



Motherhood, Women Issues and Masculinity: Deconstructing Global Beauty Pageants

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Abstract

This paper aims at deconstructing the fashion beauty pageants' organisational claim to provide the contestant models and winners platforms to treading through global relations and achieve worldwide recognition, while actually fostering the myth of beauty with culturally-fabricated norms of femininity and masculinity holding up the concepts of 'Complete' or 'Perfect' woman or man to the fore. Here, we seek to talk about the political hegemony working from behind the colossal fashion world economy and how the pageants are being manipulated by the larger capitalist countries through their market capturing tactics. But what we intend most is to show that the pageant contestants sometimes act as passive resistants, countering the hegemonic discourse to dismantle the norms set by the Fashion Politics, starting from Manushi Chhillar's vote for remunerative motherhood to Reita Faria's choice of forming her own identities in their attempt to refuse the laid out set of ideologies.

Keywords: *Deconstruction, Fashion, Beauty pageants, motherhood, femininity, masculinity, Norms, Binaries*

1. Introduction

Much ink has been split upon the normative binarization of femininity and masculinity as culturally-fabricated constructions and their presentation in international beauty pageants is termed ideological and discursive. Beauty pageants treat gender as one more category along with other categories of 'caste', or 'nation' as reflected in the seemingly 'worthy' title ascription such as "Miss India" or in the very entrance forms they fill in ticking on the given boxes of gender, nationality, religion or marital status. The existence of the patriarchal forces, capitalistic gain or gender inequality as represented by the global Beauty pageants is also noted carefully. Controversies are raised against the normative portrayal of women as *demeaning*, *immodest* and *commodities* as the pageants are claimed to have shown the *models* as puppets, sex-objects reducing female bodies to breasts, belly, torsos, buttocks or cleavage and male body type to broad dashboard abs or lionlike thin waist or somewhat aggressive gestures - things that are thought 'proper' to them. Such pageants are thus argued to be *humiliating* for the contestants as for the compulsive fitting into the norms, parameters and ideological categorizations.

2. Objective

Instead of flashing on this colonization of beauty pageant models, the concern here will be limited to the argument on if or how these *models* and contestants talk back or act as passive resistants against the capitalistic construction and dismantle the ideological pageants from within. The particular instances referred to here will explain how they refute the idea of 'complete woman' sometimes by adopting a non-heterosexual reproductive method or sometimes by posing a non-chalant attitude towards the 'naturalness' of motherhood. They show that motherhood is only a choice, and is not compulsory for all women to accept it as their 'natural' duty. Sacrifice, devotion or dedication all that

the patriarchal society inculcates in as to be the compulsory business of a mother to satisfy the myth of motherhood is what needs to be questioned. This paper questions the association of 'naturalness' to 'motherhood', how can motherhood be a 'natural' role for all women while some of them raise their voice for not opting motherhood as their wished for duty? It shows how the contestants are not always willing to accept motherhood as 'natural' rule which they must obey and therefore fit into the laid out norms of maternity. In the endeavor to expose the persuasive nature of the global beauty pageants, this paper will further trace, in short, the unseen yet sinister presence of global politics acting behind the pageants, while chiefly focusing on a few beauty pageant winners from India.

3. Discussion

The immediate push in writing this article is the video clip going viral in social media and news feeds of Miss World, 2017- Manushi Chhillar's graceful answer asserting a mother's profession to deserve highest salary including love and respect, to the question, "which profession deserves highest salary?". This turns to be the celebration of *traditional Indian heart* and suddenly she is the cynosure of media attention whereas media plays a significant role in highlighting the conventional glorification of *Motherhood*. But what they failed to get that this brings the problematic questions of *Motherhood* with all its associated responsibilities and *sacrifices* to the fore. Manushi's answer brings back Virginia Woolf's rhetorical question in *Three Guineas*

"Is the work of a mother, of a wife, of a daughter worth nothing to the nation in solid cash?"

Manushi explains salary as *love* and *respect* and "it's not just about cash". The ideological associations of compulsory motherhood, with the assumption of a *free* domestic *service* are here subverted by the demand of remunerative motherhood.

