



Beauty as a Mechanism of Social Control in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties*

Mrs. S. Dharani

Research Scholar (Part Time),
Chikkaiah Government Arts and Science College, Erode
& Assistant Professor, M.G.R.College, Hosur

Abstract

Beauty has long functioned as a cultural ideal, shaping perceptions of identity, social status, and personal value. Contemporary young adult dystopian fiction frequently employs speculative societies to interrogate the social, political, and cultural anxieties of the present. Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005) and *Pretties* (2005) exemplify this tendency by depicting a future in which physical beauty is transformed into an instrument of political governance. Although existing scholarship has largely examined the novels through the lenses of adolescent identity, body image, and technological intervention, relatively little attention has been devoted to the intersection of beauty, surveillance, ideological conditioning, and disciplinary power. The present study investigates how beauty functions as a political technology that regulates bodies, shapes identities, and legitimizes social conformity. The paper draws upon Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power alongside Naomi Wolf's concept of the beauty myth, Susan Bordo's analysis of bodily discipline, and Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumer society. The study argues that compulsory cosmetic surgery in Westerfeld's dystopian world extends beyond aesthetic transformation to become a sophisticated mechanism of ideological control. Through the experiences of Tally Youngblood, the novels reveal how surveillance, consumer culture, and neurological modification operate collectively to suppress critical consciousness while presenting obedience as freedom. Ultimately, *Uglies* and *Pretties* offer a compelling critique of contemporary beauty culture, media influence, and the commodification of identity, highlighting the continuing relevance of dystopian fiction in understanding modern practices of social regulation.

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Introduction

Dystopian literature has long served as a powerful literary mode through which writers interrogate the political and cultural realities of their own historical moments. Rather than imagining distant futures merely for speculative entertainment, dystopian narratives expose the hidden structures of power that shape everyday life. They magnify existing social tendencies-political authoritarianism, technological dependence, consumer capitalism, and ideological manipulation-to reveal the consequences of allowing these forces to remain unquestioned. Consequently, dystopian fiction functions not only as a critique of oppressive governance but also as a reflection on the subtle mechanisms through which societies normalize obedience and restrict individual autonomy.

Within contemporary dystopian literature, Young Adult (YA) fiction has emerged as a particularly significant genre because it situates these political concerns within the experiences of adolescents negotiating identity, belonging, and selfhood. Unlike earlier dystopian traditions that primarily focused on overt state violence, contemporary YA dystopias frequently examine how systems of domination operate through cultural institutions, social expectations, and everyday practices. Questions concerning physical appearance, gender identity, media consumption, and technological surveillance therefore become central to understanding how power shapes individual consciousness. These narratives invite readers to recognise that political control often begins with the regulation of the body rather than the restriction of physical freedom alone.

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005) and *Pretties* (2005) occupy a distinctive position within this literary tradition. Set in a technologically advanced future society, the novels imagine a civilisation in which compulsory cosmetic surgery is presented as the foundation of equality and social harmony. Every adolescent is required to undergo an extensive surgical transformation upon reaching the age of sixteen, after which they enter a carefully regulated community of "Pretties." At first glance, this social system appears to eliminate discrimination by ensuring that everyone conforms to identical standards of physical attractiveness. However, Westerfeld gradually reveals that beneath this promise of perfection lies a sophisticated political apparatus designed to produce conformity, suppress critical thinking, and eliminate resistance.

Rather than treating beauty as an individual preference or aesthetic value, the novels redefine it as an ideological institution through which the state governs both bodies and minds. Cosmetic transformation functions not merely as a physical alteration but as a comprehensive strategy of social engineering that restructures memory, behaviour, and desire. Citizens willingly participate in this process because they have internalised the belief that beauty represents happiness, acceptance, and personal fulfilment. In this respect, Westerfeld's dystopian world reflects broader contemporary concerns regarding media-generated beauty standards, cosmetic enhancement, algorithmic visibility, and the increasing commodification of personal identity in digital culture.

