Global Queens, National Celebrities: Tales of Feminine Triumph in Post-Liberalization India

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This paper’s analysis of print media texts about India’s six Miss World and Miss Universe title-holders maps the cultural production of the global beauty queen as an emerging hero whose tale of ascent circulates in a nation that is renegotiating its marginal position in the global economy. News and magazine texts celebrate global beauty queens’ bodily discipline and devotion to fitness and grooming programs as evidence of the meritorious hard work of committed professionals. Popular biographies construct beauty queens as humble and ordinary women, who have struggled to overcome adversities in their pursuit of global fame. Media accounts navigate the boundaries between modernity and tradition when they represent beauty queens as hybrid—wholesome, patriotic, and cosmopolitan—young women, who preserve their authentic national identities despite their success in the global arena. Unpacking the mythical tales of class, gender, and national ascent that are smuggled into the public profiling of the global beauty queen, I argue that such representations of feminine agency in popular print culture authorize the ideological interests of India’s consuming classes.

Animating popular culture’s fantasies and shaping Indian citizens’ aspirations of class mobility, the figure of India’s global beauty queen has become a fertile semiotic site for the production of celebrity stardom, patriotic citizenship, and empowered femininity. The celebrity allure of the beauty queen travels from Bollywood’s...
spectacular embodiment into an enormous range of everyday material practices and cultural sites. Providing a script that blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality, 23-year-old Sushmita Sen returns to India after success abroad to play herself, a stunning Miss Universe, in the 1997 film *Dastak*. But the script circulates even in the harshest confines of the culture: women prisoners incarcerated in Tihar Jail, India’s largest prison complex, flock to the jail’s newly established “Sushmita” beauty parlor to launch their journey toward rehabilitation. Interviewing women inmates to record the aura of glamour and salvation that surrounds the jail’s beauty salon, *Gurlz* magazine writer Jain (2000) observes, “For women at the jail, immersed in their grim routines, the spirit of Sushmita Sen’s success in the Miss Universe contest resides here in the beauty parlor, a magical place of transformation” (p. 8).

Outside the walls of Tihar Jail, the smiling beauty queen perched on a large billboard in the bustling commercial district of Connaught Place in Delhi assures pedestrians and commuters that bathing with Palmolive soap in the morning is the best way to guarantee a productive day at the office.

Invading the myriad channels of India’s public culture, narratives of radiant global beauty queens offering “good news” have begun to displace “bad news” of Third World crises—drought, famine, and poverty—from the front pages of leading newspapers that today boast of a beauty queen beat (Moore, 1994; Narasimhan, 2001; Pershad, 2000). A parade of Indian beauty queens’ conquests on the global stage over the past decade has begun to pose a serious threat to Latin America’s impressive record of victories at these contests. In the 25 years following the crowning of Reita Faria as Miss World in 1966, 12 Indian women were among the top ten finalists in Miss World and Miss Universe pageants; however, the turning point for India’s success occurred in 1992 when a virtually unknown woman, Madhu Sapre, came close to winning Miss Universe. Building momentum for future triumphs, in 1993, the popular Miss India winner Namrata Shirodkhar was second runner up in the Miss Universe contest. In 1994, a year of unparalleled pride for India, Sushmita Sen won the Miss Universe contest, Aishwarya Rai claimed the Miss World title, and Sheetal Mallar secured the crown of international model of the year. Following the footsteps of these winners, a series of other 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 earned membership on the roster of global beauty queens. Hailed as the “new bona fide beauty superpower” of the past decade, India is gaining a reputation for “blithely churning out beauty queens who win international prizes with consummate ease” (Bhatia, 2000, p. B7).

Popular print culture consumed by the Indian middle and upper classes participates in the wider cultural production of the international beauty queen as an emerging hero whose story of success circulates within a nation state that is actively renegotiating its marginal position in the global economic order. Challenging the dismissal of beauty pageants as misogynistic rituals that are unworthy of academic attention, recent research unearths the implications of the cultural rhetoric on beauty queens for larger debates over race, gender, and nation in the public sphere.
Banet-Weiser (1999) views the Miss America pageant’s contestants as gendered subjects who produce their feminine selves through discourses of pleasure, struggle, and professional ambition: “We now need to complicate the picture by exploring precisely what kinds of subjects are produced within beauty pageants and what practices and institutions not only sustain, but work continuously to revise this production” (p. 11). This article examines print media texts on India’s global beauty queens in order to reveal the complex and contradictory ways in which hegemonic constructions of class, nation, and gender structure the politics of feminine empowerment. My exploration of the beauty queen’s discursive location in post-liberalization India’s ideological field of popular culture texts identifies the articulation of new subject positions and traces the texture of melodramatic narratives of meritocracy that resonate with the priorities of global consumerism. Studying the public profiling of Indian beauty queens as industrious professionals, tenacious and upwardly mobile achievers, and hybrid global and local citizens, I argue that representations of feminine agency in print culture authorize the ideological interests of India’s consuming classes.

The socioeconomic forces underlying the rise of India’s global beauty queens include the state-sponsored arrival of globalization, unprecedented growth in the media industry, and an associated explosion in beauty culture. The Indian state’s enthusiastic endorsement of globalization can be traced to the late eighties when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi first unveiled his vision for an economic revitalization process that centered on the relaxation of import regulations—an incentive for multinationals to sell commodities that catered to the tastes of the middle classes. After the state privatized television and satellite services, Indian viewers gained access to over 50 channels including CNN, MTV, BBC, and STAR TV. Showcasing the “markets on amphetamine” in dozens of small towns across India, Outlook magazine reports that sales of television sets and the rise of bowling alleys, five star hotels, and shopping centers stocked with brand names from Reebok to Osh Kosh register a tidal change from “abstemious life to a hedonistic consumer ethos” (Jetley, Sinha, Panneerselvan, Menezes, Biswas, & Gokhale, 1998, p. 35). The tailoring of the government’s liberalization package to suit the interests of multinationals has thus resulted in a shift in the emphasis of national policies from socialist modernity—encouraging infrastructure development and the elimination of poverty—to capitalist modernity—promoting the urban middle class as a lucrative market for the sale of global consumer culture (Fernandes, 2000; Varma, 1998).

The economic boom in India’s beauty industry—products, pageants, and queens—is linked to the nation’s transformation from a protected economy into a burgeoning location for the sale of lifestyle commodities. From 1996 to 2000, there has been 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 (“World at Their Feet,” 2000). 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 (Anand, 2002). The staff of Femina, one of India’s largest circulation women’s magazines, manages the annual Miss India contest, which has evolved from a closed door event for Mumbai’s elite into a touring spectacle for large audiences in Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Cochin. Fusing the local with the global, the three finalists in the Miss India contest are automatically selected as India’s representatives in the Miss World, Miss Universe, and Miss Asia-Pacific pageants. More than 6,500 women applied for the Miss India contest in 2001 compared to a mere 1,000 applicants in 1993, the year when Femina turned the pageant into a ritual for showcasing the commodities of the beauty and hygiene industry (Ho, 2001). A range of lifestyle merchants—Hindustan Lever (Palmolive soap), Henckel Spic (Fa deodorant), Swarovski jewelry, Colgate toothpaste, Sony TV, and Videocon washing machines—have awarded prizes and served as sponsors for Miss India (Ho, 2001). Fashion, food, and soft drink companies have seized upon beauty pageants at school, college, and state levels as grassroots public relations events to capture the attention of middle and lower middle class consumers. Victorious beauty queens promote the global—Pepsi, Coca Cola, Samsung mobile phones—and the local—Fa deodorants, Vimal clothing, and Hero bicycles—on billboards adjoining village roads. The economic scaffolding of support for beauty culture in India can thus be defined as an “interlocular field,” a zone of commodity culture that is “structured so that each site or setting for the socializing and regulating of the public gaze is to some degree affected by the experiences of other sites” (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1995, p. 12).

