

# Gender, Class and the Politics of Appearance

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A Review of *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* by Wendy Chapkis (Boston: South End Press, 1986), 209 pp.

Feminists all over the world have been caricatured in a variety of images — as unhappy, separated housewives, frustrated spinsters, promiscuous and sex-hungry women or lesbians who find the cause of women's liberation the legitimizing excuse of their frustrations or justification of their inadequacies and deviant behavior. Add to that is the image that most feminists, at least in the West, are untidy creatures unmindful of their physical appearance: refusing to shave their legs and armpits, wear deodorant, make-up or even underwear. Needless to say, these are caricatured misimpressions or conscious distortions that do not alone make anyone a feminist.

Why some feminists sport hairy legs and unplucked eyebrows or wear sensible shoes and clothes which might not be aesthetically satisfactory to most, must be understood in the context of the feminist struggle, both on the personal and societal levels, against sexual objectification of women's bodies and for the abolition of society's superficial standards of femininity and masculinity. These artificial gender distinctions permeate all aspects of human life and are transmitted to everyone through socialization. Even appearance does not escape stereotyping on the basis of gender. Gender stereotyping in appearance dictates that women conform to present-day standards of beauty, and men to standards of virility appropriate for their sexes.

Feminists of the 1960s have called upon other women to resist the image of the "feminine ideal" imposed upon them by society. It felt "liberating" to wear jeans that offered more freedom of movement, to be freed from the tight bind of the girdle or push-up bra or from the mask of make-up that clogged the pores and wrinkled the skin. This "liberation" not only meant freedom from the garments themselves but also from the constricting psychological "garments" that they create. Women are perpetually made to feel insecure about

their physical appearance and they simultaneously become dependent on it that they often accept what is given them than assert what they think they deserve or want.

Rejection of the socially imposed feminine standards of beauty promises empowerment, as women create their own image of womanhood not measured against any ideal. But despite this recognition, feminists are caught in a dilemma: some of them know that they fail as women to be "feminine enough", and at the same time feel a "less than feminist" guilt because they are still concerned about being "attractive" and providing or giving erotic fantasy to their partners, let alone to whom. These doubts and confusion have been articulated by advocates of women's liberation, but they have never been articulated with much clarity of introspection as the book *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* by Wendy Chapkis.

The book shares the secrets of women's relationship to imposed standards of beauty — how they are made to conform to acceptable measures by distorting their "undisguised" selves. Chapkis presents the "beauty secrets" of 20 women whose testimonies one can easily imagine to be very difficult to share publicly, if not for the courage and confidence in themselves that they have successfully built through the years. The "secrets" are shared by women who have learned or are trying to learn to develop an unconditional acceptance of themselves and others, and to look at one another with reflected pride than fear in their visibility. Chapkis analyzes these secrets in the context of the feminist struggle against imposed femininity not only because feminine attire is less comfortable and practical than that of men's, but more importantly because feminine fashion has also been "a statement about created differences" between the sexes that make possible and easier the justification of unequal power between men and women in political, economic and social life.

Most women and society at large consider beauty an important passport to power and success, and dressing a good indicator of class position and amount of respect and attention

to be accorded to a person. Thus, we all spend time, money and energy, though in varying degrees, toward improving our appearance. Some would even invest a fortune in reshaping their bodies to approximate their sex and gender ideal. Thus, flat-chested women who seek silicon injection or small-built men who do muscle-building exercises are no less conscious about their appearance than transsexuals who resort to surgery to make their bodies conform to their sexual identity.

The task of propagating this "package deal" of gender and appearance, wardrobe and status, beauty and identity is performed in great part by advertising companies working for large multinational corporations who manufacture and market not only beauty-related products (cosmetics, perfume, jewelry, weight-reducing programs, diet books) but also service "appropriately" provided by the "feminine touch" (airline services, tours, etc.). Advertising companies further rake in greater profits for multinational corporations by creating a global fantasy of success and beauty that is predominantly modern, Western and white-skinned, and which transcend national boundaries.

In the Third World, the members of the national elite who closely resemble their counterparts in affluent countries become the purveyors of this fantasy and culture to their less fortunate local sisters. Imported television series such as *Dallas* and films also facilitate cultural convergence in tastes and preferences favorable to business climate. In contrast, people in the First World are fed with sexist and racist stereotypes colored people, combined with images of the fun, passion and adventure offered by the tropical paradise and its sensuous yet docile and passive women and, until lately, even children victimized by paedophiles.

In the West, certain groups have been challenging the automatic and rigid synthesis of appropriate biological sex (male/female) to gender (feminine/masculine), of attire to class position, and of gender to sexual preference. Punk culture for example, at least during the initial stages when the corresponding fashion was created out of cheap, second hand materials before it was transformed into a commercialized venture, was a critique of consumerism and an explicit statement on the poor state of the Western economy. The butch or androgynous style of dressing became "a symbol of detachment" from the "sense of insecurity, vulnerability and exposure" created by the feeme-y style. Lesbians who challenge the compulsory heterosexual system provide an important lesson that in Chapkis' words, "it is only really possible to begin to enjoy appearance, gendered and otherwise, when male privilege is no longer a concern." The widespread acceptance of homosexuals within the feminist movement abroad did not come that easy. During the early years of the movement, lesbians were considered an embarrassment due to the fear that feminism would be less acceptable if the controversial issue of sexual preference was tackled alongside civil rights issues which, ironically, also became the rallying point within the ranks of homosexuals.

