



RESEARCH PAPER

From Parvati to Pageant: The Rise of the Body Business in Capitalist India

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ABSTRACT

Prompted by the critically acclaimed documentary *Bitches and Beauty Queens: The Making of Miss India*, by the Fulbright scholar Minkie Spiro, this research intends to deconstruct the politics of beauty pageants and see them as events that commercializes the female body. Far from embodying the mythical values of Lakshmi and Sita, the Indian beauty pageants theatricalize women as occasions for capital and revenue. *Bitches and Beauty Queens*, more than merely projecting the independent Indian woman, focuses on the machine that makes this product possible—'beauty queens are not born, they are made' says Meera Syal, the voiceover for the documentary. This research hence view the body as a product of, what Adorno and Horkheimer call, the culture industry. The female body becomes 'plastic' inscribed with gender and cultural standards. It is this plasticity that, Susan Bordo argues, popular culture remoulds and reconstructs. Both Adorno and Bordo agree that postmodern patriarchal capitalism obscures the natural female body and substitutes it with a prototype of femininity. The outcome of this industrial process is a corporeal bizarreness. The body is eternally incarcerated in a state of lack called anorexia.

Keywords: Anorexia, Body Inscription, Culture Industry, Plastic Bodies

Introduction

In the year 2021, Harnaaz Sandhu from India was crowned the new Miss Universe. A conservative country like India, one that also thrives on the Hindutva ideology, responded to the crowning with a celebratory zeal. An article in *Business Today* reported Narendra Modi sending the winner best wishes and the multi-millionaire industrialist Anand Mahindra seeing the victory as a beginning of a good business week. This alone is enough to see the political and economic hinges of the event. While the colonial fetish with the exotic Hottentot Venus might have departed, the neo-imperialist male gaze continues to permeate culture and aesthetics. *Bitches and Beauty Queen: The Making of Miss India* is a world of contradictions. Minkie Spiro's, the director of the documentary, behind-the-scenes rendition of the Femina Miss India is beset with binaries that are subverted, and renewed all at the same time. India, as the choice for the documentary's setting, is a clever selection that enables the director to place the contest in a country that itself is infested with opposing ideals, human values and ideologies. The scene of the documentary opens with the Miss World being crowned at an international platform and then gradually shifts to India where the remaining 45 minutes of the movie are to take place. The contestants are girls from different parts of India, from different ethnic and religious backgrounds all under the age of twenty five. As they move into a high rise five star hotel, with the hope of a successful and promising future, they wish to live the Indian equivalent of the American dream. Like the multiplicity of the urban space these contestants now occupy, the contest too has various layers that sometimes collude against each other. Spiro's ethnocentric distrust of a third world country best appears in the scenes where the city's abject surplus is shown alongside the tinsel trappings of the world of pageantry. If on one side the contestants train and exercise in considerable peace, the riots and disapproval from right wing groups is the flip

side of the picture. In another similar scene, while the contestants work and toil in air conditioned compartments, the director does not hesitate to expose the slums and ghettos which surround the urban unit. These contradictory visuals augment the flaws inherent in the beauty exhibition. Designed originally to allow women public representation in matters of gender and sex and body image the pageant eventually became an event that controlled not just women's bodies but also set standards of beauty. With the coming together of business and entertainment, the pageant has acquired a commercial face. Its value resides more in the business it brings—television rights to air the event are sold for millions, companies bid to sponsor the event, high end hotels are booked not only to accommodate the contestants but also the judges who fly in from different parts of the world—than in the celebration of womanhood. Little effort is made then to retain the uniqueness of the product, which in this case is the female body; all differences are subsumed in a generic sameness and it is to this sameness that the title is attributed to.

