

Miss Lebanon or Miss Habalon*: Beauty Queens and Reality Television

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Is it reality television or realistic television? This question demands an urgent and necessary answer when “our beauty queens” become the subject matter of such television, especially since the beauty queen no longer represents a fantasy creature, a flawless role model for young women in terms of her behavior, actions, and activities sponsoring the disabled, children, and elderly. Instead, our beauty queen has become a topic of inspection, at least before she became a beauty queen. Before becoming a queen, she underwent a difficult experience with her fellow candidates. She underwent that experience on air and on live broadcast on a daily basis 24 hours a day. She and 15 contestants showcased their intelligence and education directly on live television. This is what makes it crucial to distinguish between reality television and realistic television.

Nadine is the beauty queen, “our” beauty queen. She is also the holder of a “political position” that never fails to believe in conspiracy theory - the theory that all her female colleagues conspired against her. As for her first runner-up, Lamita, she made a record rebellious exit on air and left the stage without congratulating her com-

petitor. But this is the same Lamita who is elegant, peaceful to the extent of sarcasm in days fraught with problems and fights among contestants and the one with earth-shattering replies that made a kilogram of cotton weigh less than a kilogram of metal. Apart from Nadine and Lamita, 14 potential beauty queens had their daily lives aired on live broadcast television. These daily lives encompassed excursions of gossip, grudges, envy, deception, and a resort to famous sayings that turned Maurice Awwad into a contemporary of Gibran Khalil Gibran, and Nelson Mandela into a character of anonymous time and place.

Is this reality or realistic representation? Are we before a micro-society that sums up the young Lebanese woman’s reality, or are we before 16 female fashion models? If we admit, for argument’s sake, that we are before a representative sample of female models — that is, if we admit that these 16 represent a large segment of Lebanese females in their attitudes, behavior, and nature, this would force us to admit that we have entered the media reality phase where distinction is no longer possible between billboard girls and any random young female passerby. However, though this assumption gains strength from observation and shallow-level commen-

* Habalon in slang means stupidity

taries, it becomes uncertain upon a deeper understanding of the reality television program format and upon a more accurate observation of the nature and extent to which everyday girls identify with television reality girls.

Because any attempt to analyze this phenomenon from a theoretical perspective remains mere speculation not based on tangible reality, exactly as air devoid of oxygen, the best approach for analysis and consideration remains the field observation approach; that is, acquiring views from those most influential and subject to being influenced by this phenomenon – young women. According to young female university students (belonging to the middle class and pursuing their studies at the Lebanese American University), what we are trying to understand does not apply only to reality television and its consequences but actually outlines the nature of the controversial relationship between the female and reality television.

Wendy, a female university student, did not hesitate to repeat the phrase “it’s depressing” when asked about her view of the beauty queen selection experience via reality television. Her statement stems from the following: This program confirmed that the more Lebanese a girl is in her social upbringing, the more shallow she is, concerned only with appearance; that is, the Lebanese young woman continues to be a prisoner of her social context, which refuses to view her outside the “be pretty and stay silent” perspective. Farah insisted on repeating that phrase in French before she added to her speech a group of phrases of the type “the most important is internal beauty” and “education is paramount” in an attempt to ridicule the actions and pronouncements of the latest Miss Lebanon contestants. Farah is majoring in Trade Sciences, and she continued: “Terrible failure, mindless girls who earned a diploma in madness. All they care about is rehearsing the questions and how to answer them during the event and they forgot to answer the most important question: What are they doing in life?” Farah allowed herself to answer the question: “All they seek is men chasing after them.”

Regardless of the accuracy of Farah’s description, her answer raises another question: To what degree does this apply to young Lebanese women in general? In other words, if we admit that these girls have no concern in life other than seeking men chasing after them, does this apply to the image and reputation of the young Lebanese woman in general? Farah, in turn, refused to accept this comparison. Yet her colleague, Yasmina, a Hotel Management major, noted that the young Lebanese woman loves appearances and yields to the media’s stereotypical image of herself. The gist of the discussion between Farah and Yasmina is that both believe that Miss Lebanon contestants represent 70 percent of Lebanese

young women. This belief, however, did not worry Rasha, a Communication Arts major. Rasha does not doubt the shallowness and naïveté of the majority of the program’s contestants, yet she refuses to view them as acting prototypes because the realism of their television reality is doubtful. Rasha thus undermines the realism and natural behavior of what we viewed in the Miss Lebanon daily life episodes, particularly since nothing confirms the realism of what they show or removes the “theatrical acting” feature; as such, it is not possible to view these models of doubtful realism as representative, even though Rasha herself does not deny that the young Lebanese woman generally identifies with many of the behaviors aired on the daily journals of “our beauty queens”.

The above does not mean that all those interviewed object to that aspect of the program. Maya, an Economic Sciences major, has a different opinion. To her, the mission of Miss Lebanon contestants is not representing the young Lebanese woman, saying: “It’s not their business to represent the young Lebanese woman.” In her view, they are participating in a program in search of fame and “reality TV” facilitates and accelerates that search. As for the manifestations of gossip, envy and hatred, these can be attributed to the high-pressure conditions to which the contestants were subjected, “24 hours a day at home, what else can girls do?” That is, Maya attributed contestants’ psychological instability to their boredom. Though Maya does not deny that the program has negative aspects, such as specifying unrealistic physical attributes for contestants, which might define the feminine image by imaginary features, she classifies this negativity as belonging to the empty half of the glass.

While Farah and her colleague Yasmina chatted about Miss Lebanon news, Yasmina told Farah sarcastically about the social activities of the recently elected Miss Lebanon, Nadine Njeim, who opened a hair salon. Farah replied to her: “But the hair salon is great” then went silent for a while and added: “Really, I mean it. The hair salon is great.” Of course, Farah and Yasmina consider themselves among the 30 percent who do not seek money and fame. As for Maya, she says: “But girls are jealous. That’s why they criticize the program.”

Is it reality television or realistic television? Not even scientific statistics can accurately answer this question. When Woman becomes the exclusive topic of this television, the answer becomes more complicated. And what is even more complicated than that is that we live stranded in a reality where the thin line between television and truth is almost invisible. Between Farah and Maya is a television, a television that resembles nothing but itself.

Translated by Hania Jurdak