Body Politics in Beauty Pageants: A Study of Miss Nepal Discourse

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Abstract
The paper attempts to explore how the female body is often controlled by the power politics, which is discussed with reference to the Miss Nepal beauty pageant. The pageant being organized since 1994 has drawn not only ideological and ethical debate, but it has also generated street demonstrations including violent confrontations since then. Though women’s wings of various politico-cultural organizations tried to stop it by organizing various protest movements, multiple forms of regional and community-based beauty pageants are proliferating in Nepal. This study primarily tries to observe the forms of body politics that exist in Miss Nepal beauty contests from the perspective of indigenous aesthetics. Secondly, it analyzes how the female body is tied with the power politics in the name of beauty pageants from the Gramscian notion of ‘hegemony’ and Ngugi wa Thiongo’s ‘decolonizing the mind’. Finally, as indigenous aesthetics is an extensive domain, this paper recommends some ways to deal with the Miss Nepal beauty pageant issues, especially with reference to the indigenous Newa: women aesthetics.

Keywords: Women body, beauty pageant, cultural hegemony, indigenous aesthetics

Introduction
Women’s bodies are often used for the politico-cultural battlefields. One of the best examples of the modern world body politics is the beauty pageant. A fashion show as beauty pageant was organized in Nepal in 1994 while celebrating the Silver Jubilee of Kathmandu Jaycees. The Hidden Treasure Company then came into existence in 1995 solely to organize it annually as The Miss Nepal pageant. The role of Kathmandu Jaycees in the Miss Nepal pageant went meager and finally it detached from the beauty pageant battlefield. The Hidden Treasure came to the front to hold the sole franchise for Miss Nepal, Miss Earth and Miss International pageants. The top three winners participate in these three international pageants since then.
Since its inception, the pageants have faced controversies and confrontations. The protesters once had forty-point disagreements, including an argument to stop it or just say it the Hidden Treasure Company Fashion Show, not the Miss Nepal Beauty pageant. However, the company (exclusively from the core capital city, Kathmandu) having ninety percent (9 out of ten) members from the Newa: community of the valley has been organizing the Miss Nepal pageant annually since then. The pageant was not held in 2001 due to the royal massacre. It was the time of selecting contestants when the royal massacre occurred. In 2006, it did not take place due to the political crisis in the country. The left-wing women protest groups including the civil society pressurized the government with aggressive demonstrations including various formal appeals and meetings to stop the so-called Miss Nepal beauty pageant. One of the directors of The Hidden Treasure, Subarna Chhetri recalls those days of contestations, when they involved in various negotiation meetings. In his words, they learnt from the meetings and incorporated Nepali cultural flavor in one of the auditions. “All of their demands were not bad; but some of the points, out of 40-point demands, were unacceptable,” as he says, “We couldn’t give up Miss Nepal brand. We couldn’t just call it the Hidden Treasure pageant or fashion show.” According to him, they tried the best till the last day, but could not organize it in 2008. The preparation was final, but a day before the finale, the Chief District Officer ordered them to stop it. The Maoist-led government sooner lost the power and they continued the pageant again without obstacle. In 2022, some left-wing activists including the civil society began to oppose it with dialogues, debates and demonstrations. According to Chhetri, Miss Nepal beauty pageant is connected to the global beauty pageant history.

The debates and demonstrations for and against the beauty pageants have a remarkable history. So is the history of the proliferation of the beauty pageants. Since 1880, the United States of America adopted the beauty pageant originated from Scotland in 1839. Then New Jersey merchants organized the Miss America since 1921 to prolong the tourist season at a seaside resort; this forms of beauty pageants proliferated within and outside the USA (Crawford et al. 62). In the USA alone, as Banet-Weiser writes, thousands of beauty contests are being franchised each year by Miss America and several thousand more take place at the local level (qtd. in Crawford et al. 26). By 1951 the pageant was reported as the most watched TV event in the world. Thus, the beauty pageants existed as a global phenomenon. In Britain, according to BBC report, Eric Morley, the bingo game promoter, organized a bikini contest and the media dubbed it as the Miss World beauty pageant. The main motif of the contest was to promote the bikini recently introduced in the market. When the 1951 Miss World tag holder was crowned in a bikini, it fueled to the controversy. The countries with religious traditions discouraged delegates to future events of Miss World. Even the bikini issue was condemned by the civil society including the Pope. The swimsuits were replaced by evening gowns in crowning since 1959. During 1960s and 1970s, the beauty pageants Miss World, Miss Earth and Miss Universe were reported as the most publicized events in the world (Smith 13). But, in 1970s, the Miss World contest in London was disrupted by the women’s liberation protesters armed with floor bombs, stink bombs and water pistols loaded with ink. In 1970, the contest drew a hot debate when South Africa sent two contestants (one black and one white). Africa was banned from the contest till apartheid was abolished. Various reports show, there was a decline in the popularity of the beauty pageants. Still the Miss World contest is said to be franchised in more than 100 countries with series of controversies and contestations including violent street demonstrations and inter-

