



PUTERI MUSLIMAH INDONESIA: NEW FORMS OF OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN BODIES IN BEAUTY PAGEANT

Fatkhu Rohmatin

Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia
E-mail: fatkhurohmatin2@student.uns.ac.id,

Sri Kusumo Habsari

Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia
E-mail: skhabsari@staff.uns.ac.id

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Abstract

This paper discusses the new objectification of women bodies in the beauty pageant Puteri Muslimah Indonesia. It proposes to explore that the pageant "Puteri Muslimah Indonesia" continues to serve the consumptive culture raised by capitalism, despite its dedication and concern to promote Islamic values. This paper wants to argue the ambivalence of this pageant which in some way still glorifies the idea that women bodies as the object of gaze through the presentation of the beautiful display of the contestants with bold makeup, high heels, ideal body, glamorous gowns and ornamented hijab, despite the requirements to have some qualities of Islamic values and elements to be able to join the competition.

Keywords: *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia; Objectification; Women Bodies; Beauty Pageant*

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of beauty pageants and the glorification of the winners attract many young women to participate in the competition. Many young women who join the contest are rarely aware of the history of beauty pageants that it was initially designed to function as a reminder that women's bodies are restricted by the measuring tape and the judge's approval of their physicality. Although there are competitions based on other forms of talent, the overarching message is that the female body is valued from the physical body (Nur, 2015).

Some feminists disagree with this contest. Valenti (2007) for example, has stated that women should be taught to value their intelligence and abilities instead of just valuing themselves to look sexy in bikinis and making themselves an object of the male gaze. Another researcher, Wright (2017) has also argued that the evolution of pageantry swimsuit contest from a one-piece bathing suit, to a two-piece, then evolved into a bikini is a perfect example of how society continues to expose and objectify women bodies for capital ends and a great example of the male gaze. Similarly, Hester (2014) also dislikes beauty contests because of the use of females as sexualized objects in ways that benefit men's desires.

Protests to the beauty pageant and the controversy to the organization of the contest are not recent. On September 7, 1968, the second-wave feminists that consisted of nearly 400 women protested the Miss America Pageant outside the Atlantic City Convention Center (Thornham, 2006). The group protested the pageant's promotion of the ludicrous beauty standards. Despite many protests arisen, beauty pageants continue to be organized and take in many forms to meet public responses.

The rise of beauty pageants in Indonesia is also accompanied by many protests that have sprung up. Some Indonesians criticize the beauty queen contests that are identical to bathing beauty which is not in by with the Eastern culture. Due to many controversies that emerged, in the 1970s and 1980s the Indonesian government imposed the ban and the delivery of Indonesian women to the international arena (Amini, 2013). Protests until the big demo re-emerged in 2013 when Indonesia had the honor to host the Miss World 2013. Because of the protest, the venue that originally in Jakarta should be moved to Bali to avoid mass riots (VOAIndonesia, 2013).

In the same year, 2013, Indonesia also held a beauty contest devoted to Muslim women 'Miss World Muslimah'. Not only dressed in headscarves and floor-length dresses, but contestants must also have the ability to recite Al-Qur'an and apply Islamic values in everyday life. Irawan, a spokeswoman for Miss World Muslimah 2013, claims that "we do not exploit women, but we want to show that Islamic women are talented, skillful, and we hope to be a good example for other Muslim women" (BBCIndonesia, 2013). In contrast to the implementation of Miss World 2013 which is rejected by some Islamic groups, beauty contests devoted to Muslim women do relatively not cause any noise. This indicates that the Miss World Muslimah beauty contest is more acceptable to the majority Muslim community of Indonesia (CNN, 2013). This form of acceptance can be seen by holding a national beauty contest with a national scale in 2014 in Indonesia, namely *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia* (Miss Muslimah Indonesia). Beauty contests that are devoted to Muslim women are held every year and broadcast by a national-scale television station, Indosiar. This further reinforces the reach of acceptance of Indonesian society, especially Muslims against beauty contests that are claimed to be based on Islam.

