

Beauty Contests Gender Norms and Social Expectations

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Introduction

Women have been sexualized and objectified since the beginning of times, which has degraded them as human beings and snatched away their equal rights. Women have always been forced to fit into the beauty standards set by society and stereotypical features of the “perfect” women. The beauty contest held in September 1921 marked the beginning of unrealistic beauty standards that sexualized women. The first contest held at Atlantic City, New Jersey, included eight women who stood in front of a board of judges. These young ladies were compared to the beauty standards set by the judges, who chose the best one. The “Miss America” was meant to set an example for all women who lacked the qualities of being the ideal housewife and mother with the “perfect” looks.

Beauty contests were inherited from the times of colonial America when competitions such as Queen of May were held to encourage fertility and motherhood among women. The competition included judging factors such as physical appearance and leadership qualities. The importance wasn't entirely focused on beauty. The Queen of May had to be popular among the public in order to be the most loved woman in America. Beauty pageants were meant to stereotype appearance and personal qualities.

Discussion

The beauty contests that judged women on the basis of looks, personality, character, poise, and other qualities were first promoted by P.T. Barnum. The entrepreneur encouraged these competitions since 1854, which appealed to the American population and soon became one of the most anticipated events of the year. Following the immense popularity, a beauty contest held in 1905 attracted over forty thousand women participants.

A year later, beauty contests for infants were held. The aim of these contests was to create a positive image in the heads of the American population and set examples like the ideal and healthy baby and the perfect woman. No matter how noble the initial intentions of the contests were, they soon turned into a feud between contestants and destroyed basic decency.

Young women and infants were forced into the standards set by society that killed their confidence and created a wave of self-hate, depression, and an inferiority complex. Young girls were objectified through inappropriate clothing, which included bath suits, bikinis, and long sparkly gowns. They were

measured to see if they fit the ideal body type and measurements. Women were rejected for a single imperfection. These reminded them that they were unwanted and not loved.

“The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity” by Sarah Banet-Weiser throws light on the sexism and racism encouraged by beauty pageants that made women feel terrible about themselves. Weiser talks about all the other qualities added to modern beauty contests, which include strong personality, independence, community service, and a great idea for young women around the country. However, the swimsuit competition that has been included in the contest since the past century still objectifies women while their bodies are sexualized and measured for perfection (Banet-Weiser 88-120).

The Miss America beauty pageant claims to be culturally diverse and promotes women from all ethnic groups and races to be a part of the competition and prove herself and her qualities. However, the competition’s various rounds and conditions eliminate most women belonging to different groups of races, religions, and cultural backgrounds. Weiser, in her research study, uses interviews with actual participants and considers the impact of the contests on American thinking. She criticizes the method adopted by beauty pageants to promote feminism and equality.

Women should be judged on their personal achievements and service to the community instead of looks and appearances. Moreover, emphasis on the ideal body types and facial features is extremely discouraging for women who struggle every day to work and make academic and career-oriented achievements but don’t fit into the beauty standards set by these commercialized contests.

The term ‘beauty’ is undefined and does not refer to certain features or qualities. Beauty is subjective and can vary from person to person, affected by multiple factors such as cultural background, media, and, most importantly, conformity. A study by Kathy Peiss reveals that beauty pageants and the media have set unrealistic beauty standards for an average woman that constantly drive her to buy marketed beauty products. Peiss talks about the beauty industry has grown rapidly and forced women to think they are not good enough naturally, hence, they require to purchase beauty aids and products to make them appear more attractive.

The paper by Kathy Peiss related beauty and business on several occasions and highlighted different themes. These include the advancement and importance of the beauty products, fashion and style, and the idolization of the perfect American woman that is constantly emphasized on by the beauty pageants like ‘Miss America’. Moreover, the importance of beauty has led women to be an exchange value. Their beauty has been sold in the form of prostitution and, in more recent times, in the form of sexual images and objectifying roles in movies (Peiss 485-506).

Watson and Martin, in their paper “The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One,” shed light on the constant beauty advertisements and the projection of ideal women that affect the confidence level and the social performance of the common women. They are always told how to look, talk, behave, and style, following the guidelines set by profit-driven beauty industries and the illogical existence of the Miss America beauty pageant. The idolization of a young woman with the

'perfect' body and facial features is not only discouraging for women who do not fall into the category but also against the equality provided to women. A woman's value should not lie in her looks but in her character and achievements and the fact that she is a strong lady who fights social norms every day (Watson and Martin 105-126).

Conclusion

Beauty standards and women objectification have been major problems affecting the mindset of society and impacting the equal opportunities offered to women. While the word beauty was defined subjectively, beauty contests and the commercialization of beauty have set new guidelines and standards for women to meet. 'Experience History' (Davidson, 658) provides a detailed insight into the causes and consequences of the beauty pageants that took place as early as the 19 (Davidson et al. 658)th century. The source includes data that shows the number of followers these beauty contests had. The concept was widely accepted, and it was okay to sexualize and objectify women, including little babies, who were judged for their healthiness and beauty.

The people who arranged these contests, such as P.T. Barnum, are not the only ones to be blamed for introducing the idolization of women's bodies and looks but also the society who made these contests popular and invested their energy in them. America is obsessed with competition and "perfections," which are entirely focused on physical beauty and the definition of womanhood. While men are judged for their personality, personal achievements, sports skills, and professional development, women are only appreciated for their appearance and the way they dress, talk, walk, and style themselves. Even though modern-day beauty contests claim that they are driven by a woman's character, contribution to society, professional life, and accomplishments, these competitions still include women showcasing their bodies in swimsuits and provocative clothing to present themselves to the board of judges.

Works Cited

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