces/bodies to her male clientele. Thus, it can be said that the choices Kyuri makes about her looks are not an expression of free will and personal taste, but instead result from her professional duties. These issues are further problematized by the protagonist's unfavorable standing within society due to her implied lower class background, lack of wealth, and employment in a taboo industry. As demonstrated in Chapter Four, women dealing with such conditions usually cannot opt out from striving to achieve the beauty ideal. Cha emphasizes this point by contrasting Kyuri with richer women who do not alter their appearance.

Unlike the rest of the protagonists, Sujin is a unique character in the novel because she does not serve as a narrator. This stylistic choice indicates her outsider status and contrasts her with Kyuri. Sujin is a socially excluded woman from a marginalized background who lacks physical beauty. In order to escape her unfavorable social status, she decides to improve her appearance by surgical means. As I have pointed out in my analysis, her belief regarding attractiveness as a way to receive more positive treatment reflects the notion of beauty as a form of social currency, which often motivates female beautification. It is also worth noting that many Korean people share such beliefs and that beauty quite frequently proves to be a source of individual advantages in society (Hyeon-kyeong 2017: 54; Kim T. 2003: 108). In *If I Had Your Face*, Sujin is enamored by the world of room salons and desperately wants to join its ranks. She repeatedly ignores warnings from Kyuri, especially regarding debts, and is convinced that working as an aesthetic laborer would bring her a substantial income. The protagonist's overly favorable perception of aesthetic labor reflects her belief in the positive image that such establishments try

to create. Even after becoming a room salon girl and experiencing precarious employment, Sujin seems to be happy with her new life and its surface glamour, a common phenomenon in new aesthetic hires (Williams and Connell 2015: 269). Similarly, while she struggles with pain and limited physical abilities after plastic surgery, she accepts them as an inescapable part of becoming beautiful.

Another of Cha's protagonists, Ara, mainly observes and comments on how the other women in the novel strive for beauty. She is involved in the girlfriend gaze, which seems to be a part of her everyday interactions with others. It is especially apparent in her admiration for Kyuri, whose version of femininity she approves of, while disapproving of Sujin's appearance. Cha also uses this protagonist to explain beauty-related phenomena in Korean society. Ara frequently consumes makeover television programs, which are popular in South Korea. Such shows can impact the viewers as they solidify the negative perception of certain features and legitimize undergoing plastic surgery. The popularity of cosmetic procedures is highlighted in the scene where Ara remembers a high number of girls in her school opting for surgical beautification, which refers to the Korean phenomenon of offering plastic surgery as a present to teenage girls and young women. It is significant that the students who did not undergo surgery, like Ara, opted out only for economic reasons. Unfortunately, such division into surgical haves and have-nots can lead to the relegation of certain individuals to "a cosmetic underclass" (Geléezau 2015: 3) that is treated less favorably than their beautiful counterparts. As somebody who presumably lacks physical beauty and has a speech disability, Ara can be seen as being affected by social exclusion. Through this lens, the lack of the girlfriend gaze, manifested as an absence of comments from other women about her physicality, is quite striking. While it can be perceived positively, since the gaze can be cruel, the way Ara's appearance

goes unnoticed by her friends might serve as a way to exclude her from the rituals of womanhood.

Out of the four protagonists discussed in Chapter Four, Miho is perhaps the most detached from Korean beauty standards. She grew up in an orphanage, works as a visual artist, and, most importantly, has spent a significant amount of time living in the USA. The author uses Miho to juxtapose the beauty standards in the West and South Korea. Influenced by American individualism, the protagonist departs from the duty to strive for facial attractiveness, and instead perceives it as a choice. Despite her friends' disapproval, she resists the pressure to beautify herself and sees women who conform to the norms as almost pitiful. Her views, however, still seem to be influenced by some Korean values, especially those about social class. By refusing to use makeup or dye her hair, the protagonist mimics the Korean higher class, for whom not striving for the beauty standard serves as a status symbol.

Nevertheless, while on the surface Miho might seem rebellious, she still legitimizes certain aspects of Korean appearance norms. She feels a sense of pride about possessing the highly valued “non-made beauty” compared to her peers (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012: 62). This boastfulness undermines the subversive potential of her refusal to engage in beautification. Miho's facial beauty also entails drawbacks similar to those depicted in Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* and Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*. Like Shannon and Charlotte, Miho is objectified by men and self-objectifies herself. In order to keep the advantages brought by attractiveness, the character engages in self-surveying, carefully controlling herself in the presence of men. While physical beauty grants the protagonist more visibility in the art world, it also causes her male coworkers and journalists to trivialize her achievements and

talents. Thus, it can be said that in Cha's novel, a beautiful face can be both a source of power and oppression.