Beauty, Power, and the Politics of the Body

Across cultures and historical periods, beauty has rarely existed as a neutral aesthetic category. Standards of physical attractiveness are shaped by social institutions, cultural ideologies, and political interests that determine which bodies are celebrated, disciplined, or marginalised. Feminist scholars have



repeatedly argued that beauty operates as a cultural language through which societies regulate behaviour, reinforce gender norms, and maintain existing power structures. Consequently, beauty should be understood not merely as an individual characteristic but as a socially constructed discourse that influences identity, self-perception, and social participation.

Westerfeld extends this critique by imagining a society in which beauty becomes the principal instrument of governance. Citizens are not controlled through visible coercion alone; rather, they willingly embrace the procedures that limit their freedom because those procedures are presented as opportunities for self-improvement. This inversion of political authority is one of the novels' most striking achievements. Oppression is disguised as privilege, conformity appears as liberation, and surveillance is experienced as social acceptance. Such a system illustrates how power becomes most effective when it operates through desire rather than force.

The novels therefore invite readers to reconsider conventional assumptions about physical perfection. Instead of depicting beauty as a source of empowerment, Westerfeld reveals its potential to function as a mechanism of ideological discipline. Bodies become political sites where authority is exercised, identities are reconstructed, and individuality is systematically erased. Through this perspective, *Uglies* and *Pretties* participate in broader debates concerning body politics, biopower, and the cultural production of identity in late modern societies.

Beauty as State Ideology: Constructing the Perfect Citizen

The most striking feature of Westerfeld's dystopian society is that beauty is institutionalized as a political ideology rather than an individual preference. Every citizen is taught from childhood that becoming "Pretty" is both a privilege and a moral obligation. The operation is presented as a benevolent social reform intended to eliminate discrimination, violence, and inequality by ensuring that everyone possesses an identical standard of physical attractiveness. Consequently, beauty becomes synonymous with citizenship itself. Acceptance into society depends not upon personal character or intellectual ability but upon conformity to government-approved physical norms.

Unlike traditional authoritarian regimes that rely on explicit coercion, Westerfeld's government exercises power by manufacturing desire. Citizens willingly anticipate the operation because they have internalized the belief that natural bodies are incomplete, unattractive, and socially undesirable. This process reflects Foucault's (1977) argument that modern power functions most effectively when individuals regulate themselves according to institutional expectations. The government rarely forces citizens to undergo surgery because they have already accepted beauty as an unquestionable social necessity.

The ideological nature of beauty becomes evident through the language employed throughout *Uglies*. Individuals awaiting surgery are consistently identified as "Uglies," while those who complete the procedure become "Pretties." These labels function not merely as descriptive categories but as ideological constructs that shape identity long before physical transformation occurs. By repeatedly describing natural bodies as "ugly," the government establishes a binary opposition in which only one form of existence appears socially acceptable.



Language therefore becomes an instrument of political authority. Citizens gradually internalize these classifications until they evaluate themselves through official definitions rather than personal experience. Tally initially demonstrates this conditioning when she dreams of becoming Pretty and considers the operation the most significant event of her life. Her desire illustrates how ideology functions by persuading individuals that institutional expectations correspond with their own aspirations.

This ideological construction of beauty closely parallels Naomi Wolf's (1991) observation that beauty standards frequently appear natural despite being culturally produced. In Westerfeld's novels, physical perfection is presented as objective truth rather than political invention. Citizens never question why specific facial structures or bodily proportions are considered beautiful because the state monopolizes the authority to define attractiveness. The absence of alternative standards ensures ideological stability. Furthermore, the government's rhetoric transforms beauty into a promise of equality. Officials repeatedly argue that universal attractiveness eliminates prejudice because everyone looks equally beautiful. On the surface, this claim appears progressive. However, Westerfeld reveals a profound contradiction: equality is achieved only by eliminating individuality. Diversity becomes synonymous with disorder, while uniformity is celebrated as social harmony.

This contradiction exposes one of the central paradoxes of totalitarian ideology. Political authority often justifies restrictions upon personal freedom by claiming to promote collective welfare. In *Uglies*, cosmetic surgery symbolizes this paradox because citizens voluntarily surrender bodily autonomy in exchange for social acceptance. The government therefore succeeds not by suppressing desire but by redirecting it toward institutional objectives. Beauty consequently functions as a political language through which obedience becomes pleasurable. Rather than fearing punishment, citizens fear exclusion from Pretty society. Social acceptance becomes conditional upon conformity, making resistance appear irrational and self-destructive. Westerfeld thus demonstrates that modern systems of domination frequently operate through aspiration rather than intimidation.

