OMIGAWD, THAT'S SO COCO!:

A Postcolonial Analysis of the Miss Singapore/Universe Pageant 2001

by

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Introduction

The Miss Singapore/Universe 2001 pageant was held on 3 March in order to select a winner to represent the nation at the Miss Universe pageant in Puerto Rico in May 2001. This year marks the first time ever that the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant is organised by national broadcaster Mediacorp TV and telecast 'live' to home audiences. Although Singapore has been sending representatives to the Miss Universe pageant since 1966, previous Miss Singapore/Universe contests have been small-scale affairs with little publicity. In a way, this year's pageant is the first one that can be regarded as truly 'national.'

Beauty pageants, like the Miss Singapore/Universe contest, put gender norms- typically, idealised notions of femininity- on stage in a competition which awards the winner the 'royal' title (of a beauty queen) and a crown. Yet beauty pageants are not just about beauty or femininity or even competition. Issues surrounding the beauty pageant may not even be related to the pageant itself, but are related instead to the larger political, economic, cultural etc. concerns of the nation. By choosing an individual whose deportment and bearing embodies the values and goals of a nation, beauty pageants expose these very values and goals to interpretation and challenge. This sort of opening and rupture happens, as we will see later, when local opinions diverge over who should win and why; who should be regarded as 'worthy' enough to represent the nation at the international pageant. In this essay, I will examine the events surrounding the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant and the

debates which took place after the pageant. I argue that the pageant offers a glimpse into the constantly changing and always-complicated stories of Singapore itself. Some of the pertinent questions which I will ask are: How are social concerns mediated in and through women's bodies on a public stage? What are the social and cultural conditions through which particular kinds of representations can occur? etc. However, in seeking to find some answers to these questions, I will not ask why women participate in beauty pageants. Instead, I offer a postcolonial reading of the pageant and the debates surrounding it. By 'postcolonial reading' (sometimes called 'postcolonial criticism'), I am referring to a "set of reading practices… preoccupied principally with analysis of cultural forms which mediate, challenge or reflect upon relations of domination or subordination- economic, cultural and political- between (and often within) nations, races or cultures, which characteristically have their roots in the history of modern European colonialism and imperialism and which… continue to be apparent in the present era of neo-colonialism" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997:12).

Let me firstly make some preliminary comments about the beauty pageant with regards to the definition of 'postcolonial criticism' above. In 1982, a Peruvian film-makers union, Grupo Chaski, produced a documentary entitled "Miss Universe in Peru", which juxtaposes the production of the Miss Universe pageant, held in Lima that year, and the material, cultural and political lives of women in Peru. The point of the whole documentary is to criticise the pageant as being a form of American cultural imperialism. A typical cinematic technique adopted is to juxtapose billboards advertising American products such as Coca-Cola with camera shots of women and children struggling to make ends meet on the streets of Lima. As one pageant critic in the documentary commented, "Transnationals have a worldwide forum to advertise their products- all under the pretext of selecting the most beautiful woman in the world" (Women Make Movies Inc., 1982). This assessment of the pageant is valid to a large extent- but it is only part of the whole picture. Although the beauty pageant is originally a Western entertainment genre and carries with it economic and cultural values, I argue that these values are not simply imposed onto the non-West. To view the non-West as unquestioningly adopting Western cultural forms would be to rob the non-West of its agency in reinterpreting, contesting and reworking those Western cultural meanings.

My stand with regards to the beauty pageant is reflective of my take on the on-going debates about postcolonialism. In my judgement, while we should attend to the power of Western narratives, we should also not overlook of the ability of the non-West to subvert, resist, challenge or even reaffirm Western discourses. By keeping these two ideas in constant tension, we are able to explore the possibility that the West is not just the producer of ideas and that the non-West is not just a passive recipient. More importantly, we will also be able to think of new forms of relationships between the West and the non-West than just that of a dichotomous one. By viewing the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant as a site of contestation and negotiation (of the local and global, national and international, West and non-West), this essay will reflect on some of these pertinent issues of postcolonialism.

