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Behind the Bars of “Beauty”

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ABSTRACT

Using Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, as my starting point for analysis, I set out to find the truth about the “beauty myth,” and what affect it has on women in our society. With the help of research done by Michelle Goldberg and Marissa Audia-Raymo, I analyzed current society, and examined why women still seem to be held back. My initial prediction proved to be naive. I wasn’t giving women enough credit for their struggles both now and throughout history. What I encountered was a problem that was established very deeply in the roots of our society. Patriarchy proved to be at the heart of the “beauty myth,” and what has and continues to hold women down in society.

INTRODUCTION

Women have been forced to come up against its fury for ages. Now, it’s back and it’s stronger than ever. The beauty myth is once again rearing its ugly head into the lives of American women, and as Wolf explains in her book, it’s unfortunately and all too often successful. *The Beauty Myth* pushed me to rethink the many aspects of myself that I tend to harshly analyze, and it made me notice that there is a deeper problem within society—one that often goes unnoticed. I ventured out to discover if there was an intense connection between patriarchy and the idea of “beauty.” I needed to know if the beauty myth still exists today, and if so, what can women do to start challenging its principles?

THE BEAUTY MYTH: ANALYSIS

Wolf explores how women’s liberation and women’s perception of beauty are interconnected through the ideas of a liberal feminist. Although Wolf, I feel, is dangerously close to crossing the line from liberal to slightly radical at times, these ideas are seen throughout every aspect of women’s lives: work, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence.

To begin, Wolf explores the life of a working career woman, and how “beauty” is not intimate or even sex-related. It is political and linked very closely with the economy. On that note, Wolf describes how “beauty” has actually become a form of currency, and how the beauty myth has taken a very tight hold on women that are both qualified for and deserving of their high-ranking positions in companies. The growing focus of women’s attractiveness as they become more powerful and independent emerges as a way for men to undermine

women's progress, and ultimately remain in the more powerful position. Men have every reason to be intimidated by women's desire to obtain economic independence and to acquire positions of power. Since they are intimidated, the beauty myth is necessary because "women work hard-twice as hard as men" (Wolf, 22). This has been proven throughout history, and in places all over the world. However, now that women are obtaining full-time careers outside of homemaking, they are now expected to maintain their careers, home, family, and, on top of all that, their appearance. Since women must come home after a long day of work, only to do more work, the beauty myth just adds to their anxiety. Wolf credits the beauty myth as being the so-called "Iron Maiden" of society today. It essentially bears down on already over-worked women, sometimes causing them to lose their motivation and drive for independence. The most dangerous aspect about the beauty myth is that it is not only torturing women, but it is doing so internally—emotionally destroying women's sense of self.

Subsequently, Wolf takes a look at the role of the beauty myth in our culture, and how women have turned to fabricated means, such as the media, in search of role models. It may not seem entirely obvious, but once it is pointed out, it becomes quite undeniable. There have been countless men throughout history that have been preserved by way of monuments and statues, where women tend to appear only anonymously. Rarely have women been recognized and praised throughout history. This lack of sufficient female role models could be the reason that women today turn to magazines and television in pursuit of someone, anyone, to look up to. As Wolf describes, even heroines in literature and movies are picked apart by the myth. "Culture stereotypes women to fit the myth by flattening the feminine into beauty-without-intelligence or intelligence-without-beauty; women are allowed a mind or a body but not both" (Wolf, 59). From the Bible to Shakespeare to Gilligan's Island, two women are best viewed in way of one being the winner (beauty), and the other being the loser (brains). So, as patriarchal culture has sparked this segregation of qualities, women have grown up learning and knowing only that beauty is the desired trait above all the others.

Magazines and other forms of media have grown to reinforce the myth. Stick thin models with perfect hair, breasts, and complexion bombard women from all corners of the media world. In turn, everyday women feel belittled by these near-impossible standards despite the fact that, little do they know, these "perfect" women are airbrushed, photo-shopped, and technologically altered. In the documentary, *America the Beautiful*, independent filmmaker Darryl Roberts goes on a journey to find out how "beauty" has affected women today. What he found were mass amounts of women and young girls that expressed how they wanted to be skinny and "beautiful" like the models in magazines (Roberts, 2007). The myth steps in to give women the impression that they are to be this way—and this way only—even though the "perfect" is, by most, absolutely unattainable and unnatural.

Following culture, Wolf explores the beauty myth's origins from religion, and its impacts as a form of religion. Wolf (1991) claims:

The beauty myth is essentially the gospel of a new religion...women participate in re-creating a belief system as powerful as that of any of the churches whose hold on them has so rapidly loosened. The Church of Beauty is like the 'Iron Maiden,' a two-sided symbol...the social order imposes it as eagerly, to supplant religious authority as a policing force over women's lives (p. 86).