Cosmetic Surgery as Bodily Discipline

Compulsory cosmetic surgery represents the most visible expression of governmental power in *Uglies* and *Pretties*. While the procedure appears to be a medical intervention designed to improve physical appearance, it ultimately serves as an instrument for regulating bodies and producing obedient citizens. Westerfeld deliberately shifts cosmetic surgery from the realm of personal choice to that of political obligation, illustrating how the human body becomes a site of institutional control. Foucault's concept of the "docile body" provides an important framework for understanding this transformation. According to Foucault (1977), disciplinary institutions reshape the body to make it more useful, predictable, and compliant. In Westerfeld's society, surgery performs precisely this function. Citizens emerge with nearly identical facial features, body proportions, and physical abilities, symbolizing the state's successful elimination of visible difference. Individual identity becomes secondary to standardized perfection.

However, bodily discipline in the novels extends beyond external appearance. The operation secretly includes neurological lesions that reduce intellectual independence and emotional complexity. This revelation fundamentally changes the reader's understanding of beauty. Physical perfection is inseparable from cognitive regulation. The government does not merely create attractive citizens; it manufactures compliant minds. The dual transformation of body and consciousness reflects Susan Bordo's (1993)



argument that cultural power is exercised through the regulation of physical appearance. In Westerfeld's dystopia, the body becomes a political document upon which state ideology is permanently inscribed. Every reconstructed face symbolizes governmental authority, while every standardized body reinforces the illusion that conformity produces happiness.

Tally's experience after becoming Pretty illustrates this process. Although she initially enjoys the privileges associated with beauty, she gradually notices a decline in her ability to think critically and remember important experiences. Moments of intellectual clarity—described as becoming "bubbly"—interrupt her conditioned complacency and reveal the artificial nature of her happiness. Westerfeld thereby emphasizes that bodily transformation cannot completely erase human agency, suggesting that resistance remains possible even within highly disciplined societies. Moreover, cosmetic surgery functions as a ritual of political initiation. Upon completing the operation, citizens are welcomed into a new social identity characterized by luxury, entertainment, and privilege. This transition resembles an initiation ceremony through which individuals abandon their previous selves in exchange for institutional recognition. The operation therefore marks not simply biological change but ideological rebirth.

By transforming cosmetic enhancement into a compulsory civic duty, Westerfeld critiques contemporary societies in which beauty increasingly becomes associated with personal success, employability, and social acceptance. Although modern cosmetic procedures are generally voluntary, the novels invite readers to question the extent to which cultural expectations shape seemingly individual choices. The distinction between voluntary conformity and institutional coercion becomes increasingly blurred when social acceptance depends upon adherence to dominant beauty standards.

Tally Youngblood's Resistance and the Reconstruction of Identity

Despite the extensive mechanisms of surveillance, bodily discipline, and consumer manipulation, Westerfeld does not present power as absolute. The character of Tally Youngblood demonstrates that resistance remains possible even within highly regulated societies. Her gradual transformation from an obedient citizen into a critical thinker constitutes the moral and political centre of both novels. Rather than portraying rebellion as a sudden act of heroism, Westerfeld depicts resistance as an intellectual process that begins with doubt and develops through self-reflection. At the beginning of *Uglies*, Tally fully accepts the values of her society. She eagerly anticipates becoming Pretty, believing that cosmetic surgery represents the natural progression toward adulthood and happiness. Her worldview reflects the success of ideological conditioning. Like other *Uglies*, she equates beauty with acceptance and perceives conformity as desirable rather than oppressive.