The beauty pageant organizations (like MWO, MUO) lay stress upon a number of dictative forms to somewhat foster the perceptions and stereotypes a person faces in the society. The term *model* is itself genderless issue. But the pageants attribute gender to the models: gendered female models are seen as *young, beautiful, sexually -alluring figures* equipped with the very *Essence* of *femininity* and *Womanhood* whereas the gendered male models are injected *Masculinity with responsibility*. By tagging the "Beauty with a purpose" motto (Miss World Organisation-MWO) to the women contestants, they are harnessed by the rein of social responsibilities, one of these being the myth of *Fulfilment* of womanhood and the way to achieve *fulfilment of womanhood* is heteronormative procreative sexuality. Reproduction is thought to be a *Natural* and compulsory role of women. The glorification of the romantic notion of *Motherhood*, a disciplinary practice conforming a prevailing notion of *feminine beauty* causing the subjection of female body. The role of Mother as *Supermother* includes *sacrifices*, endurance, self-negligence, domestic and something *Divine* that narcotise women to get convinced to live within social conditioning. The mother remains identified with child nursing. The emphasis on the 'happiness' of a mother (which is 'dictative' because of its conventional assumption that stepping into motherhood makes one the 'happiest' or having a baby is the 'best' feeling for a mother.) is an endeavour to undermine the risks and dangers a woman faces in her nourishing the foetus which depletes her strength and energy. The whole period of conception is very painful and uncomfortable, limiting the physical movement almost to *bedrest*. Expectant mothers are bombarded with advertised *needs assuring comfort* for the consumption of capitalist products such as pregnancy kits, maternity apparels and a variety of baby products by way of backing up the myth of *motherhood*. Pregnancy acts as a patriarchal discipline to keep women in submission, glorifying the ideals of *complete* woman. The most recent example being the tag on Aishwarya Rai (Miss World, 1994) as the "Most Successful Miss World" with a purpose. This must be the endeavor from the MWO's part to stabilize the heteronormative discourse of a *successful woman* with her supposed *Completeness*: having a heterosexual marriage partner and a child. The bodies of the *successful* women are useful fields of normative discourse to represent the economically independent and family person and such utility of bodies render it as obedient site to social control. But it should be kept in mind that heaping such honour with such boxing epithets like *most beautiful, most successful, most desirable* largely acts to limit the prospect of multiple identities she is forming herself.

A powerful attack on patriarchy, refusing the material use of her body, is launched by Miss Universe Sushmita Sen (1994) with her multifaceted resistance to the traditional *Motherhood*. Sen seeks to destabilize this essentialist gender performativity by moving into an *Unnatural Motherhood* by adoption. She faced normative pressure on her decision to adopt two girls (Renee and Alisah) as *Single* woman. She, in Simi Garewal hosted talk show "Rendezvous with Sushmita Sen and Renee" (November, 2013) stated how she had been scandalised on the basis of her decision of adopting two girls as publicity stunt. She asserted she was not *Perfect* because *perfection* denotes the myth of *Completeness*, the illusion of anatomic uniformity. She counters the *intelligible* body which is the field of power-politics, by opposing to reproduction. She offers an effective resistance to disciplinary practices further by backlashing *Motherhood as inclusive* of self-sacrifice or cutting down individual identity and the grand-narratives of devotion and dedication. At the same time she feels absolutely free from feeling a lack of patriarchal father figure in bringing up her kids. She voices her choice of living life in her own term celebrating the *unhealthy* body type of her elder daughter who was vulnerable for owning an *unhealthy* body. Moreover, Sen keeps mum about her *partner(s)* (man, woman, transgender or *genderless*) - rather a defensive attack on the repressive power-structure, making it hard to define her body and sexuality. Posing against the utility of female body, she frees her body from the normative institution of marriage, motherhood or compulsory heterosexuality. This is her alternative self-creation that works to empower herself and helps formation of her identity - neither subverted, nor subversive. She re-examines traditional and inherited knowledge of *woman enough or womanly*. Moving to *motherhood* is only a choice, not compulsion. The regulatory ideologies of women's intellectual freedom is thus dismantled by her following non-traditional lines of conduct. What is powerful in this mode of resistance is deconstructing the hegemonic power structure from within, not opposing from an external site. While the disciplinary power limits the possibilities of identity formation, Sen's self-fashioning exercises personal transformation in the light of specific goals where politics cannot interfere with. "Still unmarried" is a choice for her as she believes in relationships with no or some distant possibility of heteronormative marriage. Diana Hayden, Miss World 1997, writhed the dominant ideologies further as she became mother last year, so far deferring childbirth till she was 42. The process was not *natural* as the baby was born through Egg-freezing, that she had frozen years before. The forced or coaxed decision of childbearing at an early age is critiqued by her because instead of compromising she thinks it is right time for childbirth. What is more interesting that her daughter Arya is surnamed after her, not after its father, Collin Dick, further refutes societal norms of assigning father's surname to daughter, while consciously overlooking the mother figure. While her baby-bump, usually seen as *shameful* or *embarrassing*, is something she flaunts and takes pride in, she is equally vocal about pregnancy as "good, bad and worse". She dismisses the conventional way of looking at children as "future": "..... (Eat) not like there's no tomorrow. After the baby is born, you'll still have yourself to deal with." "Tomorrow ' here is future, but this is not her baby and there is no question of self-sacrifice to bring up a child. Thus, she rejects the essential grand-narratives of motherhood and its associated approaches as a mother *should* live only for her children and caring for or guiding them throughout whole life are the only goals for mothers. The self-indulgence from a mother's part is thought to be "unmotherly" or "not motherly enough". This quip of Hayden stands back the repressive representation of motherhood.