Background: The Miss Universe Pageant

I begin my investigation by providing some information as well as the important debates about the Miss Universe pageant. The Miss Universe pageant was started in 1951 by Madison Square Gardens Inc. in the United States. The pageant is dominated by major corporate sponsorship arrangement with close ties to media empires: presently, the Miss Universe pageant attracts contestants from over eighty nations, and its festivities are telecast 'live' via satellite with an estimated audience of 800 million to one billion people (Miss Universe website, 2001). Each year, the winner of the Miss Universe crown will become an ambassador for Miss Universe Inc. as well as a campaigner for Aids awareness. Banet-Weiser argues that the concept of the ideal woman ('Miss Universe') which the pageant promotes is based on a Westernised concept of femininity- she must possess 'beauty' and 'intelligence' as measured by American yardsticks (Banet-Weiser, 1999:8). Also important to this idealised femininity is a sense of civility and compassion- contestants for the Miss Universe crown are usually expected to speak about social issues such as poverty, children's welfare, education etc.

The Miss Universe pageant categorises individuals from various participating nations into competing yet mutually affirming representations of what could be called the global 'feminine.' Malkki likens the pageant to the Olympic Games, as both events have their own sets of cultural meanings and regulations concerning what it means to belong to an

international family (Malkki, 1994:42). Key to the success of the romantic vision of the 'local' (participants are individuals who are competing against one another) and the 'global' (competing participants are at the same time reaffirming one harmonious, unitary 'feminine') is the active reliance on the rhetorics of liberalism, where the pageant is seen as a level playing field for all contestants (Banet-Weiser, 1999). This idealised concept of equality is also invoked through the discourse of diversity, where each contestant represents a particular nation and the nation's commitment to join the imagined international community, the 'family of nations.' This leads Malkki to call international beauty pageants a "ritualised and institutionalised evocation of a common humanity" (Malkki, 1994:51).

Although non-Western nations and heritages are clearly supported in terms of their participation in the pageant, the structural and ideological basis of the pageant remains firmly embedded in Western values and histories. Banet-Weiser (1999) and Cohen et. al. (1996) argue that the largely US-sponsored Miss Universe pageant has frequently been depicted as global showcases for American products and its participants as being constructed according to American norms and standards. National pageants (for example, the Miss Singapore/ Universe pageant) are portrayed as embracing similar values. Similarly, in her study of the Miss Universe 1992 pageant in Thailand, Van Esterik argues that the structure of international beauty competitions is a conduit for proliferating Western styles, values and expectations (Van Esterik, 1996 and 2000). However, it must be emphasized that both Banet-Weiser and Van Esterik also highlight contrasts among local and globalised notions of beauty and identify the local conditions which enable global styles to be resisted and contested.

I take inspiration from both Banet-Weiser and Van Esterik's assessment of the Miss Universe pageant. While on the one hand, we must focus on the organising structure of Western imperialism, we must also, on the other, attend to the complex nature of pageants in which they become a showcase of important issues in the nation. As such, the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant cannot simply be understood as the product of meta-narratives such as Westernisation, globalisation or global capitalism. Instead, we should examine local meanings related to femininity and nationalism while also attending to the interaction of those processes with global forces. In order words, I see the Miss Singapore/Universe

pageant as a local adaptation, a refashioning of a dominant cultural form to the particular needs of representation within the Singapore society.

Contextualising The Miss Singapore/Universe 2001 Pageant

The rationale behind national broadcaster Mediacorp TV's decision to organise the pageant is that since Miss Singapore would represent the nation at an international competition, it is only logical that the pageant be made a 'national' one instead of remaining an obscure small-scale one. Singapore's participation in the Miss Universe competition can be interpreted as an eagerness to be embraced as part of the international 'family of nations.' Since the nation attained independence in 1965, taking part in international events such as the Miss Universe pageant and the Olympics has always been deemed important for its own sake as that participation becomes a way in which Singapore can be recognised as a sovereign nation. As Borland puts it in her study of a Nicaraguan beauty pageant, "For new nations of the [non-West]… organising a beauty contest now often functions as a badge of civilised, modern status" (Borland, 1996). Accepting Western cultural values such as the beauty pageant is hegemonic because it sets up the West as the reference point to which the non-West compares itself and judges its own worth and achievement. This posits a relationship in which the West becomes the superior partner, constantly to be emulated.