The first section of this essay outlines my qualitative methodology and weaves together the theoretical propositions that underlie my textual analysis. The second section examines the hegemonic embodiment of a capitalist ethos that takes place through media discourses on the beauty queen’s disciplined professionalism, her struggle to rise above her “ordinary” middle class position, and her hybrid global-national identity. The concluding section argues that these media accounts legitimize the consumer subject of recent state and corporate discourse and thrust the beauty queen into the anatomy of the “role model,” a classed discourse of therapeutic inspiration that excludes poor Indian citizens from the global imaginary of prosperity.

Representation, Agency, and Symbolic Femininity: The Beauty Queen as Cultural Text

My qualitative methodological approach to the analysis of public discourse explores the range of meanings that print media texts assign to the Indian beauty queen’s recently acquired global “superpower.” Relying on textual analysis to examine the relations among the discursive limits of popular culture, institutions of power, and the authority of accepted knowledge, cultural studies critics have deconstructed the ideological lenses through which the media filter discourses of gender, race, class, and nation (Fair, 1996; Mankekar, 1997; McLaughlin, 1998; Munshi, 1998; Steiner,
This article’s deconstruction of the visual and linguistic repertoire of print artifacts is based in the insights of semiotic, feminist, and Marxist approaches to cultural practices of signification. My analysis illustrates the ways in which the discursive mechanisms that constitute beauty queens as hardworking, heroic, and nationalist citizens rearticulate the impulses of a growing hegemonic political culture in India, one that is discarding state-driven planning for transnational consumerism and the promise of “globality” (Fernandes, 2000). I offer a careful study of the linguistic maneuvers that media texts employ—how “facts” on women’s life stories are invoked, calibrated, and stitched together—to propel the beauty queen into a new modality of feminine achievement.

The English-language print media texts analyzed in this article include newspaper reports, magazine features, editorials, biographical essays, media interviews, and photographs that focus on six Miss World and Miss Universe winners—Sushmita Sen, Aishwarya Rai, Diana Hayden, Yukta Mookhey, Lara Datta, and Priyanka Chopra. During eight months of fieldwork in India in 1998, 1999, and 2000, I collected articles, cover pages, and photographs from women’s magazines (Femina, Women’s Era, Gurlz, and Savvy), news magazines (India Today, Outlook, and Sunday), and film publications (Stardust and Cine Blitz). Using Lexis-Nexis and online archives of media organizations, I located 568 reports on global beauty queens from Indian newspapers (Times of India, Indian Express, The Statesman, and The Hindu) and 42 reports from newspapers produced in other geographic locations (The Straits Times, The Guardian, South China Morning Post, and the Los Angeles Times). The limited number of stories from international rather than Indian media is symptomatic of the dwindling newsworthiness of Miss World and Miss Universe contests in Europe and the United States. I do not claim that the texts analyzed here represent a randomly chosen sample nor do I assert that my paper provides a comprehensive biographical portrait of women’s “real” lives. My analysis of print documents registers dominant patterns and reveals recurring discourses in media representations.

This article’s exploration of the beauty queen’s narrative signification in English-language print media relies on an interwoven matrix of theories—Althusserian approaches to textual representation and postcolonial critiques of gender and nation. Interrogating the intimately enmeshed ways in which textual representation and reader-identification operate in tandem, Hall and Charland argue that texts are more than merely mimetic discursive surfaces for producers to transpose the practices of everyday life. In his felicitous phrasing of the relations between texts and their social contexts, Hall (1996a) writes, “How things are represented and the machineries and regimes of representation do play a constitutive, and not merely, a reflexive, after-the-event role” (p. 443). Making the case that audiences’ identities are constituted within, not outside, representation, Hall (1996b) urges us to acknowledge identities as contingent, “produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (p. 4). Charland (1987) calls attention to the fragile boundaries that separate symbolic systems from social consciousness; he writes that “we cannot accept the givenness of
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‘audience,’ ‘person,’ or ‘subject’” (p. 137) because texts make sense to readers, who are always already interpellated by ideological structures. The semiotic repertoires of texts designed for specific audiences, as Charland notes, provoke persuasive modalities of identification and invite readers to empathize with particular subject positions because these narratives are rendered “real” through three representational effects. Texts constitute collective archetypes of subjectivity, posit transhistorical subjects, and produce “free” agents whose actions seem to unfold according to the “logic of meaningful totality.” How do media texts rhetorically maneuver the “free agency” of the beauty queen into realist stories that generate classed and gendered processes of subjectivation? Here, I consider Charland’s cautionary words on the representational limits of narratives:

All narratives have power over the subjects they present. The endings of narratives are fixed before the telling. The freedom of the character in a narrative is an illusion, for narratives move inexorably toward their telos. To be constituted as a subject in a narrative is to be constituted with a history, motives, and a telos. (p. 140)

The constitutive rhetorics of texts are ideological not only because they “provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience, but because they insert ‘narratized’ subjects-as-agents into the world” (p. 143).

Tracking the pervasive “doctrines of femininity” that a capitalist media apparatus peddles to its consumers, Smith (1990) argues that textual discourses transform unruly experiences of gender into facts of objective knowledge. Her approach combines Marx’s insistence on the osmotic exchange between political-economic structures and the rhythms of everyday life with a modified Foucauldian notion of diffuse discursive power that nevertheless allows for the active presence of subjects. Smith’s formulation of femininity as a complex of actual social relations mapped onto texts captures the intense textual mediation of the feminine in post-liberalization India: “In our time to address femininity is to address, directly or indirectly, a textual discourse vested in women’s magazines and television, advertisements, the appearance of cosmetics counters, fashion displays and to a lesser extent books” (p. 163). Although differently influenced by their conditions of production, texts produce orderly narratives by linking disparate events and offering a version of reality in which embodied representations speak loudly in the absence of “real” speakers. Scripts of femininity, she notes, are rendered meaningful to readers through their indexicality, that is, texts are embedded in invisible subtexts that register missing moments of “background knowledge” and traces of institutional and historical memories.

My analysis of the textual Indian beauty queen’s interpellation of middle class readers considers historically specific ideologies of tradition and modernity that have haunted the symbolic realm of the feminine in India’s public culture. Institutions of patriarchy, capitalism, and caste, and historical forces of colonialism and nationalism have left their indelible marks on representations of the feminine subject (Kandiyoti, 1991). For instance, nineteenth century Indian social reformers harnessed the chaste Indian mother, wife, and daughter as the most potent signifiers of a resilient Hindu
tradition that could survive the onslaught of British imperialism. Chatterjee (1989) locates the idealization of middle class Indian femininity within the ideology of upper caste Hindu nationalism, which proposed a powerful distinction between “inner/outer worlds” and, correspondingly, between “home, private/material world, public.” Consigned to the realm of the private world, the “respectable” Hindu woman became the quintessential emblem of a superior inner Indian morality, and hence the ground for establishing difference from the West. In contemporary India, as elsewhere, despite predictions that globalization would erase the legitimacy of the nation, the trope of the feminine, albeit in the reformed avatars of consumer modernity, serves as an enduring symbolic prop for public imaginings of the nation. The hybrid subjective space of the “New Indian Woman” in media discourses accommodates simultaneously elements of tradition/modernity, femininity/feminism, and conformity/liberation (Basu, 2001; Munshi, 1998). Popular culture’s creatively fashioned hybrid idioms of the modern nation fused with the elastic and flexible feminine render “globality” into a digestible and reassuring local motif for Indian audiences (Fernandes, 2000).

