
The Portrayal of Beauty Myth in *Me Vs. High Heels* Film by PingkanUtari

Devi Anggita Vela

Dewi Meyrasyawati

English Department, Universitas Airlangga

Abstract

Generally, a woman is expected to be stereotypically feminine and to perform beautifully. The beauty myth belief such as having beautiful manner and appearance has been deeply rooted almost in the core of every part in the society and also constructed by the mainstream media. The construction of beauty myth has affected the understanding of *beautiful* woman and creates plentiful descriptions about beauty. This understanding seems to influence the story of a film entitled *Me Vs. High Heels*. This one hour and fifty eight minutes film was directed by PingkanUtari. The film tells a woman named Sasha who tries hard to have feminine and beautiful appearance in order to gain attention from a male named Arnold.

This study is conducted to examine how the beauty myth is portrayed in the film and how the beauty myth influences the main character of the film. The beauty myth theory by Naomi Wolf is used as the framework of the study. The study is done by observing and analyzing chosen scenes from the film focusing on the representations of the beauty myth within the film. Narrative aspect of the film is not only the main concern; the non narrative is also part of the analysis especially on costumes and color, make up and hair style, and performance.

The main finding in this study is that the film in one hand promotes beauty myth but on the other hand provokes women to release themselves from the influence of beauty myth and create a new definition about beauty. The most interesting finding is also the ideology related to beauty that lies within the film. All of these ideas are wrapped in interesting film such as *Me Vs High Heels*.

Keywords: beautiful, beauty myth, feminine

Introduction

Our society judges women's beauty by the standards of beauty that deeply rooted amongst them. Naomi Wolf states that those beauty standards of beauty are called *The Beauty Myth*. The idea of beauty myth is suggested by Naomi wolf through her book "*The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*" on 1991. She critiques women insecure about their bodies. According to Wolf, woman is emotionally vulnerable about their own beauty because beauty is defined as something is bestowed from the outside and can always be taken away (Wolf 36). Woman need acknowledgement from both male and female that they are beauty to avoid *feeling* insecure.

A quality called beauty is very important in woman lives. They learn that stories only happen to "beautiful" women. And if a woman is not "beautiful", stories will never happen on her (Wolf 2002 p. 61). Wolf's argument is reflecting in a film entitled *Me Vs. High Heels*. *Me Vs. High Heels* is a 2005 Indonesian film starring Ayushita and based on the novel in the same title, *Me Vs. High Heels* by Maria Ardelia. It was directed by PingkanUtari, a film director who has already directed more than 50 films since 2002 until 2013. Some of his works are categorized as Indonesia box office movie such as *PanggilNamaku 3X* (2005), *CintaPertama* (2006), *Ekskul* (2006) and many more.

The qualities of beauty are appeared clearly in the film. This study focuses on how *Me Vs. High Heels* film portrays the definitions of beauty myth and examines it. The film tells about a non-feminine woman who tries to be an ideal feminine as an effort to gain attention from a boy named Arnold which described as a man who loves a woman in feminine physical appearance and behavior. The film explores about the portrayal of beauty myth and how Sasha, as the main character comprehends the beauty myth with her own ways. Therefore, the writer is interested to explore how beauty myth is portrayed in this film.

Methodology

This research is focused on how the film portrays beauty myth and how the main character, Sasha, copes with beauty myth amongst her. In doing so, textual research is used in researching this research. Because textual analysis is suitable used in researching cultural studies, mass communication, media studies, and texts like film, magazine, newspaper, advertisements, etc. Film here is analyzed as a text or discourse therefore the methodology used in this research will be a qualitative methodology because qualitative research is a research method which is used by researchers who are interested in studying social sciences, human behavior, the social world inhabited by human beings and is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena, opinions, experiences and individual's feelings in producing the data (Hancock 1998 p.1-2).

In collecting the data, the writer takes the figures and dialogs of the film that portray the focus issue of this research. The data source is divided into two aspects. The first is *narrative* aspect, and the second is *non-narrative* aspect which is also known as *mise-en-scene*.

