Following in the orbit of economic globalization’s spreading reach, global beauty pageants have begun traveling more often to new parts of the world over the past decade. Although Donald Trump’s Miss Universe contest was held sporadically in Puerto Rico and the Philippines in the seventies, since 1992 this performance has toured a number of developing nations—Thailand, Peru, Namibia, Mexico, Trinidad, Tobago, and Cyprus. The Miss World pageant was held in the United Kingdom for 39 years before founders Eric and Julia Morley began shipping it to Eastern Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa.

Unfolding sometimes in the midst of bitter controversy and conflict, recent global pageants in Asia and Africa have become sites for protests against Western imperialism and global capitalism. In 1994 in Manila, politicians in high office protested the large sums of money the state agreed to invest in the Miss Universe contest. Similarly, in 1996, following the announcement of the Miss World contest’s impending arrival in Bangalore, India, religious leaders, conservative and leftist political parties, feminist activists, and a number of community groups organized marches and demonstrations and vandalized offices of commercial sponsors to protest the pageant’s symbolic association with economic and cultural imperialism. In an even more disturbing turn of events surrounding the Miss World pageant in 2002, more than 220 people died and approximately 1,000 people were wounded during the riots that broke out in Kaduna, northern Nigeria. Journalist Isioma Daniel’s commentary on the forthcoming Miss World pageant incensed local politicians and religious communities. Weighing the pros and cons of the contest’s entry into Nigeria, Daniel wrote in her column that even the prophet Mohammed would have approved of this modern and seemingly immodest ritual because he could have chosen a suitable wife—talented, pretty, and virtuous—from the pool of beauty contestants.

Such stories of violence and heated opposition represent one public dimension of global beauty contests’ recent history. The phenomena of
non-Western beauty queens securing prime spots as finalists in global pageants in the midst of a booming climate of global consumer culture in their own nations is a second dimension. For instance, in India, the victories of six Indian women in Miss World and Miss Universe contests in the last decade coincides with the shift toward diversity and multiculturalism in global television and the expansion of the global beauty industry in South Asia. In the 25 years following the crowning of Reita Faria as Miss World in 1966, 12 Indian women were among the top 10 finalists in Miss World and Miss Universe pageants.

But the turning point for India occurred in 1992 when a virtually unknown woman, Madhu Sapre, came close to winning Miss Universe. In 1993, the popular Miss India winner Namrata Shirodkar was second runner up in the Miss Universe contest. In 1994, a year of pride for India, Sushmita Sen won the Miss Universe contest, Aishwarya Rai claimed the Miss World title, and Sheetal Mallar sported the crown of international model of the year. A series of other Indian women including Diana Hayden (Miss World 1997), Yukta Mookhey (Miss World 1999), Lara Datta (Miss Universe 2000), Priyanka Chopra (Miss World 2000), and Diya Mirza (Miss Asia Pacific 2000) have also won titles as global beauty queens.

Simultaneously, even as Indian beauty queens claimed international trophies, the beauty industry—products, pageants, and parlors—has witnessed an unprecedented growth that follows in the wake of the Indian government’s rapid implementation of economic liberalization policies in the early nineties. From 1996 to 2000, according to Anita Anand in her book, *The Beauty Game*, there was a 25 percent growth in the cosmetics and personal care sectors, and the size of the 2000 cosmetics market was estimated to be about $160 million. Revlon, Maybelline, Oriflame, Avon, and L’Oreal have begun to compete for a share of the surplus income in middle-class Indian women’s purses. Oriflame, the Swedish giant, established Mumbai as its regional Asian hub because Indian consumers represented the third largest export market following Russia and Poland. Oriflame’s sales for the year 2000 in South Asia were $650 million and the company’s Indian subsidiary projected a 60 percent growth in 2001, according to Anand.

More than 6,500 women applied for the Miss India contest in 2001 compared to a mere 1,000 applicants in 1993. The staff of *Femina*, one of India’s largest circulation women’s magazines, manages the annual Miss India contest. The three finalists in the Miss India contest are selected automatically as India’s representatives in the Miss World, Miss Universe, and Miss Asia-Pacific pageants. Hindustan Lever (Palmolive soap), Henckel Spic (Fa deodorant), Swavorski jewelry, Colgate toothpaste, Sony TV, and Videocon washing machines have awarded prizes and served as sponsors for the Miss India contest. Fashion, food, and soft drink companies have
seized on beauty pageants at school, college, and state levels as grassroots public relations events to capture the attention of middle and lower middle-class consumers. The recent victories of Indian global beauty queens are thus an integral part of India’s transformation from a protected quasi-socialist economy into a burgeoning location for the production and sale of global commodities.