Servicing Global Imaginaries: Diligent Workers, Struggling Achievers, and Patriotic Citizens

The following three sections analyze the ways in which the textual configuration of Indian beauty queens’ triumphs forges the subject position of the deserving, heroic, and patriotic consumer for middle class audiences. The first section explores the public fashioning of the beauty queen as an ideal worker of a global economy, the second section reveals the tales of marginality that structure stories of class mobility, and the third section examines the blueprint of the beauty queen as a hybrid citizen who embraces the global yet preserves her inner Indian self.

Disciplined Minds, Hardworking Muscles: Embodying the Nation’s New Work Ethic

Examining the fragmentation of feminine subjectivity in the Miss America pageant, Banet-Weiser (1999) writes that the swimsuit parade, a silent performance of North American “apple pie” tradition, heightens the commodified display of women as non-speaking female objects. In India, in the midst of an infectious virus of consumer culture that distills modernity through images of Indian women cloaked in the transgressive sexual aesthetics of Western femininity, the beauty contestant’s uninhibited exhibition of her partially clothed body has come to signify the nation’s willingness to discard regressive tradition. As Sunder Rajan (1993) argues, the most vivid signaling of rebellious modernity in India’s current phase of globalization takes place through visual images of women in jeans, skirts, and short dresses and young women participating in dating and courtship practices. On a deeper level, media texts puncture the silence of Indian beauty queens’ climactic performance of bodily perfection by trumpeting women’s abilities to endure rigorous training. Women’s quest for the perfect stage persona becomes the semiotic filter through which media
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reports configure beauty queens into quintessential examples of the professional Indian citizen, an eager recruit to First World capitalism’s ethic of meritocracy and hard work.

Indexing the growing economic and social salience of the fit feminine body in post-liberalization India, media texts on beauty queens’ devotion to physical discipline increased fivefold from 1994 to 2000 and, by 2000, these stories command premium textual and visual space on newspapers’ front pages (Baria & Abreu, 1999; Bhatia, 2000; Iyer, 2001; Schmetzer, 1999; Sharma, 1997; Suri & Kaul, 1999). For instance, a day after Mookhey was crowned Miss World, the Statesman’s front-page color photograph, inset with a small diagram of a brain, displayed a full shot of a beaming Mookhey in athletic clothing poised on a treadmill. Substituting nation for person and according equal status to human agency and modern machinery, the headline proclaims, “Winning combination of mind, heart, and equipment helped India win Miss World” (Suri & Kaul, 1999). Similarly, writers of glowing stories, which appeared soon after Chopra, Datta, and Hayden won their titles, imply that beauty queens’ commitment to arduous physical exercise—step aerobics, weight training, running, and stretching—is an outward manifestation of their inward focus, determination, and ambition, desirable qualities that shatter the stereotype of the “vacuous beauty queen” (Manavalan, 1995). Resonating with the beauty industry’s discursive and material dismemberment of the feminine body, isolated body parts of Indian beauty queens come alive in media accounts as recalcitrant offenders that require taming and control. For example, in an interview with Filmfare’s lifestyle editor, Sen talks at length about her initial despair over a “deficient décolleté department,” a problem that she solved with the help of the “Firm and Full Bull-worker” machine: “I did not give up until I could see the good results. I knew India had to win” (Pillai, 1998, p. 72). In similar first-person narratives of acquiring the perfect body, other women cast their patriotic desire to bring glory to India as a motivational source for the energy that enabled them to subdue the wayward impulses of flat breasts, slack thighs, expanding hips, and bulging stomachs.

Some media reports detailing beauty queens’ routines of bodily discipline adopt the linear narrative technique of modernist biographies that excavate evidence for adult celebrities’ accomplishments from the originary moments of their childhood (“Childhood Dream,” 2000; Chopra & Menon, 1997; Cox, 1999; “Hometown Basks,” 2000; “India,” 1997; Mehta, 1998; Mody, 1999; Nair, 1999; Najmi, 1999; Verma, 1997; “World,” 1995). The sentimental memories of teachers and family members transform the entrepreneurial beauty queen’s dedicated willingness to “pare, prune, tighten, and master the body” into a seamlessly authentic extension of childhood traits that emphasize determination and discipline (Bordo, 1993, p. 195). Media texts portray India’s six global beauty queens’ childhood personalities in the following ways: seven-year old Datta was perennially thirsty for information, Chopra was highly competitive, headstrong Hayden was an “assertive, possessive, and meticulous” child (“India,” 1997, p. 13), Rai was aggressive with pushy boys, Mookhey was a diligent and respectful girl, and Sen was a confident teenager, who would not let anything stop her. In a story on Hayden’s winning package of
exercises, readers also learn that “Dianamic Diana” was “a small girl who played
chess with her grandfather and won most of the time” (Mehta, 1998, p. 9).

Addressing their readers as prospective beauty contestants, narratives on the
elaborate grooming protocol designed for India’s Miss World and Miss Universe
candidates, who may lag behind in the cultural performance of White upper class
feminine perfection, simulate the detailed descriptive and didactic vocabulary of
manuals. Whereas texts on workout regimens emphasize women’s individual drive
and agency, narratives describing the pedagogical practices that produce the beauty
queen’s magnetic stage persona underscore the compelling power of “teamwork” led
by a battery of coaches, experts, and mentors (“Coaches Thrilled,” 1997; Deoshi,
2000; “Helping Them,” 2000; Kaul, 2000; Mathur, 1999; Savlani, 2002; Schmetzer,
1999; Singh, 1999; Venkat, 2000).

Intervening forcefully in the textual field, these instructors’ collective refrain sets
into motion yet another modality of agency that lurks beneath the surface of the
beauty queen’s objectified performance of femininity. In these laudatory scripts,
coaches and experts classify the beauty queen as a tenacious warrior and resilient
pupil, who learns to survive hardship in order to secure her prize. Experts, coaches,
and mentors, who supervise the grooming of the potential Miss World and Miss
Universe, include diet and nutrition experts, yoga teachers, language and diction
coaches, modeling specialists, fashion designers, cosmetics consultants, and former
beauty queens. Kelly Dorji, former model and ramp-walking coach, employs the
hyper-masculine language of war and combat sports to explain her teaching style: “I
am extremely hard on them and they fear me. I show my squad how to attack and
neutralize the bias against South Asian girls” (Venkat, 2000, p. 3). Mehta, personal
trainer and motivational therapist, argues that Indian women must learn the secrets
of beauty warfare to excel in the boxing ring of global contests:

Quite contrary to what many may believe, there is more to squashing one’s opponents
in Miss World than simply having a gorgeous body: Beauty queens like Diana Hayden
and Yukta Mookhey must walk the ramp, pose, and radiate confidence, all of which
need day and night preparation, intense repetition, and no time for fatigue. (Deoshi,
2000, p. B3)

Winning the contest, as many experts describe, requires “tolerance for exhaustion,”
“thick and beautiful skin,” “burning ambition,” “extraordinary strength,” “ability to
take a beating,” and “soldier-like fortitude.” Promoting surgery as an indispensable
option, dentist Bhoolabhai and plastic surgeon Pandya outline, with bulleted lists of
surgical procedures in sidebars, the temporary pain their patients endure in order to
race to the “finishing line” (Baria & Abreu, 1999, p. 63).