Based on Bordwell and Thompson, narrative means 'a chains of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space'. Narrative usually starts with one situation in the film, and the conflicts begin based on cause and effect, then a new change happened or the solution is found and becomes the end of the narrative. In making sense of narrative, story and plot are needed to describe things that are not explicitly shown (Agustina 2012 p.13).

Non-narrative on a film is simply understood as everything which appears within the frame, including setting, props, costumes and make up, lighting, the behaviors of the performers, cinematography, and special effects (Speidel 2006 p. 2). Non-narrative concerns more to the visual content of the film and help audiences understand the background of the story. Film director use this element to provide his audience with 'vivid, sharp memories' (Lathrop & Sutton). Non-narrative aspects which are used to support the narrative analysis are: costume and color, make up and hair style and performance.

In analyzing the portrayal of beauty myth within the film, the writer uses *The Beauty Myth* theory by Naomi Wolf. The data analysis can be divided into three stages, there are: finding beauty myth portrayal on the text, the influence of beauty myth toward the main character and find the ideology which lies within the film.

Discussion

The analysis of the *Me Vs. High Heels* film, will begin with the comparison between feminine beauty woman and non-feminine beauty woman which repeatedly shown within the film and figures out the portrayal of beauty myth in the film. Next, the writer examines the influence of beauty myth toward the main character. The narrative and non-narrative aspects of the film is used to uncover the ideology behind the film.

The Portrayal of Beauty Myth in the Film

Me Vs. High Heels film contains obvious portrayal of Beauty Myth in its scenes. In this research, the writer examines and analyzes in detail the portrayal of beauty Myth in the film. The analysis is done by observing both of narrative and non-narrative aspects within the film.

Narrative Aspects

To strengthen the portrayal of beauty myth in the film, the director shows the comparison of feminine and non-feminine woman characters. Early scenes of the film presents a woman who does not follow beauty myth. She is ignorant both of her appearance and her behavior. The first scene that emphasizes Sasha is not a feminine woman is when she is going to go school but she wears yesterday uniform and does not comb her short hair. It implies that Sasha does not care about her appearance. Her mother tries to warn her messy hair but she does not mind her mother comment and says that her messy hair is a *new trend*. According to Lord Denning, a woman's hair is her crowning glory, she does not like it disturbed (Wolf 2002 p.40), but refers to previous conversation, it clearly enough that Sasha does not feel the same like what Lord Denning says.

The next scenes depict Sasha's undisciplined such as often late to reach school and irresponsible toward her homework because the previous day she stays up all night to watch football game in television. Sasha is also depicted as a woman who has big appetite. In the sixth minutes of the film, Sasha is eating a whole durian alone and belches in front of her friends. What Sasha does is gaining protests from Lola, her feminine best friend. Lola says that a woman *should not* do inappropriate things like that.

Sasha's appearance is first depicted in the ninth minutes of the film. At that moment Sasha goes dinner with her parents in a restaurant. She wears old jeans, and worn out t-shirt. Her father protests about the costume that she wears in that quite luxurious restaurant. As always, she ignores the suggestion about her ignorance appearance. It shows that Sasha is a woman who does not put much attention on her appearance. The old clothes are enough for Sasha, at that moment she does not need clothes which make her look like a *beauty* woman.

The film depicts Dina and Lola as the comparison of Sasha's personality. Both of them are feminine women. Dina and Lola have neat and long straight black hair. They are also depicted as women who always have good appearance. The film tells that Dina often go shopping and renew her clothes, whereas Lola is a woman who continually goes to beauty salon. This means that both of them are taking care of their appearance and they are considered *fashionable*.

The problem in the film starts when Sasha accidentally meets a handsome man in a restaurant named Arnold who is Dondon's stepbrother. Sasha thinks that she falls in love at the first sight to Arnold. But unfortunately, Arnold's type of woman is the feminine one. Sasha realizes that Arnold will not love her because she is not feminine. So, she tries to become the feminine one. Although previously Sasha's friends and parents have already questioning her beauty and her femininity, Sasha does not mind because she knows that they love Sasha just the way she is though she is not beauty or feminine. But this time is different, this time Sasha meets sexual encounter with Arnold who does not *see* her because her lack of femininity. For the first time, Sasha feels insecure and dissatisfied with herself. This phenomenon has already explained by Wolf. She says that: "*Young women today feel vulnerable to judgment; if a harsh sentence is passed (or even suspected or projected), it is not her reputation that suffers so much as the stability of her moral universe*" (2002 p.163).