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1 But the paper is not found preserved.
religious riots (over 200 people were killed in the city of Kaduna in 2002 with many houses burned) and a scheduled contest to be held in Nigeria during the month of Ramadan was moved to the UK to continue as plan. The Miss America contest was also attacked by religious groups and women’s clubs (Crawford et al. 62); however, the media’s response to the protest solidified a limited oppositional message (Dow 32). The Euro-American models of the pageants have been spread all over the world. Recent discourses on the beauty pageants are a complex mix in which the opponents and supporters struggle to define nationality in terms of women’s bodies and sexuality (Oza 1068).

The history of protest against the beauty pageants and the proliferation of the contests have influenced the Miss Nepal events. The organizers and the supporters of the contests show the popularity of the pageants. The protesters also have a lot of evidences to fight against the beauty pageants. Both groups, the protesters and supporters, have been struggling hard to justify their argument. The Miss Nepal titleholders get space for the time being.

As an instructor of one of the Miss Nepals, Sadichha Shrestha, at St. Xavier’s College, I observed her performance from the perspectives related to autonomy, freedom and empowerment. She belonged to a Newa: indigenous community, which has its own distinctly rich cultural heritages. The protesters charge that such beauty pageants are tools to a continuation of neo-colonialism through cultural hegemony. Such consumerist products of the West kill distinct indigenous cultures of the East and make the girls the puppets of their capitalist products. The supporters of this pageant argue that it is the best platform for creating an empowered citizen - Miss Nepal is the property of the country (God Father 38). Subarna Chhetri says, “Perhaps, this is also a symbol of freedom from the shackles of our various social dogmas and rules that women were made to live with...we are talking with big business houses including the government to come forward and help the process for mutual benefits” (Vivacity Magazine 32).

Supporting the organizer’s claim, the Miss Nepal titleholder of 2010, Sadichha Shrestha, says, “All the Miss Nepal titleholders are very special, unique and gifted individuals; they are performing well as far as they can in their fields” (00:08:38-00:08:45). The Miss Nepal titleholders often argue that they have a very big responsibility to represent Nepal via this platform. The anti-beauty pageant protesters denounce their claim that beauty pageant is a platform of representing the nation by a woman. They say that the Miss Nepal titleholders themselves are unable to truly represent their self autonomously; their bodies are being presented as commodities in the capitalist markets; this is a fake representation. In this context, the paper primarily attempts to observe the forms of body politics that exist in the Miss Nepal beauty contest from the perspective of indigenous aesthetics and recommends some ways to deal with the Miss Nepal beauty pageant issues with reference to the indigenous Newa: women aesthetics.

Method

This article attempts to approach the Miss Nepal beauty pageant discourse from the point of view of indigenous aesthetics in the Nepali context so that decolonizing the mind is possible gradually through academic activism rather than merely through violent demonstrations. For this purpose, this paper has used the handbook, an anthology, on Miss Nepal beauty pageant discourse titled Resisting Beauty Pageant in Nepal published in 2010, which critiques the polarized viewpoints (who support it as a tool to individual freedom and empowerment and those who criticize it as capitalist tool to continue domination and subordination). To explore the gap between the Miss Nepal beauty
Miss Nepal Beauty Pageant: The Politics of Beauty

The handbook *Resisting Beauty Pageant* published in August 2010 by All Nepal Women’s Association (Revolutionary) comprises eleven articles and more than a dozen appeals and letters to the concerned authorities. They resist against the Miss Nepal beauty pageant with their critical views. This is the only document found collectively produced as a response to beauty peasants from Nepal till date. The source of the document is women activism against the Miss Nepal beauty pageant. The expressions of the activists, as Gramsci and Thiongo believe, exist as counter-hegemonic discourse of the Miss Nepal beauty pageant so that decolonizing the mind of the young girls, who are dreaming be popular in the capitalist market, is possible.

