

## Confronting Beauty Standards in Scott Westerfeld's 'Uglies

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### *Abstract*

*This study attempts to reveal the beauty standard concept that is confronted by the main character in Scott Westerfeld's Uglies (2005) novel. It focuses on the issue of beauty standards criteria and the way the main character confronts it. In Uglies, Westerfeld depicts two female characters that one of them praise the standard of beauty and one another confront to it. Meanwhile, Uglies novel also portrays the women as the object of beauty standard icon in practising the cosmetic surgery. In overcoming the problems in this novel, the concept of feminism from Naomi Wolf (2002) entitled "Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women" is applied with qualitative approach that presents analysis in the form of essay focuses on culture, work, hunger, and violence. The result of this study shows that beauty standard which is created by society drives the women to an excessive beauty obsession and makes them as the object to end up on the operating table. However, the main character can confront it by self-love and making decision.*

**Keywords:** *Beauty Standard, Confronting Beauty Standard, Cosmetic Surgery, Culture, Feminism, Woman.*

### **A. Introduction**

Generally, woman wants to be pretty instead of being ugly. Nevertheless, it will be a problem when women are influenced to believe in typical beauty standard that caused them to follow it. The beauty standard is set in society, influenced by the culture and created by men such as beautiful is the one whose eyes are big, skin is white and glowing, hair is black and straight, body is slim, and so on. Those criteria of beauty standard make women do not love their physical appearance.

Women who do not love their physical appearance will feel that they are not attractive because in men perception, women will be identified as the attractive creatures if they have the ideal beauty and look desirable to men. As Maresa (2017) argues that women have to make themselves to be desirable because men

always want to have pleasure with women who are attractive and have the ideal body. Thus, the stereotype of beauty images make the women think that beauty is important and it becomes an asset of pleasure because men like beautiful women. Glaveanu (2007, as cited in Tanjung and Dewi) states that the stereotype of beauty becomes similar perception for others. That stereotype is formed by men in society to control the women. Men also create the ideal beauty standards for women that recognize as social belief, it is created and controlled by the society itself.

The example of society that brings up the beauty standard is in South Korea. In that country, there is a term called “lookism.” It is a discrimination based on physical appearance. With the rise of the term of lookism, plastic surgery has grown to be a mainstream culture. “This phenomenon of *lookism* has led many individuals to pursue cosmetic surgery as a means for reaching social and professional success” (Park et al., 2019). It gives the clue that women in South Korea are forced to follow the beauty standard to be accepted well by the society. In order to be beautiful and be accepted, women in South Korea will do everything to achieve the ideal beauty. As Magnusdottir (2015), states that the ideals beauty can be achieved; with salons, cosmetics and plastic surgery. If they do not do the operation they will be classified as uglies.

Uglies and pretties are always controversial especially in work and entertainment as a celebrity. In the work place, the physical appearance is important, every enterprise has the criteria of beauty standard to hire their workers. The woman that has ideal beauty is easier to get the job and otherwise for them who are not ideal. In this case, the writer highlights a case of plastic surgery that is done by an American journalist, Julie Chen. As cited in “USA Today News,” Julie Chen revealed her story life about plastic surgery on “The Talk” in 2013 that she gets racial feedback from her boss because of her Asian eyes. Her boss says “You will never be on this anchor desk, because you’re Chinese ... your Asian eyes, when you’re on camera and you’re interviewing someone, you look disinterested, you look bored.” Thus, Chen undergoes plastic surgery to make her Asian eyes look bigger.

Meanwhile, every woman is different in responding the term of beauty standard. Some women accept it while the others refuse. The women who accept and support the beauty standard will undergo plastic surgery but the women who refuse the term of beauty standard will never undergo plastic surgery because it leads the women to the unrealistic beauty image. The beauty standard has to be confronted by the women because it causes many problems in their life, for example is dissatisfaction of body. It happens when the shape of body is beyond the expectation (Moffitt et al., 2018 as cited in Rosida and Saputri). Some women are influenced to expect the ideal body that fits to the criteria of the standard.

