

# DECOLONIZING MAGHREBIAN BEAUTY STANDARDS

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When I visit Algeria every other year, I can't help but notice a fixation on American beauty standards—everything from hair straightening and bleaching treatments to colored contact lenses and nose jobs. Of course, it would be incorrect to say that there is one distinctive North African appearance; the region has long encompassed a variety of facial features and hair types. But it certainly seemed like features that are common among North African women—curly hair, dark-colored eyes, thick lips, aquiline noses, and darker skin tones—were not the prevailing beauty standard.

I learned that my experience reflects a larger trend in the past several decades; in conjunction with one another, European colonization and increasing globalization have effectively “whitewashed” North African beauty standards, pressuring girls in the region to invest their time, money, and psychological well-being to adopt these unrealistic norms.

Colonization marked the first major exposure to Western beauty standards in North Africa. As England, France, Italy, and Spain began their colonial endeavors from Morocco to Egypt during the 18th and 19th centuries, they perpetrated a barbaric characterization of North Africans to justify their occupation. This was captured in colonial-era art of Maghrebians—women from North Africa—by European artists; infamous paintings like *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* by Eugène Delacroix and postcard photographs like *Mauresque d'Alger* were staged to portray Algeri-

an women as dirty, hypersexual, and “uncivilized” people.<sup>1,2</sup>

These works of art, publicized by French authorities, contributed to the degradation of ethnic North African features. Other pieces, like Henri Matisse's Moroccan-inspired *Reclining Odalisque*, depicted European women in luxury Maghrebian attire.<sup>3</sup> This cultural appropriation conveyed that North African traits were only appealing when paired with a white woman's features, a message reinforced by the emphasis on European culture in colonial schooling.<sup>4</sup>

With technology and globalization accelerating hand-in-hand, these Eurocentric beauty standards have become more prevalent. Social media, online magazines, and television have made it easier for beauty contests, celebrity trends, and advertisements to pressure many North African women into changing their own conceptualizations of beauty. For example, in the highly-televised Miss Egypt, a beauty pageant held in 2019, of the 24 finalists, only eight had curly hair and even fewer had dark skin tones, despite how common these traits are in the country.<sup>5</sup>

In the same year, Khadija Ben Hamou received harsh backlash on Twitter and Facebook for her dark skin color after being crowned Miss Algeria.<sup>6</sup> Pop stars like Moroccan-Egyptian singer Samira Said and Tunisian influencer Manel Amara serve as role models of whitewashed beauty standards with straight, light hair and Eurocentric noses. And given that the cosmetic skin care market in

the MENA is predicted to more than double by 2024 from 2015 levels, that leaves room for plenty more advertisements that disproportionately represent lighter skin tones and other European features.<sup>7</sup>

These beauty standards run the risk of causing serious psychological harm for many North African women. One concerning World Bank study from 2015 found that depression is the leading cause of illness for women in the MENA region; the pressure to adopt Eurocentric features can understandably cause feelings of insecurity that could contribute to this disparity.<sup>8</sup> It is also important to recognize that these beauty standards are not exclusive to North Africa. Even in North African communities throughout Europe and North America, some women experience pressure to adopt Eurocentric features from their families or communities, which is often reinforced by a lack of representation in Western media. Consider, for example, a 2017 U.S. study which found that only one percent of series regulars on television are of MENA descent.<sup>9</sup>

Although body positivity movements are gaining prevalence worldwide, North African women are often left out of the discussion, underscoring the need for more inclusive activism. Thankfully, however, social media and entrepreneurs have been combating the disproportionate representation of Eurocentric beauty standards. In 2015, Palestinian-American student Sara Mahmoud launched the trending #TheHabibatiTag challenge on Twitter, in which women of MENA descent posted selfies to combat their lack of representation in pop culture.<sup>10</sup> AZEEMA, founded in 2017 by Sudanese-British creative Jameela Elfaki, empowers women in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia through a popular print magazine. Similarly, in 2018, young fashion models Imran and Yusra Eldeeb founded Egypt's first modeling agency, UNN Model Management, which has the goal of “decolonising beauty standards” in the Arab fashion industry.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, similar to



the Natural Hair Movement for Black American women in the U.S. during the 1960s, some North African women have opted to wear their natural, curly hair as an act of resistance.<sup>12</sup>

As someone who shares many of these traditional features, it is my hope that Western beauty norms are deconstructed and natural beauty is celebrated throughout North Africa and the world. Of course, not all North Africans experience societal pressure, but there should be a more concerted effort to center North Africans in studies, discussions, and activism related to beauty standards. Hollow articles that co-opt traditional North African beauty techniques like kohl and argan oil are not enough; we must do more to celebrate the natural beauty that characterizes this region.