A steady stream of mass media narratives about Indian global beauty queens constitutes a third and vital dimension of beauty culture’s excursion to South Asia. My research project examines the stories of professional success, class mobility, and nationalism that are woven into media reports on six international beauty queens—Sushmita Sen, Aishwarya Rai, Diana Hayden, Yukta Mookhey, Lara Datta, and Priyanka Chopra. India’s English-language newspapers and magazines have provided extensive coverage to the winners of Miss Universe and Miss World contests. The audiences for these English-language print media in India are primarily urban and upwardly mobile, educated middle classes, a socioeconomic group that the state has identified as the one of prime markets for the sale of global lifestyle consumer goods.

The media sample analyzed in the project ranges from women’s magazines (Femina, Women’s Era, Gurlz, and Savvy) and news magazines (India Today, Outlook, and Sunday) to film publications (Stardust and Cine Blitz). Using Lexis-Nexis and archives on homepages of Indian media organizations, 568 reports on global beauty queens in Indian newspapers (Times of India, Indian Express, The Statesman, and The Hindu) were collected. The various genres of media content that were evaluated qualitatively include newspaper reports, magazine features, editorials, biographical essays, media interviews, and photographs.

Three symbolic patterns and overarching themes emerged that demonstrate how media narratives represent Indian women’s victories in global contests in the midst of the rapid changes wrought by globalization. First, many media stories project the beauty queen as the ideal professional worker of a global economy, an individual who is capable of being a meritorious achiever and an obedient disciple. In her role as a dedicated professional, the beauty queen is represented as a hard-working person, who dutifully learns lessons about success from her strict mentors. In newspaper interviews that appear after routine media announcements of Indian beauty queens winning Miss World and Miss Universe titles, Mookhey, Sen, Chopra, Datta, and Hayden talk at length about the hours they spent exercising in the gym to get rid of their slack thighs, expanding hips, bulging stomachs, and flabby arms. Some magazines juxtapose images of the smiling beauty queen wearing her tiara with images of the same woman using a treadmill, running outside, or exercising with free weights. The voices of these
women’s parents, relatives, and schoolteachers testify that even as children, these successful beauty queens were determined and diligent and did not fear the hard work that was necessary to accomplish their goals.

Teachers involved in the grooming program, which is designed to train beauty queens prior to their debut at Miss World and Miss Universe contests, praise their students for their “tolerance for exhaustion,” “thick and beautiful skin,” “burning ambition,” “extraordinary strength,” “ability to take a beating,” and “soldier-like fortitude.” Diet and nutrition experts, yoga teachers, language and diction coaches, modeling specialists, fashion designers, cosmetics’ consultants, and former beauty queens present themselves as skillful sculptors working their magic on the raw material of the national beauty queen, a pliable product they can prune to meet global standards. *Femina* magazine’s commemorative 2002 annual issue, a glossy two-page spread, “Grace and Grit: The Making of a Queen,” applauds teachers and students: “Perfection takes patience, hard work, and determination. Here are some glimpses of expert trainers working on their eager students.” A collage of 22 sequentially numbered action photographs of coaches training young women beckons readers to take a peek into the systematic backstage production of the international beauty queen.

Media narratives promote the sanctity of hard work in two other ways. In prominent headlines and testimonials that appear after Indian women failed to secure the Miss Universe title in 1993 and 2001, coaches and experts profess that India would always score higher in the Miss World pageant because the winners of the Miss India contest, routinely held in January, had ten months to sweat for the forthcoming Miss World (held in November) and only six months for Miss Universe (held in May). Some columnists write that India’s Miss Universe winners, Sen and Datta, have staked out more prestigious turf in the global beauty race because they had much less time than Mookhey, Rai, and Chopra, Miss World winners, to train for the contest.

Furthermore, in several magazine stories, leading beauty professionals argue that some Indian beauty queens’ success demonstrates the higher value of the hard work that produces the constructed and groomed body over the easy legacy of inherited or natural beauty. Evaluating Indian women’s cumulative record of victories, a number of beauty experts suggest that the 1994 Miss World, Rai, a “perfect beauty with green eyes, olive skin, and a slim body,” deserves fewer accolades than Mookhey, Hayden, and Sen, who all survived exhausting makeover rituals and surgical procedures to match the blueprint for international beauty.

