THE UGLY SIDE OF BEAUTY

The Ugly Side of Beauty: When Obsession Turns the Beautiful into Ugly

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**Abstract**

No one would ever really think to synonymise "beauty" with "ugly". However, there is a saying by Christopher Pike, a New York Best-Selling author, which goes, "nothing is as it seems", and this, too, applies to "beauty". How may you ask does "beauty" not seem beautiful? Why it is when there is an added element known as "obsession". Being obsessed with beauty can turn the most beautiful of people into something much less than beautiful. Among these various negative effects which obsession with beauty can cause are: financial peril, a pessimistic outlook and warped judgement, damaged relationships, needless suffering and bodily modifications, as well as various health risks and ultimately, death.

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We have all heard of it, stories of brave, handsome men who would fight wars over beautiful women; of the beauty of Aphrodite, Cleopatra and Helen of Troy. Even fairy tales such as ‘Snow White’ depict their heroines as beautiful women. This clearly shows how humanity values and interprets “beauty” as “physical attractiveness”. Take for example the fashion industry, where models are considered the embodiment of the fairer sex, the standard of what is attractive, and the epitome of what a woman is and represents, but as the representatives of women do they truly symbolise what a woman of today is? That answer is a very obvious ‘NO’. In reality, instead of representing how women truly are, models have to conform to some ridiculous formula which the fashion industry has deemed as “beautiful”—to be thin, tall with a pretty face. Driven by this misconception, countless are discarded or disregarded for their failure to conform as if they are less of what they are—a woman.

Unfortunately, the fashion world holds great influence over humanity, especially over the female population. Therefore, such a misconception of beauty has unwittingly become a natural standard of beauty among women. Beautiful people, especially women, are believed to have it easier with more opportunities opened up before them whether in relationships or career-wise and are overall more fortunate and happier. This is not a new revelation as demonstrated from the stories we have heard of historical beauties as well as fairy tales. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that women place a lot of importance—some more so than others—in their appearance, as they strive for the happiness and success “beauty” has to offer. People, especially women in particular, can be relentless in their pursuit of beauty, and unfortunately, this has led to an unhealthy obsession that has varying degrees of negative impacts on the people and their lives.

**Defining “Beauty”**

Over the centuries, philosophers, artists and the like have pondered and struggled to define what “beauty” is. It has a meaning that simply cannot be contained within one statement which is proven by the existence of numerous definitions thought up by various people over the years. Freedman (1986); Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) has touched on this elusive quality of "beauty” which “cannot be quantified or objectively measured; it is the result of the judgments of others. The concept is difficult to define, as it is equated with different, sometimes contradictory, ideas". However, there are general definitions of the word “beauty”, for example, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), “beauty” means "excelling in grace of form, charm of colouring, and other qualities, which delight the eye and call forth admiration: a. of the human face and figure: b. of other objects."

Aside from that, there are also definitions of “beauty” which touch on the relation between women’s beauty and men such as that by Naomi Wolf, an influential American author and former political consultant, who defined "beauty” as “a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact" (Wolf, 1991), as well as Sones (2002) who has neatly explained how beauty in women evolved from a psychological desire to attract and hold the interest of men, to gain access to a man's resources for herself and her offspring in order to ensure their survival. It is from these two definitions which shed some light on what drives a woman towards a need—some, desperately—to be beautiful. However, all things have their limits, and it is a known fact that pushing any limit is risky and dangerous. So the question is: When is one considered pushing beyond the limit in the pursuit of beauty?

**The Beauty Obsession**

One is said to be too far gone in the pursuit of beauty when one has resorted to spending beyond one’s means on beauty products or any beauty related procedure as being obsessed with beauty can be financially draining. Dale Archer, a medical doctor, psychiatrist and Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, has appraised how beautiful women usually spend about one third of their income on maintaining their good looks (Archer, 2012). In Venezuela, better known as the beauty queen factory which has won more international beauty pageants than any other country, the obsession and high price tag of beauty is startlingly clear. The article “The Death Of Monica Spear: Venezuela's Insane And Dangerous” by Palash Ghosh, an experienced business journalist, touches on how the beauty-obsessed country has brought about a dangerous trend seen among the female youth as they "...will do anything -- including placing their families deeply into debt -- to "improve" their looks, through attendance at finishing schools and modelling classes and expensive cosmetic surgery on their noses, lips, teeth, breasts, bottoms and various other body parts" (Ghosh, 2014).

Moreover, this “paid” beauty is not without its risks. A separate incident where beauty obsession has driven a woman beyond her financial limits and its aftermath is about Hanieh, a 35-year-old office worker who obtained a bank loan of 70 million rials for a car but used it instead to pay for a nose job. She bought the car and sold it like many other women in order to have sufficient funds for the procedure. However, instead of enjoying a blissful life with a new and prettier her, Hanieh now has to worry about the post-surgery difficulties such as respiratory problems, a dented nose and loss of her sense of smell (Mahmelbaf, 2013). It is unfortunate but there exists such a phrase as “too much” for a reason, and those who do not keep their selves in check tend to get more than they bargained for.