Despite the public acceptance of the beauty contest, *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia* questions arise whether this contest is free from the objectification of women's body or they are presented in other forms in response to the controversies. Another consideration that needs to evaluate is aspects that bring about public, both contestants and Muslim audiences to accept the celebration of the female Muslim body on stage as a public performance. This article purposes to explore how the contest constructs particular norms of femininity to resonate with Islamic ideologies of the female Muslim body which has to be displayed publicly. It is also to scrutinize how the pageant resolves the contradiction with the values of capitalism. Developed from Nussbaum's theory of objectification, this study attempts to argue that although there are many requirements to join the competition that in some way all are Islamic in ideas and values, *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia* is still a beauty contest which some way continues to engage with dominant norms of femininity and comprise with commercially driven popular Islam.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed using a qualitative research model with a case study method. This is because the object of study is in the form of an opinion or perspective that does not require numerical variable values and factual data. Meanwhile, the object of study requires deep questions to not only answer what is happening but also why it's happening. Researchers obtained data from the site www.vidio.com. The data consists of 4 (four) supporting videos and 1 (one) main video with a duration ranging from two to four hours. The data that has been collected is then analyzed using the semiotic analysis technique of Roland Barthes. If Saussure uses the terms signified and signifier, Barthes uses the term's connotation and denotation to provide a meaning (Barthes, 1967). Both terms are used by Barthes to describe the level of representation or level of meaning (Chandler, 2002). Barthes affirms that the relationship between the signifier signified and myth by stretching out a difference and distance between denotation and connotation (Strinati, 2004). In the connotative meaning, the existing data is seen and interpreted from the point of view of feminism and pop culture by using the Nussbaum model of objectification theory.

RESULT

Objectification of Women Body in *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia*

To show that there are elements of objectification utilized in the beauty contest *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia*, this study applies Nussbaum's seven notions of treating a person as an object. However, to evaluate the possible element of objectification, she does not mention to use all 7 notions for evaluation to confirm that there is a form of objectification. Nussbaum also avoids providing a straightforward statement, whether we can treat each of these seven features as sufficient for the objectification of persons in some cases. She stresses the idea that the elements of the objectification are morally problematic, contextually evaluated. Treating a person in one of the seven notions on her lists can be sufficient for objectifying that person, whereas in other cases it cannot. However, in the case of a person's objectification, usually, it plays more than one of these seven features (Nussbaum, 1995). In this study, it is mainly to look at whether the contestants are treated as an object, which neglects their subjectivity as a human being.

The first notion offered by Nussbaum is in terms of instrumentality: it evaluates whether the subject, in this case, is the owner of the show and all parties involved treat the contestants as a tool for their purposes. Looking at the number of sponsors supporting the performances of the contestants, it is difficult to say that there is no element of instrumentality, although it is hidden behind the euphoria of worthy of respect gained by the contestants. For example, for the Muslim community, according to Yenny Wahid the contestants are made as peaceful Islamic ambassadors and are required to contribute with softness, beauty, and good morals to represent the true Islam of Indonesia (In Wulandari, 2015). Besides, the contestants are also asked to serve as a model to promote various products. Products that are marketed quite a lot, as many as the number of sponsors behind this beauty contest, such as cosmetic products, fashion (ranging from high heel, dress or gown, and hijab/veil), tools related to Muslim prayer activities such as *mukena* (white long curbed dress for praying), and so on. For the mass media, this pageant program is a substantial profit contributor. This can be seen from the number of ratings and share reached 3.7 / 16.7 (Karibo, 2016). The acquisition of this number can be quite high when compared with other similar programs. Unlike, other beauty contests which somehow produce controversial issues, the Muslim beauty contest event is claimed not to show or exploit the female body. Not only

does this beauty contest serve the dominant opinion of the need to carry out the Indonesian morality of the acceptance of public display, but it also brings the values of religion. Because of this high rating, it is not surprising that this beauty contest is held regularly starting in 2014, and in 2018 the organizer begins to expand its scope, not only on a national scale but covering the Asia region by holding *Puteri Muslimah Asia* (Anindyakirana, 2018). Based on this phenomenon it is clear that women, in this case, the beauty pageant contestants are a tool to boost the television media profits. For the audience, both men and women, the beautiful performances of the contestants with beautiful dresses, attractive makeup, and elegant gait are considered an interesting spectacle to gain public attention to watch. This can also be interpreted as that the contestants serve as a tool to meet the pleasure and object of the female and male gaze.