Within the identification of significant issues, it will further be suggested that politics, underlying the globalised beauty pageants is a powerful legislation acting from behind. The pageant's organizational claim of women empowerment by the process of providing the winners platform to access the world, needs to be focused, as what we think individual empowerment or personal transformation is already politicised. The urgent necessity of serving strategic intermerging of geo-political, social, national or racial boundaries brings about the discourse of global economy and politics. There is the need to focus on how the beauty pageant organizations and agencies by way of empowerment, manipulate the pageant winners for the greater political and capitalist goals, while seem to deconstructing ideals of *Home* and *World* dissolving the defined line while the *world* becomes *home* to the contestants, to have a free access to countries and continents.

The fact that Miss World, 2017 finale was held in China, the golden market of Asia or the crowning of an Indian woman there itself puts a significant comment on the international politics today, especially

keeping in mind the Indo-Chinese political relationship now. In such a political condition the winner directly serves as a tool to promote Chinese market and culture and negotiates the British economy. This negotiation can be an advantageous goal for the eurocentric patriarchal capitalists like Julia Morley, CEO of MWO and a leading businessperson. The political intention is further stressed if we focus on the relationship of MWO and MUO (Miss Universe Organisation) in a long run. MWO's chief rival MUO is an American organisation and was owned by U. S President Donald Trump who, however, was compelled to sell MUO in face of controversies for his racist accusation of the Mexicans as 'Criminals' and 'rapists'. The professional rivalry could be generated by Trump's oral threat to buy MWO for nothing. But the rivalry is two-fold: professional and political. The aim of MWO to make the pageant the "richest and biggest" beauty agency with China, the allied country, is fostering the political as well economic needs. The American diplomacy in its occasional threats of rivalry to China and apparent support to India, along with the recent visit of Ivanka Trump, the US presidential advisor, to India for the cause of empowerment of poor women and business conference, strategically bamboozled by Julia Morley in her favour of China market and policies to overcome her American rival. This political power play is what we overlook led by the biased media coverage of customary Miss World travelling. Her being provided with free pass to travel across the 68 New Silk Road partners is to foster the Chinese New Silk Road initiative to underline a China-centered trading network and to get the fashion market as its colossal fund-generator. Personal business interests thus intermerge to political affairs treading into gigantic economic policies. This is, of course, a significant stunt from Julia's part as it actually creates a women space to voice her decision in mainstream politics, the supposed male-dominated field.

The role of Manushi Chhillar is significant here and how far she succeeds in her move is what we still look forward to. But now her initiative to move to the *personal* world is relevant. Her *purpose* as stated in MWO motto: "Beauty with a purpose", is anti-normative as it speaks against the foundational silencing of women experiences like menstruation, contraception etc. which have negative correlations. Pregnancy, women body and sexuality serve as definite tools to situate women in the *private* world, terming them 'women issues' or "women's" problem". Manushi's distribution of *free* or *low-cost* sanitary pads may act as advertising Pampers and Walmart production companies, but what we need to pay attention to is her talking about menstruation to the grassroots voicing against the hiding of the 'strength', as she calls it. The dismantling process of talking about the social taboo and other forms of power mechanisms by spreading mass awareness about menstrual hygiene and not *whispering* about the sanitary napkins or tampons, is the act of silencing censorship. The *private* space of women, however, creates a unified strength, forming anti-ideological discourses on menstruation, child-bearing and child-labour. Here comes the need to sustain this *private* world of women- a creative space or world of shared power and undermining patriarchal values. But the political concern and influences on *private* life can jeopardise it because of the fear of anti-patriarchal strength. By realising the need of *publicising* what is /are *personal* women issues, patriarchy manages to endeavour to get into the space where the marginalised people take hold of mainstream and redefine the line between these two spheres.

