

## BEAUTY MYTH AND FEMALE RESISTANCE IN THE MOVIE *I FEEL PRETTY*

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to describe the beauty myth and the female resistance in the movie I Feel Pretty. This research uses gender study which focuses on beauty myth and the female resistance towards the beauty myth. The object material in this study is a chick lit movie, I Feel Pretty. The formal object of this research is gender study that focuses on beauty myth. Data analysis was performed through qualitative descriptive techniques by interpreting the data found in the movie I Feel Pretty and linked to beauty myth theories. Beauty myth has been promoted through the mass media, including the movie I Feel Pretty. However, there are also various forms of resistance performed by the female character to challenge the beauty myth and promote a more inclusive and diverse definition of beauty. This paper tries to highlight some resistances towards beauty myth in this movie, which are being confident, being passionate, and having a good personality. This research eventually finds out that having these traits is a form of resistance against the normalized unreasonable beauty standard.*

**Keywords:** *Beauty myth, female resistance, film, I Feel Pretty*

## INTRODUCTION

The perception of beauty changes over time and so does how women perceive it. In other words, images of beautiful women are all around us and they are portrayed differently from time to time. They are given through the mass media, such as television, fashion magazine, social media, and movies. As Prianti (2013) stated that the beauty of women is presented in all kinds of mass media and forcing women to accept the standards that define what is considered to be the “beautiful women”. People, especially women, consciously or unconsciously accepted this constructed definition of beauty by letting them divide women into categories, beautiful and ugly. In general, woman will follow the standards of beauty that they see and exist in society. The definition of beauty is different in every country and era as it is not something universal but cultural. From the 15<sup>th</sup> until 20<sup>th</sup> century, there will be different beauty standard portrayed by the women who are considered ideal at the time (Sari, 2019: 5). Hence, the depiction of beautiful women in the mass media was considered as the reflection of beautiful woman at that time. Despite the fact that they can contribute to body dissatisfaction, mass media featuring thin ideal images are popular forms of media. Many women and men choose to expose themselves to idealized body images as featured in the media (Mills et al, 2017: 150).

The American movies industry, Hollywood, has been promoting these images of beauty through movies since the twentieth century. Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburns might be the best portrayal of beautiful woman in American classic movies in 50s and 60s. Since then, American movies provided images of beauty for the following years. In 70s, there are Barbra Streisand and Meryl Streep. In 80s, Molly Ringwald was given a nickname as the queen of romance movie at that time. In 90s, there are many actresses got so popular for their role in romantic movies, they are Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan. In 2000s, there are more actresses famous for their role in romantic comedy movies. Names like Drew Barrymore, Sandra Bullock, Reese Witherspoon, Jennifer Anniston, and many more are often associated in romantic genre. These actresses might be said as the face of beauty in their era. The magazine, such as *People* mostly mentioned names from movies industry as the most beautiful women annually (Shultz & Hogan, 2022)

Besides romance movies, chick lit also contributes in giving the portrayal of beauty as the heroine is mostly woman. Chick Lit refers to works that are written by young female writers, about contemporary women's life and struggles, with young women as the target readers (Lu, 2014: 103). The main formula of chick lit genre is a single woman who lives in a city and struggles looking for her identity. Some popular American chick lit movies are *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Sex and*

*the City* (2008), and *Confessions of the Shopaholic* (2009).

The romance genre let the woman finds out that they will be happy if they find and achieve their love and usually ends with marriage as the archetype of romance is the love triumphant. The contemporary formula of romance is the career girl rejects love in favor of wealth or fame, only to discover that love alone is fully satisfying (Cawelti, 1976: 2). The main interest of heroines in chick lit is not love towards the opposite sex but themselves, which can be their career, status, or their body. They struggle about their life and identity. Once they have found who they really are and be able to love themselves then they will find happiness. The stories in chick lit mostly talk about relationship; relationship between man and woman, relationship among friends, relationship between parents and their child, or relationship between boss and the employee. The relationship does not make any segmentation anymore. They are blended. Although story in chick lit mostly emphasizes to show the identity of the heroine but it does not oppose the opposite sex (Dinurriyah, 2014: 18).

*I Feel Pretty* is 2018 movie which tells a story about a single woman, Renee Bennett, who works for a cosmetic firm in the online division. She struggles with her feelings of insecurity and inadequacy about her body. Her biggest wish is to be beautiful and when she hit her head, she believed that she has magically turned into a beautiful woman. By this, she changed into a confident woman who dares to live her life to the fullest. She got her dream job as a receptionist in Lilly LeClaire, a cosmetic firm and she even got herself a boyfriend. However, along with the physical changes she thought she had, her attitude and personality are also changed. She faces new problems, like getting more distant with her best friends and when she thought she changed back to her old self, she lost all of her confidence.