Jayapuri Gharti argues that they are beautiful who are ready to sacrifice for the social transformation, which is deep in interior not outside the body skin” (2). In her words, they are fighting against the Miss Nepal beauty pageant collectively and stopped it in 2008. She further states, “When capitalist media are presenting the evils as elixir, which has been established in common sense of the people; to dismantle this evil culture, we have to fight” (2). For her, the innocent young girls’ bodies are being used as commodities. In her words, there are males who often become more public; but why are they not using the males’ bodies as commodities of the advertisement? In the words of Yasoda Subedi, our myths also present ancient women nude as nymphs Menuka, Urvashi and Tilottama in the palace of Lord Indra; now the very males are trying to present our young girls in beauty pageants, fashion shows, in music videos, restaurants and massage centers like nymphs in front of the very erotic males. She notes, “Our beauties are supporting the capitalists” (4-5). According to Anjana Bisankhe, some Nepali businessmen were invited in India for the pageant who copied it after they returned back to Nepal (16). She asks, in the federal Nepal, what sorts of women could be the role model, beautiful, or a mentor? Women are fighting for various sorts of their rights including their proportionate representation. Do such pageants educate them for autonomy and freedom of the oppressed? (24). For Amrita Rana, so, there are many reasons to stop beauty pageants in Nepal. She argues, “Our culture has no such tradition. In terms of cultural aspect as well, it’s wrong, where working class women are humiliated” (12-14). Rana claims that it should be discontinued at the state level. But she also claims that only discontinuing the Miss Nepal beauty pageant is not enough for women’s autonomy. There are various other regressive systems to be curbed that are promoting a corrupt consumerist culture. Even a male scholar like Ishowr Chandra Gyawali claims that one should look to the term ‘beautiful’ relatively, which is not an absolute, universal term. For the capitalists, who want cosmetic reality, they see makeup obsessed women beautiful and working class women ugly (25). Therefore, for Dama Sharma, the beauty pageants are the badly distorted form of consumerist culture (32). Jagadis Chandra Bhandari believes that a beautiful woman cannot make other women
beautiful; but a revolutionary woman can produce many revolutionary women (35). The Miss Nepal beauty pageant, in the words of Nani Khadaka, (the Miss Beautiful Hair title winner in 2007), produces a snobbry idiot class in Kathmandu, who needs money for a year for a leisure class life, performing a drama each year (36). For Sabitra Sharma, they play with women’s psychology (42). Therefore, in the words of Sita Subedi, the exploitation of women in the name of beauty queen should be stopped as soon as possible (44). Hari Govinda Luitel, giving reflections of the street demonstration scenes then (the violent contestation, burning the welcome gate of BCC hall of Baneshor by hundreds of protestors), lists out who played the role of the politics of silence. Taranath Sharma had stood against the resistance by writing an article in The Kantipur who blames the demonstrators as a regressive or orthodox force. In his words, beauty pageants are killing the essence of beautiful by reducing females as cosmetic idols (55).

For him, mapping the beauty of someone is a nonsense act; it is against the rule of nature. Businessmen should not carry the burden of aestheticism (58).

A university student association comprising ten student organizations had collectively organized an interaction program in Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur. Discussions were more concentrated on the aspects of the Miss Nepal beauty pageant. The activism of such resistance is alive in reminiscence now. Those who were in the street gradually went neutralized, who raised discourses on beauty pageants including violent street demonstrations. In 2008, they were able to stop the contest one day before the finale. Recalling that moment, Subarna Chhetri expresses his views in this way:

We met Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, who said, “We have to criticize the beauty pageant ideologically.” There was a big demonstration. We shifted our finale from BCC Baneshor to Army Officer’s Club. The demonstrators blocked the gate. We took all 11 judges from the Tripureshor gate to Army Officer’s Club and planned to organize the program without audience. Nepal TV did not live our program. The demonstrators had 40 demands and among them, four demands were serious. They also said, “Stop to call it “the Miss Nepal, you can say “The Hidden Treasure Miss Beautiful” only.

Once in Jhamsikhel Training Hall, Satya Mohan Joshi was called for the orientation. The women activist entered the training hall. Joshi waited for a long time but the discussion between the contestants and the activists went on. Joshi had to return back home without any event. There were series of discussions, interactions and meetings between the organizers and the activists. Amrita Thapa, one of the leading anti-Miss Nepal activists, argues that the organizers have to say what they are and they have no right to deceive people. In her words, a private company The Hidden Treasure has no right to select ‘Miss Nepal’. They can say ‘Hidden Treasure Beauty.’ Furthermore, in her words, the organizers should speak the truth that they are organizing the show not to represent the country but to represent some capitalist product and sell them and get profit; they should tell to the public that the beauty pageant is a business. They should tell the truth to the contestants too that they have been used for the advertisement (10).