The punk, butch and lesbian are still considered a minority in a society where the norm is still dictated strongly

by a functional gender divide. To Chapkis, the gender-bending culture created by these significant minorities is important only in so far as they help "shake the definitions of appropriate sexual identity", but is not sufficient to make the sexual revolution triumph or dismantle the fundamental sexism in society. Such individual acts of defiance, she claims, may however have some relation to eventual liberation.

*Beauty Secrets* . . . is expected to be evaluated on the basis of the ideological biases and values of the party concerned. To the conservatives and puritans, the book is but a glaring evidence of the decadent culture in the West and the disintegrating moral fibers of its people. To the cynical, the book is but a trashful of 'sweet lemon' testimonies given by deviants who happen to take pride in their ugliness ("Ann has diastrophic dwarfism; Kathryn has severe acne problems; Adena and Kathay are fat; Cathy and Julia had undergone mastectomy.") and unique psychological aberrations ("Dolores is a professional prostitute; Joolz is punk; Betty is a transsexual; Keetje is still bitchy at 79; and the author herself is a lesbian.")

Radical feminists may find the book "less radical" than expected for its failure to give more analytical importance to patriarchy and to directly point to oppression of women by men as the most fundamental question in society. They may also find allusions to capitalist contradictions unnecessary in analyzing the gender divide.

Marxist political economists may find the book inadequate in its exploration of the transnational dimension in the economics of the politics of appearance in particular, and sexual politics in general. This inadequacy is definitely traceable to the author's lack of an historical materialist outlook and absence of a clear class analysis. In general, bespectacled scholars may find the book, as most feminist studies and works, short of meeting their academic standards in methodology and theoretical framework. Socialist feminists, on the other hand, may be disappointed by the book's lack of a scientific critique of the capitalist system that sustains the gender divide. The book did not go beyond alluding to "the need to recognize" that "in a economically divided society, clothing and appearance are meant to intimidate by indicating the relative power of class position." In another instance, Chapkis succinctly summarizes her main points:

The beautiful woman will continue to serve as a symbol of feminine mystery to the man who desires her and of potency and success to the male who can claim her. And to the women around her, she will remain a symbol of the ideal against which they will be judged. This can only change when beauty loses its distorted power in the evaluation of a "woman's worth", that is, when the dependent relationship between men and women has been dismantled. Thus are the politics of appearance inextricably bound up with the structures of social, political and economic inequality.

Lastly, feminists in the Third World may be less bothered by the politics of appearance than by the economics of stomach or the politics of national liberation in their countries. The realities of imperialist exploitation and state repression are likewise the more pressing problems that confront their people. To put it in a trite yet simplistic manner, Third World women would not simply care about "burning their bras" as they do not have bras to burn. This only shows the peculiar nature of Third World women's oppression and hence, of the movement that will liberate them and the society as a whole. At the same time, the "silence" of many Third World women, including feminists involved in the women's movement, on the issues discussed by the book, only manifests that the problems of everyday life (especially in the realm of family, marriage, sex and reproduction) are rarely discussed not only within the women's movement but in revolutionary movements in the Third World as well. They are often treated as matters of personal concern, separate from politics, whose potentials for translation into political campaigns are rarely considered, if at all.

It is clearly a feminist value for women to create their own definition of themselves rather than accept society's definition of them, not to be restricted by sex-role, expecta-

tions of femininity and to define themselves as complete, whole human beings whose identity is not tied to relationships with men. It is equally important for women to develop a sense of personal power, not by dominating others, but by being active, assertive and self-reliant without being dependent on men for survival. While some feminists see their individual liberation as something not divorced from the struggle towards greater social change, there is also a strong tendency among some to see the women's liberation movement primarily as a source of psychological therapy or individual self-improvement. How many feminists would agree to Chapkis' ideas on the interlinked nature of women's oppression and other social inequalities in a divided society? And how many would prefer to take an individualistic attitude than seek from and provide support to other women and men who are equally confronted by sexism and other unjust social structures?

The book has touched on a variety of subjects very rarely discussed openly. Yet, until women are valued as full, complete and independent human beings regardless of appearance, the book shall not only "keep us talking for a very long time" but shall also be credited for being among the firsts to give a courageous revelation of beauty and its not-so-beautiful secrets.

# Resolving an Identity Crisis

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*Readings in Ideology*. Edited by Charles Avila. Published by KASAPI Pilipino International Foundation (New York) and Action Line Foundation (Manila). 1986. 57 pp.

**T**here is one thing conspicuously absent in this collection of social democratic essays and its omission can perhaps be objectively decided as something very atypical. What is pertained here is that body of thought collectively known as Marxism which, for years since Philippine society detected that tendency of social democracy, has dutifully served as the latter's whipping boy. Yet the hostility is more than just pure intellectual contention between social democracy and Marxism; it indicates something more. Not a few will forget how during the polarized days of the Marcos regime, the adherents of social democracy painfully made its

presence felt not only by way of indicting the dictatorship of various crimes, but also by equally villifying the most formidable enemy of the dictatorship, namely, the national democrats. Though, not a few will also forget how the social democrats' claim of being the 'third option' were repeatedly dampened by waves of mass defections to the national democratic camp; proof, as some observers would say, of how social democracy as an ideological formation fared under comparison with national democracy as the local variant of Marxism.

Thus, coming up with a *Readings in Ideology* will definitely bring observers a form of mild surprise. More so, the obvious absence of usual critiques of Marxism which, for the past years almost defined Social Democracy, will generate mixed feelings of bewilderment and hope. Have the social democrats arrived at last at their long overdue ideological maturity? Have they finally outgrown those lofty Jesuit