While we need to recognise the hegemony in the acceptance of Western cultural values, we also need to take into account the ways in which Singapore attempts to bend the pageant as a means to achieve its own goals and objectives. It should be noted that while Singapore's participation in the Miss Universe pageant has previously been for the sake of participating, there has been a change of attitude recently. The state has been increasingly emphasizing the importance of performing well in international events, as it is believed that such achievements by Singaporeans can stir nationalistic sentiments of fellow Singaporeans. In sports, for example, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has encouraged the nation's athletes to 'go for gold' at the Olympics. He has also challenged the Singapore soccer team to qualify for the World Cup finals in the year 2010. This attitude is similarly reflected in the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant. By organising the pageant on national TV and offering attractive prizes to the eventual winner (a $10,000 prize money as well as a contract to

become an artiste with the company), Mediacorp TV hoped that the contest could attract better representatives than previous years and improve Singapore's performance at the Miss Universe pageant. (It is a well-known fact that the nation's beauty queens have a poor record at the Miss Universe pageant; in fact, only two representatives have ever made it to the semi-finals stage of the competition- in 1983 and 1987). In a pre-finals TV segment, Mediacorp TV announced that it was extremely impressed with the calibre of the girls who made it to the pageant finals, declaring the contestants to be 'the best batch of girls ever' in the history of the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant. Mediacorp TV's statement gave the impression that the strategy of staging the pageant on national TV in order to lure 'the best Singaporean girls' to participate was successful and that it was a positive step towards improving Singapore's performance at the Miss Universe pageant.

It should be noted that organising a beauty pageant would seem out of line with Singapore's typically pragmatic and practical outlook towards things. Singapore has consistently shown a preference for activities which are deemed beneficial to the country's economy such as information technology, education, communications infrastructure etc.- activities which could help the nation attain the status of a 'world class' economy. In contrast, the beauty pageant seems like a trivial- frivolous, even- affair for the nation to engage in. For us to understand the rationale behind the organisation of the Miss Singapore/ Universe pageant, we must attend to the recent changes in the state's vision of the future. While still firmly committed to building a 'world class' economy, the state has realised the importance of building up the nation's 'soft environment'- or the desirability of the nation as a place to live in. According to Prime Minister Goh, "Singapore should be a fun place to live. People laugh at us for promoting fun so seriously. But having fun is important. If Singapore is a dull, boring place, not only will talent not want to come here, but even Singaporeans will begin to feel restless" (Goh, 1999).Thus, the state's project of transforming Singapore into a fun city is hardly a frivolous affair; in fact, it is a serious undertaking aimed to attract foreign talent into the nation and to halt the 'brain drain', or the exodus of talented Singaporeans overseas. In order to develop a fun city, the state has been actively promoting various 'fun' activities in the arena of sports (for instance, the push to host more international sporting events), the arts (for instance, planning for the development of a Renaissance City), and entertainment (for example, developing better quality TV

programmes). The Miss Singapore/ Universe pageant, therefore, is part of the commitment to have more entertainment in order to develop the fun city.

The Pageant and Subsequent Debates

As an advertising campaign for the actual pageant itself, Mediacorp aired a pre-finals TV showcase which introduced the contestants to home audiences. Interestingly, most of the contestants did not fit into the image of the beauty queen which is based on the Western model of femininity. I have argued earlier that apart from beauty and intelligence, the ideal woman ('Miss Universe') is expected to possess civility and compassion. However, most of the Miss Singapore/Universe contestants did not outwardly exhibit those values. For instance, to the question, "Why did you participate in the pageant?" some of the answers included, "I want attention. I want people to look at me"; "I want to use this as a platform to get into the broadcasting industry"; "I just want to try out to build my self-confidence"; and "this pageant can serve as a stepping stone for my future careers." Although beauty queens from the West undoubtedly have the same kinds of motivation for participating in pageants, they are nevertheless aware of the qualities which they are **expected** to exhibit- that they need to portray a sense of compassion and altruism in front of the audience and make it seem that their participation is not because of a desire to fulfil their own 'selfish' ambitions (Banet-Weiser, 1999). (In a similar vein, an Indian pageant expert laments how India's beauty queens say that they want to champion women's and children's causes, and confidently cite Mother Teresa as their role model when competing in international beauty pageants, but instead promptly becoming Bollywood actresses once they win the crown. Dahlburg, 1994.) Similarly, the answers which the Miss Singapore/Universe contestants gave to the question, "What is your wish for the future?" were rather pragmatic and materialistic: "I want to own a Mercedes and a condominium"; "like all Singapore girls, I want to fly SQ. So my wish is to become a flight stewardess with Singapore Airlines"; "I hope that I will have a good career in five years' time. That is my wish for the future." Only one contestant said something vaguely altruistic (in the spirit of the 'true' beauty queen): "I would like to work with a children's aid foundation." The pre-finals TV showcase, therefore, shows that the contestants of the Miss Singapore/Universe do not just mimic Western models of

femininity, but instead represent the kind of material and practical values which the nation itself embraces.