Literature Review

“The beauty business is big business. Beauty queens are not born they are made” (Spiro 2:01). This prophetic declaration by Meera Syal, the narrator of the documentary, is in essence the creed of the whole rigmarole. Brain child of a commercial beauty magazine *Femina*, the Miss India contest is a conglomeration of highly influential, multi-millionaire corporations. Consequently the product they seek to create is a commodity—its value lies in the pleasure it provides and the business it attracts. *Bitches and Beauty Queens* offers an insight into the very nature of this pleasure. The first half of the documentary is dedicated to making the product complete, perfect and desirable in all regards. Like a ring master, juggling and training the circus animals, the contest's trainers engineer the contestants so as to erase all flaws. Lubna Adams is one such master trainer. In the 50 minutes film she is seen controlling, dictating and commanding the participants to the state of a perfect deportment, posture and performance. The resulting entertainment is less pleasure and more longing. The more the contestants are pushed towards perfection the greater the desire they create in the masses. This desire sets in motion the production of various commodities and instruments. From items of personal care to creating new ideologies all is put to sale on the very bodies of the contestants. The contestants, (reduced to the status of mannequins), and the audiences exist only to lubricate the capitalist machine. It is important here to note the role of media in creating a cycle of desire. Seen only through the screen of the television, the contestants become nymphs far too pretty to be real yet too seamless to be ignored. The director, the choreographer, the trainer, the lights, camera, music, sound and set design are all technical aids that empower the economic position of the industrialist master.

The more densely and completely its (film/television production) techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it creates the illusion that the outside world is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema...according to this tendency life is to be made indistinguishable from the sound film (Leitch, 2010, p. 1036)

The female body thus becomes the promise of pleasure. Her body is accentuated through a series of exercises both physical and technical. The Indian contestants thus embody the Indian desire of success and skyscrapers. Like all elements of culture industry—movies, music, literature, the body too becomes the dominant culture's text. It is not difficult to discern how this text is fashioned. The production of the body-text is thus a handmaiden, a monopoly of haute bourgeoisie whose representation ensures profit, capital and also patriarchal control.

The “promissory note of pleasure issued by the plot and packaging” (1040) of the contestants is a capitalist surplus—always present but eternally delayed. The culture that produces the body to be consumed also suppresses complete accesses to the same. Thus the

body-text of the perfect woman is repeated to create another demand, another desire but never upheld to extinguish the desire itself.

...the promise which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the dinner must be satisfied with the reading of the menu...the desire inflamed by the glossy names and images is served up finally with a celebration of the daily round it sought to escape... By constantly exhibiting the object of desire, the breasts beneath the sweater, the naked torso of the sporting hero, it merely goads the unsublimated anticipation of pleasure, which through the habit of denial has long since been mutilated as masochism (1040)

Minkie Spiro portrays exactly how the multitudes are limited only to the starters without the leastest possible entry to the esoteric halls of the main course. As the documentary enters its 34th minute and 47th second we see how, even when the event is to be televised for millions of masses, the pornographic content is served only to a “privileged few”. Needless to say this privileged class is the one who wishes to create business of entertainment and desire yet at the same time disband the audiences from the pleasure they seek.

This vicious cycle of supply, demand and scarcity (withdrawal of full access and pleasure) of the aesthetic object, which in this case is the female body, is a pernicious effect of what Horkheimer and Adorno call the industrialization of culture. It is this mechanization of culture that separates beauty from art, consumer from consumption and producer from buyer. In a 2018 article in *The New Yorker*, Jeffrey Toobin exposed the pageant for its capitalistic roots. Toobin notes how Donald’s Trump involvement in the pageant was not only a male desire to prevail but also a tycoon’s desire to control the commodities and means of production.

