Betty la Fea and the Success of Ugliness

In 1999, television’s most beautiful ugly girl was born and she in time would become a cultural icon like no other and would also give Colombians like me something to be proud of. Many Americans might remember Ugly Betty as a moderately successful ABC show, but what many might not realize is that this concept did not originate in the United States, but in the South American country of Colombia as Yo Soy Betty, la Fea, a telenovela that aired from 1999 to 2001 focusing on the story of Beatriz “Betty” Pinzón Solano, an intelligent but unattractive woman who makes her way through the unforgiving world of beauty and fashion. The show soon became a big success in its home country and quickly gained success internationally as well in the form of re-broadcasts and remakes. Yo Soy Betty, la Fea is a show that has left a lasting legacy in the world of television and in myself as well thanks to its national triumph, unprecedented international success, slew of international adaptations, relatable themes and characters, the subversion of traditional telenovela tropes, and the way it emotionally impacted me by managing to present Colombia in a different light than other pieces of media.

The beginning of the legacy of Betty la Fea can be seen from the unprecedented success that the series had in its country of origin, Colombia. Yo Soy Betty, la Fea was a ratings success in Colombia both during its original airing, as well as during its most recent reairing. A Colombian journalist noted, “Although it is only a repeat, ‘Yo Soy Betty, la Fea’ has marked an
important footprint in media and has become the most important production in Colombia, because once again it reached a rating score of 13.5, similar to almost 20 years ago when it premiered” (Mejía). The fact that the show managed to receive similar ratings even twenty years after its original airing only scratches the surface of the success of *Betty la Fea* in Colombia since the show also spawned a sequel series, an animated spin-off, and a theatrical adaptation. The success of *Betty la Fea* in Colombia is undeniable, but the true start of its status as a cultural icon began with its success beyond the borders of Colombia.

After the success of *Betty la Fea* had in Colombia, other Spanish speaking countries started to broadcast the telenovela, where it quickly grew in popularity. The show managed to become a ratings success throughout Latin America and even resonated well with Latin American audiences in the United States, where it also became successful as told by a reporter, “U.S. Spanish-language web Telemundo aired the show in September 2000, and it drove Telemundo’s ratings for 11 months” (De la Fuente). The success of the show allowed it to become an international phenomenon, so much so that it was at times used in order to gather an audience for public events, as seen in a situation in Puerto Rico described by the *New York Times*, “By 2000, the show was drawing record ratings throughout Latin America; in Puerto Rico, when the leaders of political protests in Vieques noticed crowds thinning out, they erected a giant screen for viewing the show” (Fogel). The unprecedented success that the show was having worldwide was unlike anything seen before in television, and it would not be long before international networks started thinking about bringing the success of *Betty la Fea* into their own countries.
A big aspect of the success of *Betty la Fea* that allowed it to become a cultural icon was the slew of adaptations of the telenovela that were produced worldwide. There have been at least 21 official international adaptations of *Betty la Fea*. India was the first country to remake the show in 2003, and soon other countries began making their own versions of the show such as Germany, Mexico, Spain, the United States, China, Egypt, and others. The series became so successful internationally, that in 2010 it was awarded the Guinness World Record for the most successful telenovela of all time. Most adaptations followed the exact storyline of the original show with slight differences in order to better adapt to the country’s culture, as reported by the *New York Times*:

Soon production companies from around the world came calling, snatching up the rights not to rebroadcast the show but faithfully to remake it. In India, Betty became Jassi, and the show, “There’s No One Like Jassi,” was an instant smash. Other versions followed — in Germany as “Falling in Love in Berlin,” in the Netherlands as “Lotte,” in Russia as “Born Ugly.” They all tweaked the tone of the original (the German version all but excised the comedy) but kept the ugly duckling storyline intact. (Fogel)