Very little attention did we pay to Rohit Khandelwal, Mister World 2016 from India or to any other biological male/gay/ transgender beauty pageants because of the opportunistic discrimination of media coverage. The biased media highlighting is the direct offspring of the *naturalness* of self-beautification process from Women's part while the same effort from the gendered male is shamed at. While male athletes or sportsmen are often accorded more attention, women are accorded on the basis of the celebration of *Beauty*. The exception is Reita Faria, Miss World 1966, whose first newspaper headlines were her hockey hat-tricks. Faria's declination to all modelling and film-acting offers actually springs from her resisting the idea that global beauty pageant is not the only platform through which a person can gain access to the world. As a medical student, it was a better choice for her to pursue gynecology to face the *women health issues* rather than losing one's head over the limited promise of success: "Try not to take pageants too seriously: If you win, don't let it go to your head. You need to keep your feet on the ground and the eyes fixed on the stars.", as she asserts. The male pageants also serve as deconstructing tools against the normative idea of *masculinity*. The stereotype images of lean, chiselled washboard abs, well-defined muscles are critiqued very often. But these

bodies are the fields to propel resistance to the traditional presentation of desexualised male body. The bare-breasted, sexually charged bodies are no longer female *useful bodies*, the flaunting body language thus gets a free expression without fear of retribution and they generate pleasure from it. The catwalk on ramp does not render them to "objects of gaze" because they *gaze* back having refrained the idea of voyeuristic pleasure to be one-sided. The expressive body language transforms a *model- a hanger, a puppet* towards forming an alternative identity. The anti-foundational inclusion of *womanikelonghair* and *effeminate* male body (As is the case of Junjie Huang, Mister China), amputated leg (Jack Eyers, Mr. England) or cooking -event to the grooming session defines masculinity in the new light , makes the pageants the fields of diversity- accepting and celebrating all body types - *disabled, mutilated, transgender or straight* within the homosocial existence of interaction, shared interests and strength to frustrate hegemonic power structure under which gendered males/females are caught. By assigning the Gay men *masculinity*, terminating the repressive idea of *effeminate gay person*, gay beauty pageants called into question the social realist construction. Mister World Finale 2016 included the task of *winning* the heart of Megan Young, former Miss World Philippines. Apparently, such endeavour of the contestants may lead to the assumption that *winning* a woman is the norm of desirability for them. My question here is "Does not the act of kneeling down before Megan on the floor suggest *humble submission* of the gendered male to stand against the normative practice of men's dominance over women?" What is more interesting, Megan poses a confident non-selection failing the able-bodied men, including the Mister World - Rohit Khandelwal.

Nitasha Biswas, who bagged the Miss Transqueen India, 2017 title and participated in global pageant in Thailand, received almost no attention as this actually furthered the need for inclusiveness and questioned the double standard of patriarchal criminalisation and body-shaming politics. Identifying pageant contestants with 'perfect ' epitome of 'womanhood ' or 'real man' is itself problematic. But by accepting different body types the pageants are being more inclusive of changing parameters.

4. Conclusion

The probability of beauty pageants to trigger significant changes is not the concern here as has already been stated, whether the pageants provide scopes of quality lifestyle or career opportunities is not our field of conflict either. We will end up this article by arguing further that by accepting physical appearance and mental abilities both in consideration of *beauty*, these pageants themselves indirectly dissolve the *female-body* and *male-brain* binary. The wit, intelligence, strength and endurance so far attached to masculinity in one hand; and the art of seduction and sexually attractive bodies of femininity on the other, inter-mingle the normative hierarchical definitions. This dismantling process is furthered by some of the beauty pageant contestants who bring into corrosive break in the produced images of the Third World women as *uneducated, dependant and victimized* scandalising the traditional codes of behaviour and they stand erect, voicing their own decisions and interests inspite of the presence of defined organisational needs and set goals. They refute laid out models of behaviour, appearance and performance in favour of floating on the waves of relative ideas irrespective of their assigned sexes set upon on them by repressive forces. As the world of fashion is the most potential area of mobility, open to accept most frequent changes, the pageants can be the space of exploring choices of multiple identities for the contestants or the winners, rather than speeding up hierarchical binary formation or establishing politically backed up ideologies.

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