Therefore, this study finds the issue of beauty standard because the issue of the beauty standard rules does not just exist in real life, but it also depicted in a

novel entitled “Uglies,” written by an American author Scott Westerfeld and published in 2005. “Uglies” represents a society with extreme beauty standard that makes every one has to undergo plastic surgery at sixteen years old in order to classify as a pretty. There is a gap between ugly and pretty that leads the character named Shay who has to confront the beauty standard. That is why the novel entitle *Uglies* but the characters have to be pretties.

Hereafter, the writer is interesting to analyze the novel entitled “Uglies” because beauty standard issue that represents in the novel is one of the social issues which still becomes the major problem of human in society especially for women. The novel also gets an award as the best book for young adult that is given by American Library Association (ALA) in 2006.

Finally, the objectives of this study are to uncover the beauty standards represented and to reveal the way the the main character in confronting the beauty standard depicted in *Uglies*. In analyzing the issue about beauty standard depicted in “Uglies,” this study uses a theory from Naomi Wolf (2002) entitled “Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women” focus on culture, work, hunger and violence. This study also highlighting how the main character in “Uglies” confront the beauty standard in the daily life by making decision and self- love. The theory that is used in this study has the relation to the issue of beauty standard that depicted in “Uglies” novel.

There have been some studies that are related to beauty standard issue which is used to support this study. The first study is a thesis which has been conducted by Havlikova (2011), it is from Masaryk University. The thesis entitled “The Beauty Standards in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes*.” The aims of her study are focus to investigate how African-American women and also men have been influenced by the white standard beauty, to analyze the devastating impact that the white standards have had on them. In conducting the thesis, Havlikova used the beauty myth theory from Naomi Wolf (2002) entitled “The Beauty Myth” with subtitled “How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women.” The qualitative method has been used in her study. Finally, the result of her study indicates that the white standard beauty has the devastating impact of African-American women. Its impact is shown by the efforts of the main character such as drinking milk everyday in order to get the white skin as a symbol of beauty.

The second previous study is a journal written by Vela and Meyrasyawati (2016), it is from a Journal of Allusion Volume 05 Number 01 entitled “The Portrayal of Beauty Myth in *Me Vs. High Heels* Film by PingkanUtari.” The aims of their study are focus to examine how the beauty myth is portrayed in the film, to describe how the beauty myth influences the main character of the film. In writing the journal, a theory from Naomi Wolf (2002) about beauty myth has been used by Vela and Meyrasyawati. In their study, they used qualitative method in analyzing the data. The result of their study indicates how the term of *beauty* is

define as a good appearance and good behaviour to women. As the impact, the main character is influenced by the beauty standard and she changes her appearance in order to reach a beauty which is recognized to the standard of beauty itself.

The third study is a journal which has been conducted by Fitria (2020), it is taken from the journal of “Seminar Nasional Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia Unpam.” It is entitled “Konstruksi Standar Kecantikan Dalam Cerpen Fenghuang Karya Wendoko.” The aims of her study are focus on revealing the social construction of beauty standard that is represented in “Fenghuang” short story and revealing how the beauty standard puts the woman as object. In conducting the study about “Konstruksi Standar Kecantikan Dalam Cerpen Fenghuang Karya Wendoko,” Fitria used Naomi Wolf theory and qualitative method to analyze the data. For the result, the study indicates woman empowerless as a victim in constructing the beauty standard that is set by society. The impact is depicted by an inferiority of women celebration to the beauty standard. They are made to be imaginative and illogical.

To sum up, all the related studies have the similarities and the differences with this study. Similarly, the studies analyze about the beauty standard issue using Naomi Wolf theory and using qualitative method. Meanwhile, the object of the study is different. This study uses Scott Westerfeld’s “Uglies” novel as an object.

This study used Naomi Wolf (2002) theory. In her book entitled “Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women,” Wolf (2002) introduced the term of beauty myth and she mentions six things that make women being oppressed and burdened: work, culture, religion, sex, hunger and violence. Meanwhile, this study is focus on culture, violence, hunger and work.

**Culture** creates women’s stereotypes to agree with the myth such as an ideal imagery and it becomes obsessively important to women. “... it is flattening the feminine into beauty- without-intelligence or intelligence- without-beauty ...” (Wolf, 2002). Thus in men perception, women are allowed to have ideal body; to be beautiful or have a mind; to be intelligence but not having both. The ideal image of women also portrays on magazine, women become models or advertisers in selling the beauty product and also the “beauty” itself.