Second, many media reports construct the middle-class Indian beauty queen as a struggling individual who manages to scale the ladder of class mobility to become a national hero. One of the key elements in the melodramatic creation of heroes in popular culture, as scholars of hero culture in the United States have noted, is to emphasize the emotional and material distance
between celebrities’ past and present lives. The rhetorical convention of developing narrative contrasts between individuals’ previous status as non-entities and their current status as celebrities contributes to the heroic flavor of their ascent from humble beginnings to triumphant destinations. *Savvy* magazine’s lengthy April 1998 interview with the “Bold & Beautiful” Sen, Miss Universe 1994, represents the most vivid autobiographical exposition of the beauty queen’s life story as a heroic persona. Sen’s commendation as one of *Savvy* magazine’s women of the month, a list that honors military pilots, social workers, classical dancers, feminist activists, and artists, registers the assimilation of the beauty queen into middle-class ideals of professional success and community pride. Similarly, other magazines like *Women’s Era* and *Femina* honor India’s Miss World and Miss Universe winners by including them in their own rosters of women who will be remembered for their national accomplishments.

A series of chronological themes in *Savvy* trace Sen’s upward trek from her birth in 1974 in Hyderabad, a city in South India, to her crowning at the 1994 Miss Universe contest in Manila. In the opening paragraphs of *Savvy’s* story, Sen yokes her emotional state of contentment to her material success and fame—readers learn that on a scale of one to ten for happiness, she would assign herself a ten today because she has the “ocean in front of her Malabar Hills home, legions of fans, millions of children who love her, and two cars.” Immediately after describing her affluent two-car life today, the narrator then transitions to the unexpected crisis that preceded Sen’s birth. Sen ridicules the impotence of her father’s modest scooter, a middle-class mode of transportation that has turned into a lower middle-class commodity in the last decade. She recalls her father’s frustration when he discovered that he could not use the scooter to transport his pregnant wife to the hospital when she went into labor. Fortunately, a kindly upper-class neighbor, who owned a car, came to her father’s rescue and thus Sen was born safely in a hospital. Sen contrasts her beauty and poise as an adult with the physical limitations that severely handicapped her as a child. Accentuating Sen’s revelation of her early personal liabilities in bold, upper case letters, the text of *Savvy* magazine reads, “AS A CHILD, I WAS SHORT, FAT, AND DARK AND HAD THIS MAJOR INFERIORITY COMPLEX.”

Sen compares her articulate command of the English language in *Savvy’s* interview with the humiliation she experienced as a young girl who was teased mercilessly because she couldn’t speak English fluently. She tells the interviewer about her miraculous metamorphosis from a traditional girl, who grew up in a conservative Bengali Brahmin family, into a modern and sophisticated woman. She describes, in detail, the courage it took her to shed her sari and wear revealing mini skirts for her
first fashion portfolio. Finally, she jokes about shopping for her Miss India outfit six years ago at a crowded middle-class bazaar that was starkly different from the cosmopolitan stores she frequents in Mumbai as a celebrity. Color photographs of Sen’s post-Miss Universe life juxtaposed next to blurred black and white images of her early family life escalate the velocity of her passage from middle-class woman to wealthy celebrity.

These key rhetorical elements in Savvy’s textual production of Sen’s ascent ripple through early chronicles of other women’s triumphs at Miss World and Miss Universe pageants. News stories claim that Chopra’s travel from the small town of Bareilly in north India to London was a vicarious experience of mobility for all her neighbors and friends. Some reports celebrate Hayden’s heroic trip from Mettiguda, a neighborhood of narrow lanes and tiny homes in the city of Hyderabad, to sunny Seychelles for the Miss World contest. In Mookhey’s case, newspaper headlines and magazine features congratulate her for waging guerilla warfare against her traditional father so she could wear immodest clothing to compete in beauty contests. Media reports use the semantic qualifiers average and ordinary when they describe the extraordinary ascent of these middle-class women to their envied status as celebrities.

Finally, global beauty queens may show that they can excel in being modern Westernized women, but they are also portrayed in news reports as loyal and patriotic Indian women. Leading scholars of consumer culture in India have challenged propositions that have predicted the demise of national or ethnic identities under the onslaught of globalization’s push toward standardization and homogeneity. Media representations of middle-class identity in India deploy “hybridity,” a mutually interactive combination of global and national cultural images, values, and symbols. For example, recent television commercials show that Indian women can be modern subjects—scientific homemaker, discriminating consumer, and rebellious careerist—and at the same time preserve their traditional roles—loving mother, devoted daughter-in-law, and faithful wife. English-language women’s magazines profile their ideal reader as the woman, who cherishes her Indian heritage and champions values that would make her family proud even as she participates in the trendy consumption of global lifestyle products.