In the words of Chhetri, after 2010, there were no more resistances against the beauty pageants. They organized the contest annually for twelve years. According to him, they have no difficulties to find the sponsors now. The sponsors themselves outreach them to tie up. But in May 2022, the protests erupted again in Nepal after a twelve-year-old alleged rape by the beauty pageant organizer eight years ago. This case brought a debate on the Miss Nepal contest and some of the women organizations announced open resistance against the pageant including street demonstrations.²

According to Shuvam Dhungana, the organizer of the pageant called Miss Global International 2014, the owner of Model Global Visas Consultancy, Manoj Pandey was arrested days after the day a former beauty pageant participant posted a series of videos on TikTok sharing the details of episodes of sexual harassment (4). This episode regenerated discourses and protests against beauty pageant in 2022.³ Ahuti argues, “Bigger issues superimposed lively debates and demonstrations against beauty pageants and this issue was left aside.” He further argues:

The women activists and their supporters turned to be an opportunist after their director parties assimilated into capitalist market oriented systems. Some left activists, who run campaigns against the beauty pageants have participated their daughters in the contest and they are feeling proud of it now. But, some groups of intellectuals and activists are still dedicated to resistance. They are reinventing the tools, techniques and organizations to carry on the resistance in new context.

(my trans.; 6)

According to Ahuti, in 2022, after the episode of pathetic expression of a former beauty pageant participant, which was exposed through social media two months before the Miss Nepal beauty contest finale, the protests against it were reactivated again. It has exposed the real faces of senior women celebrities as well, who were born in the screen and turned old within the screen having no chance to touch the actual ground of Nepali society. Ahuti claims that the notions of slave era and feudalism developed through patriarchal interest that defined women as commodity, beautiful and weak. The capitalist patriarchy wants to continue it via various tools and one of them is the beauty pageant (6). For him, it is not only the issue of women as there is no point in just blaming the contestants and their parents and organizers. It is a cultural neo-colonization. This politics of beauty has to be deconstructed and reconstructed by the politics of liberation. But the perception of the beauty pageant contestants is different.

Perceptions of Miss Nepal on Beauty Pageant

In an interview, the Miss Nepal 2020 titleholder Namrata Shrestha presents herself how obsessed she was for it. During the photo/video shoots for the beauty contest, she had to go to Rara in the far western part of Nepal. She was so scared that she cried a lot during her flight; she was crying even in the airports. But she was so strong enough to compete the beauty contest.

As she planned to apply for the Miss Nepal contest, Namrata was eighteen and half years and a criterion was of nineteen years. When she heard that a call for application was open, she cried loudly because she was not qualified for the contest. Her mother suggested her to apply. She got selected in the first round and contested up to top five. She thought that she would not win the crown; however, she would reach up to the final round. She was not confident enough, and she thought that she had to be prepared for the competition. When she was out in the top five, she cried a lot for about three months as she says, “I cried so badly for two and half months; it was too difficult for me to bear it” (00:24:19-00:24:23). She was, in her words, so much obsessed for it since she was in her third grade. She narrates,

In grade two, when I heard the term Miss Nepal, I found these words very fancy. I was trolled when I said to my science teacher I want to be Miss Nepal…I didn’t know properly what it was. I knew Aysorya Roy is the Miss World. I didn’t know why but the word ‘world’ looked very obsessive to me. I also want

to be there, I thought. Then I began to watch Miss Nepal and Miss World…ten years ago I tempted for it, I wanted it, I desired it…. (00:26:30-00:26:42)

She proudly says, “I vividly remember raising my hand while my science teacher asked us what we want to be when we grow up. I was in grade 3 and I answered, ‘Miss Nepal.’ I have had many idols that happened to be Miss Nepal(s) and Miss World(s) and this ignited a fire in me to belong in these categories” (18). Namrata was so obsessed that she would imagine wild; most of the time she would even imagine negatively. Once she had a mini heart attack, too. She says, “I had a mini heart attack as well then….I need three subtitles and for that I asked to my god…I believe in manifestation a lot- ask, believe, receive…I would read a lot about manifestation, watch YouTube too…if you want something, ask your god, tell I want it” (00:28:28-00:29:30). She says, “I believe in magic…I’ve a special connection with divine” (00:31:18-00:31:20). In next time she learnt rules, walked well, got make up knowledge, as she says “I had already researched a lot. I used to watch Miss India as well because they were in this business for last 60 years. I would watch Miss World and Miss Universe a lot” (00:34:30-00:34:48).

