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Beauty, Precarity, and the Gendered Economy of the Body in Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*

Nicy Joseph
Assistant professor
Department of English
Muhammed Abdul Rahiman Memorial Orphanage (M.A.M.O) College, Mukkom, Kozhikode, Kerala
Email: nicyalphonsa@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6083-730X

Abstract

This research examines Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face* (2020) as a critical representation of beauty culture under the circumstances of neoliberal capitalism and gendered precarity. The study concentrates on cosmetic surgery, emotional work, and spatial insecurity and states that the novel creates the body of the female as a biocapital conditioned by the market discipline and societal control. Based on Foucauldian ideas of biopower, Bourdieu's theory of capital, feminist body theory, and feminist political economy, the analysis shows that aesthetic self-management is a survival technique and a controlling mechanism. The storyline reveals how the discourses of choice and empowerment conceal the structural restraints concerning the inequality of classes, labour insecurity, and the valuation of the patriarchal system. Placing intimate bodily practices in the context of the wider economic systems, the research locates the novel as an important contribution to the modern literary consideration of neoliberal subjectivity, aesthetic capitalism, and the process of the body becoming an economic asset.

Keywords: Neoliberal feminism, Aesthetic labour, Biocapital, Gendered precarity, Body politics.

Introduction

Frances Cha, a Korean American journalist and former culture editor whose work is often focused on the contemporary South Korean society, places the female subjectivity in the competitive infrastructures of contemporary Seoul, where beauty is both an aspiration and a requirement of present Seoul, in *If I Had Your Face* (Cha). The novel was published in 2020 and engages with the lives of four young women who interact under the circumstances of a

precarious leader, and the presence of the hierarchical structures of gender as dictated by neoliberal capitalism. Kyuri serves in a personal room salon that has high-end male customers. Miho seeks artistic recognition following her life in a foreign country. Ara is recovering after jaw surgery, and she is also trying to establish her career as a hairdresser. Wonna is faced with increasing financial panic in marriage. Collectively, their stories reveal economic force in the organization of intimate and professional life (Cha 45).

Cha also demonstrates the way aesthetic discipline can be treated in the daily survival tactics through multiperspectival narration. The cosmetic surgery, fashion, and emotional performance are not considered as superficial cultural practices, but they are calculated responses to restricted opportunity. Beauty is like currency and affects employability, marriage, and social legitimacy. Instead of unveiling transformation as an individual luxury, the novel introduces it as a logical adjustment to the market requirements. Physical modification and self-presentation are strategic actions that are determined by structural inequality. Here, the female body is structured based on the principles of the competitive standards that conform self-worth to the visibility and exchange value (Cha 78).

This research underwrites that the novel conceptualizes the body as biocapital generated by surveillance and self-optimization, as well as commodified intimacy. Based on feminist political economy and biopower theories, the discussion argues that aesthetic transformation is a technology of governance that transforms vulnerability into productivity. The characters bring in the market- driven norms as they strive to exercise limited agency in them. The novel reveals the way neoliberal feminism remodels the coercion of the structure as empowerment by anticipating this tension. Freedom seems to be achievable, but it is still influenced and constrained by economic precarity and patriarchal demand.

Recent studies on modern South Korean feminism highlight the non-linear engagement of the body and social conformity and structural restraint. Park examines the Escape the Corset movement, which emphasizes the feminist subjectivities based on the resistance and ambivalence to the dominant beauty norms (Park 491). According to Jung, the rejection of cosmetic practices often goes hand in hand with social pressure and bargaining instead of absolute emancipation (Jung 21). An indicates that the modern-day media culture provides both a sense of self-improvement and the reinforcement of the normative femininity (An 126). On the ideological level, Kim examines the issues of the localization and legitimacy of transnational feminist discourse in Korea, and defines the emergence of the so-called economic woman, with a focus on the fact that the discourse on financial rationality, self-optimization, and gendered subjectivity is becoming neoliberal (Kim 196).

