



# Feminist Reading of Naomi Wolf's 'The Beauty Myth'

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Received: 18 Oct 2022; Received in revised form: 04 Nov 2022; Accepted: 09 Nov 2022; Available online: 15 Nov 2022

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**Abstract**— *This project provides a feminist reading of Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth. In this book she talks about deconstructing the myth of beauty and realising how patriarchy stresses our appearances in order to damage us all. Figures, data, citations, and statements abound in this book, which is divided into six topics: labour, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence. In each part, Wolf tries to demonstrate how the concept of "beauty" has historically and continues to keep women in inferior positions.*

**Keywords**— *Beauty Myth, Feminism, Other Woman, Society, Violence.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Naomi Wolf's first book set out to debunk the beauty myth that persisted in the 1980s and 1990s. Wolf noticed that the ladies in her milieu were largely concerned with their beauty and body form throughout her time at Oxford. This discovery inspired her to write on health difficulties and the reality of women being subjugated by patriarchal society to look a specific way and to meet the society's expectations, particularly those of males. She not only sheds light upon eating disorders in this book, but also the various domains in which the beauty myths are found, such as culture, labour, sex, hunger, and violence. The writer says, "There is no legitimate historical or biological justification for the beauty myth; what it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today's power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women." (Page 13) Wolf uses statistics to indicate that practically every other American woman at the time had an eating disorder and that the magazines were to blame because they only featured slim, white, blonde models instead of embracing all bodies, colours, and religions. Breast implants were very popular at the time due to the unattainable aesthetic standards that women felt obligated to satisfy. The doctors conducted these procedures without informing the women about the myriad potential negative effects. The female audience was greatly worried about their age and fell prey to marketing firms promising them anti-aging creams. Furthermore, there were no older models in the magazines or on the cover pages; only the young ones

were put in the spotlight. This led the majority to feel that the only way to look beautiful was to conform to societal norms rather than to admire their bodies as they are. Wolf argued in the preface, which was later added in 2002, that the twenty-first century has progressed, but there is still a long way to go. She points out that while people are more aware of eating disorders than ever before, the difficulty is that these diseases are now considered normal. As a result, models openly discuss the side effects as if the conditions are not dangerous. Legal actions took place against silicone breast implant providers and according to Wolf, this is a step forward. She investigates all the beauty myths that have poisoned and continue to poison the minds of society. In modern times progress has been made yet these misconceptions remain.

## II. MAJOR DISCUSSION

Wolf proclaims that the myth of beauty is an order that governs action rather than appearance: above all, the beauty myth creates the urgency of basing women's identity and worth on their attractiveness. After the 1930s, various social fictions arose, including the beauty myth. In the bourgeois marriage markets of the nineteenth century, women began to conceive of beauty in economic terms. These fictions controlled what women should wear and how they should behave, both of which are laborious, and it provokes one to think about it. After the Industrial Revolution, the beauty myth in its modern form grew stronger. Women gradually

confronted an unbiased attitude and at the same time female consciousness took over an actuality that used notions of "beauty." Manipulating society through beauty standards is the finest way to emotionally degrade women because they have become monetarily powerful. Following the resurgence of feminism in the early 1970s, Western women gained legitimate rights, increased education, and access to liberal professions. Women, on the other hand, do not feel as liberated as they would desire. Their dissatisfaction stems from the relationship between women's independence and feminine beauty. According to the writer "the beauty myth" is a backlash against feminism. It uses images of the physical appearance of women as a political tool to hamper women's advancement. The portrayal of feminists as "ugly" and "masculine" has created a new area of opposition to radical feminism. Naomi Wolf challenges the idea of beauty myth in this book by debunking the whole concept through the help of the following aspects:

### 2.1 Work

The community takes advantage of women's beauty by utilising it as a sort of exchange. The number of employed women began to rise as the feminine mystique started fading. Wolf used statistics to illustrate that after WWII, the percentage of working women in the United States was 31.8 percent and grew to 53.4 percent in 1984. By 1986, 77 percent of Swedish women were earning, 55 percent of French women occupied several professions, and 63 percent of British women had paying jobs. Wolf declares that the "beauty myth" has always been a political move and that as the number of working women expanded, it became money rather than a symbol of currency. Wolf analyses how women made progress despite having to work two shifts (one as per their occupation and another at home) compared to men's single shift; and how the beauty shift, which refers to the unrealistic expectations of society, intends to keep women below men by keeping the female audience preoccupied. Another important role of the Beauty Myth is to diminish women's sense of self-worth and self-esteem, lowering their yearnings, goals, and aims to levels that society can handle. She mentions how even after sex discrimination bans, women have been put through a wide range of authorized discrimination based on their looks - what Wolf refers to as the PBQ (Professional Beauty Qualification). The PBQ, of course, is only applicable to women. For instance, male newsreaders do not need to be young, attractive, or sophisticated; they gain dignity with age. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for women who are fired because they are aged or not attractive enough to read the headlines, and the courts responsible for imposing anti-discrimination rules maintain their employers' right to do so. Viewers want to see juvenile, alluring women while watching the news, thus older, less attractive women can

properly be fired, regardless of how effective they are at their jobs, which is viewed as an irreversible fact of life. As a result, women's worth is increasingly being determined by their appearance rather than their ability or expertise.

