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The Curse of Beauty in Carol Ann Duffy's "Beautiful" and Beyoncé's "Pretty Hurts"

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ABSTRACT

The idea that women are only as valuable as their looks is a patriarchal notion that is still encouraged even in the twenty-first century though humanity valorizes progress and forward thinking. This notion sets women back as scrutiny is on a shallow exterior while inner qualities are subverted. Feminist artists like Duffy and Beyoncé have chronicled the pain of beauty in their works and have often blamed fixation on women's looks as an attempt to denigrate their contributions to society and write them out of history. Duffy is renowned for her attempt to deconstruct patriarchy by voicing feminine issues that have hitherto been neglected. Beyoncé equally sheds light on the obsession on a woman's looks that inevitably leads to the erosion of self-esteem, rather than on her potential as a contributing member of society. The ideas of feminist theorists like the beauty myth conceptualized by Wolf (1990) along with concepts of commodification of beauty propagated by Irigaray (1985) and Haraway (1991) will be useful in exploring the traumatic outcomes of a global society's addiction to superficial standards of feminine beauty. While Duffy focuses on the iconic



beautiful women of history, highlighting how beauty turned out to be a curse rather than a blessing, Beyoncé uses the concept of beauty pageants in her attempt to expose the cruelty of feminine objectification. Beauty as an achievement is packaged by the chauvinist beauty industrial machinery as the sum total of a woman's aspiration which leads to low self-esteem.

Key words: *Beauty, Curse, Commodification, Feminism, Objectification.*

1. INTRODUCTION: Conceptualising the Discourse

Duffy (2002) and Beyoncé (2013) are two artists who have addressed the traumatic consequences of society's fixation on beauty as the sole source of feminine worth. In "Beautiful" and "Pretty Hurts" they reveal how the commodification of women's looks can be distressing. The study pays attention to Wolf's (1990) argument that women's commodification in contemporary society is encouraged by a beauty industry (predominantly male) that uses "women's appearance against us" (p. 290). Though Duffy (2002) and Beyoncé (2013) share the view that fixation on a woman's beauty leads to trauma, they differ in conceptualization. The former takes a historical survey of some renowned beauties and their tragic fates while the latter captures the trauma imposed on women through the beauty queen pageant machinery. Wolf (1990) takes a historical perspective to argue that each epoch has utilized a calculated patriarchal machinery of beauty to brainwash women. Duffy's "Beautiful" aligns with the idea of the historical brainwash as it debunks the myth that beauty is all women should aspire to. Chronicling the experiences of beautiful women from legend and history like Helen of Troy, Lady Diana Spencer, Marilyn Monroe and Cleopatra, Duffy indicates that they were tragic heroines and their gorgeousness was their tragic flaw. Although these women made numerous contributions in their specific domains -Princess Diana was known for her philanthropic works especially cleaning up mine-fields while Cleopatra upheld the autonomy of Egypt against the incursion of the Roman Empire - they were only known for their physical



beauty. The poet dwells on the sensational aspects of their lives to emphasize on the superficial perception of women. The human beauty value concept postulated by scholars like Sunwo and Yuri (2018) suggest that women are environmentally brainwashed to see value in standardized precepts of beauty.

Beyoncé captures the beauty pageant as an outmoded stereotypical contest that results in psychological trauma. The young beauty queen attempts to live up to the conflicting and unattainable standards but fails dismally and to Wolf (1990), this is beauty pornography promoted by male dominated media, cosmetics and fashion industries to sell useless products. This is attained by creating a subliminal problem of inadequacies in the subconscious of women. The feminine body has been a problematic aspect of feminist discourse because of its relation to the issue of objectification. Haraway (1991) insists that unless gender binaries are deconstructed and replaced with the concept of the cyborg⁴², the objectification of the feminine body will continue. The cyborg is gender neutral thus eliminating the need for the commodification of the feminine body. Wolf (1990) uses the metaphor of the lipstick to posit that women have a right to look the way they desire without guilt or fear of objectification. The lipstick is opposed to the cyborg since it projects femininity while the latter encourages neutrality as a defense mechanism; to Wolf, a woman should not suppress herself because of societal censor. Both Haraway (1991) and Wolf (1990) propose extreme solutions to female objectification which creates more conundrums within human interactions. Gender neutrality eliminates the unique attributes that gender diversity contributes to society. Haraway (1991) indicates the proposition of the cyborg as ironic since:

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction...liberation rests on the construction of the

⁴² "The Cyborg Manifest" was published by Haraway in 1991 wherein she proposes the cyborg as a solution to female objectification.



consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. (pp. 65-66)

The awareness of the extremity of the cyborg as the future of humanity underscores the view that feminine oppression must be combated at the risk of mechanistic transformation. As a socialist feminist, Haraway (1991) holds the view that tremendous sacrifices are required including the de-feminisation of women. Although inspired by fiction, contemporary debates on gender pronouns suggest the potential for realization. The idea is appealing for women who seek to avoid the trauma experienced by women portrayed by Beyoncé and Duffy.

Feminine beauty as a curse is oxymoronic since patriarchy upholds the concept as the height of edification. Great (male) artists throughout history have paid homage to feminine beauty icons from Homer's portrayal of Helen of Troy to Leonardo Da Vinci's depiction of the Mona Lisa's smile and more. Yet, Beyoncé and Duffy portray the physical and psychological torture that women of great beauty seem to endure. One would argue that Helen of Troy would not be happy with the legacy of destroying Troy. Reflecting on the poetic visions, the tragic deaths of Marilyn Monroe and Lady Diana clearly indicate that pretty hurts, just like the chronicling of the psychological strain witnessed in the life of Beyoncé's beauty pageant queen. Despite the apparent anguish of the personae understudy, contemporary society retains the notion that women should aspire to certain notions of attractiveness. This begs the question; are women culpable or are they victims of such situations? From Duffy's and Beyoncé's artistic visions, it is evident that society's fixation on perpetual feminine beauty rather than on women's intellectual potential enhances the subjugation of women with traumatic ramifications on their physical and psychological wellbeing.

Third wave feminists' ability to synthesize arguments that have raged within feminist discourse pertaining to the concept of beauty indicates its relevance to this current endeavor. Some feminists look at the fashion trends and their evolution as particularly calculated to restrict women.

2. THE BEAUTY MYTH FIXATIONS

Wolf (1990) observes that the beauty myth is increasingly reinforced as women gain status in society. Using physical appearance to create low self-esteem among women is a chauvinist agenda. She outlines five areas in which women are affected by the beauty myth and these include: work, religion, sex, violence and hunger. Wolf (1990) opines that patriarchy utilizes the iron maiden mentality to subjugate women. The iron maiden to the critic represents societal expectations and assumptions about women's bodies wherein they are made to feel inadequate and suffer body image problems that are as chronic as "the unwilling Victorian hypochondriac felt ill" (p.17).

The image of the Iron Maiden suggests the inferiority mentality that a commercialized society intentionally uses to brainwash women. Although the traditional Iron Maiden was a physical contraption, the contemporary one is societal double standards. Beyoncé and Duffy explore these double standards in their art when they focus on society's fixation looks. There is financial gain in a woman's pain as evident in the different cosmetic procedures that are promoted to give women the 'standard looks'.

Guilt is a pervasive feeling that arises from the scrutiny that women face in attempting to meet up with outlandish standards of beauty. Wolf (1990) avers that guilt stems from the feeling of shame that women experience for conforming to the outrageous standards of beauty encouraged by a commerce driven society. Beyoncé's pageant queen exhibits that sense of guilt since she is not strong enough to reject societal dictates. Though she looks beautiful and poise on the outside, she is a psychological wreck as evident in her meltdown when she fails to win the pageant. The turmoil is more devastating because "ain't got no doctor, or pill that can take the pain away/the pain is inside...it's the soul that needs surgery" (L37, 39) because she cannot accept herself. Wolf further avers that patriarchy also imposes guilt on women by imposing an unattainable sexual fantasy; "summoned out of political fear on the part of male-dominated institutions threatened by women's freedom, and it exploits female guilt and apprehension about their liberation" (p.16).