Although much has been written on the subject of present-day Korean feminism, literature on it is primarily focused on the concepts of beauty resistance, feminist identity formation, and ideological critique in the social movements and media settings. Although this scholarship throws light on the conflicts between agency and structural constraint, there has been little consideration of how the dynamics of agency and structural constraint are reflected in the lived experience of contemporary literary texts, reflecting neoliberal precarity. Specifically, the intersection of aesthetic discipline, economic survival, and gendered

subjectivity has been underexplored with regard to literary analysis. In response to this gap, this research will consider how *If I Had Your Face* conceptualizes beauty as an economic and biopolitical formation that determines the agency of women in modern South Korean society.

This research is a close reading of the novel that follows a qualitative approach, where it seeks to analyse feminine body construction in the novel as an object of regulation, investment, and social value. The discussion is complemented by the notion of biopower and governmentality by Michel Foucault that characterizes the modern version of power as the one that works through numerous small practices of normalization and self-surveillance instead of open coercion (Foucault 139). It is in this context that beauty practices are viewed as disciplinary technologies that give rise to self-regulating and compliant subjects. The fact that aesthetic norms are embodied by the characters proves the way social control is imposed on the level of daily body practices that bring personal desire in line with the greater economic and cultural demands.

The work also relies on the theory of capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in order to conceptualize beauty as a type of socially produced and exchangeable value (Bourdieu 87). The Bourdieu framework allows examining the physical appearance as embodied capital, which can be translated into social mobility, economic opportunity, and symbolic recognition. Make-up, fashion, and aesthetic presentation are explored as competitive strategic investments in social spheres. This approach emphasizes the influence of body modification on the wishes to climb the social ladder and structural inequality, showing how the novel also offers the connection between appearance and the larger patterns of stratification and resource allocation.

Feminist body theory gives an insight into the gendered point of view on bodily discipline. The discussion relies on the writings of Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo, and the analysis perceives the female body as a place where cultural norms of femininity are inscribed and reproduced (Bartky 45; Bordo 22). According to these theorists, feminine self-management works by internalized monitoring, restraint, and self-correction. Dieting, cosmetic improvement, and emotional regulation are some of the practices that portray the normalization of gendered self-surveillance in the novel. This model focuses on how aesthetic work is a daily necessity in the need to remain socially legitimate and respectable for both sexes.

The research is also based on the feminist political economy, which studies the connection between gender, work, and the restructuring of the neoliberal world. This viewpoint enables the analysis to relate body practices to precarious work, marketized intimacy, and commodification of self-identity (McRobbie 101). Emotional performance, appearance management, and self-optimization are viewed as gendered labour that is affected by economic insecurity and competitive individualism. Combining the feminist political economy and the textual analysis into the overall changes in modern capitalism, the research manages to place the novel into the context of the global shifts in modern capitalism, revealing how the structural forces are transformed into personal accountability and self-investment.

In *If I Had Your Face*, cosmetic surgery is not a promotion of luxury but a prudent planning of survival in an economy based on appearance. The narration of the long recovery of Ara and the cautious care of her body by Kyuri is pragmatic, not emotional. Normalization

of surgical modification by way of regular discourse, familiarity with clinics, peer pressure, and anticipation normalizes it and presents it as an ordinary routine aspect of self-improvement instead of something extraordinary. That is the normalization of the concept of disciplinary power proposed by Michel Foucault, which functions through the establishment of norms that individuals internalize at will. Beauty serves as a standard of regulation that rearranges the aspirations, employability, and self-worth without any overt pressure.

In this context, suffering is redefined as investment and not pain. Physical pain, monetary loss, and prolonged healing are accepted as logical costs that are paid to achieve the social ladder and economic chance. The aesthetic incompetence is strengthened as the moralization of appearance promotes the view that aesthetic weakness is individual incompetence as opposed to organizational limitation. As Ara observes, "In our country, you could be poor, you could be unlucky, but if you were not beautiful, that was your fault" (Cha 116). The disciplined feminine body theory by Sandra Bartky can be used to shed some light on how such tolerance generates femininity by means of constant body correction and self-control. The body is turned into a continuous project, which needs to be monitored, perfected, and sustained so as to be socially and economically competitive.