In the pageant finals, out of the 20 women competing for the title of Miss Singapore, 15 were Chinese, 3 Indians, 1 Malay and 1 Eurasian. The multi-ethnic participation in the pageant somewhat parallels the diversity (contestants come from a multi-national and multi-cultural background) in the Miss Universe pageant itself. Thus, if the Miss Universe pageant displays diversity on a global stage which gestures towards an imagined international community, the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant similarly reflects diversity which constitutes and encompasses the imagined community of the nation. Additionally, it should be noted that the guest-of-honour at the pageant finals was the Minister for Information and the Arts, Lee Yock Suan. Lee's presence is significant as it shows that the pageant received the endorsement of the state, as represented by a Minister in its Cabinet.

The format of the pageant followed that of the Miss Universe pageant closely- there were three areas of competition: the evening wear, the swimsuit and the interview segments. The criteria used in judging the contestants was "70% beauty and 30% brains" (Khoo, 2001) but it was the lesser emphasis on 'brains' which contributed partly to the heated debates after the conclusion of the pageant. The contestants' performance in the interview segment (where their 'brains' were judged) in particular drew a lot of criticisms because the contestants were thought to be inarticulate in answering the questions posed to them. Additionally, critics opined that many of the contestants could not speak good English. Contestant Sharon Lee was one of those who were criticised. She was asked the question, "If you were stranded in a jungle, which would you choose, a handphone or a make-up kit?" Her answer, which was later condemned as insipid or 'bimbotic', was, "I would choose the handphone because I could use the radiation to help save myself." Another 'bimbo' contestant which critics pointed out was Grace Lew. She interpreted a Rorschach butterfly diagram, used in psychological tests, by complimenting its colours, "I like the orange colour because it reminds me of youth and Vitamin C. I like purple because it's... err... unique?" But it was contestant Coco Ng who later became the centre of debates and criticisms. She was asked the question, "What is the most pressing concern facing Singapore women today?" Ng was unable to give an answer for almost half-a-minute. This prompted one of the hosts of

the pageant to help her by suggesting some possible answers. Finally, after quite some time of ackward silence, Ng gave an answer about the need to juggle both career and family life as being the most pressing concern of Singapore women presently.

Harsh criticisms were hurled at the pageant contestants by the following day (4 Mar 2001). The New Paper's banner headline declared: "They couldn't even speak good English… It was terrible, horrible…" Its reporter, Yeoh Wee Teck wrote that "the most riveting thing was the appalling spoken English… All night long, I was on the edge of my seat, ears gyrating, holding my breath" (Yeoh, 2001). On 5 Mar, Project Eyeball reporter Ronald Rajan called the contestants "beauties without brains." He wrote, "Intelligence was no pre-requisite for these alleged hotties… Indeed, the first Miss Singapore Universe finals, broadcast 'live' on television, was but a showcase for the utterly stupid… So much for the search for the **epitome of Singaporean womanhood**' (Rajan, 2001. Emphasis added). Another day later, Project Eyeball reporter Serene Goh wrote a report entitled "Survival of the Dumbest." Goh cited Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection- the process of nature selecting her best adapted species to survive, reproduce and evolve: "Evidently, however, Miss Singapore/Universe contestants… hail from a mysterious genus which has somehow survived solely on looks… [The contestants were] descendants of Jurassic bimbos (*insipidious maximus*)… A more reactive response to a 'live' broadcast has not been seen since Orson Welles' War of The Worlds in 1938. Welles' fake news bulletin of a Martian invasion sent millions of Americans scurrying *a la* Chicken Little… Similarly, Singapore's panic-stricken denizens were devastated after the show" (Goh, 2001).