The second notion is to find out the element of denial autonomy of the contestants. It is the purpose to determine whether there is an element of autonomy or self-determination of the contestants. Hesse-Biber (1997) claims that as long as women viewed their bodies as an object, the mere controllable and profitable. While women are essentially controlled by the expectations to conform to societal standards, women ironically report heightened feelings of control over their body upon achieving the thin ideal, as well as a sense of control in their ability to lure a man through attractiveness (Gilligan, 1982; Piran & Cormier, 2005; Tolman 1997). However, in the case of Puteri Muslimah Indonesia Pageant, for the owner of the show and all parties involved, the contestants are mere as an object. The subjects are the owner of the show, the sponsors of the show, and can be the audience because all of them are the holder of the determination of the winner. They are the controllers of all aspects that the contestants should embrace to join this event. For example, by becoming a contestant of *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia*, the type of makeup they put on, the model of clothes they wear, the shape and size of the high heels, and their hijab models are determined by the subjects behind the event. Not only the accessories to enhance their look but even they also control the way they walk, talk, and smile. This can be seen from how the contestants were quarantined before appearing on television screens on the final night. In the quarantine, the contestants are trained in various classes, such as beauty classes, catwalk or modeling classes, acting classes, and so on (Liputan6, 2016). Contestants are not permitted to violate any rules set by the organizer if they do not wish to be disqualified. This is where the contestants lose autonomy over themselves. By registering to be a contestant of this beautiful event, they surrender to the owner of the program, and essentially, they lose their autonomy and self-determination to others, in this case to the subjects behind this event.

Nussbaum also offers the idea of inertness to identify the elements of lacking in agency and activity. In relation to the contest, it seems there is an ambiguity between the requirement to join the contest and the reality of how women are positioned in this contest. Although this pageant requires the contestants having some qualities, which in some way these qualities are against the idea of inertness, in their performance during the contest they are presented as an inertness figure. The subject considers the object, in this case, the beauty pageant contestants as sluggish in terms of intelligence and ability. The myth that women have the power to control their circumstances by deception their feminine wiles, rather than with brains, talents, and perseverance, has been playing crossroads of beauty pageants (Anuakan, 2004). Therefore, to cover this inertness, it highlights aspects of the appearances and beauty of the contestants. The inertness and inactivity of the female body are signified through the use of high heel, long dangling glamor gown, bold makeup, and stylistic hijab models, which all are accessories hindering body movements. However, this form of repression is softened through discourses that all are to support the quality of women's grace.

A combination of the use of elements that support the appearance, in fact, limits women's space.

The fourth attitude is the notion of fungibility, which could be assumed as objectifying the contestants. It is to identify whether the contestants are considered as interchangeable with other objects of the same type or with objects of other types. To employ this notion to the contestants, it should notice their independence in one to another. It is difficult to deny that the owner of the show and the sponsors are the absolute subjects to reach their means (Papadaki, 2012). They determine the taste, behind the argument of market or audiences' demand. A beauty contest is a big show which attracts a lot of sponsors. Sponsors consider that contestants can be representative of their products. Sponsors support contestants with luxurious accessories for their performance in an exchange that contestants should only consent with the requirements as dictated by the show. However, all requirements look pleasant and wonderful for the contestants, which leads them to neglect their subjectivity. They happily exchange their subjective self with the product promoted as it is considered as a compliment for being a contestant. Thus, it raises a question of the interchangeable of the contestants and the products (Ibid).