The Rites of Beauty, as Wolf calls them, contradict women's modern freedoms by implanting a medieval, mindset that beauty is not determined by people, but by a higher,

divine power. The biblical story of Adam and Eve reigns as an example. God chose to make Eve from Adam; therefore, it was seemingly implied that men possessed this inborn, God-given right to be able to judge women while remaining unevaluated. However, the church has lost a lot of clout in the past generation when it comes to dictating women's actions. Since women were being less constrained by the patriarchal powers of churches, men were going to be threatened. If women began to formulate their own moral guidelines, the guidelines could contradict the very structure of patriarchy. For example, compassion could supersede patriarchal hierarchy, and "a traditionally feminine respect for human life might severely damage an economy based on militarism, and a job market based on the use of people as expendable resources" (Wolf, 90). To combat this fear, the Rites of Beauty intervened to ingrain in women a new religious authority to keep them in order. This new religion grew quickly as it destroyed women from the inside, leaving them with a new void to fill—one that the beauty myth would soon consume.

Thereafter, Wolf tackles issues surrounding female sexuality, and how the media, religion, and other factors have suppressed the amount of pleasure a woman feels—both mentally and physically. Women have it all. From multiple orgasms to continual orgasms, the magnitude of female sexual pleasure is endless, but unfortunately that sexual experience isn't seen in women living in today's society. Not long after the sexual revolution, the beauty myth was deployed to subdue female sexuality, once again, by way of "beauty pornography" and "beauty sadomasochism," "which arose to put the guilt, shame, and pain back into women's experience of sex" (Wolf, 132). For a patriarchal society, women who felt freedom in their sexuality posed a serious threat, so "the external cues of the beauty pornography and sadomasochism reshape female sexuality into a more manageable form than it would take if truly released" (Wolf, 132). Beauty pornography gives this impression: the "flawless" woman remains lying on her back in a state of domination. Women see this not only in pornographic films and magazines, but also in ads for everyday products such as perfume, shoes, clothes, cigarettes and cars. Sadomasochism in ads has affected women in the same way. Women relate the ecstasy felt by these women to domination, pain, and perfection. This misrepresentation of female sexuality sparked the idea that women and their bodies are just objects—objects to be perfected. These ideas arose not only as a way to boost consumerism for the economy (for example, beauty products, diet supplements, cosmetic surgery, etc.), but also as a way to sustain the sexual battle between men and women. Therefore, images that objectify and seductively belittle women have appeared to negate women's self-declaration. These images became necessary because it seemed that men and women were becoming too equal in the eyes of the powerful, and something was needed to keep women in their place. This objectification, sadly, has begun to be the norm.

Wolf also investigates America's hunger crisis, or technically, lack thereof. Bulimia and anorexia are becoming increasingly more common as the beauty myth saturates more and more areas of women's lives. Wolf paints a vivid, fictional image in the reader's mind about an epidemic of anorexia and bulimia sweeping America's male population. She points out that one would expect an immediate response from both the government, and the population. America would not want to see this happen to its sons. This crisis is actually occurring right now, only with the opposite gender. Each year, "150,000 American women die of anorexia," (American Anorexia and Bulimia Association as cited in Wolf, p. 182), and the public is

almost entirely oblivious. The media coverage of women dying from these disorders is extremely rare even though the death toll exceeds many other well-publicized events. Why is America reluctant to ask why their women are starving? Why doesn't America want to promote awareness of these all-consuming, deadly diseases? Maybe it is because these women are "over-achieving" at something that they are expected to do. The beauty myth expects a woman to be thin, and these women that are dying from bulimia and anorexia are simply just too good at what they are expected to do. I believe that many people in our population, mainly men, do not take these disorders seriously.

Ultimately, Wolf wraps up the book by taking a look at the violence that the beauty myth has caused women to commit against themselves. Cosmetic surgery is a rapidly growing industry where women are mutilating not only their bodies, but also their sense of self. They are making themselves believe that they are not beautiful, perfect, or otherwise, without these surgeries.

With this, Wolf states her main point. She notes that as women make more legal and political advancements, the image of feminine "beauty" becomes more strict and more harsh. It is evident that our patriarchal society keeps women "in check" by challenging them with the extra, unnecessary preoccupation of fulfilling a certain image. The "Beauty Myth" makes women objectify themselves, which in turn, lowers their self-esteem, and keeps them at a notch below their bold, self-assured counterpart-men. So, what can be done to confront the beauty myth, and maybe even challenge patriarchy?

CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE BEAUTY MYTH

The Beauty Myth and the points that Naomi Wolf defends were undeniable. Equipped with statistics, Wolf made it almost impossible for readers, especially women, to brush aside the fact that inequality between genders is still very much alive in our society. Women are being held back by a notion that society has created. The beauty myth is not only tearing women apart emotionally and mentally, but it is also causing women to destroy themselves physically. There is proof of women's self-mutilation floating through the media, and even experienced more personally through women's female peers. Diet supplements, cosmetic surgery, anorexia and bulimia plague American women's thoughts on a daily basis. What can women do to help reverse the beauty myth? Is it too late to help women love themselves for who they are?