Meanwhile, the novel does not represent its characters as helpless victims of the beauty norms of the patriarchal society. Rather, they can also be seen as strategic actors who are aware of structural pressures and act with calculated decision-making. The decision-making in matters concerning surgery is influenced by class restrictions, unstable jobs, and the financial rationality of marriage and social promotion. This complication makes the simplified accounts of oppression and the intertwining of agency and constraint difficult. Cosmetic surgery, as a discipline invested through Foucauldian normalization and feminist body theory, transforms vulnerability into a potential capital and agency into a strictly limited phenomenon that is contained within the circumstances of neoliberal precarity and aesthetic governance.

The room salon in *If I Had Your Face* functions as an intensified location of aesthetic display and emotional performance, organized into a very organized gendered labour. The novel contains a lot of information about conversation, posture, appearance, and affect, being carefully tuned to the expectations of elite male clients, via the narration of Kyuri. This is not a casual and more sexualized work but a structured, practiced, and cost-benefit analysis. Feminist political economy helps to understand that such environments make intimacy a profit-making resource, and the aspect of emotional labour by Arlie Hochschild elucidates the need for even feelings to be controlled, regulated, and shown strategically. In this system, physical attractiveness, charm, and attentiveness are aligned with professional skills.

The story brings out clearly that desire in the salon is organized in performance and not in authenticity. Hostesses are forced to uphold male power and create the illusion of selective attention and emotional preference at the same time. As Kyuri explains, "Men want to feel powerful, but they also want to feel chosen" (Cha 62). The expression of emotions is disconnected from the personal experience and restructured as a calculated spectacle aimed at creating a sense of recognition and control in the client. The framework created by Hochschild sheds light on how this controlled effect creates economic value through the creation of a well-

calculated emotional space. Femininity, therefore, acts as the performative capital, which manifests itself in the voice, gesture, timing, and bodily closeness. The focus on Kyuri as a strategic self-presentation centralizes the story, which foreshadows the labour behind what could otherwise be easily viewed as natural sociability.

This disciplined embodiment cannot be separated from class mobility in the novel. The drive to attain economic security and rise in Kyuri relies on her skills to retain aesthetic accuracy and emotional versatility to face the critical assessment. The room salon is a conditional way to progress, which needs unceasing optimization of the body and effective control. Meanwhile, the story does not diminish her role in active exploitation. The manner of her self-awareness and the calculated decision-making can be described as a constrained agency that is conditioned by structural limitations. With this characterization, the novel reveals the aspects of how neoliberal economies commodify desire such that femininity is made an investment strategy that connects beauty, emotional labour, and survival in the economy.

The apartment that is shared among the women serves in *If I Had Your Face* as a setting beyond the city. The instability based on their economic and social destiny is actualized in its small size, absence of privacy, and the physical rundown of the facility. The story itself is a repetition of the vertical hierarchy of housing in Seoul, in which wealth can be seen spatially but is inaccessible structurally. As Miho observes, "in Seoul, you could tell exactly how much someone was worth by where they lived" (Cha 94). Precarity, therefore, is an architectural one. The socially produced space by Henri Lefebvre sheds light on the way the apartment is a mirror of systems of economic stratification. Domestic space is no longer a neutral shelter but a location of the position of classes, which constitutes the structuring of aspiration, anxiety, and bodily self-presentation practices.

