Divine Beauty: The Rise of Cosmetic Surgery as a Religious Practice

Throughout religious history, the human body has been depicted as a sacred vessel. From iconographic art portraying divine perfection to Islamic purification rituals that emphasize bodily sanctity, beauty and spiritual value are heavily intertwined. For many traditions, the idealized body is associated with symmetry and purity as a manifestation of divine order. In contrast to many religions' beliefs in submitting to natural beauty ideals, many pious women find solace in cosmetic surgery—seeing it as an enhancement rather than a contradiction to their faith. In the Muslim suburbs of Chicago, I have found myself at countless *haflas*, or parties, in Arabic, where dozens of women take their hijabs off in the privacy of an all-female space. At these *haflas*, the topic of cosmetic surgery dominates conversation, with women showing off their seemingly-subtle face lifts or gossiping about who secretly traveled to Amman for the best rhinoplasty. It is a contradiction I think about often—seeing women dressed modestly in hijabs and abayas while also wearing identical nose jobs and plumped-up lips.

Here, the pursuit of the ideal body is not just about vanity. Instead, it is an act of devotion, a ritualistic striving for perfection akin to religious purification. Cosmetic surgery is often considered a secular, aesthetic, or medical procedure; however, it can function as a religious practice through its ritualistic nature, transformation of the self, and the pursuit of an idealized, almost sacred body. The popularity of procedures have increased about 19% from 2019 to 2022 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2023). As

aesthetic surgery has become more widely accepted in the past few decades, its presence in religious and culturally conservative communities parallels the way ritualistic practices function. In this essay, I will analyze how Muslim women, in particular, engage with cosmetic surgery as a form of embodied spirituality. It is interesting to understand this demographic because of the values of modesty embedded within Islam. While not all Muslim women wear the hijab, for many women who veil themselves, the face becomes the primary site of self-expression, which suggests an increase in beauty treatments and alteration. Cosmetic surgery can be seen as a religion of beauty. In this context, bodily modification symbolizes spiritual rebirth through ritualistic processes, pilgrimages to surgery hubs mirror sacred journeys, and worship of idols such as celebrities.

While Islam generally views cosmetic surgery and bodily modification as altering God's creation, many Muslim women continue these processes. Attitudes towards plastic surgery in Islam are interesting and complex, as the religion emphasizes modesty, which contrasts with contemporary beauty standards. This disparity is reflected in many women's relationship to cosmetic surgery, where beauty is pursued as a form of self-improvement within the framework of Islamic values. It is important to note and understand the Qur'anic interpretation of bodily modification when understanding aesthetic enhancements as a religious practice for Muslim women. In Surah An-Nisa, which translates to the Women's Surah, Shaytan (Satan) says that he will instruct people to alter God's creation (Qur'an 4:119). Surah Al-Tin states: "We have indeed created humankind in the best of molds" (Qur'an 95:4). Many scholars cite these verses in arguing that aesthetic procedures go against divine design, which is the general consensus

among Muslims in the 21st-century (Atiyeh et al. 2008). However, it is also worth mentioning that for some, religious beliefs are more flexible in the context of health-related operations, such as facial reconstruction surgery after an accident (Muslu and Demir 2019). Surgery, in the case of Islam, is not explicitly marked as forbidden. However, despite the fact that many Muslims believe that cosmetic surgery is forbidden in Islam, women still choose to undergo procedures, which can be seen as its own religious observance—where people worship the pursuit of beauty.

Like many sacred practices, cosmetic surgery marks both a physical and psychological transformation. As women change their appearance through common procedures—whether it be a nose job or breast implants—many describe their experiences as a rebirth or a new beginning, which is similar to spiritual renewal. The idea of transformation is a very important one, especially in Islam: Muslims perform wudu or ablution five times a day before prayers, signifying purification of the physical body and the soul. Cosmetic surgery can be seen as a rite of passage that follows a ritualistic process like wudu. From consultation, preparation, operation, and post-surgical healing, these steps closely parallel the journeys Muslims undertake in their religious practices. In both cases, the acts are not just physical but also representative of a conscious effort to improve the self and reaffirm the sacredness of the body. For Muslim women who have had plastic surgery, their operations are not a contradiction to their faith, but rather an extension of spiritual self-improvement that Islam promotes. While cosmetic surgery does not have a similar cleaning effect as wudu, it can still be seen as a form of ritualistic salvation. Many Muslim women get plastic surgery in hopes of feeling

beautiful and empowering themselves in order to achieve a sense of physical renewal, much like how spiritual renewal is pursued through traditional religions (Haris 2018). Just as Islam preaches self-improvement, cosmetic surgery fulfills the desire for both physical and spiritual transformation.