Irigaray (1985) takes a Marxist approach to expose the commodification of women through the concept of beauty. She posits that women's bodies are abstracts of masculine desire. These bodies are indistinguishable because they have "identical sublimations" and "all these objects now manifest just one thing" (p.175). The theorist uses of the mirror imagery to illustrate her perception of the commodification of the female body. To Irigaray (1985), any woman who does not meet these standards loses her "usefulness and exchange value...commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man... they give up their bodies to men as the supporting material of specularization, of speculation" (p.177). Although Irigaray is criticized for her essentialism, her comments about the negative representations of women and the intentional misrepresentation of true femininity are relevant to the objectification of women. Her premise derives from Simone de Beauvoir who insists that no one is born a woman but becomes one through societal conditioning.

Both Beyoncé and Duffy use their artistic visions in "Pretty Hurts" and "Beautiful" to debunk the idea that beauty makes a woman happy and this has received varying scholarly interests. Feminist scholars have extolled the merits of Duffy's poetry especially her dedication to emancipation discourses of marginalized groups especially women. The poet has consistently explored the various ways in which patriarchy stonewalls women's achievement and progress. Equally, Beyoncé's attempt to show the downside of society's fixation on feminine beauty by cataloguing the psychological turmoil of the pageant queen has received mixed critical responses. Several feminist scholars like Tinsgley (2015) and Green (2019) indicate that the artist is part of the problem since she seems to be the embodiment of that edified superficial standard of beauty. Tinsgley's perception is more of ad hominem considering the fact that she disregards Beyoncé's underling message. The artist has documented her own struggles to keep up the standards dictated by a chauvinist entertainment industry in an effort to convey her message of emancipation.

Feinstein (2017) explores *Feminine Gospels* as a book that portrays women in all their forms. Focusing on "Beautiful" the critic declares that the



poem is about “a series of women who appear to be manifestations of the same being, defined only by the ability to excite the desire of men” (www.theguardian.com). Although “Beautiful” embodies elements of women’s ability to arouse masculine sexual desire, the poet focuses on how this desire is animated by their beauty which often ends tragically for the women. Feinstein negates the fact that these women are regarded as trophies with their looks being the only interesting quality. This objectification erodes their humanity in ways that illuminates Simone de Beauvoir’s idea that one is not born a woman but becomes one through negating and subjugating roles ascribed by society. Reducing the woman to an object of male gratification and child birthing vessel represents the objection of this scholar.

Brown (2017) comments on Duffy’s revisionism of history in her attempt to voice women who have been marginalized by history in order to expose feminine objectification. The scholar makes use of binary opposition like master/servant, public/private and more to indicate the archaic nature of marginalization and the successful attempt of the poet to undermine them. Duffy’s historical revisionism as an effort to redress the wrongs against women has equally been examined by other scholars like Coussens (2009) and Reis (2004).

Beyoncé’s “Pretty Hurts” like Duffy’s “Beautiful” has received its share of critical appraisal. Critics are divided on the artist’s portrayal of the trauma that underlines the attempt to meet commercialized beauty standards and this current endeavour supports the inclination that forced standards of beauty are devastating to women’s wellbeing and development. Critics like Mustika (2017), Green (2019), Vernallis (2017) and Tingsley (2015) are among those that have analyzed Beyoncé’s “Pretty Hurts” from the perspective of the relevance of beauty in the life of a woman. Mustika (2017) attempts a feminist exploration of the body image issues raised in the song. The critic dwells on the fact that being pretty becomes the central achievement for women which leads to unhappiness. The paradox is glaring since many are brainwashed to thinking that being pretty is synonymous to happiness.