In "Feminism for Sale," Michelle Goldberg (2000) explores how consumerism plays a huge part in women being stuck in the rut known as the beauty myth. The beauty myth and patriarchy make women believe that they are to maintain a "perfect" image. They must use makeup, wear the most fashionable clothes, cling tightly to their youth, and possess and maintain a "desirable" body image. These qualities of the beauty myth promote consumerism, and thus, allow patriarchy to get the best of women. By preoccupying themselves with shopping for all the "right" products, women are performing just as patriarchy wants them to. Patriarchy wants women to feel content preoccupying their time with frivolous acts because they definitely do not want women interfering with important political, legal, and business-

related issues. They created the beauty myth to distract women from progressing in independence and power, and it has been, unfortunately, quite successful.

The current “feminist” model seems to be this trendy, “urban, liberated career chick... In the year 2000, decades after wrangling the myth of the ugly, hirsute, ball-busting women’s liber, the culture has finally seemed to reconcile beauty, power, fun, and feminism” (Goldberg, 2000:1). However, are we sure this is the feminist role model we want? Goldberg states that this “easy-to-swallow feminism,” persuades women to spoil themselves, dispose of guilt, and glide through life like Carrie in *Sex in the City*. This type of feminism doesn’t make women feel bad about wearing makeup, or buying that pair of over-priced, but oh-so-darling, red stilettos. It tries to prove to women that a consumer culture is enjoyable (2000:1). Ultimately, the message that this feminism presents is that women will find pleasure and confidence in buying products like over-priced stilettos. As one can see, the beauty myth is present, and still very active.

Why is it that we try so hard, today, to forget about the efforts of the women in the 1970’s? Consumerism was exactly what the feminists of the 70’s were fighting against. They were angry that society was trying to convince them that they should find satisfaction and meaning simply in the things they buy. “On a very deep level, to re-embrace the commercial culture is to betray the agenda of the modern women’s movement (Faludi as cited in Goldberg, 2000:2). Women today seem to think that the 70’s women’s movement was all about saying “no” to everything that was considered feminine. So, to go against that, they want to prove that feminism is about confidence and showing that women can wear makeup and dresses and still be powerful. However, this consumer-based “feminism” completely misses the point of the second wave feminists. It was never about instructing women that it was bad to wear makeup, it was about encouraging women to think for themselves rather than just buying things that society told them was necessary. Consumerism is a backlash against the very foundation of feminism, and is simply a supporter of the beauty myth. It is convincing women that they should be using their economic advancements and independence to buy thoughtless objects.

I believe that by understanding that consumerism is only nurturing the beauty myth, women can learn to overcome the ridiculous standards that society puts on us. In her article, “The Fat Friend,” Marissa Audia-Raymo (2010) shares her story about how she defeated the feelings of a reckless stereotype. Audia-Raymo had always felt that she was the “fat friend” in her group of friends—she was there to solely make all the other girls feel more attractive. She soon realized that even after periods of dieting, starvation, bulimia, and weight loss pills, she was skinnier than her friends, but she still felt fat and ugly. She finally came to the conclusion that her weight obsession stripped her of her self-esteem and personality. “Women have been made to feel like second-class citizens because of their bodies, often from a very young age, (Audia-Raymo, 2000:64). It took Audia-Raymo a very long time to realize that she wasn’t really the “fat friend,” she just thought she was, and the societal standards are what sparked that notion in the first place. She felt like she had to wear all the right clothes, use makeup, and make use of the newest, hottest diet program in order to fit in. She had to consciously choose to be happy with herself after years of doing all the “right” things and still being discontent. When she did, she realized that she needed to fill her life with people that loved her for her good qualities and accepted her bad—excluding weight as a feature.

It does seem that women are becoming slightly more aware of the danger and demeaning essence of the beauty myth, and the “Iron Maiden” that it has produced. Ads like Dove’s Campaign for Beauty, are taking some steps forward in helping women and society accept all kinds of beautiful. The campaign promotes Dove’s Movement for Self-Esteem, whose overall goal is to instill in girls and women that “beautiful” includes women of all shapes, sizes, races, and statures. This impression is what could positively change society for both women and men.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, I came to realize that the beauty myth poses a bigger burden on women than most tend to realize. Much to my surprise, I discovered that not only does patriarchy impact the idea of the beauty myth, but it is also the culprit behind its creation. What society sees as simply the “norm” is a notion that is devastating the daughters of America. I feel that society can change, and Campaigns like Dove’s Movement for Self-Esteem is a great way to begin in our current media-saturated society. Such campaigns will hopefully spark confidence in women throughout the Western world. Women with this newfound certainty can then stand up and support the rest of society’s emotionally damaged women. In turn, we can create positive feminists role models that can oppose materialism, and attest that there is more to life than an expensive pair of shoes. With women being raised in this mindset, we can then block out the beauty myth and the consumerism it promotes which occupy both women’s time and money. Without the anxiety of the beauty myth bearing down on women, we can steer away from that pair of \$400 stilettos, and use our financial independence to change the world. Think of the contributions that we, as women, can make to the world with the “\$12.4 billion that is spent on cosmetic surgery yearly” (Roberts, 2007). I do believe that there is hope for the women in our society. The beauty myth can be defeated. It takes just one strong role model, and from there we can finish what first and second wave feminists began—the fight for the equality of women everywhere.

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