From 1996 to 2015, Donald Trump co-owned the Miss Universe Organization, which also included the Miss U.S.A. and Miss Teen U.S.A. pageants. A day or two before a pageant began[...]when the finalists were announced, “the list looked like the countries that Donald Trump did business with, or wanted to do business with.”... “The finalists were picked by Trump. He was really in charge. We called it the Trump card.” (A Miss Universe spokeswoman said that the pageant rules allowed the company’s staff, including Trump, to participate in naming the finalists.) (*The New Yorker* 19 February 2018)

Evident in these accounts is the exercise of power over the female body through the agency of capitalist consumer culture and patriarchy. Trump’s cavalier attitude towards the contestants shows how the female body is dehumanized, commoditized and monetized. The pageant organizes its products according to their physical appeal and once launched in the market they compete against each other till the moment where only the best product survives (the best face and body is crowned the winner). This symbiosis of the body, media houses and business corporations, creates newer notions of womanhood. Beauty is no longer an inherent quality, rather something that is acquired through rigorous grooming and preparation. The woman is no longer free to embrace her body but has to conform to the ideals laid down by rigid capitalism and patriarchy. Countries, like India, no longer reinforce the mythical values of Parvati, Sita and Lakshmi rather resort to the idea of a revolutionary new woman, who in her multicultural and often immodest appearance promises India global recognition. This ‘beauty turn’ in nationalism while it boosts business and capital enslaves woman to a male-gaze that at once desires and disregards the female body; it desires for an ideal body type but disregards all that do not fit.

Beauty and the Bizarre Body

The colonial project was largely an essentializing project. It content itself by assigning races, genders and ethnicities fixed categories, characteristics and traits and

identifying alien races as made up of similar elements. Late capitalism borrows this reductive colonial tendency to create a culture of “standardization and mass production” (Leitch 1034). *Bitches and Beauty Queens*, an Indian version of “a production line, a boot camp factory” (Spiro 1:51) of beauty reveals how the body today has become an object of consumerism. To fulfill the need of an increasing demand of female body images (for advertisements, movies, sports mascots, and pageants), the beauty factory churns out miraculous numbers of identical body types: identical because all tastes and preferences are largely Caucasian. The culture industry sees this demand for standardized forms of entertainment, art and beauty as direct result of globalization and increasing needs of consumers. Like all goods, the body too requires constant duplication and production. Pressurized thus the beauty industry produces objects at a rate that is “swift and brutal” (41:46). This constant demand on the female body creates a bizarre sameness. From costumes to appearance, the body is admired not for its ingenuity but its ability to obey set aesthetic patterns. The beauty contests’ claim to be inclusive is dismissed both visually and ideologically as soon as the models start walking on the ramp. The stage, with its paraphernalia, prescribes set reactions—the drum roll at every undulant step of the contestants is matched to the psyche of the audience, who enamoured by the stage and its unreachability is already experiencing an adrenaline rush. In addition to the dramatization, which suspends faculties that acknowledge and admire individuality, the contestants too are raised to look alike. “Under the eye of the trainer the transformation continues. But as the days pass the girls come to resemble a more western stereotype of beauty” (09:26). Under constant scrutiny thus by consumer, patriarchal and western cultures, the contestants become a simulation of beauty.

Eurocentric beauty ideals, valorized in beauty pageants and Disney films, exercise social control over female bodies generating fantasies, inspiration, injury, and inequality. Women can attain or approximate this beauty ideal only if they can mold, sculpt, manipulate, and reshape their body according to culturally validated norms (Jha, 2015, p. 14)

Another colonial tendency which the capitalist-consumer culture aspires to borrow is that of creating the terribly beautiful, the exotic, the uncanny and the fascinating—cyber culture does create some semblance of the phantasmagorical. Pageants and more particularly the beauty industry create a range of inadequacies in order produce the exotic and the ideal. The process through which this exoticism is achieved is both psychological physiological. On the psychological level, the contestants are trained to internalize perfection, self-worth, and distinctiveness— Medha, one of the contestants of the Femina Miss India 2002, in *Bitches and Beauty Queens*, challenges all stereotypes; she is neither Indian in her deportment, nor completely western. Like the title she is torn between two worlds and in her elusiveness lays her uncanny appeal. The physical achievement of exoticism is however more brutal and harsh. Not pleased with strict physical training, diet regimes and abstinence, the beauty industry settles for nothing less than body-altering surgical procedures. The modern obsession with slender bodies and thinness has given rise to multiple eating disorders and a boon to cosmetic surgeries. “Technology is used to scan the girls for body fat. In the beauty business there is no room for excess” (Spiro 10:17) Growing dissatisfaction with physical appearance and complexion has instilled, especially in the Third World, a desire to for another similarity—the likeness to the white-male-corporate giant.