After that, Sasha is doing whatever Arnold believes in qualities of beauty. She wears dresses, high heels and learns how to eat, walk and laugh in feminine ways. She even has a diet and given up on her hobbies such as basketball, rock climbing and boxing because Arnold forbids her to do men's stereotyped activities.

But After all Sasha's efforts to become a feminine beauty woman as Arnold please, Sasha's heart is broken after she finds out that actually Arnold is just play her. Instead of Sasha, Arnold loves Dina who is his classmate and Roland's girlfriend. Arnold approaches Sasha because Dina asks him to. This is exactly like Wolf said about men and women relationship in general:

"Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless." (Wolf 2002 p.12)

In this case, it is clearly enough that Sasha is a woman who does not follow beauty myth, so she becomes not beautiful. Whereas Dina, a feminine woman who follows beauty myth, become beautiful woman. So that is why she wins Arnold.

Non-narrative Aspects

The non – narrative describes the portrayal of beauty myth accurately. It explains about beauty myth looks like supports the descriptions with images. The film says that a *beautiful* woman is a woman who is stereotyped feminine. Beauty myth demands women to have good behavior, good appearance, gentle and avoid masculinity in both their activity and their costume.

In the film, the main female characters are Sasha, Dina and Lola. Sasha is described as non-feminine beauty woman, whereas Dina and Lola are feminine beauty women. So, the comparison between feminine and non-feminine woman will be Sasha against Dina and Lola.

Costume and Color

Costume and color support film's narrative and help audiences to understand the characters in a film. Pingkan Utari as a director of *Me Vs. High Heels* also use costume and color to describe characters' personality and strengthen the narrative.



*Figure 1: Sasha's uniform
(00.07.53)*



*Figure 2: Dina's uniform
(00.41.46)*

Uniform in school has purposed to make the students equal in social status and forced students to be discipline in getting dressed. But Pingkan Utari finds a way to make difference between Sasha's uniform and Dina's uniform. Sasha's uniform in figure 1 looks untidy with one side of her shirt is out from her skirt to support her *careless* personality in dressed up. Sasha brings her school bag in sideways just like men usually do to show that she is boyish and not a feminine woman. Meanwhile, Dina's uniform in figure 2 looks different. Both of the Dina's shirt's side falls neatly outside her skirt to show that she *cares* in the way she dressed. Dina's choice to wear long white socks and white shoes shows her tendency to match the color of her dresses which strengthen her personality that she is stylish feminine woman. Dina brings her school bag in one shoulder just like usually women do.

Make Up and Hair Style

In this film, audience also can see the differences between woman who follows beauty myth, and a woman who does not through their make up and hair style. These pictures below show the portrayal of make up and hair style between those women.



*Figure 3: Sasha's hair.
Short and messy
(00.03.06)*



*Figure 4: Dina's hair.
Long and neat
(00.14.27)*

Figure3 and figure4 show Sasha's and Dina's hair style in school. Figure 3 show Sasha's short and messy hair. Sasha's messy hair implies that Sasha does not take care much about her performance. Sasha's

hair also short, whereas in Indonesia, beautiful woman is identically with a woman who has long black hair. The definition of *beautiful* woman's hair is portrayed by Dina's hair. Dina's hair is long and neat. Long hair notifies her femininity, and neat hair implies that Dina always pay attention to take care her hair in order to look *perfect*.

Performance

Both of figure 5 and figure 6 are taken in a certain restaurant. Through the pictures we can see the difference between those two. In figure 5, Sasha uses her hand to eat, and eats her meal voraciously. In the other hand, Dina uses a fork to eat, cut her meal in bite-size, and eats it elegantly. *Beautiful* is how woman present their selves in public. The way Sasha eats her meal in public will less desired by men. Dina presents the right way to eat for women. Moreover, by doing her meal elegantly, it implies that Dina has lack appetite than Sasha. Wolf states that, women feel guilty about female fat because under the myth, women's bodies are not their own but society's (2002 p.187). So, Dina is in the right track. She is not eating much to keep her body slim.