Her friendship with Shay introduces an alternative understanding of identity. Shay rejects compulsory surgery and escapes to the Smoke, a community that values natural bodies, individual choice, and personal responsibility. Through Shay and later David, Tally encounters a social order founded upon diversity rather than uniformity. These relationships challenge the assumptions she has internalized since childhood and encourage her to recognize the political purposes underlying institutional beauty. Tally's internal conflict becomes particularly significant after she undergoes the Pretty operation. Although neurological lesions initially reduce her capacity for critical thought, moments of mental clarity repeatedly interrupt her conditioned consciousness. These "bubbly" experiences symbolize the persistence of authentic



identity beneath ideological manipulation. Westerfeld suggests that genuine human agency cannot be completely eradicated because the desire for truth continues to emerge despite institutional conditioning.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Tally's resistance illustrates that where power exists, possibilities for resistance also remain. Foucault argues that power is never entirely one-sided; every system of domination generates opportunities for contestation. Tally's growing awareness enables her to reinterpret beauty not as an unquestionable ideal but as a political construct designed to sustain governmental authority. This shift represents a transformation in consciousness rather than merely a change in behaviour. Her journey also reflects contemporary debates concerning body autonomy and self-definition. Westerfeld ultimately argues that identity cannot be reduced to physical appearance. Authentic humanity depends upon the capacity for independent thought, ethical decision-making, and meaningful relationships rather than externally imposed standards of perfection.

Beauty, when detached from freedom and individuality, becomes an instrument of domination rather than self-expression. Through Tally's development, Westerfeld offers a cautiously optimistic vision of resistance. The novels acknowledge the immense power of ideological institutions while affirming the possibility of reclaiming agency through critical reflection, solidarity, and the willingness to question accepted truths. Tally's refusal to accept official definitions of beauty transforms her from a passive recipient of ideology into an active participant in redefining the meaning of human identity.

Theme	Evidence from the Novels	Function of Social Control
Beauty Standardization	Mandatory Pretty operation	Eliminates individuality
Cosmetic Surgery	Physical transformation and brain lesions	Produces obedient citizens
Surveillance	Social monitoring and institutional regulation	Encourages self-discipline
Consumer Culture	Parties, fashion, popularity	Distracts from political awareness
Identity	Tally's transformation	Demonstrates conflict between conformity and autonomy
Resistance	The Smoke and Tally's awakening	Challenges ideological control

The findings of this study demonstrate that Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties* conceptualize beauty as a sophisticated political technology rather than a superficial aesthetic ideal. Unlike conventional dystopian narratives that foreground coercion through violence, Westerfeld imagines a society in which domination is achieved through consent, desire, and internalized discipline. Citizens willingly embrace bodily transformation because beauty has been institutionalized as the foundation of social acceptance, equality, and happiness. Consequently, the state's authority is sustained not by overt repression but by the normalization of conformity.

This interpretation supports Michel Foucault's (1977) argument that modern power operates by producing "docile bodies." In Westerfeld's dystopian society, the compulsory cosmetic operation disciplines



both the body and the mind. Citizens internalize state-approved standards of beauty and subsequently regulate their own behaviour without requiring constant external surveillance. The operation, therefore, functions not merely as a medical procedure but as a disciplinary practice that reshapes identity, desire, and social relationships. By transforming beauty into an institutional norm, the government ensures that individuals willingly participate in their own subjugation.

The analysis also extends Naomi Wolf's (1991) argument concerning the "beauty myth." Wolf contends that beauty standards are culturally constructed mechanisms that regulate behaviour by encouraging individuals to seek validation through physical appearance. Westerfeld amplifies this idea by depicting a society in which beauty is no longer an unattainable ideal but a compulsory civic obligation. While every citizen ultimately achieves physical perfection, inequality persists through new forms of social distinction based on popularity, lifestyle, and conformity. The novels therefore suggest that standardizing beauty does not eliminate hierarchy; rather, it reconstructs hierarchy through different ideological mechanisms.

Susan Bordo's (1993) discussion of the disciplined body is equally relevant. Bordo argues that the body functions as a site where cultural values are inscribed and reproduced. In *Uglies* and *Pretties*, the body becomes the primary location through which governmental authority is exercised. Cosmetic surgery transforms natural bodies into symbols of political compliance, while neurological lesions ensure that external transformation is accompanied by psychological conformity. Westerfeld thus demonstrates that bodily regulation extends beyond appearance to include cognition, memory, and emotional experience.