*I Feel Pretty*, like the other chick lit movies, focuses on the heroine's life and how they cope with the issues they face in their life. Aging and marriage are the main issues in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Sex and the City* (2008) movies. Career, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and finding identity issues can be found in *I Feel Pretty* (2018) and *Devil Wears Prada* (2006). It is interesting to see how beauty myth can cause self-loathing in chick lit movies. *I Feel Pretty* movie gives a concept of American women's ideal beauty. Renee hated herself for being fat as she believed that beautiful woman must be thin. She also believes that her happiness depends on the physical look. This movie shows that slim and thin body, toned skin, blonde, and symmetrically beautiful face are the general standard of beauty in America.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by using descriptive analysis with qualitative method, by analyzing beauty myths and female resistance in the movie *I Feel Pretty*. The primary data in this research are the dialogues in the movie *I Feel Pretty*. The secondary data are articles, books, or journals that are relevant to the analysis. The first step of processing data is watching the film and reading the script intensively. Subsequently, analyzing dialogues and narrations in the movie related to the study. The data obtained were analyzed using the theory of beauty myth. Data analysis was performed through qualitative descriptive techniques by interpreting the data found in the movie *I Feel Pretty* and linked to the feminist theory, beauty myth.

## **FINDINGS**

Movies turn out differently in every culture as they are produced by people whose ideas and culture shape the production (Heider in Adi, 2011: 132). What is considered a beautiful woman in Asian movies might be different with the portrayal of beautiful woman in America as beauty standard is something constructed and different in every culture. In America, beautiful women are the women who have charming appearance, glowing skin, moist lips, beautiful cheeks, and perfect face shape (Udasmoro, 2017: 20). Globally, beauty standard in Asia is also influenced by western beauty standard. A cross-culturally accepted standard of ideal beauty features high eyebrows, large eyes, high cheekbones, a small nose, and a narrow face (Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu in Yan and Bissell, 2014: 194). In other words, beauty is not something fixed and constant. As Wolf said in her book *Beauty Myth* (2002: 12) that “Beauty” is not universal or changeless... Its ideals change at a pace far more rapid than that of the evolution of species.

It has been a long time ago that thin body is considered as the ideal body type for women. Ultrathin, ideal body image models and actresses have increasingly been featured in the media from the early 1900s with the thin, short-haired flapper to Twiggy in the 1960s to the majority of today’s fashion models, centerfolds and celebrities being 15% or less of their expected body weight in regard to their age and height, a major characteristic for anorexia nervosa (Martin, 2010: 98). 47 experimental studies have shown that girls and women do report greater dissatisfaction with their body and overall appearance following acute exposure to media images of thin women compared to media images of average sized women or inanimate objects (Want in Mask and Blanchard, 2011: 357).

Hence, there are many Hollywood movies supported that thin women are beautiful and suggested that fat women are ugly. Movies like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), *Shallow Hal* (2001), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *The Duff* (2015) tell the story about how fat women are

undesirable and miserable. Female fat is the subject of public passion, and women feel guilty about female fat, because we implicitly recognize that under the myth, women's bodies are not our own but it belongs to society, and that thinness is not a private aesthetic, but hunger a social concession exacted by the community (Wolf, 2002: 187). Renee Bennett, the main heroine in *I Feel Pretty* movie struggles with this body issue. Her lack of confidence is shown in the beginning of the movie. She is reluctant to tell her shoes size at the gym as there are many people there. After the struggle, she also needs to face the humiliation regarding to her body shape and size from the employee who is ironically a woman.

*Employee: Do we have a double wide shoe. It's just like a regular shoe but it's wider and then it's wider for that. I guess for just for wider feet. You know what, I think we have a male instructor who used to be like a fireman. Maybe he matches your big foot?*

Besides the body shape, some of the other features that are also considered as the standard of beauty in America are the toned skin, blonde hair, and voluptuous body. When Renee believed that she was beautiful, she mentioned some of her body changes that make her feel like a beautiful woman. Some of the changes are the toned skin, the abs, the slim face, and the big breasts and buttocks.