Coaches and instructors, who enter these narratives as powerful architects of the
modern science of beauty, morph into skilful sculptors working their magic on the
“raw material” of the national beauty queen, a pliable product they can prune to
meet international standards. In 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” (Savlani, 2002, pp. 4–5). Generating a simulacrum of the assembly line, a collage of 22 sequentially numbered “action” photographs beckons readers to take a peek into the systematic backstage production of the beauty queen. In Picture 4, diction teacher Merchant instructs rows of “little women,” gazing up at her, how to enunciate words in “impeccable English.” The text of the article specifies that although Miss India contestants can competently speak the English language, Merchant’s students are taught to minimize their regional accents and cultivate a more upper class British accent, that is, to “round out their vowels, say water not ‘vater,’ and tone the twang” (Savlani, 2002, p. 6). Other pictures show photographer Irani demonstrating correct posing techniques, former model Eisa sharing grooming and etiquette secrets, lifestyle columnist Johar dispensing knowledge on world cinema and culture appreciation, beautician Shah offering haircare tips, and nutritionist Mukherjee describing healthy diets (with a food chart mounted on an easel). A final photograph captioned “Spinning fairy tales through teamwork” casts beauty queens as subordinate apprentices—presenting a clear hierarchy, eleven coaches stand in the background looming over their compliant young female students seated on the floor (Savlani, 2002). Similarly, Savvy and Gurlz magazines’ images of the “work-addicted” Sen illustrate teachers Pai and Bans instilling the art of multi-tasking in their student, who must master “time management and efficiency” in order to acquire multiple talents within a short duration of time.

Overlapping in a parallel and paradoxical fashion with euphoric tropes of masculine endurance, in some narratives, the beauty queen’s docile acquiescence to her stern coaches and trainers transmutes into a desirable sign of her agency. Writers and editors valorize the beauty queen’s entrepreneurial zeal through words of praise for her prescient awareness that voluntary submission to the rigors of military style training leads to long-term success. One Times of India story locates the cause for Chopra’s victory in her childlike conformity and acceptance of hierarchy: “The building of this Miss World went more than skin deep. A dream team of experts worked on Chopra, an ideal winner because she was an obedient and willing student” (Nair, 2000, p. 7). A newspaper report attributes Mookhey’s serene demeanor when she won the Miss World title to her humility and simplicity, qualities that were prime assets when she was an “ignorant” student soaking in her trainers’ advice (Kamath, 2000). A biographical sketch of Hayden includes a quote from dance choreographer Davar, who fondly recalls her dedication to his classes, “She came to my institute for two to three hours a day. She had absolutely no ego. If I asked her to do something 10,000 times she would do it” (Chopra & Menon, 1997).

The very same beauty queens, however, when armed with an arsenal of experiential knowledge as Miss Universe and Miss World winners (not women who failed), manage to cross the bridge dividing infantilized amateurs and wise experts. In interviews published in Indian Express, Mookhey and Datta affectionately cite 1994 Miss Universe “Sush” as a “generous tutor and philosopher” and Chopra, the last in the row of six global queens, refers to “Lara” and “Diana” as “brutally honest,” but caring critics (Balakrishnan, 2000; Khubchandani, 2000; “New Status,” 1999).
Media texts circulate two grand hypotheses of achievement that sanctify discipline, diligence, and personal responsibility as indispensable ingredients in the recipe for global triumph. First, narratives explaining India’s consistent success in the Miss World rather than Miss Universe contest reify the legitimacy of grueling training and self-motivated hard work. In stories that appeared after Indian women failed to secure the 1993 and 2001 Miss Universe titles, coaches and experts profess that India would always score higher in Miss World 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). Contrasting Mookhey’s 1999 success at Miss World with the disappointing failure of Sapre (a model praised for her sultry looks) in the 1993 Miss Universe contest, fitness trainer Mehta asserts, “Madhu did not win Miss Universe because she could not deliver her best performance in the interview round. If only she had more time for speech training. Just before Yukta left for London, she practiced 150 possible questions with Sabira” (Singh, 1999, p. 8). Buttressing Mehta’s theory, gossip 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 chip away at their rough edges (De, 1999; Tandon, 2001). One story plumbs the depths of history to spin Feria’s 1966 conquest of Miss World into a serendipitous accident that could not be replicated for 28 years due to the absence of formal training in India:

Once upon a time in 1966, a woman glided awkwardly down a ramp at London’s Albert Hall to stake her claim to the Miss World crown. The girl was Reita Feria. She went for a lark, dressed in her mother’s sari and wobbly gold sandals. They disintegrated in the final round, only to be chucked aside with chutzpah, as she continued barefoot. Cut to 1999 … the same Feria would not even make it to Miss India. Reita was naïve and did not have a clue what it took to enter an international contest. (Baria & Abreau, 1999)

Second, media accounts inflate the currency of the sculpted and molded body, an embodied artifact of feminine empowerment, over the genetic virtues of natural beauty. Scrutinizing Indian women’s cumulative record of victories, one feature story suggests that the 1994 Miss World, Rai, a perfect beauty with green eyes, olive skin, and a slim body, deserves fewer accolades than Mookhey, who survived exhausting makeover rituals and painful surgical procedures, to match the blueprint for international beauty (Baria & Abreu, 1999). Linking Chopra’s success to the “trailblazing” career of Sen (1994 Miss Universe), Mohan, the director of a modeling school, discredits the hereditary legacy of beauty, “Chopra’s victory in 2000 is part of what Sushmita sparked when she went through calisthenics, weight training, and intense grooming unlike Rai who was always deemed this impossibly gorgeous creature” (Farrell, 2000, p. C5). A lengthy report codes Hayden, the “consummate worker,” as the symbol of a new meritocracy:

Hayden was no made-in-heaven beauty, as was Miss World 1994, Aishwarya Rai. Hayden’s beauty was created on earth in the nineties when we Indians are realizing our potential. She was like a tomboy in what I call window-cleaner clothes. She was a plain
Jane, heavy around the hips with little knowledge of poise and fashion. (Chopra & Menon, 1997, p. 68)

Together, such representations of beauty queens as diligent women, obedient disciples, and meritorious achievers invite readers to occupy the subject position of the ideal professional whose dedicated labor promises success in the globalizing nation. Rather than extolling beauty queens as objects of feminine perfection, business leaders mine these women’s biographies to flesh out the skeleton of the hardworking and patriotic Indian worker. Explaining his choice of Hayden as an ambassador for the export industry, the president of the Council for Leather Exports argues, “Our export products are produced in India by well-trained artisans. Hayden’s hard work resulted in immense prestige for the label ‘Made in India’” (Kamath, 2000). Goodyear Asia-Pacific’s president Pace quips that Mookhey, like his newly launched Eagle series tires, was the result of “tireless” perseverance and “cutting edge technology” (Vetticad, 2000, p. 88). An advertising executive leading a branding conference translates the “workaholic” Sen’s winning formula—hierarchical relations with managers, belief in competition, and the power of teamwork—into the “employee management mantra” that would guarantee the best outcomes for India’s nascent experiment with globalization (“Style, Substance, and Success,” 1997, p. D5).