**Violence** related to the trend of plastic surgery which appears since women feel anxiety of their physical appearance because of the beauty standard that is created by male and society. There are a lot of women that do not love their physical body appearance, they worry to look ugly and can not be accepted by society in high standard of beauty. The high level of standard beauty leads women to undergo an operation called plastic surgery. According to Wolf (2002), there are about 80 up to 90 percent of women undergo the operation of stomach and intestinal organ in order to follow the beauty standard. That

condition is so concerned because women dare to take the risk in doing the operation to reconstruct their body and every woman can be the object of operation as Wolf (2002), states that “all women are operable.” It indicates that the practice and the term plastic surgery is created for a woman body.

**Hunger** can not be separated from the standard of beauty called an ideal beauty. It drives women into a hunger even the diseases called anorexia and bulimia nervosa, “from 90 to 95 percent of anorexics and bulimics are women” (Wolf, 2002). It shows that women especially teenagers do an extreme diet for an ideal body image. They adore slim body like a Barbie doll without thinking the impact of the extreme diet itself, an anorexics will be dead easy. Beauty myth makes women torture themselves, women have to suffer to be beautiful.

**Work** is inseparable from the requirement of beauty standard. In work, beauty is defined as a symbolic form of currency. “Her face is her fortune” (Wolf, 2002). It indicates that women get the job because of their appearance. The women with more beautiful face will be paid higher than the women who are not beautiful. Most of companies around the world apply the Professional Beauty Qualification (PBQ) as a requirement in hiring female workers. Wolf (2002) states that PBQ is something demanded for someone (especially woman) to do the job. Women have to qualify the PBQ to get the job while men do not, it shows a discrimination in work place between men and women. According to Wolf (2002), beauty standard is descended from the perception in believing beauty myth. That perception becomes a doctrine in women’s life since they are children. However, the term of beauty standard does not always have to be followed by the women because it violates the women’s rights. Thus, the standard of beauty has to be confronted by the women.

Wolf (2002), states that the definition of pleasing beauty for women can replace the despair with playing and replace narcissism with self-love. It can be concluded that women can confront the standard of beauty by learning self acceptance such as self-love in order to be free from a control that is done by the culture. Wolf (2002) also says that women have to seek for happiness and avoid the pain, drink and eat whatever they want. It clearly indicates that women have to make a decision because they have the choice to determine their life without the intervention of other people. Including the rules of beauty standard.

## **B.Method**

This study used qualitative approach method. It used qualitative method because the data are taken and written in the form of sentences and paragraph of essay, not in a numerical form. Qualitative Research is a research that is conducted by doing an exploratory research. It is the research that based on phenomenon that happens in society. Shank (2002), mentions that “qualitative research is a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning.” The word *systematic* means planned, ordered and also public. It follows the rules that are agreed by members of the

qualitative research community. Then, *empirical* means that this type of research is grounded in an experience.

Meanwhile, in conducting this study the writer did some steps to collect the data. First, the writer read the novel several times to get more understanding toward the whole story of the novel. Second, the writer indentified the sentences including the essential passage that related to beauty standard and the passage about confronting the beauty standard based on “Beauty Myth” theory by Naomi Wolf (2002). Third, the writer marked the essential passages and typed them in a note as the data that would be used in analyzing the issue of beauty standard. The last, the writer took every essential passage from the data to analyze it based on the theory that was used in this study.

### **C. Findings and Discussion**

#### **Representation of Beauty Standard in Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* Novel**

Beauty standard is a branch of beauty myth that partially people are believed. According to Wolf (2002), beauty standard has attacked several aspect of human life such as in work, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence. Those aspects especially culture, violence, hunger, and work become a critical issue as portrayed in Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* novel.

#### **Culture**

The beauty standards which exist in culture make the main character and other women think that beautiful is defined as purity and healthy which can be attractive to the men. It is represented in the quotation below:

“The big eyes and lips said: I’m young and vulnerable, I can’t hurt you, and you want to protect me. And the rest said: I’m healty, I won’t make you sick. And no matter how you felt about a pretty, there was a part of you that thought: If we had kids, they’d be healthy too. I want this pretty person.” (Westerfeld, 2005, p.16 – 17).