Apart from journalists, others who watched the pageant were also quick to air their criticisms. A member of the audience was quoted as saying that "if this is the best we have to offer, then our chances on the world stage are pretty slim." This was the most important concern of those who watched the pageant- who is actually 'worthy' enough to represent the nation at the international stage? What constitutes this 'worthiness'? Many people pointed out that those who were unable to speak good English or were unable to articulate themselves well should be deemed as the 'unworthy' ones. This attitude is evident from the following comment by one of the viewers, "We should invent a new word 'Coco' [after contestant Coco Ng] to mean stupid or bimbotic. Next time someone says something stupid,

we should say 'Omigawd, that's so Coco!' " (Project Eyeball forum page). Another person commented that, "I am seriously wondering about **the criteria of choosing someone who is 'qualified'** to be a contender for the Miss Singapore crown. I am utterly disappointed that articulation and self-confidence weren't on the top of the list. I would believe that in the opinion of many, the above mentioned personality traits are just as important as simply being beautiful" (Project Eyeball forum page, emphasis added). Additionally, "if it was just a local contest, then perhaps we would just shut up and watch, but I cringe at the thought of having a representative from our country opening her mouth to answer a question in front of an international audience." What we see in these comments is a kind of insecurity in which people feel that there is a compelling need to compare the local to some external yardstick- presumably Western, as beauty queens from the West consistently perform well in the Miss Universe pageant- and inadvertently sets the local up to be inferior and 'not good enough.' Although many people believed that most of the Miss Singapore/Universe contestants are unable to compare with beauty queens from the West, they were also quick to point out that the poor quality of the contestants should not be regarded as a reflection of the general female population in Singapore because "there are many potential Miss Singapore around, just walk along Orchard Road or Raffles Place and you'll spot plenty of them. These women, if they do decide to take part in the Miss Singapore pageant, will not only inject new life and lift the image/profile of the pageant, it will also show what **a true cosmopolitan Singapore woman** is- attractive, intelligent, graceful, and capable. Sadly, those that paraded around on Saturday nite on telly were not one of these" (Project Eyeball forum page, emphasis added). Thus, only a "true cosmopolitan Singapore woman" is deemed worthy enough to represent the nation at the international stage.

Woman = Nation

It is interesting to see the amount of controversy and criticisms surrounding the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant, considering that it is a relatively minor event in Singapore. I argue that the Miss Singapore/Universe contest is not **just** a beauty pageant, but it is an important site where ideas of femininity and nationalism become contested, and issues and tensions underlying the Singapore society get voiced. Miss Singapore is deemed to be an important person precisely because she will bear the name of the nation at the international

stage. That the woman is equated to the nation she is representing (woman = nation) necessitates the selection of a 'worthy' representative is important in order to give a 'correct' portrayal of the nation. The 1999 Miss Singapore winner, Cheryl Marie Cordeiro, opines that, "everybody else is looking at Miss Singapore, so train her well… An articulate and well-groomed woman would be an asset to the nation… The beauty pageant is a glamourised interview for an ambassador for Singapore" (Ho, 2001). Because of the 'woman = nation' equation, it becomes important for people to ask, "What kind of image of the nation do we want other people to see? What kind of image would someone like Coco Ng (a 'bimbo') give of Singapore?"

The arguments regarding the 'worthiness' of a beauty queen are linked to two important debates in Singapore. The first is the issue of Singlish (or Singapore Colloquial English). The state believes that speaking a brand of English which only Singaporeans can understand (Singlish) hinders the nation's ambition to 'go global.' According to Prime Minister Goh, "if we continue speaking Singlish, we will develop our own type of pidgin English, which the rest of the world will find **quaint** but incomprehensible. We are already halfway there. Do you want to go all the way? … We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish" (Goh, 1999. Emphasis added). Similarly, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew urges the media to "not popularise Singlish. Do not use Singlish in our television sitcoms, except in humourous bits, and ***in a way that makes people want to speak standard English***" (Lee, 1999. Emphasis added). As seen from Goh's and Lee's comments, Singlish is not the mark of a 'world-class' nation. The perception that Singlish is the 'wrong kind of English' comes about because the West is seen as a standard bearer which must be emulated. As such, the kind of English which contestant Coco Ng speaks is perceived to be "quaint", humourous in a derogatory way and should not be spoken at the international stage because it would paint a 'pejorative' (backward? not 'world class'? not modern?) image of the nation in front of other nations. Koh Tai Ann, a linguist who subscribes to the state's stand regarding Singlish, argues that "language is an instrument of thought. It's an instrument of analysis. It is an instrument whereby you obtain knowledge. Now if your language is not up to any of these functions… then you cannot perform these well" (Chua and George, 1999). Thus, according to the logic of this argument, those contestants who

speak Singlish and are inarticulate when answering questions cannot possibly be intelligent-they are necessarily 'bimbos' who are not 'worthy' to be Miss Singapore.