Another dimension of objectification which quite difficult to evaluate is to identify the element of treating the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, or in other words that it is permissible to break up, smash and break into (Nussbaum, 1995; Papadaki, 2012). Evaluating the position of the contestants who should perform under required rules determined by the sponsors of the program, some contestants are aware that in that show she becomes the product representative of the sponsors. All accessories for their performance are from the sponsors. Although they could not be loyal to the products or the brands they represent on the show: they can break up from the products and use other products, subconsciously they feel that they look more stunning wearing these products. After the show, they continue to use the same accessories, although from different brands. So, the integrity of the contestants is questionable, because of the high possibility of the violability of the contestants to the brands/products represented during the show.

The sixth notion developed by Nussbaum is morally problematic because it is to identify the element of treating a person as an object owned by another and possibly to be sold and bought. Applying this notion to the show requires to read all scenes of the contest symbolically. Once the contestants perform on the stage, they symbolically have been transforming themselves as the object of the gaze of the judges and the audiences. They should suppress their individuality and subjectivity and willingly surrender to gain attention and rewards. The idea of buying and selling in the show is constructed as a false consciousness of gaining a reward if they are able to construct themselves as an attraction of the show. Meanwhile, the audiences are the buyers who judge them, choose which one is the best from their perspective, and drop their choice on one of the contestants as the best among the others. This process is not much different from the idea of buying and selling. The seller displays the best of the merchandise, while the buyer buys the best goods meeting with their taste. So, in other words, when someone decides to join the beauty pageant contest, she subconsciously allows herself owned by another party, especially during the contest.

The last notion as argued by Nussbaum is finding out the elements of denial of subjectivity (Nussbaum, 1995; Papadaki, 2012). Again, it is also morally problematic. However, when this notion is applied to the contest: asking the contestants of whether the owner of the show does not take into account their experience and feeling, their answers substantially represent their false consciousness of their docile bodies. In line with feminist

scholars who consider that beauty pageants reproduce dominant norms of femininity in the forms of a spectacle of the show, this study also finds out that *Putri Muslimah Indonesia* attempts to embrace these values although they are negotiated to meet the values of popular Islam. Although their body is covered, their beauty is still accentuated to produce the spectacle of the show. For some contestants, their performances can be considered as the denial of their subjectivity as Muslim women. Their personalities as Muslims are neglected and they are products being judged and evaluated.

Beauty Standard and Naturalizing of Objectification

Naturalization of the objectification process occurs when women agree on the beauty standards established and disseminated by the mass media, then control and treat their bodies to conform to those standards. To meet these standards of beauty, women subconsciously imagine themselves to prepare as the object of the gaze, which unfortunately is one of the elements of objectification, although it is self-objectification. Self-objectification occurs when individuals perceive and treat their bodies as visible objects which continuously need surveillance (McKinley, 2011; McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

Several studies have presented that media are a primary source of self-objectification (Calogero, et al., 2005). The pervasiveness of the media makes it very challenging for most women to avoid evaluating themselves against the projected socio-cultural standard of beauty. These images support amongst most women the message that 'you're not good enough' (Milkie, 1999). Thompson & Coovert (1998) argues that most companies that target women in the media actually attempt to foster social comparison with idealized images, to motivate women to buy the product that will bring them closer to the ideal (fashion, cosmetic, high heel, healthy food product, etc.).

In the contest of *Putri Muslimah Indonesia*, the naturalization of the objectification process can be seen in how the contestants are displayed on the television screen. Their appearance is designed as attractive as possible in accordance with the beauty standards that are reinforced through a set of discourses by the media. Representation of beauty standard discourse in this contest of *Putri Muslimah Indonesia* can be described as follows:

a. Body Ideal

The objectification of the women's body of *Putri Muslimah Indonesia* is evident from the requirements for the contestants. Among the requirements that tend to lead to the objectification of the female body are: the contestant must have a minimum height of 165 cm. In addition, contestants should also look attractive and beautiful. On the registration form, it is also included columns of shirt size, size T-shirt, chest circumference, pants size, weight, hip circumference, waist circumference, and shoe size. All the terms mentioned are more likely for the contestant's physical judgment. This certainly makes women who do not meet the ideal criteria required by pageantry to feel low self-esteem. Poorani (2012) states that society values thinness; slim bodies are regarded as beautiful ones and overweight is seen as disgusting.