The quotation implies that the men think the women personality and health are based on the beauty standard criteria. The words “I’m young and vulnerable” that are said by the big eyes mean that beautiful is always young and a young woman always has the big eyes. The old one will have small droopy eyes. The words “I can’t hurt you” are defined as feminine women, they are attractive and friendly, they do not have the intensity to hurt the men because they are weak and weaken by the beauty standard itself. Another thought about pretty women is they are healthy. It can be seen by their appearance. For example, a man will choose a pretty woman to be married. It happens because he thinks that a pretty woman is healthy and she can give him some beautiful and healthy children. Otherwise, he

thinks that ugly woman is not healthy and she will give him the ugly children too. Thus, that condition is forced the women to practice the beauty standard culture.

### Violence

Women hurt themselves to be pretty. Hunger and surgery hurt women's bodies. It happens because women are set to believe that they are ugly by patriarchal culture. Women who believe they are ugly will follow the rules of beauty standard in order to be accepted in the culture, though it drives the violence to dominate their bodies by doing that cosmetic surgery. In *Uglies*, everyone at sixteen has to undergo cosmetic surgery to be classified as pretty and accepted in Pretty Town. The violence in the rules of beauty standard is illustrated in the following quotation:

“The doctors used much sharper and bigger knives in the operation. They rubbed you raw, and you grew all new skin, perfect and clear. The old marks of accidents and bad food and childhood illnesses all washed away.”  
(Westerfeld, 2005, p.25)

The quotation above indicates that the operation is horrible and it hurts woman body. It can be proved by the words *sharper and bigger knives* because a big sharp knife is always connected with something painful and threatening. Nevertheless, many women keep doing the cosmetic surgery because it is the only way to make them pretty. They have to be pretty instead of being ugly. The patriarchal culture have influenced the women to believe that ugly is a disease and it needs to “be cured” by the operation. The dark skin tone and the marks of the skin are the disease that have to be vanished, it is proved by the words *old marks of accidents... childhood illnesses all washed away*. Consequently, the women are lying on a crude operating table for skin grafting. That kind of process will turn dark brown into fair skin tone and remove the scars on skin.

### Hunger

The ideal beauty drives women into a hunger even the diseases called anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Women especially teenagers do an extreme diet for an ideal body image like a model on television or magazine. The beauty standards in *Uglies* make the characters have to be thin like a Barbie doll if they live in Pretty Town. Thus, they are rather to do extreme dieting instead of being fat and called as ugly. It is illustrated in the quotation below:

“Tally remembered, a lot of people, especially young girls, became so ashamed at being fat that they stopped eating. They'd lose weight too quickly, and some would get stuck and would keep losing weight until they wound up like “this model.” Some even died, they said at school.”  
(Westerfeld, 2005, p.199)

The quotation above indicates that young women usually admire the body

shape like a model. The words *they'd lose weight too quickly* indicate that young girls do a wrong diet which makes the body lose weight quickly because they are stop eating. They are still innocent so that they will easily do something without thinking any risk. The words ... *keep losing weight* ... portray the sign of anorexia which makes the body to be unreasonably skinny. The words ... *until they wound up like this model* ... represent that the women do not care about their health, all they want is being thin like the model on magazine. Therefore, they suffer from anorexia which will cause the death.

## **Work**

Normally, everyone needs to get a job in order to fill up the daily needs. Woman and man will apply a job vacancy but there are some standards and criteria of beauty requirement for company to hire a new worker, especially for women because in beauty myth a woman looks like a million dollars asset and her face is her fortune. It shows that woman needs to be good looking, in other words woman has to follow the beauty standard to get a job as illustrated in the quotation below:

“Everyone judge everyone else based on their appearance. People who were taller got better job, and people even voted for some politicians just because they weren't quite as ugly as everybody else. Blah, blah, blah.” (Westerfeld, 2005, p.44)

The quotation above indicates that beauty standard is relevant to the work place. It can be proved by the word *appearance* that strengthens the term of beauty standards in workplace which called PBQ (Professional Beauty Qualification). The qualifications of beauty standard in woman appearance such as skin tone, the size of the eyes, the shape of the nose, and the shape of the body including the weight and body height. The words *people who were taller got better job* show that a woman who is taller is always easier to get a job than a woman who is not tall because a taller woman leads an opinion that she can work better. Thus, when a woman apply for a job, appearance be the first thing which is judged and considered by the company. The appearance is not only judged in the company, it also judged in politics. Sometimes, the people vote someone for a politician not because of her ability which makes her deserves it, but it because of her beauty. The beauty that blinds their eyes to see the justice.