Green (2019) explores the standards of beauty that seek to create competition among women enhancing low self-esteem. Green observes that the song questions the moral dilemma of beauty by juxtaposing the emotional torture exposed by Beyoncé in her song, though the artist seems an embodiment of the standard of beauty that society commodifies. Although Green seems to convey that Beyoncé is part of the problem because she fits into the criteria of beauty, one can argue that this makes her more aware of the stress related to the cultivation of such good looks which she has articulated in “Pretty Hurts” albeit being a seemingly willing victim.

The problematic depiction of beauty and its psychological implications in Beyoncé’s “Pretty Hurts” has equally been investigated by Tinsley (2015). This critic reiterates that while many women cannot be said to be beautiful in reflection to the glossy standards projected by magazines, they can relate to the double standards society has in relation to women’s potential. Beautiful women are not expected to be intelligent since their looks are enough to get them through life. Unfortunately, “Pretty Hurts” opens up psychological conflict both for pretty and plain women, increasing the outrage among some feminist critics on society’s superficial standards.

3. MEDIA SCRUTINY “ACT LIKE A FUCKING PRINCESS”

Beyoncé (2013) and Duffy (2002) have exposed the ways in which media scrutiny has insidious consequences that include death and inner turmoil. Media scrutiny in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has further emphasized the curse of beauty evident in the lives of numerous beauty icons. Duffy uses iconic women like Lady Diana and Marilyn Monroe to depict the tragic outcome of media scrutiny on beautiful women. Being trailed by the paparazzi does not help the state of mind of these women who are treated like mannequins who are only valuable when posing for the entertainment and financial benefit of the media. “Pretty Hurts” equally shows the intrusive ways in which media scrutiny can increase psychological torture. Through media scrutiny, the objectification of the



feminine becomes more evident though it is part of the culture within which the artist participates.

Lorde (1984) also comments on society's objectification of women which supports that harsh media scrutiny obliterates her humanity. She focuses on the dominant binaries of opposition that promote the idea that the masculine gender is superior to the feminine making it the right of the former to dominate the latter. Lorde (1984) adds that the binaries of superiority typically held by the privileged part of society are perpetrated by the mythical norm. Beauty represents a shallow perspective as opposed to intellectual attributes because "the closer women come to power, the more physical self-consciousness and sacrifice are asked of them...beauty becomes the condition for a woman to take the next step" (p.28). Marilyn Monroe is depicted in "Beautiful" as an iconic beauty whose life has no value beyond her looks. The media chases her mainly because of her looks; her only valuable asset: the camera loved her, close-up, back-lit/ adored the waxy pouting of her mouth/ her sleepy, startled gaze... guys fell in love/ dames copied her" ("Beautiful" p. 12). The paparazzi commodify her looks through the sale of images and her photographs since her attractiveness has made her a public commodity. She becomes the conduit through which other women are converted into the quest for a superficial beauty. Media scrutiny has become more intrusive in the hyper reality we currently exist in yet Princess Diana's tragic experience amplifies the problem. Duffy depicts Diana as one of the tragic heroines whose demise results from her beauty. Through the lens of the media, Diana is larger than life and every aspect of her life is scrutinized. Her marriage to Prince Charles, the birth of her two children and her divorce are public knowledge because of media infatuation. This media scrutiny became intrusive especially after the divorce when Diana attempted to live an ordinary life. Her relationship with Dodi Fayed caused a lot of consternation within the British media establishment which became extremely invasive and insulting "*act like a fucking princess/ how they loved her/ the men of the press/ give us a smile, cunt*" ("Beautiful" p.12).



Diana is reduced to a role - that of a princess which comes with expectations that society extols. Even after divorcing Prince Charles who cheated on his wife with Camilla Parker Bowles, his current wife, the royal family still disapproved against Diana having romantic relationships. When she is instructed to “act like a fucking princess”, it is not because she is doing something wrong, but simply because she is going against the script by showing her humanity. The tone of the poet is ironic and sarcastic when she says the men of the press loved Diana especially after deriding her. The paparazzi are traditionally men whose focus on offensive coverage of female celebrities is well documented. The use of derogatory words like ‘fucking princess’ and ‘cunt’ in reference to Diana shows the violation of privacy that she suffered. Following Irigaray’s logic in “Woman on the Market” there is that suggestion that Princess Diana is treated horribly by the paparazzi because she breaks the norm by divorcing her husband. Irigaray (1985) opines that “woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of a man’s labor” (p.175). When Monroe is juxtaposed with Diana, one sees the plausibility of Irigaray’s assessment. The former is passive and needs validation from the powerful man in her life while the latter is assertive and breaks from the relationship. Yet their beauty curses them equally, as media scrutiny also contributes to their trauma.