Now, she believes that she has a very big responsibility, representing the country. For her, this is higher than any other forms of responsibility: “Now I have to represent each Nepali; now I realize it’s a very big responsibility. If I do any mistake, it harms to my country” (00:38:05-00:38:10). She means that the beauty pageant contestants need government funding as other fields get. In regard to its criticism, she feels that the Miss Nepal titleholders have their parents and kids; they also get hurt. She says, “We are going to a battle field, holding our country’s flag; it’s too big responsibility, don’t criticize us” (18).

As I talked to Sadichha Shrestha, who used to say that all Miss Nepal titleholders are something extraordinary and are doing well in their professional life, which are related to glamor, cosmetic, fashion, films, etc., the new ‘beauty queens’ have a similar sense of pride. For instance, in the finale of Miss Nepal Beauty Pageant 2022, a question was like this: “What do you think that one girl can do or be example to be an independent and fearless woman in future?” Priyanka Rani Joshi after writing the answer within two minutes and thirty seconds recited her answer with twisted tongue, “…today one girl is enough - a power to search changes…to bring the entire world together because the sublime beauty of womanhood is in her parallel strength to hold… the world in her and I stand for uplifting and empowering that strength…” (00:05:58-00:06:34). Joshi further says, “…As a young girl everyone has a dream of becoming the Miss Nepal or Miss World at one point of life. You are so influenced by everything you are watching TV and YouTube these days…now I feel this platform is more than a glamor; it’s a platform of an ambassadorship” (00:06:02-00:06:18). Joshi’s judgmental claim seems shallow when Bandana Dhakal recalls her childhood:

When I was child, there would be discussions about beauty pageants in various meetings in our home. My father (Ghanashyam Dhakal) would say that beauty pageants are subtle forms of anti-women cultural invasion. I began to participate in street demonstrations and resistance against the beauty pageants. We would try to stop Miss Pokhara beauty contest. Police would lathicharge. However, we would keep on fighting. I thought beauty pageants get stopped sooner. But beauty peasants are bourgeoning in various forms. There is a deep politics behind beauty pageants.

The anti-beauty pageant campaign did not cease. On 15 June 2022, the Scientific Socialist Women’s Organization Central Committee Kathmandu issued an appeal to stop the Miss Nepal Beauty Pageant again. The appeal signed by Dhana Kumari Sunar, the central coordinator of the organization, claims, “The small kids are being engaged in
such shows. Multinational companies are using them to earn profit." Her statement indicates that such pageant shows the class centric attitudes. The appeal further indicates that such pageant has no role at all in the long history of women movement. They do not care for the issues of the oppressed women. Announcing a nationwide street demonstration against the pageant, the protesters requested the organizers to stop the Miss Nepal 2022 contest. It also warned the twenty-four contestants, the organizer and thirty-five sponsor companies not to involve in such nonsense act. The appeal of 2022 recalls those days of the first decade of the anti-beauty pageant movements. A dozen press releases, appeals and declarations are available at the last part of the book Resisting Beauty Pageant in Nepal. With appeals, there are collective signatures of the renowned women activists and civil society leaders. More than a dozen women organizations, cultural associations and civil society members have contributed to the resistance movement.

The resistance against the Miss Nepal beauty pageant did not stop. According to Laxmi Bardewa, these sorts of pageants promote regressive forces (qtd. in Sargam, 2022). On 15 June 2022, in Kathmandu, the Scientific Socialist Women’s Organization organized a program entitled Saundarya Pratiyogita: Sasaktikaran ki Vastukaran? [Beauty Pageant: Empowerment or Commodification?]. In the program, the Miss Teen titleholder of 2008 Sambriddhi Rai said, “The concept of keeping girls standing each other, measuring their external beauty and declaring one more beautiful than other itself is an ugly practice.” She was the winner of Miss Tourism Queen, which was the first Asia episode organized in China. She further said, “I came from a village, where we never talked about beauty pageant in childhood. . . . How can a girl beautiful because of her walk, age, figure, face, height, speaking? How other cannot be beautiful having intellectual skills, distinct identity?” For Aruna Upreti, motivating girls to be more beautiful than others is a business; in her words, it is not a competition; it can never be empowerment where girls cannot realize that they are being used as a commodity. Adding to Upreti’s argument, Mina Paudel said, in the name of becoming beautiful, women are suffering from malnutrition.

The above statements by the women activists and their supporters show that the beauty pageants, including the Miss Nepal contest have a capitalist motif. In their views, the young innocent girls and their mind have been manipulated by the capitalist glamour politics. The bodies of women have been used as commodities in the capitalist market. The innocent women including the general public are hegemonic in the capitalist power. As Gramsci argues, manipulation has been made possible by means of the hegemony through a consent strategy, which ultimately demands Thiongo’s notion of decolonizing the mind.

