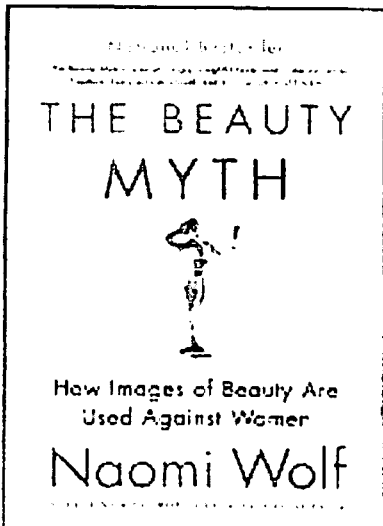


A BOOK REVIEW

THE BEAUTY MYTH: HOW IMAGES OF BEAUTY ARE USED AGAINST WOMEN



Naomi Wolf

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Women all over the world nowadays are frequently bombarded by images that make them look continuously over their beauty mirror to see whether they have lost that extra weight, have the right sized thighs, breast, and abdomen; in addition to a shiny, colorful, straight hair – and white, soft and radiant complexion. TV shows, such as the program “Extreme Makeover” or “The Swan” or just the short and intriguing TV and magazine advertisements of “Ponds Whitening Cream” or the ideal “Wella Colored Hair” have made women envy of other women’s bodies because their own,

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looks and feels flabby or ugly. Almost all women feel that their skin needs to have that extra white radiance and their hair needs a tint of blond, brown, burgundy red or just a simple bluest black. This is caused by the fact that the image of a "perfect" woman is usually a gorgeous blonde, although sultry brunettes, redheads and exotic women of color are also shown. The ideal woman is tall and willowy, weighing at least 20% less than what her height requires. She rarely looks older than 25, has no visible flaws on her skin, and her hair and clothes are always immaculate. Why is the beauty myth so enticing that women would give more than anything to be as close as that image of perfect beauty?

The book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, discusses how those TV and magazine images have harmed many women. No longer does the word "beauty" makes a woman proud but it is a weapon to make her feel bad because she could not live up to the ideal beauty shown in those media. To become thin, pert and youthful is something that nowadays becomes an unhealthy aspiration. In other words, the beauty myth is becoming a nightmare to some "70%" of American women (Wolf 2002:53).

Naomi Wolf's book explores six areas of life in which problems result from the beauty myth that exists in Uncle Sam's country, the United States of America. Each can be read alone – whichever interest the reader most, as it need not be read continuously from one chapter to the next.

In *WORK*, the author details the way the concept of beauty can be used to discriminate against women in the workforce. If women are too pretty, they are not taken seriously. This is like what happened in one 1986 case, where a woman lost a sexual harassment claim because she dresses too beautifully. She lost because "her beauty in her clothes was admitted as evidence to prove that she welcomed rape from her employer" (Wolf 2002:38). Yet, if women are not pretty enough, they can legally be fired for being too "businesslike" and not "feminine" enough (Wolf 2002:42). For example, a woman felt there was no point in doing her job well, when she was once told by her supervisor that he was very happy with her work but that "she needed some improvement from the neck up" (Wolf 2002:41). Then again, if women are too pretty and attractive in their attire, it becomes their own fault when they are sexually harassed. According to Wolf, "beauty provokes harassment, the law says, but it looks through men's eyes when deciding what provokes it" (2002:45). Over and over, Wolf supplies precedent

law in which the woman is judged to be too beautiful, too ugly, too old, too fat, dressed too nice, and not dressed nice enough. In other words, this chapter shows that it is legal for a woman to be hired or fired generally on the basis of her physical appearance.

In CULTURE, it is shown that ever since a child, a girl is taught that stories only happen to “beautiful” women whether they are interesting or not. And, interesting or not, stories do not happen to women who are not “beautiful” (Wolf 2002:61). So, as a consequence, women would do anything to gain their beauty. This chapter also tells about the role of women’s magazines (the sole arbiter of women’s culture) in shaping their lives, by selling them on the need for beauty products by making them feel bad about themselves is being focused. It also notes that advertisers pressure the magazines into this, because it is only when American women feel terrible about themselves will high-income women spend a quarter of their each paycheck on beauty products advertised in those magazines. For example, *Cosmopolitan* is so popular that it appears in “seventeen countries” (Wolf 2002:77).

In RELIGION, Wolf convincingly argues that in The Bible, “Genesis explains why it is women who often need to offer their bodies to any male gaze that will legitimize them” (2002:93). It is explained further that The Bible teaches women to feel proud for having become as perfect as their Father which is in Heaven. This chapter also argues that the quest for thinness has replaced the quest for moral virtue and heavenly salvation, and shows how this quest has the same effects that religion once did — of keeping women submissive and preoccupied – in the home. If they are too wild, men would likely divorce them. In this case, Wolf supplies readers with the fact that the divorce rate in “the United States have nearly doubled between 1970 and 1981, ... tripled in the Netherlands, quintupled in the United Kingdom”, and even ... “one in three in Indonesia” had filed divorce cases (2002:117).