The tragic dead of Princess Diana occurred when her car crashed in an attempt to evade the paparazzi in France. The tragedy is captured thus “and her blue eyes widened/to take it all in: the flashbulbs/ the half-mask flags, the acres of flowers” (“Beautiful” p.14)

The invasive nature of media scrutiny is made manifest as the paparazzi keeps capturing her till the end. The panic she felt is suggested in the widening of her eyes while the flashlights of the cameras continue to film her as she gradually dies. Even her funeral is a spectacle indicating how beauty had turned her into an object. Living in the spotlight and constantly being scrutinized is clearly unhealthy because of the invasion or deprivation of privacy. Lady Diana’s tragic dead is indicative of this



concern although the findings of the Inquest⁴³ published in 2008 claimed her death was as a result of willful neglect on the part of her chauffeur, Paul Rees-Jones. This ruling cannot undermine the fact that her car crashed because of the attempt to outrun the paparazzi.

Media scrutiny also has an invasive effect in the life of the pageant queen depicted in Beyoncé's "Pretty Hurts". Her entire life is in the limelight and this inevitably leads to psychological breakdowns though she is poised and regal. Life for the young woman is measured through pageants and nobody cares about her inner turmoil. She wants to be happy and the pageant life does not fulfill this aspiration since she is always the runner up. Her trauma is captured thusly "pretty hurts/we shine the light on whatever's worse/ perfection is the disease of a nation...tryna fix something/but you can't fix what you can't see/ it's the soul that needs surgery" ("Pretty Hurts" L 13-21). Knowing that she can never be good enough is deeply harrowing though she has to constantly try to fit into that perception. The obsession over perfection is clearly problematic since there is no set standard of beauty. Every group has its own standard increasing the mental torture that the pageant queen is already undergoing. The focus on outer beauty is clearly ironic because it is the inner self that needs healing. The myopic view of society undermines the psychological issues that pervade women's health. It is the psychological torture that the pageant queen undergoes while struggling to be perfect that has caused critics like Green and Tingsley (2015) to insinuate that Beyoncé seems to subscribe to this ideal of beauty even though it takes a gruesome toll on women.

Critics like Sutter (2008) have explored the associated effects of media scrutiny on public figures. Sutter calls it the media scrutiny paradox because it leads to private and reputation costs. The more scrutiny an individual receives, the higher the risk of catching them in bad behavior considering the fact that no one is perfect. The fear of being caught in a

⁴³ The inquest referred to the findings of the investigations into the causes of Diana Spencer's tragic death published in 2008.



compromising situation therefore leads to tragedy as evident in the lives of the heroines chronicled by Duffy and Beyoncé. Their experiences are similar to those of other celebrities like Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Miley Cyrus and more whose private lives were scrutinized by the media to the point where the public only associated them with antithetical behavior. The human beauty value is consistent in these cases since the paparazzi do not chase random women but those who are perceived to uphold societal expectations of beauty.