This homogenization of body is what Susan Bordo calls the “cultural plastic”. *Bitches and Beauty Queens: The Making of Miss India* shows how this plasticity is achieved. Through strict control by cosmetic and other industries the body of the female contestant is a *body produced* rather than naturally achieved. Like the production of culture, the produced body is nothing more than a clone. In creating a prototype bizarre measures and machinations are adopted. While the audience experiences a suppression of pleasure, the contestants are forced to suppress a vital bodily need, hunger. In a world that monetizes surplus, for the bodies to go hungry is bizarre and ironical. Like the workers of the early capitalist period

who laboured under inhuman and cruel conditions, these contestants are expected to give up all that is profuse and abundant. This capitalist obsession with thinness bordering on emaciation is similar to the fascination for bizarre body types of the earlier centuries. From the Chinese custom of foot binding to wearing neck rings in Far eastern and African countries, along with customs and body altering procedures like piercing, body tattooing and breast implantation, women's bodies have always been subjected to pain and duress. The beauty world too creates magnificence, desire, perfection and glamour through means that sublimate oppression by creating alternate discourses of healthy bodies, fat free existence and the like. These discourses, advocating abstinence, in turn create many physical and psychological conditions. Susan Bordo focuses on how global body images, an unnerving abundance of fashion weeks and pageants have created what she calls the "anorexic body". This new bizarre body is a direct result of a pervert culture of consumption. This culture, while it creates freedom to choose what to eat, produces excess of inorganic sustenance, and constructs food fads, believes in suppressing food desirability in people who are to play mascots to this food industry. This doubleness of excess production on the one hand and extreme impoverishment on the other contributes to the modern day illnesses of which anorexia is one.

Conclusion

The anorexic body once produced and perfected (in its thinness and flawlessness) becomes the culture industry's favourite image. The female body becomes a site after it becomes a spectacle. Like Susan Bordo who considers body a "text of cultures" (Leitch, 2010, p.2094) and a site where desirability is constructed, Laura Mulvey explains how "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure". Both Bordo and Mulvey argue how the symbiosis of patriarchy and capitalism fashions women's bodies of which the pageant is an example.

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey, 1989, p.19)

This erotic and sensuous rendition of the female body exhibited in beauty pageants and constructed by makers of popular culture position women as passive and unwitting participants of the culture industry. The construction of their beauty and remapping of their bodies is like the production of tastes, values and entertainment for the masses. Like mass culture, mass beauty is concerned little with the talent and creative ingenuity of the subject. The more the subject can be controlled (in this case the artist/pageant contestant), the more its art (sexual appeal) can be sustained. It is in its regimental training that the female body, like any artifice of the popular culture, can be repeated and presented as the standard norm. The mere erotic value of the body, its pornographic display and its mechanical control creates a pleasure that evades even before it is relished. The slenderness of the female body in fact mirrors the insufficiency of popular culture. Like the anorexic body, always threatened, vulnerable and weak, popular culture is always under the danger of being replaced by newer forms of entertainment. *Bitches and Beauty Queens* foretells this apocalypse. Meera Syal, as the documentary commences and a contestant is crowned Miss India, states how the winner comes with an expiry date. Culture industry thrives on its ability to produce an unending amount of similar objects. Once the body enters into a contact and contract with the patriarchal-capitalist force, it is certain to be recycled innumerable times. This external regulation of diet, cosmetics and costumes drives the feminine further away from the female. The body business far from being revolutionary and emancipatory introduces an internalized docility in the female subject. In making all bodies resemble, the capitalist master shrewdly disguises control and subjugation. In a world

where force and coercion seem too outrageous, the beauty/body industry controls the female body and sexuality by means that bring both money and power.

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