*Figure 5: Sasha eats in restaurant
(00.09.26)*



*Figure 6: Dina eats in restaurant
(00.16.51)*

The Influence of Beauty Myth toward the Main Character

The influence of beauty myth is about how the beauty myth affects Sasha, the main character in the film. The writer examines the differences of the main character before and after the beauty myth influences which affect not only toward the main character herself, but also how the reaction people around her after she decides to become feminine woman. This section also contains deep analysis of narrative and non-narrative aspects.

Narrative Aspects

The first influence of beauty myth toward the main character of the film is her appearance. Usually her parents protest her appearance, but after Sasha decides to follow the beauty myth, her mother praises her new appearance. She is no longer ignorance toward her appearance. It is proven when Sasha buys many new clothes to renew her closet and visits beauty salon after she decides that she wants to become *beauty*.

Not only has the appearance of the main character, beauty myth also influenced Sasha's behavior. The way she eats and the way she speaks are different before and after she is influenced by beauty myth. Before her the influence of beauty myth, Sasha always eats quickly and ravenously. She is also ignorance about her speaks. But after the influence of beauty myth, she eats slowly in a bite size and she organizes her words before she speaks.

But it is not only Sasha herself who has changed, but also people's reaction toward her, especially Arnold. After Sasha figures out that Arnold just play her, she realizes that Arnold is not a good man for her, so she ignores him. But that condition does not make Sasha become as she was. Sasha is still beauty and continues her deed to become feminine beauty woman. As a result, when Arnold meets Sasha accidentally, Arnold's reaction toward Sasha is very different. At first when they met in a restaurant,

Arnold and Sasha bumped to each other. At that time Sasha was not beautiful, so Arnold did not pay attention to her and immediately leave as if nothing happen although Sasha was very interested to him. But after the influence of beauty myth the role is reversed, when they bump to each other again accidentally in a restaurant, Arnold is impressed by Sasha's beauty. Arnold even begs Sasha to become his girlfriend but Sasha rejects it and kicks Arnold in his groin as an act of her revenge.

If Sasha is totally influenced by the beauty myth, surely she will not kick a man in his groin. By doing such thing, Sasha declares herself as a woman who experts in martial art. It means that, Sasha has negotiated her understanding of *beauty* and creates a new definition of beauty because her appearance is feminine (she is well dressed and use make up), but she experts in martial art, a branch of sport that stereotypically masculine.

The ending of the film is interesting. At the end of the film, Roland, Dina's boyfriend, utters his affection to Sasha. It means that instead of Dina, a feminine beauty woman, Roland chooses Sasha, a non-feminine beauty woman. It breaks the pattern of beauty myth which says beautiful woman are reproductively more successful in winning a man's heart (Wolf 12). Whereas Dina, a feminine beauty woman, does not have a spouse in the end of the film because Roland leaves her, and she does not love Arnold so she cannot make relationship with Arnold. It implies that the film communicates that a feminine beautiful woman is not always possess a man that she loves and she is not always be happy in the end.

Non-narrative Aspects

There are a lot of differences or the comparison before and after Sasha is influenced by the beauty myth. The differences are including Sasha's costume and color, make up and hair style and Sasha's performance.

Costume and Color

Based on YMI, every garment worn in a movie is considered a costume. Costumes are a storytelling tool, communicating subtle details of each character's personality and history quickly and economically to the audience (2008, p.3). Kurland & Landis state that costumes are the key feature in constructing cinematic identities and the tools to telling a story. Costumes are aimed to support the narrative in specific way (Andersson 2011 p. 103). Sasha's costume and color show big differences before and after the influences of beauty myth.



