

Exploring the Beauty Myth: A Study of Representation in Frances Cha's *'If I Had Your Face'*

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the issue of beauty myth. This study is entitled "Representation of Beauty Myth in Frances Cha's If I Had Your Face". The focus of this study is to analyze the impact of Beauty Myth aspects of work, culture, violence, sex, and hunger on the lives of female characters. The object of this study is If I Had Your Face novel by Frances Cha (2020). This study shows that the work aspect has the greatest influence on women in the novel because when women enter the workforce they have to adjust their appearance. Therefore, to meet the standards, women mostly use cosmetics, go on extreme diets, and undergo cosmetic surgery. This study used qualitative approach. As a guide, the writer used the Beauty Myth theory from Naomi Wolf (1991). The results of this study indicate that aspects of work, culture, sex, violence, and hunger are harm women. In addition, women must adjust their appearance to society's standards in order to survive and earn a living.

Keywords: *feminism, beauty myth, qualitative research, narrative elements.*

A. Introduction

The beauty of a woman is an object which never enough and endless to talk about. Everything about women with their identities in real life always attracts the attention of many people. What women do and wear always attracts the attention of many people and becomes an evaluation of women themselves. However, the misconception of the beauty standard has been deeply rooted in society whether it leads to the wrong perspective for women. The beauty standard that exists in society is called the beauty myth, where the issue is still relevant in nowadays situation. Therefore, it is very common to see women who are so obsessed to be beautiful as the standard of society and it raises the beauty myth. Furthermore, until today most cultures and societies defined the standard of "beauty" based on physical appearance, whether a woman is considered beautiful or not. For women who find it less attractive, the road to success may be a little more difficult than for those who look attractive (Webster & Driskell, 1983).

Myth refers to things that are imaginary and not real. On the other hand, myths such as abiogenesis and evolution, which are concepts created by humans, have no

basis in observable reality but are nevertheless peddled to the public as scientific facts. According to Levi-Strauss (1955) myth is a certain history that is set some time ago and the story is timeless. Furthermore, Strauss said that myth can be expanded and manipulated without losing its basic form or structure. This myth is still passed down from generation to generation and even traps people in this belief as well as the beauty myth for example.

The myth of beauty spreads the belief that a perfect physical appearance becomes a measurement of beauty exists and women must want to embody it. The concept of ideal beauty deals with the characters looking at their minds, attitudes, and manners. The attractiveness of a woman is relative it depends on aspects others appreciate. Furthermore, the media is enjoying exposing beauty and popularity from the outside of women whether it raises a negative perspective about beauty standards. In Asia for instance, the woman who has light skin, a sharp nose, thick eyebrows, flicked eyelashes, flushed cheek, and dimpled has become the dominant construction of a woman to be considered a pretty woman (Rondilla, 2006, p. 64). Therefore, women who are discontent with their appearance take different ways of improving their psychical looks such as using most cosmetics or makeup. Ministry of industry cosmetic sales stated the consumption of cosmetics in the world grew up by double digits annually, and Indonesia consumed the largest amount in 2016 (Kemenprin.go.id, 2017).

Even more, some women do extreme diets and plastic surgery to change the parts of their body, so that they are close to the word “perfect”. Doing plastic surgery is not only expensive but the risks are dangerous. In nutshell, some women ignore the risks and costs just to live up to society’s standards. A British woman died two days after having plastic surgery at a clinic in Turkey. She has undergone a “Brazilian butt-lift” procedure, which reshapes the buttock by transferring fat from areas including the stomach and back. Therefore, beauty specialists in British warn the plastic surgery for women after a woman dies in Turkey (BBC News, 2021).

Hence, the beauty myth has spread in society bring a big impact on women. Many women felt themselves under pressure because they do not meet the criteria of “ideal” women. The beauty myth leads women to anxiety about their appearance (Etcoff et al., 2016). The unrealistic social standards of physical appearance are getting stronger by the day. This thing sets up an image and expectation for women to meet the standards according to society.

Naomi Wolf (1991) highlighted the issue of beauty myth in her book:

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. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power. The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior not appearance. (pp. 13 - 14)

Beauty myth can be reflected in literary works such as prose, poetry, and drama, one of the literary works in prose fiction that reflection of beauty myth is *If I*

Had Your Face novel by Frances Cha. There are some reasons why it is chosen as the subject of research. Firstly, Frances Cha is one of the best authors who inspired many young people through her works. *If I Had Your Face* novel is one of her works that raises the problems that women faced nowadays regarding beauty myth in society.