However, it is crucial to note that state discourses are not merely imposed onto and accepted by ordinary citizens. As much as there are those who agree with state narratives, there are also others who try to challenge and subvert them. Despite the state's efforts to discourage the use of Singlish, the language is still alive and well as many people believe that Singlish is an integral part of the Singapore identity. Similarly, there are people who defended the Miss Singapore/Universe contestants' use of Singlish. The Straits Times journalist Richard Lim wrote a report titled "Speaking up for everywoman" where he argues that beauty contestants should not be expected to speak good English. He presents statistics which show that a significant proportion of younger Singaporeans are still speaking vernacular languages at home, and therefore may not be fully comfortable in speaking English. Furthermore, he says that "many of our educated and cosmopolitan young do not realise and cannot accept, that vernacular languages continue to be the most common spoken at home." As such, it should not matter that "beauty contestants like Coco Ng were inarticulate [in English]" (Lim, 2001). Similarly, The New Paper's Edwin Yeo argues (albeit in flippant manner) that the use of Singlish in the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant or even at the Miss Universe pageant itself should not be seen as something to be ashamed of because "many international contestants speak their own language and ask for the services of a translator. Similarly, we should have a translator for the Singapore contestant so that she can just rip in Singlish. For example- Question: 'Which part of you is perfect?' Answer: '*Aiyah*, I where got perfect one. Last time in school I always *ponteng*. Some more, exam also always just pass only." Translation: No, I was never perfect. Not before, and certainly not now.' " (Yeo, 2001). Thus, just as Western discourses become challenged and reworked, state narratives are similarly contested.

The arguments about the 'worthiness' of the contestants are also related to the larger concerns of class. More specifically, it is related to the state's demarcation of the Singapore population into cosmopolitans and heartlanders. Prime Minister Goh defines the cosmopolitans as the group of people with an international outlook: "They speak English but are bilingual. They have skills that command good income- banking, IT, engineering,

science and technology… They can work and be comfortable **anywhere in the world**." On the other hand, the heartlanders "make their living **within the country**. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. They include taxi drivers, stallholders, production workers and contractors." The state, however, has emphasized that the coexistence of both groups is necessary for the maintenance of the nation. While the heartlanders are important because they "play a major role in maintaining our core values and our social stability," the cosmopolitans are valued as they "are indispensable in generating wealth in Singapore. The world is their market. Without them, Singapore cannot run as an efficient, high performance society." (Goh, 1999. Emphasis added). By referring to Prime Minister Goh's demarcation of the different roles and the allocation of different geographic locations for heartlanders and cosmopolitans, we are able to appreciate what the 'worth' of a beauty queen means. A 'worthy' Miss Singapore must be articulate in English, polished, intelligent, possess university education etc.- she must necessarily fit into the description of a cosmopolitan citizen if she is to represent the nation at the international stage. Contestant Coco Ng, however, works as a beautician at a salon, is not a graduate, is inarticulate in English and fits easily into the state's description of a heartlander. As such, she is deemed 'unworthy' to become Miss Singapore, to bear the name of the nation at the international stage because she supposedly does not embody the kind of image Singapore wants to portray to the world. Interestingly, the media has singled out Cheryl Marie Cordeiro (Miss Singapore 1999) as someone who is 'worthy' of representing Singapore at the international pageant. Her 'worthiness' is constituted largely by the fact that she holds two Masters degrees- MA in English and MSc in Information Studies- which serve as markers of intelligence, sophistication and cosmopolitanism.

From the preceding discussion, we have seen how Western values of progress and modernity become accepted and reaffirmed in defining idealised notions of the Singaporean womanhood. But this is only part of the picture. The discourse of femininity in Singapore is not just constituted by Western ideas and values, but by an interaction between Western and local ideas. As we have already seen the workings of Western ideas, we now need to attend to the workings of local ideas to complete the picture. The 'woman = nation' equation is an anomaly in Singapore because the woman or anything feminine is never seen as able to represent the nation. According to Heng and Devan, the paternalistic state engages in a

"gendered formation of power" whereby a timeless Confucian paternal essence is defined as embodying the nation, whereas women and all signs feminine are "by definition always and already anti-national" (Heng and Devan, 1995). If we follow the logic of Heng and Devan's argument, the 'woman = nation' equation, therefore, cannot possibly be accepted as a legitimate one. Although Heng and Devan's analysis about the "anti-national" position of women is based upon the Great Marriage Debate which took place in 1983, it would appear that the notion of women being potentially anti-national is still alive today. This is clearly seen in the situation of graduate women marrying late- an issue which has been identified by the state as one of the pressing 'problems' facing the nation today. This 'problem' not only further delegitimises the 'woman = nation' equation, it also reveals that the ideal Singaporean woman cannot be a 'Miss.'