The findings further resonate with Jean Baudrillard's (1998) theory of consumer society. In *Pretties*, citizens devote their lives to entertainment, fashion, luxury, and social prestige. Consumption becomes an ideological distraction that diverts attention away from political structures. Instead of questioning authority, individuals compete for popularity, status, and visibility. Beauty itself becomes a commodity through which citizens express social belonging. Westerfeld therefore critiques a culture in which identity is increasingly defined by appearance, consumption, and public recognition rather than intellectual autonomy or ethical responsibility.

A notable contribution of this study lies in its examination of beauty as an interconnected system of surveillance, discipline, consumerism, and identity formation. Previous scholarship has often focused on body image or adolescent identity in *Uglies*, but comparatively fewer studies have analyzed beauty as a comprehensive mechanism that simultaneously regulates bodies, consciousness, and social institutions across both *Uglies* and *Pretties*. By integrating Foucauldian theory with beauty studies, this paper demonstrates that beauty in Westerfeld's dystopia functions as a political discourse that shapes not only individual behaviour but also collective social organization.

The relevance of Westerfeld's critique extends beyond fictional dystopia. Contemporary societies increasingly normalize cosmetic enhancement, algorithm-driven beauty filters, influencer culture, and digitally mediated self-presentation. Although cosmetic surgery remains voluntary in most societies, social media platforms, advertising industries, and celebrity culture continuously reinforce idealized standards of appearance. Individuals often modify photographs, monitor online approval through likes and followers, and compare themselves with digitally constructed images of perfection. Westerfeld's fictional world



exaggerates these tendencies, enabling readers to recognize the subtle ways in which beauty, technology, and consumerism continue to influence identity formation.

The character of Tally Youngblood reinforces the possibility of resistance within systems of ideological control. Her gradual awareness of the relationship between beauty and political domination illustrates that critical consciousness emerges through questioning accepted truths. Tally's transformation is not simply physical or psychological but intellectual. She learns to distinguish authentic desire from socially manufactured aspiration, thereby reclaiming agency in a society that seeks to define every aspect of human existence. Westerfeld ultimately argues that freedom depends upon the capacity to challenge institutional definitions of normality rather than merely rejecting authority outright.

Conclusion

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties* offer a compelling critique of societies that equate beauty with value, success, and social acceptance. This study has demonstrated that beauty in the novels functions as a multifaceted mechanism of social control operating through compulsory cosmetic surgery, disciplinary surveillance, psychological conditioning, consumer culture, and ideological conformity. Rather than promoting equality, the state's beauty regime suppresses individuality, regulates identity, and ensures political obedience by encouraging citizens to internalize institutional norms. Using Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power as the principal theoretical framework, supplemented by the perspectives of Naomi Wolf, Susan Bordo, and Jean Baudrillard, this study has shown that Westerfeld's dystopian society transforms the human body into a political instrument. Citizens become "perfect" not because they freely choose perfection but because perfection has been defined and enforced by those in power. Beauty consequently loses its personal meaning and becomes an ideological technology that sustains governmental authority.

The analysis also highlights Tally Youngblood's significance as a figure of resistance. Her intellectual awakening demonstrates that genuine freedom requires critical reflection, ethical responsibility, and the courage to question socially accepted norms. Westerfeld suggests that authentic identity cannot be manufactured through technological intervention or social approval but must emerge through individual choice and self-awareness. The contemporary relevance of the novels remains particularly significant. In an era characterized by digital beauty filters, cosmetic enhancement, algorithmic visibility, and influencer culture, Westerfeld's dystopian vision serves as a cautionary reflection on the relationship between appearance and power. Although the novels depict an imagined future, they encourage readers to examine the subtle ways in which contemporary institutions shape perceptions of beauty, identity, and self-worth. Ultimately, Westerfeld's novels remind readers that societies become most oppressive when conformity appears desirable rather than compulsory. By exposing beauty as a political construct rather than an objective reality, *Uglies* and *Pretties* challenge readers to reconsider the relationship between appearance, identity, and freedom in both fictional and contemporary societies.



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