Then *If I Had Your Face* is a story tells about five women they are Ara, Kyur, Miho, Sujin, and Woonah who struggle to make a living defined by beauty myths. Kyuri's character is more dominant than other characters. Kyuri hopes that plastic surgery will bring a lot of income and happiness. Unfortunately, plastic surgery is not as expected, it doesn't bring happiness to her life even if she does not satisfied with what she has. Furthermore, the story tells how cruel the beauty myth is so deeply rooted in their society, that makes the female characters suffer through the construction of beauty even making one of them nearly commits suicide.

This study focuses on investigating how *If I Had Your Face* novel represents beauty myth through the female characters. This study will be analyzed by using the beauty myth by Naomi Wolf. The writer analyzes the female characters in the novel by using a feminist point of view.

B. Method

In conducting this study, the qualitative was chosen as the appropriate method to analyze the novel it is because the data were taken from the text of a novel and the result was revealed in an essay. According to Neuman (2017), qualitative study tends to the form of words, sentences, and paragraphs where the numerical data is not used to determine the study; it reflects on ideas before data collection. Whereas. The quantitative method extensively thinks about variables, and the numerical information is an empirical data representation of abstract ideas. Qualitative studies emphasize understanding social life with empirical evidence to explain and solve the issue that presents in a text. Furthermore, the qualitative reports often contain rich descriptions, clear detail, and unique character; to provide the readers feel of a social setting. Moreover, help the readers to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation. The primary data were taken directly from the dialogues and the narratives in *If I Had Your Face* novel by Frances Cha was published in 2020. To analyze the issues, Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth theory is used. To analyze the novel there are some steps were done to collect the appropriate data as follows:

1. First of all, reading the novel to understand the issue that appears in the novel as well.
2. Second, identifying the main issue in *If I Had Your Face* novel.
3. Third, marking the points or quotations that are related to the study.
4. Last, listing the data which are analyzed by using the Beauty Myth by Naomi Wolf.

After collecting the data related to this study, the writer analyzed the data in a qualitative method. To examine the issues in the novel the writer used the beauty myth from Naomi Wolf and a feminist perspective. Hence, this study also used descriptive analysis to interpret and find the answers to the problems based on the theory.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Female Characters' Adjust Their Appearance Depicted in *If I Had Your Face*

The existence of a beauty myth in the novel *If I Had Your Face* forces the female characters to adjust their appearance to survive the impossible beauty standards and even change their appearance by undergoing extreme diets and cosmetic surgery.

Sujin is still complaining about her eyelids. She has been unhappy about them almost the entire time I have known her- before and after she had them stitched. (Cha, 2020, p. 3)

The quote above shows that physical appearance matters a lot. By saying “She has been unhappy about them almost the entire time” can be described the female character feels insecure because she does not meet the standard of beauty. The statement comes out from Sujin who wants to work as a room salon girl “Sujin is hell-bent on becoming a room salon girl.”(Cha, 2020, p. 1) therefore, she tries to find out the way how she can negotiate with her appearance.

Dr. Shim told Sujin that restitching her eyes will not be a problem and that she needs to get both double jaw surgery and square jaw surgery, desperately. He’ll cut both the upper and lower jaws and relocate them, then shave down both sides so that she will no longer have such a masculine-looking jawline. (Cha, 2020, p.13)

The quote above shows the way how Sujin negotiates her appearance by doing cosmetic surgery. Negotiating with appearance is very important to get a better job to earn money. The statement describes the kind of operation that Sujin will do to change her face. Doing cosmetic surgery is very risky even causing death. Unfortunately, the risk of cosmetic surgery is always ignored. “Dr. Shim told Sujin that restitching her eyes will not be a problem” describes Sujin does plastic surgery repeatedly. Repeated cosmetic surgery can lead to infection (Worth, 2012). It can be said women learned to understand their beauty as part of their economy. (Wolf, 2020, p. 20)

The female characters in the novel not only do cosmetic surgery however they deal with makeup to support their appearance. “She will put on a full face of makeup, Kyuri has what seems like a hundred bottles and jar on her vanity”(Cha, 2020, p. 54). It describes makeup as part of the ideal image of female beauty and makes women feel secure with their appearance. However, it traps them in strictly and heavy images of “beauty.” which could make them feel dissatisfied with themselves because of the desire to live up to the beauty standards for the rest of their lives.