Indigenous Aesthetics of Beauty

Unlike India and many other South Asian countries, Nepal was never colonized. But, Nepal remained as an isolated feudal society till 1951 when the first commercial flights landed in Kathmandu. In Nepal, television was not introduced until 1985. Since 1990, the contexts for the beauty pageants were not formulated in Nepal. Therefore, the beauty pageants were initiated late in Nepal in comparison to the western countries.
According to Malika Browne, “If Nepal was not in the grip of a bloody civil war, its number of beauty pageants would be surprisingly high” (26). The beauty pageant was introduced by a group of businessmen in 1994, when it was loosing its popularity in the Global market hubs, including London. The beauty pageants were introduced in India in the early 1950s. In 1996, a group of Maoists started an insurgency and stood strongly against the beauty pageants in Nepal. However, the beauty pageant continued in Kathmandu. The main purpose was to fill the hotel ballrooms left empty due to the Maoist insurgency and the sponsors would be generally the companies related to beauty products and tourism industries (66).

Since its inception, the pageants organized protests, ranging from the newspaper editorials to violent demonstrations with lathicharge and over a dozen protesters were injured. In return, L. Pant informs that the protesters pelted stones at the police and the scene turned uglier (7). The structural adjustment policy of neo-liberal capitalists extended from 1985 and that policy entered in Nepal, too. The Hidden Treasure, the organizer of Miss Nepal, claims, “Since the start of this pageant in 1994, it has been a platform providing a source of empowerment and inspiration not only to women but for others as well.” The period of 2019-2020, in the words of organizers, was “historic for Miss Nepal pageant and The Hidden Treasure respectively as they celebrated their 25th Anniversary after overcoming many hardships.” They proudly express that nearly 600 participants have gone through the Miss Nepal journey and have made significant strides in their various fields. They further claim:

Each of our winners has something unique to offer which can benefit the environment they are in. Contrary to the popular belief, this pageant is not only about glamour, fame, dazzling dresses and tiaras; but very much also about beauty with a purpose, tenacity of purpose, feminism, women empowerment, kindness, humility and unity. We are proud of all of our past winners and immensely joyed to follow them perseus their ambitions. The winners of the event compete in Miss World, Miss Earth, and Miss International pageants held across the globe…. we try to find the suitable gem from our treasure trove and the ones who are able represent our country as its brand ambassador internationally.11

In 2022, Priyanka Rani Joshi was declared as The Hidden Treasure Miss Nepal titleholder and Dr. Sareesha Shrestha as Miss Nepal Earth and Nancy Khadaka as Miss Nepal International. All ten males holding the board of directors12 are running the THT Pvt. Ltd. since its establishment, which holds franchise for Miss World, Miss Earth, Miss International and Miss Supranational. They claim, “As the organizers of the largest beauty pageant in Nepal, our exponential growth over these past years have made the protesters and sceptics of the beauty pageant believe that THT stands for feminism.”13

According to Julia Morley, Chairperson of Miss World, who founded the ‘Beauty with a Purpose in 1972’ title, “Miss World is a Festival that brings together over 130 nations from around the world. . . . It is more than a beauty pageant. It gathers our future leaders and business women to learn about our global needs and try to help those who need our assistance” (13). In the similar way, Ramon Manzon, Co-founder, Miss Earth argues, “2022 is now not only a restoration, but a new Miss Earth Nepal composed of a

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9 https://missnepal.com.np/
10 https://missnepal.com.np/
11 ibid
12 ibid
13 https://missnepal.com.np/AboutUs
collective of courageous and address any form of challenge that its country, or even the world, might bring forth, and these inspiring and beautiful women deserves a salute and much praise” (14). Akemi Shimomura, Chairperson and Miss International, views, “Through these experiences, we expect that the new Miss International Nepal titleholder will be able to take the opportunity to the fullest, and make your country proud by being a worthy representative” (15). Such flowery claims of the organizers and promoters are often supported by the beauty pageant winners. For instance, Supriya Shrestha, Miss Nepal Earth 2020, says, “I found a purpose for life which was not just confined to my reigning period but actually live by the virtue- Once a Miss Nepal always a Miss Nepal” (20). But at the same time, one of the contestant participants Nishma Choudhary says, “Miss Nepal is not empowering platform, rather it’s a platform for fame,” adding that From the clothes that are used for the pageant, make up and the social works all are just for fame. Even the social work is not a real social work. Nobody will fuck for the society. From 2015 to 2020, I had been there, either in the backstage or may be as a contestant, whatsoever, nobody has come there thinking for society. Even the social work they just do for the fame. . . Organizers also know, they are not empowering women. If someone wins and earns or capitalize the platform, it might be. But, honestly speaking when we don’t win Miss Nepal, nobody cares us.