4. DEMEANING BEAUTY/ THE DUMB BLONDE CONCEPT; “WHAT’S IN YOUR HEAD IT DOESN’T MATTER”

The dumb blonde concept is a pejorative idea which suggests that beautiful women are shallow and stupid. This stereotype has been enhanced by popular culture for decades and is mostly evident in movies wherein beautiful blonde women play naïve and dimwitted roles. As a precept, it is predicated on the premise that a beautiful blonde woman does not have to cultivate herself intellectually since she has her looks to fall back on. Rosalie Duthe is credited as the first dumb blonde in literary history; a character in *Les Curiosite de la Foire*. Hollywood has cast its share of dumb blondes including Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly, Jayne Mansfield and Jean Harlow. These women are supposed to be contented with their good looks while any attempt to work on intellectual qualities is discouraged. Lady Diana Spencer was a philanthropist with an interest in helping the underprivileged and banning mine fields, yet she received so much criticism for interfering. Interest was rather focused on her looks and in whom she was dating after divorcing Prince Charles. It is this demeaning quality of beauty that has encouraged feminists like Haraway (1991) to advocate for the cyborg to replace the feminine to avoid denigration and objectification. Wolf also addresses the issue of the dumbness of women especially the conception that “women are so dumb” (p.111) by educated male colleagues by averring that “women are “so dumb” because the establishment and its watchdogs share the cosmetics industry’s determination that we are and remain “so dumb” (p.111).



The dumb blond concept is illustrated in "Pretty Hurts" because physical looks are valued over intellectual prowess. The title of the song is an oxymoron since the idea of beauty has been established as one of the elevating principles of a woman's life. A beautiful woman has everything she desires because of her gorgeousness. Yet, Beyoncé presents a realistic perspective wherein the woman's quest for prettiness leads to torture and trauma. The artist's trauma derives from the fact that a woman's worth seems to be only skin deep as she has nothing else to offer her society. In "Pretty Hurts" the persona's mother reflects this patriarchal expectation, "Mama said, you're a pretty girl/ what's in your head it doesn't matter/ brush your hair, fix your teeth/what you wear is all that matters" ("Pretty Hurts" L5-8). One realizes that there are no expectations of intellectual competence for beautiful women; all they ought to do is look pretty. Inner qualities are dismissed without the consent of the young woman. It is ironical that her mother is the voice of patriarchy as she encourages the daughter to concentrate on her physical appearance. Women have struggled to overhaul the conception of worthlessness through hard work but the patriarchal agency is still actively enhancing the negative image. Unfortunately, women have been used as the tool of patriarchy for centuries through coercion and brainwash as evident in the perception of the persona's mother. The complex relationships between women especially the mother-daughter relationship as witnessed in "Pretty Hurts" has been explored by Irigaray (1985) using Greek mythology as her point of inference. She uses Demeter and Persephone to articulate her point, the abduction of the latter with the aid of her father leads to the devastation of the former. Since Demeter is the goddess of agriculture, her mourning brings winter and bareness which Zeus cannot tolerate so he makes a pact with Hades to allow Persephone to return to earth for half the year. In this myth, women are subjected to the machinations of men and their relationships depend on masculine approval. The voice of patriarchy is dominant in the conflicting expectations laid out pertaining to a woman's looks in "Pretty Hurts" and Wolf (1990) describes these patriarchal beauty standards as, to the feminist "the mass depiction of modern woman as a "beauty" is a con" (p.16). The attempt to erode the woman's confidence



through mind games is equally adumbrated by sneaky media content that always points on the flaws of women. Irigaray (1985) indicates the various ways through which language prevents women from forming their own opinions since language does not take into account female subjectivity. The conflicting messages of the media in "Pretty Hurts" expose this notion "blonder hair, flat chest/TV says bigger is better/South beach, sugar free/vogue says thinner is better" (L22-25).

Feminists like Naomi Wolf have questioned the cosmetic industry and its agents for encouraging women to aspire to expectations of beauty meant to strengthen a feeble shallow image. The image of the dumb blonde is constructed to intentionally subvert the effort of women's rights activists. Beauty pageants are often used to popularize this message as evident in the scenario in "Pretty Hurts". Typical beauty pageants are stream lined to judge women according to physical appearance thus challenging women to focus on how they look while encouraging them to valorize ignorance. The persona in "Pretty Hurts" has different aspirations and sees the beauty pageant queen tag as demeaning and psychologically traumatizing, yet she cannot escape. *South Beach* and *Vogue* are beauty magazines and the conflicting standards show the confusion that leads to psychological trauma not only for beauty pageant queens but for impressionable young women. Wolf terms the magazines "as the gospel of a new religion" (p.86) emphasizing the degrading intention of the industry with rites that seek "to isolate women" (p.89) leading to a "private distortion of self-image" (p.89).