While in *If I Had Your Face*, Cha is quite critical of facial beauty norms in South Korea and the pursuit of this appearance ideal, she also portrays beautification in a more positive way, namely as a site of female bonding. Her protagonists meet in a hair salon, exchange advice about cosmetics, and create rituals involving beautification that serve as an opportunity to spend valuable time together. During these beauty-related activities Kyuri, Sujin, Ara, and Miho deepen their friendships by opening up emotionally to each other. At the same time, *If I Had Your Face* contains a complex blend of emotions, such as sorrow and defiance, as a reaction to injustices, which seems indebted to the uniquely Korean concept of *han*. In spite of life's difficulties, Cha's characters remain strong and fight for better futures with the means that are available to them. Additionally, in a way characteristic of *han*, the hardships seem to serve as important lessons, inspiring such qualities as empathy and resilience.

The comparison of Western facial beauty norms with their Korean equivalents, as explored in this thesis, reveals that the two share certain similarities. In both spheres a dominant model of desirable beauty emerges, one that prizes youth and compliance with the appearance of the hegemonic group in a given culture. It is rather strongly influenced and reinforced by those in power: beauty conglomerates, celebrities, and the wealthy. Both in the West and South Korea, being beautiful brings benefits, such as more favorable treatment by others, better prospects of employment and career advancement, and more chances for finding a suitable partner in the context of heterosexual relationships. However, despite similarities, there are important differences between facial norms in the West and South Korea. The Korean standard, as suggested by Cha in her novel, is generally narrower and more uniform.

The world of socially accepted Western beauty, while restrictive, seems more varied, potentially due to more racial diversity in countries like the United States or the United Kingdom, as well as a bigger presence and influence of subcultural styles (goth, punk, hip hop, etc.) on mainstream culture. Additionally, invasive procedures are more socially accepted in South Korea than in the West, where, while fillers and injections are increasingly more common, plastic surgery is still perceived as a ‘last resort,’ pursued only after other methods of beautification have been unsuccessful. Beauty as a disciplinary regimen therefore proves more powerful in South Korean society and the Korean-American diaspora.

Even though the six works of fiction analyzed in this dissertation portray protagonists of different ages, walks of life and ethnicities, all of them present a critical view of at least some aspects of the feminine facial beauty ideal, especially in its relation to the male gaze and objectification. Applying different literary devices and conventions, from realistic to transgressive fiction, and targeting different audiences, they all alert the reader to the harmful effects of norms regulating our appearance, and encourage further reflection about the various meanings of face. All show that fulfilling the expectations of having a beautiful face requires significant amounts of work in the form of makeup, skincare, or plastic surgery. In each of these novels, not being able to meet the facial beauty ideal can be seen as a form of stigma, with different implications for women’s being in their bodies. While the sources are different, the discriminatory effects of racism in *The Fold* and *Slant*, ableism pointed at people with facial disfigurement in *Invisible Monsters* and *Look at Me*, or lookism in *Fix* and *If I Had Your Face*, are similar. “The specter of ugliness” (Talley 2014: 193) haunts literary heroines, causing them to desire facial perfection.

The exploration of the politics and poetics of the female face in Margolis', Na's, Williams's, Palahniuk's, Egan's, and Cha's fiction draws attention to problems women are faced with in their everyday lives that are often ignored by society at large. The characters' struggles with facial appearance norms are complex, showing a diverse picture of the feminine experience of the face. The analyzed texts show that the face is not a neutral body part, serving merely a practical function of communication and recognition. Instead, it is deeply political — what is considered beautiful is shaped by norms, disciplinary regimes, as well as social and racial hierarchies. In the West, the concept of beauty is largely influenced by whiteness, whereas in South Korea, attractiveness is shaped by preferences rooted in the beliefs of the upper classes. Globally, the beautiful female face is valued for its youthfulness and perfection, making blemishes undesirable and associating facial disfigurement with taboo, immorality, or even monstrosity. In the 21st century, the face remains highly prized, being a defining element of contemporary personhood, understood as complete and separate from others. While the early days of the Internet, when a rather high degree of anonymity was the era's defining characteristic, inspired hope for the eradication of the importance of the face, the current social media era places the face at the center of personhood more than ever before. It thus seems, as shown by the fiction discussed in this dissertation, that humans are not ready for facelessness, which would reveal “our primary interconnectedness” (Edkins 2015: 165-166); instead, we cling to the face, which provides us with a sense of individuality, strengthened by narratives surrounding beautification, such as self-improvement or self-expression through makeup and/or surgery, as portrayed in the chosen corpus of fiction. The poetics and politics of the female face remains a topic of potent discussion, including in the field of literary studies, as suggested by the bestselling status of Cha's *If I Had*