According to Chaudhary, all young girls are not dreaming of becoming a Miss Nepal. Rather, many young girls are contaminated by the capitalist culture of aesthetics. According to Rupa Sunar, “There are a lot of illusions spread via mainstream media and many young girls with the dream of becoming celebrity are flying like a kite and the harness is in the hand of capitalist patriarch” (4). Nepal Police data of 2021 shows the incensement of rape cases by more than 20 percent. The beauty pageant contestants and winners do not care of such serious gender and suicidal issues. They are promoting a cosmetic culture as the USA alone sold 511 hundred thousand dollars’ cosmetics in 2021 (Reports Global 2022). Nepal is importing more than 60 million dollar’s cosmetics each year. Lots of creative time of the girls are spent in beautifying themselves (Reports Global 2022 4). In this regard, Ninu Chapagain claims, “So-called beauty pageant is being run with a vested interest of not letting women to investigate interior beauty, which is a drama of showing females attractive and sustaining the oppressor’s power” (Munlyankan no. 163). Whatever the organizers claim about the event, the key motto of beauty pageant is showing the shallow appearance of women, as Bibhusan Paudyal argues, which is a rare public platform to women offered with vested interest to sell tangible goods with intangible wishes (20).

The beauty pageants are tools to colonize the mind of the oppressed. According to Hisila Yami, “Women activists have to be united and not only oppose the beauty pageant but also play role to find its root and deconstruct it” (34). As Pico Iyar states, the colonization through a culture is active now. The pop-cultural imperialism is as dangerous as direct imperialism. In the name of ‘global village’, a mass culture has appeared as, what Iyer claims, a form of the mass suicide. Applying a new form of invasion, the smart invaders keeping aside the physical imperialism are active to demolish the indigenous culture, which is now domesticated. Nepal has lost its spirituality, authenticity and globalization that has destroyed the local cultural values. For him, globalization is a muted colonization. The emergence of global village has made Nepal culturally colonized by the West (Iyer 1989). It has led to a loss of local culture, its spirituality by adaptation of new western consumerist values of the capitalist world. The beauty pageant is a tool of cool invasion, the hegemony through consent, as Gramsci indicates.
The criteria of beauty pageant is inappropriate for the indigenous aesthetics. In the Newa: culture, Guthi [Trust] is a key organization, which does not accept any forms of cultural invasion. It accepts collectivism and collective culture, which opposes individualism. The Newa: culture does not discriminate female as inferior. Women bodies are not taken as objects; though there are many areas to be revised and modified. For instance, the Kumari culture celebrates female as a goddess. The Newa: females have diverse forms of beautifying their body with jewelries like nyapu sikha [put on head], tayo, payo [neckless], makashi [ear ring] and cali [hards and legs’ rings]. They wear special Newari dress. They use colorful traditional handmade dhaka [a typical Newari clothe] shoes since the ancient time. In the past, both male and female wear the same costumes such as jama and suruwal [a typical Newari uniform]. The ancient images of god and goddesses are found in the similar dress. God Bhairab and Goddess Kali are seen in the same dress. Even their dancing images and statues are in the same dress.14

The equal treatment to male and female, or husband and wife is typical in the Newa: family. Both husband and wife use a similar degree of formality to each other. There are no hierarchical expressions to address each other. In some of the cases, women are given a higher degree of care and respect. During the misa bhu [feast], males prepare foods, serve to females, take the used plates, and do all washing and cleaning. The males bow to all females. This ritual is still alive in Khokana and other places in the Kathmandu valley. The most important thing is the property right to the Newa: women. A woman is more decisive to handling the economic management of the house. After the marriage, a Newa: woman has two homes – thagu [husband’s house] and thachhen [her own birth house]. A Newa: married woman takes both homes as equal and get an equal share as well. Agima, Asta Matrika, Guhesori and Bijesori are all these chhetrapal [protectors of places and peoples] who are goddesses. Therefore, the Newa: people first offer a dish to Agima [head goddess] and then start each feast and festival. Bhairab [a god] is treated at the second step; the goddesses are worshipped at first step of rituals. In the Khokana dance, Kumari [living goddess] is worshiped first and then Kali and then Bhairab are worshiped. The goddesses for the Newa: communities are far more powerful, intelligent and brave. Even, the role models for them are women. One of the best examples is Kirti Laxmi of Kirtipur, who fought against the Gorkha king Prithivi Narayan Shah and his army from the forefront. She never surrendered, rather fought till her death for her people and place. She was in putu lan [daura with eight ties as a symbol of Asta Matrika] disguising herself as a king; she kept the king’s death top secret and fought disguising herself as the king. She, at the end rather committed suicide but did not surrender.15 Dachhinkali Devi [a goddess] is also worshipped as the god of war.16