On another note, a person who is obsessed with beauty may end up beautiful on the outside but that does not necessarily mean the same on the inside. Those obsessed with beauty tend to develop a pessimistic outlook on life, and a warped judgement ethically and morally. It may be hard to believe but low self-esteem actually occurs more often than not in beautiful women. Somewhere out there, there will always be someone better or prettier, and those who feel their beauty is their best quality or only redeeming point will feel the blow even harder when faced with reality. They would then find it hard to accept when someone tells them they are beautiful (Archer, 2012). To that effect, some will try to find temporary solace in surgery which later turns into either an unhealthy dependency or into a depression with adjustment problems; or even social isolation, family problems, self-destructive behaviours and anger (Honigman, Philips, and Castle, 2004).

In addition, being obsessed with beauty has a tendency to lead to an eating disorder as a result of constant dieting to achieve today’s “thin” ideal body. Such unhealthy eating habits, which deprive one of one’s basic needs, are known to have negative effects on a person’s psychological well-being. They become obsessed with perfectionism which then takes control of their food consumption habits (Sacker, 2012). According to Sacker (2012), an eating disorders specialist at Langone Medical Center at New York University and author of “Regaining Your Self: Understanding and Conquering the Eating Disorder Identity”, underlying that obsession lies a depression and anxiety, and a lot of emotional trauma. Saltzberg and Chrisler (1995) have further supported by how, psychologically, those ensnared by the unending pursuit of beauty usually end up unhappy, confused, miserable and insecure in terms of their appearance (Saltzberg and Chrisler, 1995).

The obsession with being beautiful does not end its destructiveness there though, relationships, too, suffer blows from the addiction. Patrick Wanis, a Ph.D. holder and Celebrity Life Coach, Human Behaviour & Relationship Expert & SRTT Therapist, criticised about women’s misconception on what really makes a relationship work and what they truly have to offer a relationship which are: “love, affection, sensitivity, nurturing, creativity, humour, vulnerability, compassion, tenderness and so forth” (Wanis, 2011). On a related note, there also lies a problem in how most men fall into a rhythmic thinking of how it is natural to be attracted by appearances especially that of the more beautiful and youthful, that to keep up with such a misguided notion, young women and girls seek out plastic surgery as they believe themselves as incomplete, flawed and damaged goods (Wanis, 2011) which is the case especially in countries like China and Korea. These distressed people especially children may also experience a different effect altogether which is by adopting avoidance behaviours. They start avoiding the rest of humanity by steering clear of socialising and mirrors like they are a plague (Lyness, 2013).

According to Jean Twenge, a psychologist from San Diego State University and author of “The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement”, Twenge argued how today’s society filled with narcissists, fills the world with “less empathy, fewer long-term relationships, more incivility, aggression and cheating” as a society that merely focuses on themselves can never be functional (Twenge, 2009). In fact, U.K. researchers have found that posting too many self-portraits on social media can alienate the person’s friends and family (Miller, 2013). Being body obsessed and narcissistic, it becomes difficult for friendships to maintain its integrity as selfishness and narcissism strips the meaningfulness and devotion in such relationships (Wanis 2011; Twenge, 2009). Before long, the obsession with beauty would create a world of insensitivity and materialism where feelings and selflessness becomes the stuff of stories—comedic stories.

Take young Jenny who has no time to spare. In order to keep up with the society's beauty standard, she would spend ten hours in the gym weekly while coping with a bizarre eating habit that consists of severely restrictive and nutritionally deficient diets. Once, she blacked out during a charity event held in the university. When approached at the clinic after the event to raise concern about her fitness regime she used various self-degradation and self-denial excuses to reason the necessity of her strict routine (Saltzberg and Chrisler, 1995). My heart sank realizing just how little she values herself. Over the centuries, many women had suffered due to believing a certain culture's beauty ideology, chasing and accepting the ideal beauty during the era.

Walking down memory lane, some more examples include the traditional custom of foot binding (Freedman, 1986), Chinese women with small feet during the olden days were considered more petite and of higher social class. These alterations, starting from the early age of four to six were extremely painful and cause unhealthy growth of bone structure. Next, women in Europe during the sixteen century bound themselves into corsets of whalebone and hardened canvas (Baker, 1984). This garment made it difficult to breathe and impossible to bend at the waist. A farthingale which is worn over the corset, extend women’s skirts out from their bodies. It made basic movements and sitting nearly impossible. Brain (1979) explains that when tight corsets was back in fashion in Europe and North America during the mid-19th century, many women choose to wear them when aware that the tight lacing often leads to pulmonary disease and internal organ damage. Fainting and miscarriages among pregnant women was also common. Some would even go to the lengths whereby they get rid of their lower ribs so that their waists could be smaller and tightly laced. These practices created massive inconvenience just so women could feel accepted by the imaginary beholders of beauty. However, many of them are impractical and hinders women from the deeper business of developing their personal goals in life.