In SEX, the beauty myth is demonstrated as actually oppressing female sexuality by making many women too self-conscious to engage in sex freely and comfortably. For example, women are told that if they desire “sexual freedom and a measure of worldly power”, they’d better learn to do sex like men (Wolf 2002:134). To be overtly attractive, however, women who decide

to uplift and make larger or smaller sized breast, just because breasts must be “perfectly symmetrical” (Wolf 2002:152), may at the same time make their nipples handicapped and consequently, can no longer feel the tingling sensation they would need to reach a joyous sexual feeling. The excessive dieting to make bodies thinner in a short period leads also to a diminished sex drive. In addition to hurting women, it also argues that the beauty myth hurts men by making them unaware of what real women look like. Men are also given the role of “beauty appraisal” instead of the role of “partner” that gave further impact on sexual relations (Wolf 2002:177).

In HUNGER, the beauty myth convinces women to “willingly” go hungry, to eat fewer calories per day than famine victims in third-world countries, which results in ironic weight gain and/or in eating disorders (compulsive eating, anorexia, and bulimia). Interestingly, 90 to 95 percent of anorexics and bulimics are women and all wanted to lose “5-25 pounds even though most were not remotely overweight” (Wolf 2002:213). To some young women, anorexia is a life- saver because it can “protect her from street harassment and sexual coercion” (Wolf 2002:199). Anyway, this book has at least, solidified the fact that women of any age are slowly killing and disfiguring themselves in the name of that ever-unattainable and ever-subjective idea of “beauty”.

The chapter on VIOLENCE is not about domestic violence, but rather a self-inflicted violence of cosmetic surgery, which is so painful and damaging to a woman’s body. Liposuctions and operations such as a tummy tuck and a face- lift can be harmful as it can make women feel numb on some of their organs for the rest of their lives. Interestingly a comparison with Victorian (Wolf 2002:222-225) sexual surgery and potentially deadly experimental medical research will make readers aware that some unethical work is being done to fulfill the ideal beauty myth that many men and women want to see. In this chapter, the author also questions why so many women are willing to risk diminished erotic responses and even death in order to be made thin or small-nosed or large-widened eyes or large-breasted or whatever. Once a woman decides to go in for a nose job, for example, she would quickly find that the doctor sees her as a saddlebag and later finds the necessity to also do something about the excess fat in the thighs or underneath her cheek bones, and so on that are actually barely visible to the naked eye. In Wolf’s words:

Surgeons are taking the feminist redefinition of health as beauty and perverting it into a notion of 'beauty' as health; and, thus, whatever they are selling as health: hunger as health, pain and bloodshed as health (2002:224)

Basically, Wolf claims that the beauty myth passed on by advertisers is a political move to keep women down. Her research shows that there is a cultural backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty to keep women in their home place. How many people have succumbed to the idea of the ugly feminist activist who is only a feminist because she's too undesirable to get a man? Looking at history, that popular concept first showed up on the scene to describe suffragettes lobbying for a political vote in the 1960s. The beauty myth is the last (and most dangerous) of a long line of lies concerning the rules of feminine attributes and behavior. It is the most dangerous because it has succeeded in effecting women's internal sense of themselves. It has created a standard of femininity that is impossible to attain, and women are reacting with increasingly obsessive behavior in their attempts to measure up. Energy that might be used to further positive goals is turned inward instead – dissipated in guilt, shame and unhappiness at one's physical faults.

In general, the author, Naomi Wolf, can provide the reader with a very thoughtful and well-researched treatise on the feminine experience. It is full of studies and statistics to back up her claims, which makes her message hard to deny. The issue she is bringing to attention is actually addressed to both sexes, for women are not the only ones being manipulated by the media into feeling insecure and unhappy with them selves. Not to be a surprise is also the male sex, because they will also be bombarded with the myth that men should be rich, powerful and youthful looking to attract those beautiful women.

This book implies that the American culture sees women are better off dead than by becoming old or ugly looking because making extreme makeovers (read: have an operation to beautify themselves) give women a reasonable risk. Yet at the same time, I believe, this book can spark more discussion and research on how culture, in general, cultivates the stereotypes of women as sex objects and men as success objects.

The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women, is a strong, compelling book. At times, some of what Wolf says is rather hard to understand – but read as a whole, it presents a solid argument about the sickness of our society today. Men should read it for their wives; parents ought to read it for their daughters; and ladies must read it for themselves. I highly recommended this book to those interested in American Studies and so much more to anyone interested in Women's Studies – and to any woman, especially one who plans on having children, because it is so important to break this cycle of unattainable expectations.