In pageantry like *Putri Muslimah Indonesia*, capitalists have been able to sell any product to consumers through a tall, thin, fair, and beautiful model. Capitalist has shown to be successful in selling the tallness, thinness, fairness, and attractiveness to women irrespectively of the age factor, social-cultural set up, and income level (Poorani, 2012). The women consumers may not have necessarily bought every product or brand that they

come across but various studies prove that they have unconsciously bought the idea of body ideals, faithfully internalizing them through the exposure to media images. The objectification of the female body in the beauty contest *Puteri Muslim Indonesia* is more inclined towards the discipline of the female body by capitalist through the formation of beauty and body ideal discourse, rather than towards the pornography and exploitation of the female body (Kant, 1963).

b. Fashion (glamour gown and hijab style)

Women are also celebrated to self-objectify when they choose clothes for fashion over comfort (Tiggemann & Andrew, 2012). In pageantry, such as *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia*, generally, women choose to dress provocatively in order to get attention. This can be seen from the selection of evening gowns that tend to be glamorous and glittering. In addition, wearing a long dangling dress make women's movement limited, and this situation is further exacerbated by high heel wear. But all these difficulties seem to be naturalized. For the sake of gaining status, identity, and recognition, pageantry contestants favor fashion rather than a comfortable dress. The fashion industry makes women subject to consumerism. Fashion in the case performs as a tool of serving women's bodies as commodities to the capitalist. Behind every beauty contest, there will always be a fashion industry masterminded by famous designers. This is where capitalism flutters with thrusting a discourse 'you have to consume fashion if you want to look pretty ideal like the pageantry contestants', because actually when you buy clothes you buy identity (Easey 2009; Craik, 2009; Kaiser et al, 2001; dan Tungate, 2008). A number of studies have examined that dressing can be an act of making the self-available to others, not only for appreciation and admiration but also for objectification, clothing or dress fashion reflect the self, the identity, the material practice we engage within everyday life (Lynch, 2007; Woodward, 2008).

c. Makeup

Makeup or cosmetic is one of the most popular tools used by women to enhance their facial attractiveness. Make-up might be used as a mask, able to manipulate facial features in order to present one's own positive image to others (Robertson, et al., 2008; Puvia, 2011). Meanwhile, Jeffreys (2005) suggests that wearing makeup is an important way that a woman takes care of herself, rather than simply an aesthetic choice.

In addition to dealing with the physical appearance of women, makeup is also closely related to an awareness of the aging process. The mass media is one of the main sources through which the negative representations of old age are delivered. Media and society represent old age is not only undesirable but also fact evil. In the beauty pageant, including *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia*, a negative representation of old age can be seen with the age restriction for the contestants of the age of 17-25 years (the young age). This range enforces young femininity in the industry and contributes to the image of ideal beauty as young and vulnerable. As aging be a concern, makeup offers a solution to overcome aging and related anxiety. Ads, websites, and beauty events legitimize aging as medical condition arguments to increase the sale of anti-aging products. No wonder if behind every beauty pageant contest there is always a certain cosmetic product as a sponsor. The makeup industry is so successful in its ability to monopolize the disease of aging using the message "aging is your fault and we've got the cure" (Crary, 2011).