**Manufacturing Marginality: Class, Gender, and Narratives of Ascent**

Addressing questions of celebrity culture’s hegemonic effect in the United States, scholars have argued that valorized fables of self-made entrepreneurial success constitute the foundation of modern capitalism’s rhetoric of equal opportunity (Cloud, 1996; McMullen & Solomon, 1994; Stabile, 2000). Studying the cultural production of Oprah Winfrey as an authentic hero, Cloud (1996) argues that the bootstraps philosophy of popular biographies obscures collective histories of oppression:

> the content, pervasiveness, and popularity of the ‘Oprah’ narratives warrant the recognition of a terministic screen or genre of discourse called tokenist biography, defined as biographical narratives that authorize a person from a marginalized or oppressed group to speak as a cultural hero on the condition that the person’s life story be framed in liberal capitalist terms. (pp. 116–117)

Shifting the focus of inquiry to South Asia, I argue that the signification of India’s global beauty queens induces privileged middle class readers to don the subjectivity of the ambitious and enterprising global consumer, an authoritative category of identity mobilized in policy incentives that endorsed globalization.

The beauty queen has broken the shackles of her previous confinement within the youthful, upper class ghetto of *Femina* magazine to commute within a more diverse range of discursive accommodations. Descending the slope of class hierarchy, Sen, India’s 1994 Miss Universe, is enshrined on *Savvy*’s bright yellow April 1998 cover as the magazine’s choice for “Woman of the Month.” Less concerned with fashion
or romance, *Savvy* pitches itself as a more “modest and down-to-earth” companion for the mature and busy Indian woman, who juggles a professional career with her domestic responsibilities as homemaker. *Savvy* magazine’s April 1998 interview with the “Bold and Beautiful” Sen, Miss Universe 1994, is the most exhaustive biographical exposition of the beauty queen’s life story as a heroic persona, an individual who overcomes the limits of her provincial middle class position in the Third World to attain the “soap opera” lifestyle of First World celebrities (“Bold and Beautiful,” 1998). Flavoring the text with the intimate ambience of a private confession, Sen speaks directly, using first person address, to *Savvy*’s invisible interlocutor and hence, by proxy, to the magazine’s reader. Sen’s integration into the distinguished club of *Savvy*’s women of the month, a list that honors military pilots, social workers, classical dancers, activists, and artists, registers the assimilation of the beauty queen into liberal feminist and nationalist narratives of success and community pride.

A series of chronological themes that trace Sen’s upward trek—from her birth in 1974 in Hyderabad, a South Indian city, to her crowning at the 1994 Miss Universe contest in Manila—structures *Savvy*’s excavation of the beauty queen’s authentic and transparent persona. As Cloud (1996) explains in her analysis of Oprah’s story, melodramatic narratives gain momentum through their emphasis on contrasts between past and present, a calculated convention that charts the hero’s ascent from humble departures to triumphant arrivals. 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” (“Bold and Beautiful,” 1998, p. 18). Sen then dives to the bottom of her past, a far cry from her affluent two-car life; she deploys her father’s memories to resurrect the trauma of the crisis that preceded her birth. Ridiculing the impotence of her father’s modest scooter, a formerly middle class mode of transportation that has devolved into a lower middle class commodity, Sen recalls her father’s frustration when he discovered he could not transport his pregnant wife to the hospital when she went into labor. Fortunately, a kindly neighbor, who owned a car, came to her father’s rescue and thus Sen was born on November 19, the birthday of “accomplished former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.”

Other biographical remnants from Sen’s past align the narrative logic of her catapult to fame with fairy tales like the Ugly Duckling, mythic imprints of childhood for hundreds of middle class Indian women weaned on a diet of popular print narratives from the West. Tugging at readers’ heartstrings, the “happy and poised” Sen asserts that physical limitations “severely handicapped” her emotional balance as a child. *Savvy*’s rendering of Sen’s revelation in bold, upper case letters accentuates the pathos of her early personal liabilities: “AS A CHILD, I WAS SHORT, FAT, AND DARK AND HAD THIS MAJOR INFERIORITY COMPLEX” (p. 19). Sen contrasts her current ownership of treasured transnational cultural capital, her command of the English language, with the deep sense of humiliation she experienced as a young girl who could not embody a tenaciously classed legacy
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of colonial modernity: “As a child, I was totally a mama’s girl ... because I didn’t have any confidence in myself. I had a terrible inferiority complex because I couldn’t speak English fluently. But all this is behind me” (p. 18). Sen’s struggles with her less than cosmopolitan class history resurface as poignant moments of adversity in other magazines. Ruminating on her difficult past for *Filmfare*’s interviewer, she declares, “For someone who didn’t know a word of English until ninth standard, I haven’t done too badly” (Pillai, 1998, p. 72). Following Sen’s candid outburst about her lack of self-esteem as a child who spoke “broken English,” *Stardust* writer Stephen (2000) reminds readers of Sen’s dynamic adult personality: “For someone who studied in Hindi till so late in life, the transformation is astonishing. Sitting in front of me is a strong woman ... who is intelligent, polished, and sophisticated today” (p. 24). Soon after relaying the terror of being trapped in the stagnant margin of India’s vernacular languages, Sen provides hope to *Savvy*’s readers because she surmounted her problems by “insisting” that her parents speak to her in English all the time, a “smart move” that led to her mastery over linguistic modernity.

*Savvy*’s discursive mediation of Sen’s cathartic recovery of her first foray into the glamorous beauty profession, a modeling opportunity, tracks yet another trajectory of ascent—from traditional Hindu middle class insularity to sexually liberated upper class modernity. Sen shepherds readers into the demarcated recesses of her painful and youthful naïveté when she, as a dutiful daughter, wrapped herself modestly in a sari for her picture portfolio in deference to her conservative father’s wishes that she preserve the cultural norms of “decent Bengali girls from good Bengali families.” Her retrograde sari portfolio, as Sen quickly points out, was doomed to failure as the professional faux pas of an incompetent outsider. Secretly enlisting the support of friends to forge an updated visual identity in revealing mini skirts and jeans, sartorial signifiers of modernity that erased all traces of her subaltern class position, a rebellious Sen “bagged her first modeling campaign with a pharmaceutical firm.”

Sen’s transition from modest sari to modern mini mini skirt references the newly imported generational semiotics of the “sexy young woman” whose smiling face and Westernized body map the changing face of the nation. Faced with the threat of extinction in globalizing India, sari producers have begun to invest in glossy advertisements, which showcase beauty queens modeling creatively titillating techniques to drape the renovated sari. Sen also extricates geographical indices of quotidian middle classness to authenticate further her marginal origins. She informs readers that she shopped for her Miss India outfit at Delhi’s Sarojini Nagar market, a noisy commercial bazaar where lower middle and middle class women buy groceries, and then relied on the services of a tailor, who had never stitched an evening dress. Finally, paired color photographs of Sen’s post-Miss Universe physiognomy juxtaposed next to black and white images of her early life escalate the velocity of her passage from periphery to center.