The material insecurity further heightens the acuity of mobility investing in appearance. The availability of education, stable employment, and property ownership is limited because it is a problem of limited financial means, which reduces the channels of social mobility. Within such limitations, aesthetic capital is one of the limited resources that seems possible to achieve separately. Spatial compression strengthens the feeling of limited possibility and promotes the fact that the characters should use the body as a project, wherein expansion of material constraint may be reached. This implies that feminized economic vulnerability is converted into extreme focus on grooming, cosmetic adjustment, and social performance as sources of bargaining structural immobility.

The home thus protrudes instead of reducing market discipline. The discussions about rent, deposits, and moving around every day are interwoven with planning for surgery, jobs, and marriage opportunities. The apartment is transformed into an economic calculation based on financial pressure and competitive comparison, which determines intimate decisions. The capacity to be in physical space increases self-monitoring among others and promotes self-control as expected. In the neoliberal housing conditions, the home loses its status as a place of refuge and becomes a reminder of the neoliberalism of dispossession and instability. The story of Cha connects the marginality of the space with the maximization of the bodies and

shows the way in which the economic constraint infiltrates the personal space and accelerates the process of femininity changing into a commodifiable value.

The novel ends up disagreeing with the discourse of empowerment that often dominates the modern beauty culture. Even though the characters themselves analyse their choices as personal decisions, the situation of choosing is proven by the context of the narrative as being developed in the conditions of economic insecurity and strict division into genders. This stress indicates the criticisms of neoliberal feminism, which encourages the improvement of self-individualism and ignores structural inequality. Cosmetic appearance, emotional acting, and self-presentation or discipline are strategies of self-managing but are subject to the influence of labour precarity, housing instability, and the overall economic estimation of female looks. The agency thus works in constraint, and it is constituted by material and institutional pressures and not by autonomous freedom.

Cha builds this paradox through depicting aspiration, silent resignation, and tactical accommodation. The characters interpret their actions as the need to adapt, in a small range of possibilities, in which the only way to succeed is to decide on the most feasible solution, as opposed to the deployment of free will. Empowerment rhetoric talks of being independent and able to move around, but the story exposes that the scope of choices to be made is already set by the position of classes and gender roles. Self-optimization is therefore no longer seen as liberation but as adapting to systemic constraint by imposing structural inequality on the bodies of persons and individual effort.

In addition to a particular urban and cultural setting, the novel is addressed to the worldwide growth of aesthetic capitalism, where the body is a competitive commodity in both the labour market and the social economy. The pressures in Seoul are echoed in transnational conditions that connect appearance with employability, social visibility, and economic mobility. Using the placing of intimate bodily practice into wider value production systems, the account demonstrates the way structural insecurity has been repackaged as individual duty. What is very critical about it is that it shows how coercion works by the very work of aspiration, making market discipline voluntary and entrenching inequality in the day-to-day self-transformation practices.

Conclusion

This research has suggested that *If I Had Your Face* is not about beauty as a cultural obsession and individual preference; rather, it is a kind of biocapital that is generated in neoliberal patriarchy. The emotional play-acting, cosmetic alteration, and disciplined self-representation of the female body in the novel portray the female body as a place where economic insecurity, gender hierarchy, and class aspiration meet. Based on Foucauldian terms of normalization, the Bourdieu theory of capital, feminist body theory, and feminist political economy, the analysis has demonstrated the way the bodily practices perform regulatory technologies that transform vulnerability into market value. In the novel, agency is constrained, exposing choice as being organized by material and social restriction.

The more general meaning of the novel is that it is one of the contributions to the literature of the neoliberal subjectivity of the contemporary era, where one needs to keep

optimizing oneself in order to survive. Placing intimate body choices within broader precarious systems of labour, housing, and aesthetic competition, Cha puts forth a feminist critique at an economic level rather than at an ideological one. Such a view adds value to the contemporary arguments in gender studies by projecting a future where embodiment and political economy intersect within global urban settings. Finally, the story reveals a hallmark situation of aesthetic capitalism: No longer is the body simply a symbol of identity but an infrastructure of economic engagement according to which inequality is handled, reproduced, and experienced.

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