Makeup is always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing racial, class, and other differences and insisting that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal (Bordo, 1989). From this viewpoint, makeup finally serves to discipline the female body by providing products and practices for women to use in order to squeeze themselves into the narrow boundaries in which female bodies are expected to exist (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). This suggests that makeup implies that the female body needs to be transformed, controlled, normalized, and disciplined since the natural female body is unacceptable, ugly, and out of control.

d. High heel

Puteri Muslimah Indonesia, as a beauty pageant in general, adopts a catwalk as one component of the assessment. Meanwhile, the catwalk is not quite far from the use of high heels. According to Komarudin (2017) expression of the finalists of *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia* while walking on the catwalk shows their character and personality. Meanwhile, make a natural expression without the impression imposed on the catwalk is not easy, because it requires training. The question is, is this for empowering or oppression? Is this pain or choice? So, why women want to wear heels? In fact, there's no relationship between wearing high heels and women's power. Women still wear high heels, although they are painful, inhibiting, and definitely do not make her better at the job, the feeling of power that comes with having a few inches over everyone else is probably a cause of their popularity. The desire to wear heels is about wanting to perform femininity. The currency of feminine power is in sexuality and attractiveness. Feeling attractive equates to a feeling of power. The more attractive you are, the more mating opportunities you potentially have. Maybe, women do not need high heels to empower them; they need equal work opportunities as they do not trap them in social conventions (ILO, 2017).

Consequences of Objectification

According to Nussbaum (1995), the objectification of human beings can be either negative or positive, depending on how it affects this individual's humanity. Humanity is what distinguishes human beings from inanimate objects and animals. Nussbaum argued that objectification is of a negative kind if the objectified individual's humanity is denied, in the sense of not being properly acknowledged or respected when they are treated as an object. Then, objectification is of a positive kind if the objectified individual's humanity is properly acknowledged, respected, and even promoted when they are treated as an object.

While beauty pageants are seen by others as an avenue of developing one's self-esteem, making contestants more popular as well as creating connections for them to get future jobs with companies through promotion, we suggest that beauty pageant is fraud against women. Women are shown to have power and subjectivity upon themselves, but in reality, it is precisely the objectification of the women. The integrity and power over themselves are taken away. The contest featured a celebration issue of the beauty of a Muslim woman through the existence of a disciplined female body. A subtle body discipline with status and prestige rewards.

Frederickson and Roberts (1997) have argued that the objectified body and continual attempts to improve one's body heightens female insecurity and body dissatisfaction, where comparisons rivalry and competition are often made with other women. Because of objectification, women become obsessed with controlling, monitoring, and improving their

bodies. Women are so busy trying to control their bodies through dieting, excessive exercise, and self-improvement activities; they lose control over other important sides of selfhood that might challenge the status quo.

Women's body is a fetish object bordered with the symbols of desire, not only men but also women search the market with the same gaze; ironically women are both consumers and consumed. The consumer culture wants to believe that the 'good look' of the outer body is depended on the good maintenance of the inner body. Consumer society wants individuals to love their bodies and learn to get the highest pleasures from them. The market makes two dimensions of discourse. One is imposing women that their bodies are not good looking and the other is, by consuming new goods, their bodies can be desired and liberated ones. The only drive that is really liberated is the 'drive to buy' consumer culture wants us to believe the magic of purchasing goods. Feminist media theorists state that women with the help of feminism got rid of oppressive feminine roles but they could not rid themselves of a feminine image that oppresses women as consumers as well as workers of consumer culture (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995; Kilbourne, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Through Nussbaum's objective paradigm, the phenomenon of the *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia* contest can be said to contain objectification of the female body. The objectification is not always synonymous with sexual and pornography as Kant's opinion. However, objectification can also occur when subjects treat objects as tools to get purposes, denial of autonomy, lacking in agency (inertness), interchangeable (fungibility), lacking in boundary-integrity (violability), as something that is owned and denial of subjectivity. The seven aspects offered by Nussbaum can be found in the beauty contest of *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia*. From this it can be drawn a new paradigm that although many claim that the beauty contest does not exploit women's bodies, the process of objectification remains to be found. So, the holding of the contest of *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia* does not mean to break the process of women objectification. This is precisely the beginning of the emergence of objectification in a new form.

However, the objectification process in *Puteri Muslimah Indonesia* is naturalized by the spreading of beauty standard discourse conducted by fashion and cosmetic industry through television media channel. To meet this beauty standard, women then do self-objectification by controlling and forming their own body to fit the standard. Self-objectification encourages the culture of women's consumption of beauty products to cover up their physical ugliness.

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