Metaphors of physical displacement and rebellion—key elements in *Savvy*’s textual production of Sen’s ascent—ripple through populist taxonomies of other women’s heroic progress. One report guides readers through Chopra’s terraced trail of industrious virtue, a self-directed outward movement from Bareilly, a small town
in Uttar Pradesh, to the Miss India contest in the bustling city of Mumbai, and then to the Miss World pageant in London (Nair, 2000). The lead paragraph of another story engravés Chopra’s identity as an intrepid pioneer whose ascendance to international fame was a vicarious experience for her community:

The nondescript town of Bareilly in India was basking in reflected glory after down-to-earth home-girl Priyanka lifted the Miss World crown at London’s Millennium Dome. “I’m feeling so proud and excited,” said Chopra’s grandmother. Bareilly’s other grandmothers may wish the same success for their granddaughters. (“Hometown Basks,” 2000)

Proclaiming Hayden’s history of class mobility, Deccan Chronicle pits the modesty of Mettiguda, a neighborhood of narrow lanes in the South Indian city of Hyderabad against the cultural domination of North India and the natural splendor of Seychelles:

As Delhiites and Mumbaias are learning, sexy South India can be as much in demand as the North…. For residents of one-room houses in Mettiguda, who burst firecrackers to celebrate Hayden’s victory, the glamour of her jaunt to sunny Seychelles for Miss World can be recovered again and again thanks to their VCRs. (“Dream Fulfilled,” 1997)

Even when one Miss World, Mookhey, claims Mumbai, India’s most “hip” commercial center, as her hometown, media narratives persist in hijacking a humble starting point for her life story. Trishanku’s (1999) satirical column parodies the distinctions that separate Mumbai’s “civilized” quarters—Colaba, Fort Area, Metro, and Marine Drive occupied by yuppie artists, trendy television actors, and former aristocrats—from the barren “suburban wilderness” of Mulund where Mookhey lived prior to her Miss World sojourn in London. India Today’s congratulatory script of Mookhey’s guerrilla warfare against her father’s conformist values praises her bid for autonomy:

So many girls dream of being Miss World, but only some can keep these dreams alive. Yukta did not let her dream die even if Dad initially got in the way. This is a story about opposites, about a father who sneered at beauty contests and a daughter who would die to be in one of them. It is the story of a triumph of will. (Baria & Abreu, 1999, p. 65)

Interestingly, in disguising elite middle class beauty queens’ ascent to upper class status as a rags-to-riches story, the media fail to highlight the different struggles that one beauty queen, Hayden, may have faced in achieving her success. Unlike the five other upper caste Hindu and middle class global beauty queens, Hayden is a member of the working class Anglo-Indian community in Hyderabad, a Christian minority whose history can be traced to the colonial era when British men pursued alliances with Indian women. Anglo-Indian communities in Hyderabad, who were marginalized by the professional Hindu middle and upper classes, lived in segregated areas and worked in low wage occupations. Hayden’s disabled father had worked as an assembly line worker and then as a plumber before he retired to operate a street-side
phone booth ("Dream Fulfilled," 1997). Following her parents’ divorce, Hayden’s single mother had relied on relatives’ support to raise her two children (Penna, 1998). Popular magazines conceal the significant class differences that separate Rai and Sen from Hayden to produce a seamless liberal feminist narrative of global queens’ collective contributions to the coffers of nationalist pride. Lead paragraphs and headlines adopt an integrative strategy—"Hayden is Miss World: Indian women forge ahead," "Rai, Sen, and Hayden: Indian women rise to the occasion" and "India is on a winning spree: Hayden joins Rai and Sen"—that fuses these women’s successes and thereby effaces Hayden’s marginality. The inadequate attention the print media give to Hayden’s lower middle class socioeconomic background contributes to the silence in the public sphere on the political disenfranchisement and oppression of Anglo-Indians in postcolonial India.

Finally, the media’s repeated deployment of the qualifiers “average” and “ordinary” (Bhuchar, 1999; Iyer, 2001) in conjunction with the beauty queen’s “extraordinary” ascent perpetuates persuasive ideologies of liberal exceptionalism, which suggest that any “typical” middle class Indian woman with drive and ambition can attain the legendary fame of the global beauty queen (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Retelling Sen’s story for her newspaper’s middle class readers, Reddy (1999) writes, “For someone who entered modeling for pocket money, this ordinary middle-class girl has come a long way. She ditched the easy fable of handsome man and happy marriage and went in search of fame” (p. 2). Femina magazine editor Saran hails beauty queens as utopian symbols of the shrinking gap between the middle class and wealthy: “Average girls like Sush, Ash, and Yukta, not just the glamorous elite can succeed in contests today. The right attitude can take even middle class people very far today” (Popham, 1999, p. 20). Unlike beauty queens from the West, who can look forward to a brief interlude of celebrity, some Indian beauty queens—Rai, Sen, Mookhey, Chopra, Mirza and Jaitley—have parlayed their success in pageants to launch careers in the film industry. Sen, Rai, and Chopra have challenged the nepotism of the Indian film industry, an arena dominated by family members of film stars. These beauty queens have argued that “ordinary” middle class women’s cinematic aspirations inaugurate a more egalitarian era for India’s future actors (Pillai, 1998). In one interview, Sen reacts angrily to a rumor that predicted her failure in Bollywood: “That’s a lie. We have no sugar daddies. Abhishek Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt, Karishma Kapoor, and so on were born with the silver spoon. I am an ordinary girl and they cannot stand it” (Reddy, 1999, p. 2).

Biographical representations of women’s middle classness as a transitory test of endurance on the route to transnational success and wealth magnify the vastness of the emotional and material craters which beauty queens have vaulted over. Tales of beauty queens’ heroic ascent in English-language media, which target privileged middle class Indian citizens, sanction consumer desire when they cajole their readers to imagine themselves as amateur subjects who must learn to traverse the perilous ladder of global class distinctions. These ideological narratives of adversity incite audiences to envision their identities as struggling protagonists who can rise above their marginal class positions to march toward future lives of empowerment.
Hybrid Exteriors, Nationalist Interiors: Scripting the Cosmopolitan-Patriotic Feminine Subject

Challenging propositions that have predicted the demise of the nation under the onslaught of modes of global standardization, critics of India’s post-liberalization political culture have illuminated the robust nationalisms that sustain global culture, diasporic formations, electoral politics, and religious fundamentalism (Fernandes, 2000; Grewal, 1999; Malhotra & Rogers, 2000; Mankekar, 2002; Oza, 2001). Idiomatic symbols of the Indian nation render imagined forms of the global into hauntingly familiar icons for middle class Indians, who seek to preserve their national and ethnic identities alongside their pursuit of Western material culture. Fernandes (2000) explains that such transnational articulations of middle class identity in India’s commodity culture are emblematic of a fetishized hybridity, a mutually interactive aesthetic conjuncture of global and national that “provides a means for the reworking of the nationalist imagination in response to movements of economic and cultural capital” (p. 612). Popular media constructions of the middle class Indian populace, upwardly mobile and still claiming allegiance to the patriotism that saturated the nation after independence, rely on the amalgamated appeal of the hybrid global-national. Representations of the global beauty queen’s national identity illustrate how the global consolidates its hegemony through symbols of the national and the national reconfigures its legitimacy through assertions of superiority in the global marketplace.