In Duffy's "Beautiful", Marilyn Monroe is depicted as the typical dumb beauty whose relevance to society is only skin deep. Her humanity is inessential as long as she looks good and presents a beautiful picture every day: "dumb beauty. She slept in an eye-mask...drugged, till the maid came... painted the beauty on in beige/pinks, blues. Then it was coffee, pills, booze... it was put put on the mink" ("Beautiful" p.13).

Dumb beauty is a phrase that has been associated with women and not the invention of the poet. Her portrayal constitutes an attempt to describe the traumatic experiences of perceived beautiful women. These



women are regarded as ornaments and mostly managed to keep their looks as their selling point. Drugs are used to manage Monroe as the above excerpt indicates like sleeping pills and energy pills in addition to alcohol and caffeine. For the persona, the woman is more of an object as evident in the use of the pronoun 'it'. The reference is intended to expose the fact that the woman's will is not solicited in this commodification of her looks.

Fame for this artist does not seem to come from her talent but rather from her looks. This is emphasized in the poem when the persona states "they filmed her famous, filmed her beautiful" (p.12). Photographers seem to see her just like an object and not a person. The endless presence of the paparazzi is evident "they filmed her harder, harder, till her hair was platinum". The loss of self is echoed in the aforementioned line as evident in the attempt to improve on her looks. She becomes so alienated from herself to the point where she becomes a platinum blonde in order to keep the appeal. This is juxtaposed with her true hair color that is glimpsed after her dead; "the smoking cop who watched /as they zipped her into the body-bag noticed/ her strong resemblance to herself, the dark roots/ of her pubic hair" (p.13).

As already established, Marilyn Monroe is a woman who seemed cursed by her beauty considering the negative associations it brought. Duffy captures the essence of her fame and the ways in which her studio exploited her. Monroe was kept on by MGM not because of her talent but because of her star power and ability to intrigue the paparazzi by dubbing her and Shelley Winters as "Hollywood Blondes" (Oliver p.12). Emily Oliver avers that Marilyn Monroe was intentionally depicted as a sex symbol which led to "an uncomfortable societal obsession with her physical image (p.3). Duffy focuses on her self-destructive behavior which included drug and alcohol abuse and a relationship with President Kennedy. The studio encouraged the relationship which was clearly stressful considering Kennedy was a married man as well as the most powerful man in the world. The prepping recounted in the excerpt above is for a performance "somebody big was watching her-/ white fur, mouth at the mike... *Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday, Mr President* (p.13).



The manner in which the various women chronicled in the poem are handled further reinforces the dumb blonde ideology. Helen of Troy is famous for being the most beautiful woman in history and this beauty according to Homer launched a thousand war ships. Apart from this fact, there is nothing recorded about Helen's personality or mental capacity. As noted by the narrative persona, she is famous for being beautiful "beauty is fame" (p.9). The persona is emphatic when she declares that "beauty is fate" (p.14).

5. BEAUTY AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION; "AND FELT HIM WANT HER AS HE DID"

In correlation to the dumb blonde stereotype, sexual exploitation is equally associated with the commodification of a woman's looks. Sexual exploitation is another aspect that beauty seems to attract which Duffy and Beyoncé in "Beautiful" and "Pretty Hurts" emphasize on since consuming relationships becomes the ultimate victory for men. The most prominent is the manner in which the media focuses on their sexual appeal in ways that erodes any sense of privacy. Irigaray's essentialism especially her mimetic theory deplores the aspect of resubmitting women to outmoded stereotypes that do not represent their experience. Sexualizing the feminine is one of the ways in which patriarchy insistently and unfaithfully repeats a negative view. The feminine body is subjective and silenced; it is spoken for and acted on, creating issues of repression and exploitation. Irigaray (1985) further posits that the desirability factor equally makes beautiful women more prone to sexual exploitation because they are in the minority.