*Renee: Do I look super toned to you? Oh my God, feel my abs! Rock hard, right? I mean, look at me! Look at me jawline! Look at my boobs! Look at my ass! I'm beautiful!*

Face has been the significant part in determining a beauty standard. Nowadays, there are many filters and beauty apps provided and installed in the smartphones to enhance women's physical appearance, especially the face. This proves that the face plays an important role in determining the beauty. Women would edit their photos in order to look more attractive. Social media users have a tendency to modify their physical appearance in order to evade criticism or judgment from others (Maharani et al, 2020: 54). It can be seen from Renee's statement below that in the dating app, people do not care about their profiles or in other word, their personality. It is also mentioned that they also need to hide their flaws, like their double chin, acne and cellulites which can be done by editing their photos using beauty apps.

*Renee: Nobody cares about the profile. No one even looks at the profile. The picture is all that matters and you get a picture of yourself and you feel like really good about it. And you hide your double chin, you hide your acne, and you hide your cellulites and then when the guy meets you in person, he's like so disappointed.*

Blonde hair has been the beauty standard in America since the 90s. It was

popularized by the Barbie doll which was created in the late 1950s. Hollywood actress, such as Marilyn Monroe also supported blonde as ideal beauty (Jones, 2008: 132). When Renee must visit Lilly LeClaire company, she refused to go because she did not feel confident about herself. But her coworker encourages her by saying that she is blonde to boost her confidence. It can be seen that being blonde is a privilege for women in America as it is considered as one of the beauty features.

*Mason: Repeat after me! I am brave!*

*Renee: I am brave!*

*Mason: I am blonde!*

*Renee: I am blonde!*

*Mason: And I got this!*

*Renee: And I got this!*

Mass media such as television, magazines, advertisement, movies, and social media (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and more) plays a big role in spreading beauty myth around the world. Women are constantly bombarded by information in mass media which transmits and reinforces values, norms, and ideals of fashion and beauty via images of models, movie stars, and female celebrities in a variety of media formats (Polivy and Herman in Yan and Bissell, 2014: 194). Lilly LeClaire as a company which engaged in beauty industry advertised their products by hiring beautiful models. In the movie *Devil Wears Prada* (2006), the heroine struggles to work in a fashion industry. She must get accustomed to the fashion industry where she does not have any passion to learn about fashion and how to be stylish. In her first year, she is humiliated and discriminated for her lack of fashion sense. The job market refined the beauty myth as a way to legitimize employment discrimination against women (Wolf, 2002: 21). Fashion has become an important part to determine beauty. Renee felt insecure when she had to visit Lilly LeClaire because she considered herself as not stylish enough that day.

*Renee: I'm not going to Lilly LeClaire. No, I'm wearing bathing suit bottoms cause I have no clean undies. I have a Bed Bath and Beyond bag for my purse. No!*

In some other cases, wild and naughty women are considered sexy and beautiful. They are considered more desirable for men. When Renee was invited to the groupers (group date), she lied to the men in order to make her friends sound like they are naughty and have wild life. In spite of the fact that the men are more interested about their personality rather than their appearance.

*Renee: Actually, a lil bit about Viv that's unexpected, she was thrown out of eight grade for showing everybody her boobies. And About Jane, yes, she's dressed like an old man watering his lawn. It doesn't matter. Because once she gets out of these clothes, she has a sick body.*

*I'm setting you up for success. Just be hotter. You got to lead with your hotness and let them find out how boring you are later.*

### **Female Resistance towards Beauty Myth in the Movie *I Feel Pretty***

The images of beautiful women in chick lit movies are the manifestation of American culture but these images might change with times as beauty is nothing more than a myth. Along with these changes, women feel compelled to take an act of resistance. Beauty standards that don't make sense and are always evolving are a form of oppression for women where their bodies are only seen as mere objects. By using ideas about “beauty,” it reconstructed an alternative female world with its own laws, economy, religion, sexuality, education, and culture, each element as repressive as any that had gone before (Wolf, 2002: 16).

Nowadays, women are encouraged to love themselves and stop worrying about how they look. They need to free themselves from the beauty myth. As the main female character of the story, Renee found out that without being thin and having beautiful face like the models, she can still be confident and love herself. In order to achieve the liberation of the unreasonable beauty standard, there are some acts of resistance that have been done. Some of them are being confident, appreciating oneself, being true to oneself, and being passionate about dream and life.

#### **Confident Women are Beautiful**

It is a common perception that jobs such as receptionist and customer service require the applicants to have a beautiful appearance. The demand for beauty in the appearance and behavior of employees is greater in service-oriented industries like receptionists, flight attendants, and sales representatives, as they frequently engage with customers and strive to create a positive customer experience (Chiang & Saw, 2017). In the movie *I Feel Pretty*, there are some conditions that must be met regarding physical appearance in order to work in Lilly LeClaire as a receptionist. Among all of the requirements, Lilly LeClaire as a cosmetic company is no longer put physical beauty as the requirement for the receptionist job. They prioritize self-confidence for the applicants.