Cultural strands of hybrid nationalism, which rupture the textual topography of the global beauty queen, position these women as exemplary national citizens. India’s Miss Universe and Miss World winners, clad in the “bold” glamour of upper class Western femininity and gleaming tiaras, have chosen to greet their audiences at the moment of victory with their head bowed slightly and hands folded in the traditional namaste, an Indian gesture signifying respect and humility. Claiming decisively their collective national identities on the global stage, these women have then aligned their individual achievements with their patriotic mission to bring glory to the nation—“India has always been at the top, it’s time the world recognized it,” “I am an ambassador for India now,” and “India has won third time in a row.” These patriotic sentiments of beauty queens, which have earned the enthusiastic approval of the Indian diaspora in locations abroad where Miss World and Miss Universe contests have been held, demonstrate the link between national heroes and transnational communities.

Scott (1996) describes the epidemic of nationalism that became visible in the Indian news media when Sen and Rai’s patriotic quotations were recycled for three days: “The media reacted as if this were a momentous event in Indian history, providing front-page news coverage and numerous TV interviews. The then Prime Minister and President of India received Sushmita and Aishwarya in a style more appropriate to important foreign dignitaries” (p. 16). When announcements of Mookhey’s Miss World victory interrupted congressional sessions, members of parliament thumped their desks and applauded her for “bringing laurels to the
country” (“PM Congratulates,” 1999, p. 8). The deputy chairperson of the legislature, Heptullah, issued a statement congratulating Bennett, Coleman, & Co. for their excellent training of beauty queens: “I admire your team for developing and projecting the hidden talents of India. The key behind Indian women’s dignified appeal lies in their unique ability to combine physical appearance, moral conviction, and intelligence” (p. 8).

Such complimentary and essentialist commentary propounding the perfection of Indian beauty queens—subjects who excel in the silent outer corporeality of the West’s swimsuit body and embody an articulate “Indian” inner subjectivity—animates the field of nationalism in media narratives (Bhatia, 2000; Dahlburg, 1994; Ho, 2001; Mishra, 2000). The speaking segments of beauty contests, as Banet-Weiser (1999) notes, have morphed into forums for contestants to showcase a selfless commitment to public service and “offer evidence of the embodiment necessary for a national representative self” (p. 92). Singh (1999) praises Indian women for their superior brains and beauty, a “lethal combination” that sets them apart from women of other nationalities:

What is the secret of India’s success? Beauty alone does not decide a contest; judges must take into account personality and intelligence, and this is where Indian women have scored. They speak fluent English and are articulate. They have gone to good schools, grew up in good families, and are very confident. (p. 4)

Explaining Indian women’s superiority over other women, business columnist Dharkar quips:

What makes our damsels win with such ease? In the West, girls going into contests aren’t as well educated. Daughters of engineers, army captains, or doctors do not compete in contests. Our women are well bred, come from cultured backgrounds, and speak English more eloquently than British women. (Baria & Israni, 2000, p. 110)

Setting aside their objections to feminine nudity, even conservative politicians from the Bharatiya Janata Party confess their pride in Indian women’s unique brand of confidence and beauty, a trait that has “brought our subcontinent into the limelight” (“CMs Raise Toast,” 2000).

Other reports that link the hybrid global queen’s triumphs to her distinctive national heritage locate the inspirational origins for women’s inner confidence in India’s ancient disciplines of herbal medicine, nutrition, and meditation. One writer for the Hindu newspaper describes Western fitness practices as necessary instruments to trim women’s bodies, but insists that beauty queens cultivated their inner determination by embracing the healing power of India’s traditions of holistic health: “It is not easy to compete with conventional beauties breathing slinky sophistication and hope that your own trusty reserve of shlokas [chants] and tapas [meditation] can do the trick, but our old Indian rope tricks worked their mystical elegance” (“Inner Beauty,” 2000, p. 12). Roy (1994) attributes the strength of beauty queens’ willpower to the wisdom of coach Mehta, whose mission was to train the young global generation to insert the “cosmic within the cosmetic West” and supplement “organic poise with the plastic posture.” Roy encourages readers to
recognize that India’s spiritual traditions are no longer the preserve of defunct sages: “Mehta’s training for Lara included a vegetarian diet of grains and nuts, chanting of mantras, and deep breathing. Our spirituality is not about rejecting the material. Combining West and East can help us achieve milestones” (Roy, 1994, p. 28).

The production of the beauty queen as “uncontaminated” national citizen, a wholesome woman who does not abandon the fundamental values of her culture, takes place through the narrative construction of her dutiful loyalty to family. *Femina* magazine’s plentiful representations of beauty queens as helpful benefactors of family members smooth the contradictions between the modern image of the selfish career woman and the nationalist conception of the “selfless” Indian daughter and sister. Soon after each woman’s victory, the magazine’s family pictures announce beauty queens’ intentions to build homes for parents, fund family vacations, sponsor siblings’ education abroad, and purchase extravagant gifts for uncles and grandparents. Front-page stories and newspaper headlines name acts of generosity—Hayden buys a laptop for her brother, houses for aunt and mother; Lara gives her father a holiday in Goa; Mookhey’s grandmother is thrilled with her new kitchen; and Chopra’s gifts exceed her brother’s expectations (“Charity Begins at Home,” 1997; “New Status,” 1999; “Papa’s Girl,” 2000). These headlines ensure readers’ knowledge of beauty queens’ conformity to the role of the good Indian woman. Celebrating her inner self as an emblem of her national identity, Mookhey dismisses the notion that her newfound celebrity would destabilize her Indian roots: “I tried to be the perfect Indian on stage. I am loving in my heart and at the same time modern and open to new ideas with an Indian touch. That is what I will remain” (“Taking a Miss World View,” 2000, p. 16).

The heritage of the “loving Indian family,” a key ideological motif in Hindu nationalism, also infuses discourses on the beauty queen’s loyalty to her nation (Balakrishnan, 2000; Baria & Israni, 2000; Mody, 1999; “New Status,” 1999; Tandon, 2000). Society columnist Shobha De (1999) describes Mookhey as a balanced woman whose personality encompasses the discipline of Western culture and the enduring family ties of Indian culture. Criticizing religious fundamentalists, who have alleged that beauty contests degrade India’s traditions of family honor, she writes: “Religious fanatics can carp all they want. When Yukta won with her astonishing poise, her mother and grandmother spontaneously ran up on stage and danced. Three generations of Indian women on such a platform is proof that our culture can survive” (p. 11). Baria and Israni (2000) weave together a tapestry of family values that nourished women’s aspirations:

Sushmita’s mother is her daughter’s publicity agent, Aishwarya’s mother was her manager and driving force, Gul Panaag’s maternal aunt helped mould her aura, Yukta’s grandmother prayed for her, and Chopra’s brother motivated her every day.
No other culture has this wellspring of love and familial resources. (p. 8)

Details of family members’ support in these narratives invoke the possibility that women can realize their ambition to become beauty queens without abandoning cherished Indian values.
Global Queens, National Celebrities

Media reports also unleash a visible discourse of patriarchal masculine hyper-patriotism that intensifies the nationalist aura of these beauty queens’ triumphs. Of India’s six global queens, four—Rai, Sen, Chopra, and Datta—were raised in families where their fathers worked for the Indian army, air force, or navy. These fathers are represented as distinguished and hardworking officers, who have climbed steadily to the ranks of captains, commanders, and wing commodores. Although some stories represent beauty queens’ mothers as good Indian mothers, who assist their daughters in training and grooming routines, it is the proud voices of patriotic military fathers that dominate in headlines and lead paragraphs after women earn their Miss World and Miss Universe titles. One story, headlined “Father and daughter make India proud,” plucks Sen’s achievement into a longer history of her family’s service to the nation: “The phrase ‘like father, like daughter’ could not be more true. Wing Commander Sen, who flew Dakotas in the Indo-China war, worked selflessly for the country. Now his daughter makes him and the nation proud” (Vellloor, 1994, p. 15). This same story also includes a lengthy sentimental quotation from Sen’s father expressing remorse over his initial opposition to his daughter’s career in the beauty industry. Chopra’s father, according to one report, raised his daughter to be “strong, disciplined, and selfless.” Therefore, he was not surprised that she had carried on the “family tradition” of “bringing her country a good name” (“She Eyed the Crown,” 2000, p. 1). Datta’s tearful response, “My victory is a birthday present to my father,” appears in one story’s headline, which also describes the beauty queen’s close relationship to her retired air force pilot father, who affectionately refers to Datta as “his lioness” (“Happy Birthday Daddy,” 2000).