In a typical Newa: culture, women are not imagined slim as beautiful. They do not care for their complexion. They do not mind whether a girl or a woman is white or black skinned. For them, skills in speaking their language and performing their culture is more important. The skilled women are more beautiful. The women who handle the family and extended family members and mix up with social function with various performances in public spheres are more important. A Newa: woman can play musical instruments, dance in the streets and perform in the public places mixing with other people like the males. Such an artistically skilled woman is more beautiful. She does not

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15 Based on grey literatures
look distinct, weaker than the males. She is one actor among many others in collective performances. Her identity exists in collectivism. Both the males and females wear *kali* in their hands and *nhatcha* and *chacha* [ornaments] in their ears. They do not pierce their nose. In the ancient *Githis*, women would equally participate. In Panga Kirtipur, women are still the key actors in *Guthi* as in Khokana. During *janku*, both the male and female use the same jewels. The Machendranath chariot is pulled by women around *masimaa chahikeu* [Kamakhya roaming], which is the mother of Machhendra. While Machendranath is worshipped, *daskarma* of both males and females are performed. Adinath, Machendranath, Janabahal Machhendra, Nala Machhedra and Dolakha Machhendra have the same culture of *daskarma*, where/when both the male and female are worshipped with an equal treatment. When a baby is born either male or female, the similar sort of *pwaka lan* [Hakupatashi bhotho, that is, a typical Newari dress] is offered. In each birthday, they worship Asthamatrika, which is similar to Tibetan Buddhists.

In this scenario, can any Miss Nepal titleholders, who belonged to the Newa: community, go to their *Guthi* communities and justify the validity of the current forms of the beauty pageants? The beauty pageants are alienating the Newa: communities from our root cultural values, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Decolonizing the Mind* argues, “On a larger scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies” (28). Gramsci in *Prison Notebooks* talks about hegemony – the cultural, moral and ideological rule of an elite group over the subaltern groups, which is not only exercised through ethico-political, it also exercises the economic hegemony: the ruling group exercises hegemony through the nucleus of economic activity based on coercion and consent. Predominance gained by consent is a hegemonic status established by a common worldview. Therefore, for Gramsci, “Among the subaltern groups, one will exercise or tend to exercise a certain hegemony…” (53), and hegemony involves not only political matters, but it also uses cultural norms; domination is maintained through cultural means including socio-economic activities. Through the use of English language and mass media, the expansion of foreign companies and foreign market with franchising and globalization, the beauty pageants are proliferating. As Thiong’o believes, amidst this wasteland which it has created, imperialism presents itself as the cure and demands that the dependent ones sing the hymns of praise with the constant refrain: ‘Theft is holy’.

**Conclusion**

The beauty pageants are modern tools of hegemony through consent. Presenting cosmetic images of the beauty, such pageants are colonizing the mind of the common mass. The Miss Nepal beauty pageant, therefore, has drawn the ceaseless controversies and contestations including violent street demonstrations. The leftist groups of women activists including the civil society members are opposing the beauty pageants. They view that beauty pageants are oppressive tools of consumerist culture. This paper attempts to analyze the Miss Nepal beauty pageant discourse from the indigenous aesthetics approach. Majority of the organizing team members since inception of the Miss Nepal beauty pageant, nine out of ten, are belonged to the Newa: community of the Kathmandu Valley. Majority of Miss Nepal titleholders are also from the Newa: community. The paradox is that the indigenous Newa: aesthetics does not fit to the aesthetics of the Miss Nepal beauty pageant. The indigenous aesthetics approach is more applicable to critique the Miss Nepal beauty pageant discourse. Counter-hegemonic consciousness lies in the root of the cultural aesthetics of the indigenous communities.

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Ibid

*SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities* Volume 5, No. 1, February 2023 [pp. 1-15]
like Newa: indigenous aesthetics. Decolonizing the mind of the common mass is possible via the protection and promotion of the root culture of indigenous aestheticism.

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