Marilyn Monroe was not considered an A list actor even by her production studio, yet her sexual appeal was utilized for the purpose of publicity. The manner in which her love affair with President Kennedy was sensationalized further shows the correlation between beauty and sexual exploitation. The numerous affairs that Monroe had and her several marriages are publicized to augment her image of a sex bombshell; "guys fell in love/ an athlete licked the raindrops from her fingertips/ to quench his thirst. She married him". This is a reference to

Monroe's second husband DiMaggio, a former baseball player. Another reference is made about her last husband; "a poet came/ found her wondrous to behold. She married him/ the whole world swooned" (pp.12-13). The writer Arthur Miller was Monroe's third husband whom she married in 1956. All the affairs and marriages suggest that as a sex object, a woman must be owned by a man. Being a sex symbol is not a compliment to the woman, it rather seems like a license of possession for the man.

Wolf (1990) views the concept of beauty as patriarchal commercialisation of women since both encourage the commodification of women for various ends. The poem "Beautiful" delves into mythmaking in her exploration of the curse that has been associated to stunning women from classical times. Her first heroine is Helen of Troy, credited with causing the Trojan War. It is infatuation and not necessarily honor that propelled the Greek princes to launch a rescue mission. The fact that "she won the heart/ of every man she saw" (p.8) and they all "swore to be true to her till death" is indicative of the fact that Helen is more of a trophy than a person. It is ironical that a war that destroys a kingdom results from a woman's attempt to exercise her freewill: "so when she took a lover, fled.../ a thousand ships/ on everyone a thousand men" (p.8).

Cleopatra is the only heroine who seems to utilize her sex appeal for her own gain. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* suggests that the demise of Caesar was caused by his inability to resist Cleopatra's charms. He spent too much time in Alexandria leading to members of the Roman Senate plotting his death. The dramatic manner with which she introduces herself to Caesar "she'd tumbled from a rug at Caesar's feet/ seen him kneel to pick her up/and felt him want her as he did/ she had him gibbering in bed by twelve" ("Beautiful" p.10). Her audacious nature is evident in the above excerpt since her intention to seduce Julius Caesar is apparent. Considering that he falls for her upon laying eyes on her suggests that her power of seduction is exceptional. Here, this beauty is unafraid to use her good looks to exploit men in order to attain her goals.



Cleopatra's seductive ability is further evident in the ways in which she intrigues Caesar. She combines her feminine beauty with tough traits that include her ability to gamble, match any man at drinking games and gout game during hunts. This combination is intoxicating as evident in the choice of words; "he crouched with lust.../she let her shawl slip down to show her shoulders, breasts.../made him fuck her as a lad.../swoon on her flesh for months" (p.12). Without her ability to be sexually desirable, a woman does not seem to have much worth in the world of men. Cleopatra, the co-monarch of Egypt, has to use her sexuality to stop Julius Caesar from taking over her country and also to consolidate power by eliminating her weak brothers.

Sexual exploitation seems concomitant with a woman's beauty and one of the ways in which the feminine gender seems useful. Sexual desirability enhances the role of the woman as "the other", an object that can be possessed. It is this aspect that feminist critics like Irigaray (1985) attempt to deconstruct.


6. CONCLUSION


Beauty is often perceived as a gift that makes the bearer outstanding and blessed. Incidentally, Duffy and Beyoncé in "Beautiful" and "Pretty Hurts" have demonstrated through their portrayal of several legendary beautiful women that great beauty invites tragedy. From Helen of Troy whose beauty led to the destruction of Troy because she chose to elope with another man to Diana Spencer, Marilyn Monroe and Cleopatra, these paragons of beauty have encountered problems because of society's fixation with their looks. Through a survey of these iconic women, there is a realization that patriarchal double standards are constantly evolving, using different agencies to attain the subjugation of the feminine. By encouraging women to concentrate on their physical appearances, their contributions to progress are subverted while their commodification is upheld.

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