Finally, media narratives idolize the Indian beauty queen for setting an innovative global standard for hybrid racial beauty. Manavalan (1995) argues that Sen’s “stunning personality and palatable international look” notched points for excellence in Miss Universe because “her features are not distinctly Indian, they could be South American, Mediterranean, Eastern European, or Middle Eastern” (p. 25). India’s beauty czar, Husain, reinforces hegemonic Euroamerican norms of beauty even as he congratulates Indian women for revising these standards: “Indian beauty queens are the new striking alternative. These women have Caucasian features, but are packaged in lovely shades of brown, olive, and cream” (Anand, 2000). Warning “blondes” about the bad news of their decreasing currency in the beauty market, one report hails Miss World 1994, Rai, as a “heady tropical brunette cocktail of beauty, brains, and warmth,” a woman who has very “international looks with the right mixture of confidence and beauty” (“World is her Oyster,” 1995, p. 4). Khubchandani (2000) predicts Datta’s victory with confidence because she “has all the ingredients to win … her looks are a great combination of Indian and Scottish, what with her mother being Scottish.” Classifying Indian beauty as the “look of the moment,” one newspaper’s positive assessment explains Chopra’s unique hybridity: “Not quite Asian and not quite Caucasian, Chopra has the exotic look. She is like a Venezuelan beauty with a softer face and a more graceful body” (“World at Their Feet,” 2000, p. 10). Another writer draws on discourses of genetic supremacy to explain Indian women’s success: “If China boasts the world’s greatest female
swimmers and France, the most select of vintages, the world’s most comely women come from India of course. That India produces such beauty is entirely due to the fantastic genetic pool” (Chancellor, 1999, p. 23). Enthusiastic testimonials on beauty queens’ racial hybridity camouflage the exclusion of certain Indian subjects from these measures of beauty—short, very dark-skinned, or large women and women who cannot speak English. These media examples illustrate the strategic role that biological essentialism can play in nationalist comparisons of Indian women’s hybrid beauty to women of other nationalities. However, as the section on bodily discipline shows, in contrast to ideologies of natural physical perfection, when Indian women are compared to one another in terms of their commitment to winning the global contest, media discourses of hard work can elevate the constructed body over the natural body.

Referencing the fluid hybridity of the global Indian consumer in current advertising discourse, the symbolic resurrection of the beauty queen as a woman who treasures her cultural heritage even as she masters practices of global consumer culture interpellates readers as patriotic and cosmopolitan citizen-consumers. The discursive ingredients in the recipe for the successful beauty queen—an authentic Indian heart that pulses beneath the outer cloak of the West’s body politic—compel audiences to assemble their identities as skilful, hybrid citizens whose pursuit of material culture blends harmoniously into their nationalist subjectivities.

Class Politics, Role Models, and the Hegemonic Feminine Subject in the Global Nation

My analysis of media texts considers the hegemonic implications of the semiotic composition of empowered middle class femininity at a specific moment in India’s history (Smith, 1990). Sangari (1991) explains the challenges that shifting metaphors of femininity pose to essentialist constructions of gender: “… femaleness is not an essential quality … one has to be able to see the formation of femaleness in each and every form at a given moment or in later interpretations, and see what it is composed of, what its social correlates are, what its ideological potentials are, what its freedoms may be” (p. 57). One news columnists notes that the transformation of the beauty queen from a trivial upper class token into a career representative for the middle classes is one measure of the changing values of the educated citizenry, who no longer “obsess about genteel respectability or push their daughters to become accountants, scientists, doctors, or bankers” (Gangadhar, 2000, p. 5). On the surface, Indian beauty queens’ successes challenge patriarchal and upper caste ideologies of women’s modesty; however, in a more insidious fashion, print representations of these women provoke “persuasive modalities of identification” for middle class audiences—idealized consumers of recent state and corporate discourses (Charland, 1987). One prominent Indian corporation’s advertising copy distances India from its Third World status to re-imagine the nation in the global economic order: “200 million cash rich consumers make India’s middle class. Their annual spending power rivals that of many western countries” (Fernandes, 2000, p. 617). The editor of a magazine argues that consumerism has now become an “Indian value” because the
middle classes are suffering less today from the guilt of their “Gandhian hangover” (p. 614). Minimizing further any residual guilt about the accumulation of wealth, stories of beauty queens suspended within inclusionary myths of accomplishment suggest that hardworking, ambitious, and patriotic middle class subjects have earned global consumer culture’s bounty of rewards.

Describing the transnational as a space where multiple forces are producing the First World in the Third World, Shome and Hegde (2002) write, “The issue is not that difference, marginality, disempowerment, etcetera do not matter; rather the issue is how they matter, how they are evoked … and how they are reconstituted through differential logics in globalization” (p. 176). Editorial narratives on beauty queens import the liberal-democratic premises of popular psychology to produce capitalism’s most seductive linchpin in South Asia—the heroic role model, a Western trope of the modern entrepreneurial individual whose biography can be reproduced by her faithful subjects. *Gurlz* magazine’s regular “mentoring” feature solidifies the construct of the beauty queen as role model—the magazine invites readers to ask their favorite beauty queens “anything under the sun” including advice on improving self-esteem. School, college, and state level pageants catering to the middle classes feed into the illusion of the beauty queen’s replicable life of celebrity on the ground. The therapeutic vocabulary of the beauty queen as a role model, a recent construct of liberal individualism in South Asia, induces amnesia and insulates middle class citizens from the contradictions that such individualized discourses of empowerment can conceal. Despite the pathos in *Savvy*’s story of Sen’s 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 the resources she had to produce her glamour portfolio are profound markers of her elite status in a nation that has millions of illiterate citizens living below the poverty level. Indian citizens, who struggle for water, shelter, and food on an everyday basis, may participate in the imaginary fantasies and selective practices of the global queen’s celebrity life and even occupy space in media reports that show beauty queens hugging poor children to service corporate philanthropy’s discourses of salvation. However, globalization’s ideologies of prosperity in India offer no recourse for the vast majority of poor citizens to attain even the humble ordinariness of the middle class consumer who desires the status of the global beauty queen. While grand discourses of dams, steel plants, and rural schools illustrated the postcolonial Indian state’s goals of poverty reduction in the fifties and sixties (Khilnani, 1997), the public production of global beauty queens in the post-liberalization India of the nineties illuminates the process by which tales of empowered feminine role models valorize exclusionary ideologies of class.

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