Scrutinising the Idea of the 'Beautiful' Woman

News:

The picture of what constitutes a beautiful woman in today's world has come to be a very specific, defined image - So much so that anyone can conjure up this image swiftly, due to how familiar the world has become with it.

This standard of the 'beautiful woman' was initially defined by Western Capitalist nations where women who fit this image have been hugely associated with success, confidence and being valued and respected in society. Germaine Greer, the Western feminist and writer, further explains the link between beauty and achievement in her book, The Whole Woman: *"Every woman knows that, regardless of all her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful."*

Comment:

The Western woman prides herself on being strong and independent, holding the belief that she is free to define the image that she wishes to adopt in life – as is claimed under secular liberal societies. But the reality is far removed from this naïve view. The Western capitalist society which values profit over principle has set the standard of what constitutes beauty and it is this specific look which is glamorised in fashion and lifestyle magazines and through the multibillion dollar beauty and cosmetics industries.

Women have been bombarded by the image of beauty that sells on a daily basis through the advertising and entertainment industries. The UK beauty industry secures revenues to the tune of £8.9 billion every year whilst the US cosmetic industry grows by 10% each year. In the US, urban professional women devote up to a third of their income to 'beauty maintenance', and consider it a necessary investment. Far from having the freedom to decide for herself her image the Western woman is in reality under pressure to conform to societal pressures and look good for men who are equally exposed to the same images of what constitutes beauty and hence demand this look when looking for a partner.

The quest for the ideal image is clearly not a choice for the Western woman and the claim that she is free to choose her own image has been proven to be a myth. Since it also is unattainable for most women, instead of building self-esteem it has produced a mentality of insecurity and obsession with appearance as well as a whole host of medical problems. The National Institute of Mental Health in the US found that *'1 in 20 women in the US have anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder'*.

The fact that the woman has become fixated with her looks above all else and is valued in the majority of cases based on her appearance rather than intelligence has damaged her life, value and role in society, ultimately preventing her from equally participation. Under secular liberal values where the woman has come to be viewed by many of the men within the society, simply as a commodity to fulfil their desires rather than a valuable contributor to the society many women face discrimination and sexual harassment in the work place and in society - A study in 1993 by the Industrial Society found that *'54% of women in the UK had been sexually harassed at work'*.

The Western beauty image and the effect it has had on women is poignantly summarised by the writer Naomi Wolf: *'It is like the original Iron Maiden that was a medieval German instrument of torture. It was a body shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a beautiful smiling young woman. The victim who was tortured was slowly enclosed inside her, and then the lid was shut to immobilize the victim who either died from starvation or from some metal spikes embedded in her interior.'*

The question then arises - is achieving this image, what an intelligent woman should sacrifice her time, money and effort to achieve in her life? Should the intelligent woman really be taken in by the deception that surrounds the image of the Western woman? Or should she think carefully about the correct identity and image to adopt for life?

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