### 2.2 Culture

"Women are mere "beauties" in men's culture so that culture can be kept male. When women in culture show character, they are not desirable, as opposed to the desirable, artless ingenue." (Page 59) Wolf shows how second-wave feminism demolished the beauty myth, which had succeeded the idea of domesticity. Women who severed their links with the position of a housewife in favour of a job and autonomy were tempted by the beauty myth to discover something that spoke to them in these publications. As Wolf demonstrates in her book, periodicals are controlled by the demands of their marketers, and the marketers require to manipulate women so that they would buy the products. If cleaning supplies aren't an option, they'll have to settle for cosmetics. She investigates why women are exploited in this way whereas men are not.

### 2.3 Religion

On this subject, Wolf claims that the beauty myth has taken the place of religion in the lives of women and that it serves the same purpose. The concept of an "objective" ideal of flawless beauty has supplanted the notion of an unbiased standard of purity. The modern 4 religion expects women to be beautiful and it does not lay much emphasis on other aspects. Advertisers who promote "beauty" items (skin-lightening creams, facial makeup, etc) do so by instilling this new moral need to be attractive. Complying with what Wolf refers to as the Rites of Beauty gives contemporary women the same sense of fulfilment that adhering to religious rituals gave women a century before. The similarities between religious symbolism, language, and emblems of beauty are truly astounding. Furthermore, the methods employed by the cosmetic sectors are dreadfully comparable to those of religious groups. Wolf mentions in her book the unwavering belief the society has in the influence of beauty, the vulnerability with which they chase the standards of beauty despite having the knowledge that their bodies can never accomplish such excellence, the rigorous assessment and self-hatred that this incapability motivates, and most significantly, the virtues of saints. She provokes a question in the readers' minds, making them think about the non-rewarding journey of living up to societal standards. She says that saints end up in heaven but there is no prize for meeting the beauty expectations.

### 2.4 Sex

Sex is an evaluation of how the beauty myth confines and stifles female sexuality. It is also similar to the techniques used by religion. Wolf describes how our community views

sexuality and how the society is educated to think about it through artists, philosophy, movies, music, and pretty much everything else—not just through the marketing industry. Women are the ones who are scrutinised while men are both doers and observers. The 'rules' made by society state that attractiveness is a requirement for desirable ladies. A woman cannot feel wanted if she does not feel beautiful because sexual identity and beauty are intertwined. Wolf says that women won't have any energy left over if they spend all of their time worrying about whether or not men would find them appealing. She raises an important question as to what will encourage women to locate such energy if they are not able to imagine active female sexuality (due to the lack of examples in our popular culture). She explores the eroticization and normalisation of sexual violence against women in "beauty pornography." She addresses how women are forced to view their personal appearance as crucial to their desirability and sexuality, which breeds a complete lack of understanding between the sexes and keeps them apart. She discusses how males are disadvantaged because they are taught to objectify women sexually instead of viewing them as unique, fascinating people. As a result, they may miss out on sexual pleasure and fulfilment if they are unable to overcome their conditioning. In keeping with this theme, Wolf ponders what might occur if men and women were free to respect and love one another for who they truly are: as equal citizens, as fellow humans with a past. If this were to happen, it would be an uprising.

### 2.5 Hunger

Wolf provides frightening statistics on the occurrence of anorexia and bulimia in the wealthy West. She considers ample women who mistakenly believe they are obese, the amount of pre-puberty women who are dieting, and the females who frequently starve themselves. She then inspects the persistent health consequences of calorie restriction and malnourishment, such as unhealthy obsession with food (which includes overeating and mindless snacking), mental issues like depression and anxiety, and apathy that lowers one's function and quality of life. Excluding the major effects of famine and death, statistics prove that anorexia has the highest number of deaths among mental conditions. Hunger seriously harms people and their bodies. History has repeatedly shown that keeping a big group of people hungry is necessary if one wants to subjugate and oppress them. If forcibly preventing food would be impossible, the only option would be to persuade them to do it themselves and willingly give in to hunger. Wolf contends that the "beauty myth" does this. It promotes being slim, attractive, and appealing as something that is morally required to get women to give in to hunger. She claims that starving oneself to thinness has always been