*Renee (reading on the job requirement): Must be stylish and full of confidence. The first face people see when they come to our office, in some ways the real face of our beauty line.*

In the movie, there was actually no change in Renee's physical appearance but many people are attracted to her due to her confidence. Her charming personality attracted people around her, especially the men, Ethan and Grant LeClaire.

*Grant: I'm sure you'll just dazzle them, as per usual. You dazzle my sister, my grandma, me. I don't know how you do it, Renee. But you've gotten a whole lot of*

women who always think they know best to sit up and take notice of you. And what you think and who you are.

### **Woman who Appreciates Herself is Beautiful**

The essence of beauty lies in a woman's ability to appreciate herself, recognizing her worth and embracing her uniqueness with confidence and grace. Renee used to hate her body, but she changed her attitude towards her body when she believed that she has turned into a beautiful woman. She appreciates herself more and this also affects people around her. When a woman appreciates herself, other people around her will see the positive energy which makes her more attractive. Other people's attitude towards them would also change to be more positive. According to the research conducted by Friedman, Prince, Riggio, and DiMatteo (in Nadelkov, 2015) it was discovered that expressivity is closely linked to charisma. Additionally, it is also noted that individuals tend to be drawn to people with an expressive personality.

*Ethan: I'm not perfect but I do think that you are. You're so like yourself or something. I don't know, it's cool. I think a lot of people are confused about themselves. They like obsess over whatever negative quality. They perceive in themselves and they completely miss the thing that really makes them awesome. You like know who you are and you don't really care how the world sees you.*

### **Being a Kind and Funny Woman is Better than Being a Beautiful Women**

Being a kind and funny woman has a special charm that goes beyond the usual standards of beauty. Kindness is considered as a universal language that bridges gaps, fosters connections, and leaves a lasting impact. Furthermore, a woman who can make people laugh may have an undeniably attractive charm. A funny woman would also bring a refreshing perspective to life and spread positivity.

In other words, a good sense of humor could make someone look more attractive than having a good physical appearance. It is also said that having a good sense of humor could make a relationship last longer. Humor is seen as a sign of good genetic traits and, more proximally, desirable psychological qualities like intelligence and creativity. Recognizing someone's sense of humor should enhance the attractiveness of both physically attractive and physically unattractive individuals (Tornquist & Chiappe, 2015). It can be seen by how at first Renee only cares about how she looks. She believes that she will be loved if she is attractive and beautiful. But her friends make her realized that what makes her attractive is her kindness and funny traits.

*Renee: You don't want to go with me because I'm not pretty anymore.  
Viv: Look, why do you think everyone cares what you look like? Like, we're your friends because you were fun and funny and kind. We don't care what you looked like.*

*Jane: Your wildest dream is that you were beautiful? That is so sad.*



### **Women who are passionate about their life and their job are beautiful**

A woman who loves what she does gives a sense of purpose and fulfillment that can be seen through in her daily life. This enthusiasm often leads to excellence in her work, which further elevates her charm. Beauty is often defined by external appearance, but by being passionate about life and career, women may look lively and extremely charming.

In the movie, Lilly LeClaire which is a cosmetic company mentioned that the woman who wants to work as a receptionist needs to be passionate about beauty and dream of sitting in their lobby. Renee confidently responded that all of those traits can be found in her. In the interview, Renee shows great passion for the job that makes her got the job.

*Interviewer: So, what are your goals exactly?*

*Renee: To work here as a receptionist. My only real goal is to come here to this office every day, and help people feel the same way I feel when I step off that elevator, that this is the only place to be.*

### **CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

The portrayal of beauty in movies changes over time as beauty is not something fixed and universal but cultural. American beauty standard has been shown in Hollywood movies and it keeps changing and evolving until now. Thin body and beauty features like blonde hair and slim body are the ideal beauty for American women as shown in *I Feel Pretty* movie. Fashion also determines beauty for women as it is also shown in other Hollywood movies, like *Devil Wears Prada* (2006) and *Confessions of the Shopaholic* (2009). *I Feel Pretty* movie also suggested that wild and naughty women are considered attractive and desirable for men.

In conclusion, the movie *I Feel Pretty* suggested that beauty is no longer about physical appearance but more about personality. Confidence, funny, kind, and passionate are the traits that can make woman beautiful. However, by showing the portrayal of ideal beauty women in the movie, *I Feel Pretty* as a movie about women liberation of body image also agrees with the physical look as the beauty standard in America.

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