Your Face. Undoubtedly, further research in the development of these themes, especially in the works of young, emerging writers from diverse identity groups, both in the West and the East, is urgently needed. Invisible monsters are not only those with disfigured faces, but all of us, with our fantasies of wholeness and perfection. I therefore humbly hope that my dissertation might encourage further debate on the fundamental role of face(lessness) for the human condition.

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Streszczenie rozprawy doktorskiej p.t.

Kobiety, kanony piękna i tożsamość.

Poetyka i polityka twarzy w wybranych utworach współczesnych

Niniejsza rozprawa doktorska poświęcona jest analizie tematyki kobiecej twarzy w wybranych utworach anglojęzycznych z ostatniego ćwierćwiecza: *Invisible Monsters* (1999) Chucka Palahniuka, *Look at Me* (2001) Jennifer Egan, *Fix* (2006) Leslie Margolis, *The Fold* (2008) An Na, *Slant* (2008) Laury E. Williams oraz *If I Had Your Face* (2020) Frances Cha. Wyselekcjonowane teksty omówiono pod kątem przedstawienia w nich norm piękna, wpływu branży urodowej na społeczne standardy oraz roli, którą w nich pełni twarz jako zasadniczy czynnik w kształtowaniu tożsamości kobiety. W interpretacji wykorzystano interdyscyplinarny aparat teoretyczny obejmujący wiedzę z takich dziedzin jak literaturoznawstwo, psychologia, socjologia, estetyka, teoria płci kulturowej i teoria feministyczna. Ze względu na komparatystyczny charakter pracy, porównującej standardy wyglądu twarzy kobiecej na Zachodzie, w Azji Wschodniej (na przykładzie Korei Południowej) oraz w azjatyckiej, a w szczególności koreańskiej grupie etnicznej w Stanach Zjednoczonych, w pracy wykorzystano również odkrycia orientalistyki, badań postkolonialnych i diasporycznych. Zasadniczą hipotezą, jaką wysuwa Autorka rozprawy, jest to, że literatura współczesna zapewnia istotną przestrzeń do eksploracji i analizy aktualnej problematyki dotyczącej kobiecej twarzy, w szczególności restrykcyjnych standardów piękna i ich konsekwencji. Interpretacja tematyki twarzy w tekstach literackich stanowi ważne uzupełnienie dyskursu odnoszącego się do roli fizyczności w procesie kształtowania się tożsamości człowieka oraz akceptacji wizualnej różnorodności.

Dyskurs ten był dotąd zdominowany przez cielesność, zarówno w przestrzeni akademickiej, jak i w kulturze popularnej. Autorka rozprawy stara się udowodnić, że omawiane teksty oferują krytyczne spojrzenie na problematykę standardów piękna kobiecej twarzy, w szczególności na aspekty o charakterze dyskryminacyjnym i wykluczającym, a także kwestionują stereotypy dotyczące roli twarzy w konstruowaniu kobiecej (i nie tylko) tożsamości.

Rozdział pierwszy niniejszej dysertacji poświęcony jest tematyce polityki twarzy (*face politics*), czyli wpływu kanonów piękna rozumianych jako mechanizmy normatywne na życie codzienne kobiet, ich auto-percepcję oraz funkcjonowanie w kulturze. W pierwszej części omówiono wagę branży urodowej (*beauty industry*) w ustanawianiu i podtrzymywaniu standardów kobiecego piękna, a szczególną uwagę zwrócono na aspekty związane z wyglądem twarzy, takie jak makijaż i operacje plastyczne. Następnie wyjaśniono pojęcie „twarzy”, nie tylko jako części ciała, ale także jako zjawiska socjologicznego w ujęciu Ervinga Goffmana oraz z perspektywy koreanistycznej według koncepcji *chemyeon*. Ponadto omówiono rolę twarzy w tworzeniu tożsamości w teorii Jacquesa Lacana oraz znaczenie braku lub utraty twarzy (*facelessness*) w ujęciu Jenny Edkins. W dalszej kolejności przedstawiono koncepcję normy Michela Foucaulta oraz jej zastosowanie w teorii feministycznej w odniesieniu do kobiecego wyglądu przez Sandrę Lee Bartky. Dodatkowo wyjaśniono kluczowe różnice kulturowe między Zachodem a Azją Wschodnią dotyczące norm wyglądu. Co więcej, w rozdziale poruszono najważniejsze zagadnienia dotyczące koncepcji piękna i brzydoty oraz ich wpływu na jednostkę: w oparciu o teorie socjologiczne piękno ujęto jako swoistą „walutę” oraz formę „kapitału estetycznego”, podkreślając uniwersalną stygmatyzację brzydoty. Kolejno omówiono także teorie spojrzenia dotyczące kobiecego ciała: pojęcia obserwującego i obserwowanego Johna