If so, why would the state endorse the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant? This support was even made clear in the Parliament, where the Minister for Information and the Arts (who presided over the pageant as the guest-of-honour) defended the contestants in his parliamentary speech, "I thought the contestants did reasonably well, considering the pressure that they were under with the "live" telecast to many Singaporean viewers. However, the reports that came out blasted them for being 'beauty without brains'. This was unfounded, ungracious and unfair to the contestants" (Lee Yock Suan, Budget Debate Day 4, 9 Mar 2001). In my judgement, it appears that the state's position towards women is shifting. One evidence of this changing perception is the Prime Minister's statement that husbands are hindering women's political careers, made only a few days after the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant. Thus, it would seem that there is an increased effort on the part of the state to recognise the contribution of women, for example, the positive benefits that a 'worthy' Miss Singapore can bring to the nation. As such, this shift in the state's position enables the 'woman = nation' equation to have some legitimacy. Additionally, the preferred status of a Singapore woman as a 'Mrs.' has also become ambivalent.[1] Nominated Member of Parliament Jennifer Lee, who is a divorcee, has recently been nominated as Woman of the Year due to her outstanding performance as the chief of Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital (Mathi, 2001). Two main points should be obvious from

the foregoing discussion. Firstly, that the kinds of tensions seen in the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant come about because the discourse on femininity in Singapore is continually in flux and evolving. Secondly, that both Western and local ideas are important in shaping the discourse of femininity in Singapore (idealised notions of the Singaporean womanhood, the 'worthiness' of a beauty queen, the position of women in Singapore, the 'woman = nation' equation etc.) Rather than see the 'inside' and the 'outside' as separate forces, it is better to see how they interact and become intertwined in defining and redefining certain values and ideas in Singapore.

There are also issues surrounding the pageant which has little or nothing to do with the non-West's relationship with the West. (I regard these issues as relatively 'minor' compared to other issues discussed earlier- not because they are unimportant but that the debates surrounding the pageant largely did not take place along these lines.) One person who watched the pageant commented: "I was quite disappointed when I watched the Miss Singapore/Universe finals on TV on Saturday. I don't think we can ever do well in the Miss Universe competition with that kind of standard… In Asia, Miss India has always done well in the Miss Universe pageant. So have Miss Philippines and Miss Thailand. Even Miss Malaysia performs quite well in the Miss World pageant… If Miss Singapore can't even be compared to other Asian contestants, how can we expect her to do well at the Miss Universe pageant?" (Project Eyeball forum page). The concern of the writer is significant as it shows that factors such as regionalism (the desire to compete with others in the Southeast Asian region) are equally-important in contesting the meanings behind the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant. Another significant comment is the following, which was sent to Berita Harian by a reader: "I'm so embarrassed to see that there is actually a Malay/Muslim girl in the Miss Singapore/Universe contest… Malay youths of today no longer have any sense of shame… Such behaviour of parading on stage with skimpy outfit is really embarrassing to our community" (Berita Harian forum page, translation mine).[2] That

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[1] Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the state is still very concerned about the 'problem' of unmarried graduate women. Thus, although the preferred status of a woman as a 'Mrs.' has become more ambivalent, it is by no means completely obliterated.

[2] I am aware that the idea of morality in this instance may posit the West as decadent and that emulating 'Western modes of behaviour' (such as participating in a beauty pageant) is therefore unbecoming. But the comment made by the reader is too brief for us to read too deeply into it. I would rather just take the comment at face value- that the reader is using Islamic code of conduct as a reference point for judging behaviour.

the pageant was criticised from the angle of Malay/Muslim morality and what constitutes appropriate behaviour suggests that meanings and values of the pageant are open to ruptures and contestations in many different ways. As such, the West is not the only reference to which the non-West compares itself in order to formulate its identities, values and ideas.

Conclusions

A postcolonial analysis tells us more about the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern social order. From our examination of the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant, we can see that the persistence of imperial ideas and values remains a reality in the world today. This domination is not merely in terms of economics (inequalities in material wealth between West and non-West) but also in terms of cultural categories as well as knowledge production. It would be unreal to depict Singapore as being able to completely evade Western discourses, given on-going power relations in the world. As such, knowledge and ideas in a society are never constituted solely within its national boundaries, but are open to influences of the outside world.