In a similar fashion, newspaper and magazine stories celebrate global beauty queens’ material accomplishments, but also strive to ensure that readers are aware of these women’s loyalty to their own cultural traditions and family values. Media reports remind their readers that while beauty queens like Sen and Datta worked out in the gym like their Western counterparts, it was their deep immersion in India’s ancient practices of holistic healing—yoga, chanting of hymns, and nutrition based in grains and nuts—that gave them inner strength and willpower.
Magazine features portray beauty queens as helpful benefactors of their nuclear and extended family members. These stories announce their intentions to build homes for parents, fund family vacations, sponsor siblings’ education abroad, and purchase extravagant gifts for uncles, aunts, and grandparents. Front-page stories and headlines name specific acts of generosity—Hayden buys laptop for brother, houses for aunt and mother; Lara gives father a holiday in Goa; Mookhey’s grandmother thrilled with new kitchen; and Chopra’s gifts exceed brother’s expectations. Many media interviews highlight the “incredible family support,” “love of family members,” and “family members’ sacrifices” that nurtured beauty queens’ ambitions. Readers learn that no other culture can claim this “wellspring of stable love and familial resources” because Sen’s mother was her daughter’s chief publicity agent, Rai’s mother was her manager and driving force, Mookhey’s grandmother prayed for her everyday, and Chopra’s brother motivated her to win.

Using the language of nationalism, some media reports idolize the Indian beauty queen for setting innovative global standards for ideal femininity. Beauty and fashion experts quoted widely in the media argue that India’s beauty queens are the striking new alternatives to the mainstream because they represent the best of East and West. One entrepreneur in the beauty industry claims that Indian women have Caucasian features, but are “packaged in lovely shades of brown, olive, and cream.” Others opine that Indian women’s beauty is the “racial cocktail” of the future because people could identify these beauty queens as South American, Mediterranean, Eastern European, Middle Eastern, or North African. One newspaper classifies Chopra’s face as the exotic beauty for these times: “Not quite Asian and not quite Caucasian, Chopra has the exotic look. She is like a Venezuelan beauty with a more soft face and graceful body.”

Finally, many newspaper stories equate Indian women’s victories in the arena of global feminine beauty with their military fathers’ patriotic service and Indian men’s professional success in the global software and information industries. Of India’s six global beauty queens, four women—Rai, Sen, Chopra, and Datta—were raised in families where their fathers worked for the Indian Army, Air Force, and Navy. These fathers appear in media features as strong, distinguished, and hardworking officers who have steadily climbed to the ranks of captains, commanders, and wing commodores in the military. The proud voices of these military fathers dominate several headlines and lead paragraphs after beauty queens earn their Miss World and Miss Universe titles.

Chopra’s father, according to one report, raised his daughter to carry on the family tradition of “bringing her country a good name.” One story’s lead paragraph compares favorably Sen’s success to her father’s military work: “The phrase ‘like father, like daughter’ could not be more true. Wing Commander Sen, who flew Dakotas and IL-14s in the Indo-China war,
worked selflessly for the country. Now his daughter makes him and her nation proud.” Other stories assign the same value to Indian women’s beauty in global pageants as they do to Indian business leaders’ and bureaucrats’ brain-power, a resource that has helped to forge India’s leadership in the global high-tech economy. One business article titled “Bytes and Babes” carried a spliced picture of four smiling beauty queens sporting Miss World and Miss Universe banners that adjoins photographs of two bespectacled male entrepreneurs in Mumbai’s software industry. The lead paragraph of this article proclaimed, “India in the Next Decade. A Nation of Beauty and Brain Superpower?”

Such representations of India’s global beauty queens as hardworking and meritorious individuals, upwardly mobile and determined middle-class women, and hybrid patriotic citizens may persuade the Indian middle classes that they can achieve wealth and celebrity status if they follow the right path. But these media narratives of beauty queens’ travails, ambitions, and consumer desire also work to insulate their elite readers from the troubles and needs of Indian citizens who struggle for water, shelter, and food on an everyday basis rather than the luxury or prosperity of upscale homes, foreign travel or designer clothing. Despite the pathos in Savvy magazine’s story of Sen’s heroic struggles with broken English, an unskilled tailor, and a stubborn father, this beauty queen’s prospects for education, double-income family, English-speaking parents, father’s secure job and scooter, and the resources she availed of to produce her glamour portfolio are profound symbols of her elite status in a nation that has millions of poor citizens living below the poverty level. These alluring media stories of heroic beauty queens may thus end up promoting amnesia among powerful elites about the more basic questions of poverty alleviation, universal literacy, and infrastructure development. Such important questions of national development and social and economic justice may recede to the background in the current climate of bourgeois heroes, global lifestyle consumption, and software production.

RECOMMENDED READING

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