important for women while being thin is unimportant. As per societal expectations, thinness is also somewhat unattractive if it is compared to the sensuous power of a woman with a different body type. This chapter touches on a universal worry that everyone has about what will happen to women in the future—namely, they would be pushed to a place where no one will be able to save them. As a result, most readers can relate to it. The author says that anorexia is not about irrational self-hatred, a warped sense of self, or going too far in the pursuit of beauty. She claims that the issue is much less about the specific, private conditions of a person than it is about the larger cultural pressures and the callousness with which those in positions of power are handling the epidemic's negative impacts. In fact, it is a sensible reaction to such demands and apathy. In this chapter, Wolf makes a strong case for the idea that the beauty myth is more than just an occurrence that developed accidentally due to external factors and that society could do much more than just observe. Her "conspiracy argument," that the Beauty Myth has a real goal that is either conscious or only partially conscious, is most convincing in this chapter. The growth of "thin" beauty coincides with women's socioeconomic and regulatory autonomy, and it has gotten worse as women have gained more rights and become a greater danger to society's power structure. Nobody finds malnourishment attractive, and a healthy body is unquestionably better than being underweight, as the latest "zero figure" reaction has starkly demonstrated. Wolf questions the Beauty Myth's demand for such thinness.

### 2.6 Violence

The female audience is manipulated so that they willingly subject themselves to a legal form of brutality known as 'cosmetic surgery. Although it is a choice offered to all genders these days, women feel more inclined to opt for it. Wolf makes a comparison to British physicians who, to make money by treating patients, are delighted to glorify violence, normalise, and represent the female patient as ill. This procedure is their way of earning income by performing surgery on women who do not need it to make them look even more beautiful. All this not only creates unrealistic beauty expectations but also the plastic surgeons are more than happy to idealise these unachievable standards of beauty. Current surgeons have a significant monetary stake in women playing a societal role that makes them feel unattractive. They do not just promote a piece of an already-existing market; they also build new problems. It is a major growth driver since it may effectively generate demand by mixing content with advertisements in women's publications. Several cosmetic surgeons believe that their procedures are medically necessary due to the "therapeutic benefits" it offers. In both instances, larger society has

supported the "healthcare" firms that target women in this way because, as long as women attribute their dissatisfaction to medical complications and look to medicine for relief, they won't be holding politicians accountable for their issues. If performed poorly, plastic surgeries can be deadly and even fatal. It's even experimental at times. Without any real oversight and with no real security for the defenceless women who are looking for a personal cosmetic cure to what is so obviously a societal problem, surgeons who guarantee to do no damage are doing unneeded and harmful treatments. Wolf contrasts the current trend in breast surgical treatment with infibulation, as well as with Victorian era 'clitoridectomies' and 'oophorectomies'. Wolf says that by addressing the unidentified "Other Woman", society could dispel the myth. It makes sense that women who are silent and observant are portrayed as adversaries since men's reactions to female "beauty" is the main source of the flirty attention that women encounter on a daily basis. By being playful, courageous, and courteous with one another, this mistrust and alienation have a scope of getting dissolved. Women should entice each other with a little glimmering focus that is all too frequently reserved for men: admire each other and express adoration. Furthermore, if women are inexperienced, they are instructed to avoid identifying with older women; if they are elderly, they are taught to be a little harsh on young women, seeing them with frustration and disgust. The "beauty myth" was intentionally created to push different age groups of women in opposition; by purposefully fortifying those connections, females reclaim the fullness of their lives that the beauty myth would have prevented them from realising.

### III. CONCLUSION

Wolf provides a brutally horrific peek into the future, speculating from what is presently occurring and what has previously occurred, in which she sees no boundaries to what society, enslaved by the 'beauty myth', will do to women. Perhaps we'll be medicated into a docile obedient numbness, and poverty-stricken women will be hired to have children for the sake of the infants' wealthy mothers' youthful appearances. Maybe less fortunate women will be selected and sold for their body parts in order to be transplanted into other, 'less attractive women. Everyone will eventually be doing it because what currently appears to be completely out of control will continue to rise to the point where no one will genuinely be able to recall what natural human bodies look like. Wolf states a possibility to envision a life that is beyond the "Beauty Myth". In her concluding chapter, she presents a hypothetical life with liberty. A life where there is no longer an obligation to follow any arbitrary, nameless norm. No more assigning

values to our bodies based on their shapes, colours, or sizes. Rather, the change allows people to be who they are, to be themselves, and to live life without having to be burdened with judgments or expectations. 8 Society needs to make significant development for this to become true. Since the 1990 release of "The Beauty Myth", very little major change has occurred. The Internet has allowed us to establish venues for body-less women where our thoughts, opinions, and identities are vital, but overall, the beauty myth is still incredibly potent. Wolf's recommendations for dispelling and challenging the beauty myth seem to be just as relevant today as they were when she first made them. A genuine, robust, women's culture that is unencumbered by commercial interests must be established. A start comes from journalists and influencers but there is still a need for more. Women must celebrate their uniqueness, bodies, and personality. From birth to death, from childhood to old age, from foolishness to enlightenment, females should cherish who they are and the entirety of their lives. The community should maintain relationships with the females in their lives and gain wisdom from both the older and younger generations about their experiences. This is the only chance if humans can learn to reject and disregard the requirements of the beauty myth and see clearly through this façade.

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