Figure 7: Grey dominant
(00:26:31)



Figure 8: black dominant
(00:09:50)

Sasha's costumes before influenced by beauty myth

When Sasha becomes her true inner-self (before she is influenced by beauty myth), she wears male's outfit: cap, t-shirt, belt, sneakers, sandals, and trousers (jeans). Yellow towel in figure 7 is completing Sasha's costume as masculine girl. The towel is a symbol that she is just finished doing physical exercise which is strong-related to men activities. Shortly, all she wears are masculine traits.



Figure 9: (00:49:19)



Figure 10: (01:02:13)



Figure 11: (01:27:04)

Sasha's costumes after the influence of beauty myth (pink color dominant)

But when Sasha starts to follow beauty myth and becomes feminine ideal, her costumes are totally changed. She wears dresses, skirt, girl's top, girl's accessories in pink color and even high heels. Sasha follows the traditional gender roles that woman should be feminine and she shows her femininity through her costumes which fit perfectly with feminine traits.

Make Up and Hair Style

Makeup's and hairstyle's role in this film is completing the Sasha's performance both as feminine and non-feminine girl. Sasha's make up and hair style strengthen Sasha's personality before and after the influence of beauty myth.



Figure 9: Before the influence of beauty Myth
(00:08:21)



Figure 10: After the influence of beauty Myth
(01:28:25)

Before the influence of beauty myth, Sasha uses plain make up on her face. But during the influence of beauty myth, she applies soft make up on her face. She applies foundation, face powder, and blush on her face. It fits perfectly with Wolf argument that woman feel invisible without make up (p.273), so to feel visible, Sasha applies make up on her face.

Before the influence of beauty myth, Sasha has a very mess up hair style. But we can see that Sasha's hairstyle is changed after the influence of beauty myth. She has neat hair after the influence of beauty myth.



Figure 14: Hair style before the influence of beauty myth
(00:07:00)



Figure 15: Hair style after the influence of beauty myth
(00:43:29)

In short, make up and hair style in *Me Vs. High Heels* film helps the text to visualize and compare Sasha performance before and after the influence of beauty myth.

Performance

Performance in the film focuses on the acting of the actors, such as movements, facial expression and body language (Agustina 2012, p.52). Abrams argues that the actors' movement could indicate confidence, panic, friendliness, uncertainty. The facial expression may present fear, anger, happiness or sadness (ibid).

Beside costumes, make up and hairstyle, Sasha needs to learn about how to express femininity through her facial expression. While Sasha is not in disguise, she shows silly face as shown in figure 16.



Figure 16: Silly face, before the influence of beauty myth
(00:15:23)



Figure 17: Sweet smile, after the influence of beauty myth
(00:51:36)

Feminine girl is not expected to do silly things like have silly expression. When Sasha is not forced to be feminine, she does not really care about her gestures or her facial expression. But when Sasha is disguising as feminine girl, she shows a very sweet smile to convince Arnold that she is a real feminine ideal girl which is shown in figure 17.

Ideology

The portrayal of beauty myth is clearly inserted. But instead of depicts the beauty myth clearly, the film emphasizes more on the contrary of beauty myth itself by focusing the scene on Sasha, non-feminine woman. Early scenes of *Me Vs. High Heels* film portrays a woman who contradicts the beauty myth

amongst the society. She is everything but feminine. In the other words, she says that careless appearance and behavior, not fashionable, big appetite, ignorance speak, independent, cannot take care of household and doing physical activities which are stereotyped as men's hobbies such as boxing, basketball and rock climbing is not part of beauty myth. Therefore, beauty myth portrayal are *beautiful*; behave, concern on her appearance and behavior, fashionable, less appetite, slim, dependent, nurturing and weak.

Only from the title, *Me Vs. High Heels* provokes the writer's curiosity. *Vs* is an abbreviation from the word *versus* which means *against* or *as opposed to*. The word 'me' on *Me Vs. High Heels* refers to the main character in the film. The words *High Heels* are stereotyped to feminine woman; woman who wears high heels, usually ideal feminine and of course, follow the beauty myth. *High Heels* here also can be correlated to everything that has feminine traits; through the title, the film communicates that the words 'high heels' means *femininity*. Because of the word 'versus', we can indicate that *Me Vs. High Heels* film contains a woman who *have to* follow beauty myth for certain reason although she does not like it.