Some Muslim women view cosmetic surgery as a means of enhancing their self-esteem or fulfilling personal goals, which they may consider permissible as their intent aligns with the principles of self-care and spiritual improvement that are highly emphasized in Islam. One example of this is Ramadan: a month dedicated to self-discipline, self-reflection, and growth through purification of the mind (deepening spiritual practices) and the body (abstaining from food and water). For Muslim women who pursue cosmetic procedures similar to a religious practice, the holy month marks not only an increase in detox diets but also in plastic surgery. A 2022 study found that 57% of plastic surgeons in Saudi Arabia reported an increase in cosmetic operations on women during Ramadan (Gelidan 2022). The rise in demand for aesthetic procedures is attributed to women aligning their desire for physical improvement with the spiritual renewal and self-reflection that Muslims strive for during Ramadan. Additionally, Ramadan has been labeled as a “cosmetic season” (Gelidan 2022), where women stay inside to recover from their procedures, while simultaneously engaging in Islamic practices such as fasting, prayer, and spiritual growth. In a way, Muslim women seeking plastic surgery during the holy month can be seen as a type of religious isolation, where one is in a state of solitude for reflection. This manifestation of beauty, self-care, and surgery as a form of spiritual

growth represents how plastic surgery is not just a superficial alteration, but also an extension of religious purification.

Muslims across the world regard their trip to Mecca, otherwise known as Hajj, as the ultimate pilgrimage. However, both Muslim and non-Muslim women alike travel to Muslim countries where the cosmetic surgery industry is flourishing—this journey can be seen as their own Hajj. In understanding Muslim women's connection to plastic surgery as a religious practice, it becomes clear that the process of crossing borders in pursuit of beauty represents a personal pilgrimage. The growing popularity of plastic surgery in Muslim-majority countries supports understanding cosmetic surgery as a religious practice, as it shows how beauty standards and religious values can coexist. According to The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS)'s 2023 Report, Turkey was the leading non-Western country for performing cosmetic procedures—with other countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria following suit as prominent destinations for aesthetic surgeries ("Global Survey 2023: Full Report and Press Releases" 2024). The contradiction between the Islamic interpretation of cosmetic procedures and the medical tourism present in Muslim countries is very clear. However, this disparity can be attributed to the fact that it is often cheaper to undergo cosmetic surgery in these countries compared to Western nations, which inspires many women to embark on what can be considered similar to a religious pilgrimage. Nevertheless, the foreign plastic surgeon's office serves as a personal Mecca where both Muslim and non-Muslim women seek physical transformation and spiritual renewal. It is a common Islamic belief, based on one of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH)'s hadiths, that one's sins are

erased after performing Hajj (Abu Hurayrah, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 26, Hadith 596). Women coming back from their own pilgrimage to these plastic surgery capitals may feel a similar sense of renewal, returning not just with a new face but perhaps also a newfound enlightenment.

The popularization of cosmetic procedures in the Muslim world can be traced to modern-day celebrity culture and social media. As more women seek plastic surgery, many of them start to exhibit similar features as they get the same fillers, genioplasty, or liposuction. This phenomenon reflects the influence of homogenized beauty standards shaped by the idealization of celebrities. In many of the Muslim countries where cosmetic surgery is on the rise, women often show pictures of Lebanese singers such as Haifa Wehbe and Nancy Ajram (Doherty 2008). Even outside of the Muslim world, many get plastic surgery in pursuit of looking like famous women. This obsession with physical perfection through aesthetic procedures can be seen as a devotion to these icons—much like the worship of religious figures. While Islam forbids idolizing physical representations of God or depicting anything other than God as divine, the glorification of celebrities in the cosmetic industry likens the practice to a religious one. The influence of social media creates saints or idols of beauty, defining what is considered sacred for women who undergo cosmetic surgery. Though the discussion of lived religion and worship of idols in Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* focuses on Italian-American Catholics rather than Muslim women, the parallels are very striking. As Orsi describes how devotion to the Madonna becomes an embodied religious practice, as the pursuit of cosmetic surgery inspired by worship of the celebrity becomes one as well.

Like the material and embodied practices Orsi depicts, bodily modification functions as a religion that fosters “a peculiar kind of spiritual condition,” one that is “fed on the luxuries of religion” (Orsi 2002). However, just as Orsi critiques the superficiality of lived religion, cosmetic surgery in the context of celebrity worship can feel superficial in its material displays of idolization.

Cosmetic surgery, like religion, reflects an intense pursuit of unattainable beauty ideals—ones that emphasize physical perfection that has replaced traditional religious devotion. For some, these procedures replace spiritual fulfillment with bodily perfection. However, for Muslim women across the world, the act of undergoing surgery reflects their worship. Just as Islamic rituals purify the mind and the body, aesthetic operations follow a similar process of transformation, where the physical form is purified, renewed, and enhanced. As Muslim values such as modesty and self-acceptance contradict the dominant beauty standards, which often rely on some type of bodily modification, cosmetic surgery becomes an interesting site of tension. There is a beautification of Islam that both aligns and challenges traditional notions of modesty. In this way, a new religion has formed—a religion of beauty where devotion to an ideal body is a form of spiritual practice, and the transformation of the self through physical alteration.

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