Another proof of how the women negotiate their appearance through the beauty myth

You have to wear something really expensive. It’s more about your attitude when you wear it. You have to have that confidence you get from wearing something that costs too much (Cha, 2020, p. 53).

The quotation above shows one of the ways how the female characters negotiate with their appearance. Clothes and women are two things that cannot be separated. Clothes that women wear contribute to giving pleasure to the senses and looks to the eyes. In the above statement, Kyuri suggested that Miho who wants to have lunch with an important person wears expensive clothes “You have to wear something really

expensive” it can be said what women wear matters so much. Therefore, expensive clothes can support a woman’s appearance to look more beautiful and confident. Not only do clothes matter so much to support a woman's appearance, women also try to negotiate by changing their hair

I know it will fade by next week, but for now, it makes me happy, as if I have set off a signal to the world. Already, I have noticed how people react with great caution to someone with fuchsia hair, even if that person is mute (Cha, 2020, p. 148).

The quotation above tells about Ara just dyed her hair. This is how one of the female characters in *If I Had Your Face* novel adjusts her appearance to meet the standard of beauty. Moreover, society is very influential on existing beauty standards where people reward physical appearance more than behavior “Look who it is! Ara! Pink hair! Oh my goodness! And you gained some weight. No, she hasn’t, she’s lost weight” (Cha, 2020, p.155) the quotation tells when Ara meet her family in her hometown after a long time not seeing her family. However, when she got home, her family first criticized her appearance. It can be said the rise of the beauty myth was just one of several emerging societal influences to criticize which women consider beauty or not.

Moreover, the cruel image of women's "beauty" does not stop at what women wear and how they look. Women also try to negotiate their physical appearance with diet to get the ideal body to support their appearance. “They had to go on extreme diets and take pills and all that or the madams would shame them ceaselessly” (Cha, 2020, p. 177) since beauty myth is concerned with physical looks such as faces, clothes, and bodies. The women negotiated to meet these standards, especially with their body shape. The quotation above shows how the female negotiates her body with diet. “They had to go on extreme diets” describe to get the ideal shape, women go on a diet. Dieting is good for weight loss, but extreme diets can cause serious diseases such as eating disorders, anorexia, moreover bulimia.

D. Conclusion

After analyzing previous chapters, it can be concluded the beauty myth in *If I Had Your Face* novel depicted through female characters' lives through the aspects of work, culture, violence, sex, and hunger. In *If I Had Your Face* novel the form of work is indicate the most impacted female characters’ lives. The novel tells about the social life of women in South Korea which determine by the highest standard of beauty. Especially when they entered the workforce, women’s physical appearance matters so much.

Therefore, to meet the beauty standards of the characters in the novel *If I Had Your Face*, they decided to go on an extreme diet and even undergo cosmetic surgery to get the "ideal" appearance to get a job and earn money to make ends meet and survive. The women presented in the novel go on extreme diets just to get their ideal body shape. In fact, extreme diets can cause bulimia and even anorexia. Not only does an extreme diet have a negative impact, but undergoing plastic surgery also has risks that can impact women. In the novel, Kyuri who performs cosmetic surgery feels bad pain after the anesthesia began to wear off. The pain that she suffered made her about

to do suicide. Moreover, the existence of the beauty myth in *If I Had Your Face* novel does not only affect adults but also young adolescents under seventeen years old like Nami. She has undergone cosmetic surgery since her teenage. She has done augmentation of breasts to appeal to the men in her workplace. Undergoing augmentation breasts are not recommended for those under 18 years old. Nami did plastic surgery just to earn money to survive because since her childhood she was an orphan.

Even though the women in *If I Had Your Face* have jobs and make a lot of money, it doesn't bring happiness. They are in debt because they underwent cosmetic surgery not once but repeatedly so they were in debt. The money they earn is only to pay their debts. The only way to free them from their debt is to have sex with the client even if the client is old. The standard of beauty makes the women in the novel suffer and even damage their bodies. Therefore, one of them is thinking of moving to another country where the beauty standards are not as high as in South Korea. Hopefully, this study can be useful for readers and future English Department students who are interested in studying the same topic. However, this study is not perfect. Therefore, the writer would like to suggest it is for another English student whose focal point with the same topic, it is suggested to examine this object study using a different feminist perspective or applying Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to explore women's discrimination in the novel.

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