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From «Pretty Woman» to «Pretty Women»

Preface to the book by Dewi Nurwantari *Pretty Women*

This is a book about feminine beauty in its plurality and its diversity, and thus has a fitting title. «Pretty Women» is the plural form of «Pretty Woman», a title with which many of us are familiar. I remember Roy Orbison on the radio singing, again and again, «Pretty woman, walking down the street», a song which has maintained popularity over more than five decades. More recently, the movie «Pretty woman» was one of the early successes of Julia Roberts.

These two highlights of popular culture however each addressed only one specific woman. With this book we have now in hands, authored by Dewi Nurwantari, it is different: it shows us that there are many ways to be a pretty woman, and that every country and period has its own «pretty women», corresponding to the norms of female beauty dominant at that time and in that culture.

As we are reminded, the beauty of women in imperial China was dictated by the size of the feet, the smaller the better. On the other hand, the beauty of women as depicted by the seventeenth-century Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens contrasted with the late twentieth-century ideal of slimness. The discussion of these and other examples in this book is never sensationalist: notwithstanding its light tone, the scientific approach is maintained. The phenomena and ways of thinking are placed in their contexts and based on reliable sources such as renowned authors in the fields of anthropology, sociology and history.

Why are so many women obsessed with their physical appearance, and prepared to undergo a lot of suffering for it? Usually, the basic reason is an effort to please the men, and particularly so in the quest for a «good» marriage partner. This is one of the many areas of society where gender inequality is obvious: women, however not always conscious of this, are prepared to align with what is in final analysis a male desire. It is thus not surprising that great feminist authors, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan have paid ample attention to the topic of women's outward appearances, and that their ideas have a distinguished place in Dewi Nurwantari's book. A frequent reference and in fact a strong basis for the first part of her book is the essay on «The Beauty Myth». In this landmark of feminism, published in 1991, Naomi Wolf shows how «beauty», when applied to women, is a social construction, such as this is defined by the patriarchal system in order to continue its hegemony.

We might also think of the commercial aspects of promoting certain ideals of beauty. Professionals and big enterprises can make a fortune with the marketing of biochemical products or the application of certain types of surgery only intended for the «refinement» of the female body, according to dominant norms. And what to say about certain types of mutilations just for financial gain?? A flagrant case, also described by Dewi Nurwantari, is the so-called neck-stretching among the Padaung Karen living in northern Thailand. The use of neck-rings by women and girls has been a traditional custom and was considered to add to their beauty. However, in order to attract tourism, the members of this impoverished ethnic group have intensified this custom and increased the number of neck-rings for women, thus conferring them an exotic appearance and the nickname of «giraffe-women». The permanent damage for their anatomy and general health has been considered of less importance.

The harm which may be provoked by the desire for a beauty ideal is in many parts of the world noticeable in the numerous cases of eating disorders, such as bulimia and anorexia. Women not happy with the image they see in the mirror submit themselves to rigorous diets or unhealthy eating habits, which may lead to severe illnesses and even death.

It may seem that all women want to be beautiful - but that is not completely true. Being pretty can have negative consequences for women. For example, there is a general idea in the western world that beautiful women are not intelligent, and vice-versa. Also, good-looking women are more prone to be a victim of sexual harassment, and to suspicions about their morality. An old song in rural northern Portugal deplores the dilemma of (young) women: «Minha mãe, minha mãe, não é fácil ser mulher. Se é bonita, ganha fama, se é feia, ninguém a quer» (« My mother, my mother, it is not easy to be a woman. If you are pretty, people start to gossip, and if you are plain, nobody wants you [to marry].»).

The Bible tells us stories about women who had to suffer sexual harassment and worse because of their beauty, as was the case of Susanna and Bathseba. And what to think about the title and contents of the much-acclaimed book by Eka Kurniawan: *Beauty is a wound?* (*Cantik itu luka*). This all just shows that there are many aspects to the concept of beauty (*kecantikan*) and that it is worth to be reflected on, as is the case in Dewi Nurwantari's study.

Referring once again to the title of this book «pretty women», we should bear in mind that in English «pretty» is not the same as «beautiful». «Pretty» does not refer to a superb beauty, an unapproachable woman, but simply to somebody who is attractive. This attractiveness is external but can also in part apply to the character. This «inner beauty» and its enhancement is the subject of the second half of this book, which displays a wealth of practical advice.

Dewi Nurwantari's book may be considered «pretty» for the information and analysis it provides, in particular regarding the gender inequality. The analyses based on theories of the social sciences are also valuable, and what is more, the book is written in a personal and vibrant style. Reading it provides pleasure, information, and stuff for reflection.

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