However, the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant cannot be understood simply as a form of mimesis or as evidence of the hegemony Western cultural imperialism or a form of neocolonialism. By paying attention to local conditions, we are able to appreciate that idealised Western notions of femininity are not simply imposed upon the non-West but are contested, reworked and reinterpreted according to local values and goals. The kinds of qualities that Miss Singapore embodies, therefore, are closely related to the projects and desires of the nation. The idea that colonial culture simply never repeats itself can be made clearer by briefly mentioning the kinds of local issues which other national beauty pageants have to contend with. In Malaysia, Malay women are not allowed to become Miss Malaysia because the very nature of the beauty pageant is deemed to be in conflict with Islamic values. In the Philippines, beauty pageants is an extremely popular form of entertainment, but faces certain resistance from the Roman Catholic church. The different conditions in these different countries mean that notions of femininity are contested and reworked in different ways in these countries as compared to Singapore. Therefore, as Young argues, colonialism

is not the simple production of a new mimesis; instead, when colonial cultures are inscribed to colonised contexts, they are always translated and hybridised and thus give rise to an uncertain patchwork of identities (Young, 1990). Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that that Western discourse is not the only form of discourse at work in the Miss Singapore/ Universe pageant. Other discourses, such as regionalism, morality etc., may be equally important in constituting the notion of the ideal Singaporean woman. (Similarly, discourses of Islam and Roman Catholicism are important in shaping the outcomes of beauty pageants in Malaysia and the Philippines respectively.) Thus, although Western discourses are undoubtedly important, they do not have primacy in shaping the experience of the postcolonial nation.

The Miss Singapore/Universe pageant is a place where values and meanings are produced, consumed and rejected; and where the local and global, national and international cultures and structures of power are engaged. What is clear from our analysis of the pageant is that the local and the global (or the West and the non-West) may not work in opposition all the time. Apart from resisting and subverting Western narratives, the non-West may also reaffirm and renew those narratives, as seen in the acceptance of Western values of modernity and progress in constituting the ideal Singaporean woman. As such, the non-West itself may be complicit in propagating Western values and ideas. Additionally, where the 'local' ends and where the 'global' begins is not so clear. It is difficult to distinguish the workings of these two forces because they are very closely intertwined. Having established that the boundaries between the local and the global are in reality not clearly demarcated, we can perhaps move beyond the understanding of the East-West relationship as merely being a dichotomous one and see the relationship as an interactive and interdependent one instead.

In scholarship, beauty pageants have been largely ignored as an area of study because many academics think that beauty pageants are merely superficial culture, and do not reflect anything socially significant (Banet-Weiser, 1999). But it has been my position throughout that beauty pageants serve as important sites where conversations about gender and nationalism take place. The Miss Singapore/Universe pageant tells many stories about the nation itself, though not everything. I think it is possible to regard the pageant as a parody of the nation as the values and goals which the nation embraces becomes played out in the

pageant itself. We have seen that these stories may at times contradict one another because the interaction of both local and global forces entails a host of simultaneous and contradictory forces. The experience of the postcolonial nation can be likened to a 'search'- a journey of defining and redefining one's own identity amidst these contradictory forces.

Finally, what we get from this postcolonial examination of the Miss Singapore/ Universe pageant is a very complex and multi-layered picture. On the one hand, it has been my contention in this essay that we must acknowledge the hegemonic dimensions of Western knowledges and ideas. But we must also see the ways in which those knowledges and ideas are contested and reworked in particular historic and spatial contexts. Nevertheless, we cannot overprivilege local agency because it takes away the political commitment of a postcolonial analysis- to examine the relationship between Western discourses and the West's domination over the non-West in economic, political and social spheres. Yet, we also cannot see Western discourse as the only or the most important force in shaping the experience of the non-West. Given such complexities, I have found it useful to bear in mind that while we should recognise the ways in which postcolonial theories are useful in understanding a local phenomenon such as the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant, we should also recognise the limitations and weaknesses of those theories. As such, we need to walk the tight-rope between these two positions. Falling off on any side gives up the game.

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<cyberita.asia1.com.sg>

Project Eyeball Website
<projecteyeball.asia1.com.sg>

The New Paper Website
<newpaper.asia1.com.sg>

The Official Miss Universe Website.
<www.missuniverse.com>