## **Confronting Beauty Standards by The Main Character in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies***

Generally, every woman is different in responding to the term of beauty standard. Some women accept it while the others refuse. The women who refuse the term of beauty standards will never want to undergo plastic surgery though it is the only way to be pretty as portrays in *Uglies*. The character of Shay confronts beauty standard by making decision and self-love.



### Confronting Beauty Standards by Making Decision

Every woman basically has the right to make choices so that she is not bound by the patriarchy cultural rules that control them. For example, women are controlled by culture with the criteria of beauty standards that grow in that society. However, women can confront the standards of beauty based on their choices in life as represents on the following quotation:

“Shay sat up straight, her smile gone. “I wouldn’t do that, anyway.”  
Tally blinked. “I didn’t say you would, but...”  
“But What?” ... “But when you turn, you go over to New Pretty Town.  
... Pretties are allowed to come back over here. But they don’t.”  
“I would” (Westerfeld, 2005, p.37 – 38).

The quotation above portrays Shay as a woman who decide not to do plastic surgery. The words *I wouldn’t do that, anyway* indicate a rejection to undergo plastic surgery as a requirement to be pretty. The words *but when you turn, you go over to New Pretty Town* represent as a persuasion so that she will undergo the surgery. No matter how strong the persuasion, women who are not deceived by beauty will still reject it. The words *I would* indicate that the character does not care if she is ugly because a woman should not be affraid to go everywhere. The rejection which is shown by Shay indicates that a strong woman does not need to glorify the beauty, it has no effect on her life.

### Confronting Beauty Standard By Self- Love

Self-love is an important aspect of mental health. Women can apply it in confronting beauty standard. As it is well known that the standards of beauty often make several women feel stressed and insecure. Feeling stressed and insecure can be handled by self-love is represented in the quotation below:

“So, Shay, which do you think is your good side?” “Why do I have to be symmetrical? I’d rather have a face with two different sides.”  
Tally groaned. “That’s a sign of childhood stress. No one wants to look at that.” “Gee, I wouldn’t want to look stressed,”  
Shay snorted, and pointed at the wilder-looking face. (Westerfeld, 2005, p.42)

The quotation above implies that the character refuses the standard of beauty by self-love. It can be proved by the words “Why do I have to be symmetrical?” which imply that she has no problem with her asymmetrical face. It makes a woman looks unique. The words “That’s a sign of childhood stress” describe for women who refuse the beauty standard, the culture will say that the women is stressed if they do not want to be pretty, but otherwise, to be pretty based on the standard will make women really stressed. It is proved by the sentence “Gee, I wouldn’t want to look stressed,” which can be identified that stressed is caused by thinking beauty standard is everything. Thus, women will

not feel stressed if they love their body and do not think to focus in making themselves pretty based on the standard of beauty.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Based on the findings and the data analysis, *Uglies* novel by Scott Westerfeld reveals the standards of beauty that focus on the appearance which is described with big eyes, slim body, straight hair, symmetrical face and flawless skin. Westerfeld portrays Tally character as the woman that has influenced and victimized by the beauty standard celebration. It is shown by her desire to be pretty. The reason the character has the desire to be pretty because the society creates the certain beauty criteria that every woman must follows. It is often represented in culture, violence, hunger and work. In culture, it is created a stereotype of ideal beauty that is supported by patriarchal system to control the women using the beauty. Violence often portrays the women as the object of a painful plastic surgery. Hunger represents a woman that is being obsessed by losing weight quickly to become thinner. Finally, Work place always apply the beauty standard as a requirement to hire the women as their employers. Meanwhile, Westerfeld depicts a character Shay as a woman who confronts the beauty standard. The character can confront it by self-love and making decision. Confronting beauty standard by self-love is shown through the character in changing her negative belief about self- image. The character manages to convince herself that the woman is beautiful by her own standards, not by anyone else's. Furthermore, confronting beauty standard by making decision is indicated with the character who states that every woman, including herself has the right to choose her path in life, without anyone having to regulate it. Therefore the character chooses not to have plastic surgery and chooses not to live in the Pretty Town.

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