Bergera, męskiego spojrzenia Laury Mulvey, teorię uprzedmiotowienia Barbary L. Fredrickson i Tomi-Ann Roberts, *girlfriend gaze* (koleżeńskie spojrzenia) i *looking talk* (rozmów o wyglądzie) Alison Winch oraz zbliżone do nich pojęcia z kultury południowokoreańskiej.

Kolejną część pracy stanowią rozdziały analityczne poświęcone tekstom współczesnym, w których poruszono motywy piękna i kobiecej twarzy. Rozdział drugi przedstawia interpretację trzech książek dla młodzieży, *Fix* Leslie Margolis, *The Fold An Ny* oraz *Slant* Laury E. Williams. Na plan pierwszy wysuwają się tu normy wyglądu amerykańskich nastolatek rasy kaukaskiej i pochodzenia koreańsko-amerykańskiego, a także problematyka operacji plastycznych u młodych pacjentek. Omówiono tu kluczowe aspekty wpływające na samoocenę bohaterek, problemy etyczne dotyczące interwencji chirurgicznej w wygląd nastolatek, a także rolę świadomego wyboru oraz presji społecznej w procesie podejmowania decyzji o zmianie wyglądu. Z przedstawionej analizy wyłania się obraz krytyczny wobec restrykcyjnych norm urody dziewczęcej oraz stygmatyzacji cech uważanych za nieatrakcyjne. W portretach bohaterek, które ostatecznie rezygnują z odbycia operacji plastycznej, Margolis, Na oraz Williams przyjmują postawę kojarzoną z tzw. ciało-neutralnością, opartą na dążeniu do akceptacji twarzy i ciała pomimo ich niedoskonałości. Uznanie możliwości poznawczych i sensorycznych, które zapewnia cielesność jest tu ważniejsze od wyglądu fizycznego. Równocześnie autorki nie krytykują otwarcie operacji plastycznych, co może być podyktowane chęcią uniknięcia nadmiernego dydaktyzmu.

W rozdziale trzecim analizie poddano motywy standardów wyglądu kobiecej twarzy i jej (samo)oszczędzenia w dwóch powieściach – *Invisible Monsters* (pol. *Niewidzialne potwory*, 2010) Chucka Palahniuka i *Look at Me* (pol. *Spójrz na mnie*,

2003) Jennifer Egan. W części pierwszej rozdziału omówiona została koncepcja oszpecenia czy też utraty twarzy na skutek wypadku oraz konsekwencje dla psychiki bohaterek – ich funkcjonowanie w społeczeństwie, doświadczenie ontologiczne oraz konceptualizację własnej tożsamości. Tradycyjne, negatywne postrzeganie zniekształconej twarzy zostało w tym rozdziale skonstrastowane z pozytywnymi aspektami wizualnej odmienności, zgodnie z wykładnią brytyjskiej filozofki i politolożki Jenny Edkins, która analizuje twarz oszpeconą w kontekście ludzkiej różnorodności oraz walki ze stereotypami i oczekiwaniami społecznymi. Dla Edkins oszpecenie ma zatem charakter subwersywny, gdyż kwestionuje przekonania o ludzkiej indywidualności rozumianej w kategoriach spójności, linearnego rozwoju, odrębności i samowystarczalności. Jak wykazano w tym rozdziale utrata twarzy pociąga za sobą głęboką refleksję na temat kondycji ludzkiej, doświadczenia pełni, postrzegania Tożsamego i Innego.