The international adaptations of *Betty la Fea* allowed for the story to reach more people than ever and basically assured that the story would become an international phenomenon. The international success of *Betty la Fea* helps show how universal the story really is, and the themes that the show deals are part of this universal appeal which helped tremendously with the success of the series.
One of the factors that allowed *Betty la Fea* to be so successful internationally were the themes that the series presented. The main theme that allowed *Betty la Fea* to become popular was the ever-present struggle of the importance placed on physical beauty in society, which is an issue that people from all around the world can relate to and that is echoed by the creator of the series, “To see his creation resonate in Hindi, Russian and German, and hear of other upcoming versions, has surprised him even more. ‘It only goes to show that female vanity is universal’ he says” (De la Fuente). The theme of beauty vs. ugliness is something that people all around the world struggle with on a daily basis, and having a series that spoke of the reality of that surely helped *Betty la Fea* resonate with people throughout the world. The series also dealt with other themes that helped the show become a success, as many of them reflected the realities of people from all walks of life; some examples of the relatable themes found in the show include the difficulties of being a single mother, the struggle of having difficult co-workers, the joy of friendship, the realities pressures of bribery, and many more. Though the themes are undoubtedly one of the reasons behind the show’s success, one thing that helped *Betty la Fea* differentiate itself from other telenovelas from its time was breaking away from typical telenovel traditions.

*Yo Soy Betty la Fea* was unique among other telenovelas like it at the time, and a big part of its success can be attributed to the fact that the show subverted many of the tropes of telenovelas at the time. Most telenovelas that were produced before the creation of *Betty la Fea* followed similar tropes such as having beautiful protagonists, black and white morality, upward class mobility through coincidence, melancholic characters, and many more. When *Betty la Fea* aired, it did away with many of those tropes in a variety of ways, such as having an unattractive and intelligent protagonist, antagonists with shades of grey, showing the values of hard work and
humble values, and characters that acknowledge but laugh at their situations. The way that the show differed from other telenovelas at the time is noted by the *New York Times*, “It was a first in two regards: in the appearance, amidst all the airbrushed beauties, of such an unsightly woman, and in the way the show — rather than pitying her — poked fun at her looks and those who judged them” (Fogel). The way that *Betty la Fea* broke many of the common telenovela stereotypes allowed it to differentiate itself from other competitors which undoubtedly led to its national and international success. *Betty la Fea* is a show that has undoubtedly become important to all kinds of people throughout the world, but I cannot begin to express what the show meant to me as a Colombian.

It is no secret that Colombia has an image problem that has been fueled for years by instability, drugs, and violence. Pop culture has capitalized on this image problem for years by showcasing stories that centered around those negative images for years and as a Colombian, it hurt seeing my country being almost exclusively represented by such negative images, though it all changed when I first saw *Yo Soy Betty la Fea*. Unlike many other depictions of Colombian life, *Betty la Fea* presented a story mostly free of those negative aspects of Colombian society. As one of the leading publications in Colomba puts it, “Although there is no room for violence in Betty, nor social complaint, librettists, actors, and the director have managed to draw an interesting picture of Colombian society, with almost all its greatness and misery” (“Betty la Nuestra”). The Colombia that was depicted in *Betty la Fea* is what made me, and likely others, fall in love with the show because it managed to show a different side of the complexity of Colombian society without having to rely on the same topics.
The phenomenon of *Yo Soy Betty la Fea* is one that exceeded all expectations. The series not only showed amazing levels of success in its home country but also internationally, spawning a number of remakes that spread the beauty of the story. The themes of the show gave the audience a way to relate their own experiences to what was happening on the screen, the way it broke away from tired telenovela tropes allowed it to stand out in a constantly crowded medium, and it brought Colombians like me joy in how it portrayed a Colombia that was different from the one usually represented by its dark history in most media. Despite coming from relatively humble beginnings, *Yo Soy Betty, la Fea* is a show that has marked its legacy in pop culture thanks to its national success, international spread, numerous international adaptations, universal themes, subversion of telenovela tropes, for proving to the world and that Colombia is more than its violent past, and for showing me that my home country could be properly represented in popular media without relying in its dark history. *Betty la Fea* is without a doubt a show that will be remembered as time goes on as expressed by Elyfer Torres, the latest actress to give life to Betty, “‘The story is totally timeless,’ Torres, 21, says. ‘For women who are Latina, and a woman who doesn’t go with the beauty standards, the fact that she achieved everything she wants, not just professionally but in love too, it’s so inspiring’” (Giannotta). The sheer timelessness of the show has helped it maintain its appeal and inspiration even twenty years after the world of television was introduced to the most beautiful ugly girl.
 Works Cited