Women would do almost anything in the restless hunt for beauty, till a point whereby placing their personal health at stake or even worse, gambling with their lives. Even on a daily basis, each and every one of us were prone to small amounts of hazards from the cosmetic products we apply. Some of these products contain toxic chemicals such as ceruse, arsenic, benzene and petroleum (Schwartz, 1986) and harm us over the long term. The unsafe diet products women consume such as rainbow pills and liquid protein can also make women ill. There is a farm in the African nation of Mauritania whereby young girls were sent to be force fed in the hopes to get married (Weber, 2012). A girl age 12 could weigh a shocking 80kg after a strict routine of consuming fats at a worrying high amount. These fattening farms had since cause rising rate of obesity levels among young girls.

Back in year 1999 already, Nancy Etcoff reports that the number of Americans undergoing voluntary aesthetic surgery is rising at an alarming rate. All around the globe, these surgeries are no longer constrained within the boundaries of repairing terminal disfigure or those caused by accidents and diseases; just about every women nowadays take it as a measure to enhance their bodies (De La Rosa, 2013). However, they are not aware of or choose to ignore the dangers they face putting themselves under the knife. One of the surgery accepting high demand involve surgeons injecting silicon into women's buttocks (Markovits, 2013). Since 2011, this procedure resulted in 15 deaths. How much are we willing to sacrifice in order to achieve this impossible beauty? Does it really have to reach a point whereby lives are taken and all our efforts become invalid to make us realize that beauty is not something we can acquire or consume.

However, in the reality world, the bitter truth is that women benefit from being physically attractive. Research conducted over the range of a few countries has found out that beauty is by all means connected with financial success (Hamermesh, 2013). Like it or not, the tendency of you being hired by a company will also be based on your looks. Bias in favour of prettier women happens everywhere every day. The society assume the outer public appearance to be a mirror to the invisible, inner self (Etcoff, 1999). Those with good looks are perceived as being happier, more sociable and successful than their peers. These are the consequences of being beautiful that no one can erase by denial.

A quote by Plato explains the three wishes of every man: to be healthy, to be rich by honest means, and to be beautiful. Beauty is somewhat a natural desire. Nobody would wake up and hope that they are ugly. Mass media today also played a role in embedding and concreting this thought among the female society (Kilbourne, 2002). The heavy presence of flawless celebrities and characters portrayed in magazines and on screens is what validates young girl's shallow opinion on their external look. It is now essential for every women to be beautiful. With bars set above the stars, this beauty is impossible to attain. It leads the pursuer down the path of obsession, interfering our ability to maintain our life routines, our relationships with others and damages our feelings about ourselves. We simply cannot rely on this so called "beauty" to sustain us.

**Where “True Beauty” Lies**

The obsessive pursuit of the perfect female body is dangerous, it burns a hole through our pockets, hearts and social life. Women should challenge the culture and stop being a slave to the society's beauty standard (Saltzberg and Chrisler, 1995). Women should create a more diversify view by defining their own beauty. The essence of fundamental beauty is to be confident in our own skin. A true, beautiful woman is kind and compassionate to herself and others around her. She focuses on what her inner beauty can offer for aspiration and motivation in life. Her presence touches people's heart and enchants their soul. That is the ultimate key to freedom and a pathway for women to experience the world more genuinely.

Make no mistake, beautiful people care for their health. When asked if I could go for a facial treatment, my grandmother would simply advise me to drink more water and get sufficient sleep. People that are sleep deprived were often less attractive and projects a sloppy outlook. Being beautiful from within can be as simple as following the biological clock, consuming a balanced diet and treating your mind, body and soul well. These habits helps radiate that inner glow. Women should be calm and sincere. Negativity is beauty's enemy. We must steer free from hate, cruelty and lies to be prettier. Joy is radiant, when we are happy, we emit positive energy and people will be attracted to us (Feddenon, 2013). Beautiful people take care of their bodies because they love and value themselves.

Alas, beauty is only temporary. Beauty is youth, it is adored. The whole world could bombard us with tales of Barbra Streisand's beauty, but when her huge talent is taken away, you might rather want to look like Michelle Pfeiffer (Newman, 2000). Being old without any personal achievement or contribution to the society is a life wasted. Being beautiful on the outside is not everything. In life, there are other things that matters such as brain and substance. These are the things that will earn admiration and respect. Take Serena Williams who was named one of the Time's 100 most influential people and Lupita Nyong'o who was named People magazine's most beautiful people for 2014. They do not meet the fair and blond stereotype of how the society judge beauty, rather they play by they own strengths and talent and showed us that there is no shade to true beauty.

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