W rozdziale tym omówiono również literacką strategię *textual staring* w odniesieniu do postaci o oszpeconym wyglądzie w kategoriach budzącego równoczesną fascynację i niepokój widowiska. W analizie obu powieści samookaleczenie twarzy przedstawiono jako akt buntu przeciwko normom wyglądu oraz uprzedmiotowieniu kobiet w społeczeństwie zachodnim, zwłaszcza w świecie mediów, do którego przynależą bohaterki wykonujące zawód modelki. Tym, co odróżnia prozę Palahniuka od powieści Egan są konsekwencje oszpecenia i utraty twarzy dla tożsamości bohaterek. W *Invisible Monsters*, jak wykazano w analizie, wizualna inność okazuje się wyzwoleniem od paradygmatu twarzy i kanonów piękna, natomiast w *Look at Me* twarz pozostaje elementem definiującym bohaterkę. Choć oboje autorów, a zwłaszcza nieszczędzący groteskowych opisów Palahniuk, poniekąd uprawiają *textual staring*, rozdział ukazuje, jak przełamują literacką konwencję dzięki

pierwszoosobowej narracji, w której na plan pierwszy wysuwają się uczucia i doświadczenia psychologiczne oszpeconych bohatererek.

Ostatni rozdział analityczny dotyczy powieści *If I Had Your Face* (pol. *Gdybym miała twoją twarz*, 2021) Frances Cha i przedstawionych w niej norm urody kobiecej w Korei Południowej. W pierwszej części rozdziału przedstawiono kryteria koreańskiego kanonu piękna oraz najważniejsze aspekty kulturowe i historyczne, które wpłynęły na to, jakie twarze Koreańczycy uważają za atrakcyjne. Przybliżono również zjawisko wyjątkowej w skali światowej popularności operacji plastycznych i zabiegów upiększających w Korei. Ponadto w rozdziale poświęcono uwagę zaczerpniętym z socjologii pojęciom *beauty work* (praca nad urodą) i *aesthetic labor* (praca pięknem). Analizę *If I Had Your Face* umiejscowiono w kontekście prozy koreańsko-amerykańskiej, ukazując, na ile powieść wpisuje się w konwencję literatury diasporycznej, a na ile poza nią wykracza. Cha w przekrojowy sposób pokazuje, jak uroda wpływa na życie młodych Koreanek. Dla części z nich piękna twarz, udoskonalona poprzez operacje plastyczne i inne zabiegi ulepszające wygląd, oferuje możliwość poprawienia trudnej sytuacji społeczno-ekonomicznej. Jak wykazano w interpretacji, nie jest to jednak rozwiązanie w pełni satysfakcjonujące, a często okupione cierpieniem i wyrzeczeniami. Co więcej, raz zdobyte piękno nie jest czymś stałym, lecz ulotnym oraz wymagającym kolejnych poprawek w dążeniu do ideału. Cha pokazuje też, że piękna twarz może być źródłem uprzedmiotowienia i trywializacji osiągnięć bohatererek. Natomiast kobiety, które nie zostały obdarzone urodą przez naturę lub nie mogą pozwolić sobie na kosztowne zabiegi, mogą być uznane za gorsze lub niewarte uwagi przez społeczeństwo. Choć Cha krytykuje koreańskie normy piękna twarzy kobiecej, podkreśla również pozytywne aspekty dbania o urodę, podobnie jak autorki wcześniej omówionych książek dla młodzieży.

Również u Cha rozmowy o wyglądzie oraz wspólne próbowanie kosmetyków są okazją do wzmacniania kobiecych przyjaźni (*female bonding*).

Choć bohaterki omówionych utworów to postaci w różnym wieku, o różnym pochodzeniu etnicznym, które mieszkają na różnych kontynentach, wszystkie teksty zawierają krytykę norm piękna twarzy. Jak wykazano w rozprawie ich autorzy pokazują negatywne skutki męskiego spojrzenia oraz uprzedmiotowienia dziewcząt i kobiet. Twarz w analizowanych dziełach literackich nie jest jedynie częścią ciała, lecz ma głębokie znaczenie estetyczne, etyczne, a nawet polityczne. Kryteria jej atrakcyjności kształtują normy, władza dyscyplinarna oraz hierarchie społeczne: płciowe, wiekowe, rasowe, klasowe oraz odnoszące się do (nie)pełnosprawności. Jak wykazuje Autorka rozprawy, we współczesnej kulturze wizualnej, twarz nadal odgrywa kluczową rolę dla tożsamości ludzkiej, postrzeganej w kategoriach indywidualności, odrębności i samowystarczalności. Przekonanie o istotności twarzy podkreślają i wzmacniają zarówno współczesne media, gdzie twarz staje się najważniejszą wizytówką jednostki, jak i rosnąca popularność zabiegów kosmetycznych i operacji plastycznych, które przedstawiane są jako sposoby samodoskonalenia i auto-ekspresji. Tym samym człowiek współczesny nie jest gotowy na utratę twarzy (*facelessness*) i odejście od indywidualistycznego postrzegania tożsamości.