The film ends its story with surprising ending. Kenrick says that: "*Men should be attracted to women who appear to be stereotypically feminine.*" (Ickes 1993 p.78), but the film challenges Kenrick statement. Roland, a man who already has feminine beautiful woman, Dina as her girlfriend, considers that his affection is not for her, but for Sasha, a woman who is not stereotypically feminine. Although Roland utters his affection to Sasha when she has already influenced by the beauty myth, but Roland loves her since before she becomes *beautiful*. Moreover, the film does not give Dina happy ending story. After she breaks up with Roland, she makes relationship with Arnold. In this part spectators may assume that although Dina does not have Roland, at least she has Arnold. But she also breaks up with Arnold. This phenomenon against Wolf argument that beautiful woman is more reproductively successful in winning a man's heart (Wolf 2002 p.12). In short, the film communicates that: *Beauty myth really exists. But it cannot guarantee a woman's happiness. Women should not act against their inner self and force themselves to pretend as someone else. No matter what the beauty myth says, there should be a man who will love a woman just the way she is.*

Yet, beauty myth has positive effects toward Sasha. People around her, such as her mother and even Arnold, starts to praise her new appearance. The beauty myth also forces Sasha to become more polite than before. Her speaks are more organized and her behavior is better. In short, beauty myth makes her more *educated*. It implies that a woman who follow beauty myth will get easier and more fruitful life than a woman who does not follow the beauty myth. She will be praised, adored, loved by men and she will be *beautiful*.

Interestingly after she gives up Arnold, she does not follow beauty myth as a whole. Yes, she still beautiful, dressed up and fashionable. But she is not totally leaving her old habit. It is proven when she kicks Arnold without warning and does popular mark of Bruce Lee that is touch the tip of her nose with her thumb which indicates that she identifies herself as an expert in martial arts. In the beginning of the film, Sasha is also described as a woman who often releasing gas carelessly. Because it is considered a deed that is not very feminine, during the influence of beauty myth from not beautiful become beautiful, Sasha is not portrayed to release gas again. But, after she finds that beauty myth cannot guarantee her happiness, she recalls her old habit and often farts again.

Those explanations imply that in the end of the film, Sasha tries to negotiate her femininity. Her appearance is reflecting the descriptions of beauty myth, but her behavior is not totally stereotypically feminine. After Arnold, Sasha's understanding toward beauty myth is different. She is not bended by the beauty myth's dictations anymore. She now evaluates the good and the bad of beauty myth to herself. She is adopting some of beauty myth descriptions which suitable for her, and leaving those which against her true inner self. As a result, Sasha creates a new definition of *beauty*.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that *Me Vs. High Heels* presents a text that describes the portrayal of beauty myth. In this film, the term *beautiful* is defined as good appearance and good behavior which must suitable with the stereotype of woman. The film portrays beauty myth exactly as the same as cultural belief about beauty. A woman is considered beautiful if she is fashionable, has good appearance

and behavior, expert in taking care the household, slim, gentle, nurturing, avoid men's stereotyped activity and wearing dresses and high heels.

This film is like a double-sided coin. In one hand it promotes new definitions about beauty but on the other hand it also re-establishes the beauty myth. This phenomenon actually can be seen as the strategy to provoke women to release themselves from the bounds of beauty myth. Besides provokes women to place their confidence in the beauty myth descriptions, this film also seems to criticize the glory of beauty myth. The failure of a feminine beautiful woman to possess a man that she loves, and that she is defeated by a woman who is not feminine beautiful seem to be mocking statements toward beauty myth.

The above phenomenon suggests that a woman should not have always adopted beauty myth description in order to win a man's heart. Women can negotiate the beauty myth itself and finding a new definition of beauty instead of follow *the beauty myth* as a whole. Every woman is special and has her own beauty, no matter how far she is from the beauty myth descriptions and unnecessary to feel insecure about her body because every woman is already beautiful and do not need to be fixed. In the end, this film is believed to be a good example of portrayal of the beauty myth by Naomi Wolf.

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