

## CONTEST OR CONTENT

### *How Should We Evaluate Young Lebanese Women?*

Everyone was awaiting the night. There were those who were going to watch the long-heralded event on television, and those who would witness it live. It wasn't just a local event limited to a Lebanese audience; it was also a regional event that would have an impact on the surrounding Arab world. Some hoped to see beauty, conventionally defined; others wanted to see displays of intelligence, talent and wit; and some wanted to watch just to satisfy their curiosity. Although intentions were numerous and varied, the final result was the same: everyone who watched the recent Miss Lebanon Contest was stunned.

The program began with a procession of the young, smiling beauties entering Beirut Hall wearing bridal gowns. I could not understand what was the message of this particular costume choice, but figured that it could have been an attempt at stylishness and drama, rather than a reminder of our society's mentality, which gives the utmost value to women when they are young, virginal, unformed and ready to adopt their most sacred role: that of self-sacrificing wife and mother.

Suddenly, the mood shifted from virginal to seductive as the exhibition of the bodies began. Great attention was given to the exact size and dimensions of the breasts, the hips and the waist. The girls' very fates seemed to hinge on the tiniest calibrations of weight and height. After this rigorous competition was completed, the girls displayed their glamour and charm in elegant evening dresses. The only thing missing were some eye-glasses to make them look a little intelligent.

Eventually, having no more outfits or body parts to display, it was time for the girls to demonstrate their intelligence, wit and character before an audience of millions. The judges were ready to ask and the viewers eager to listen. But the questions were quite simple; not one required academic specialization in any field. However, in appraising the girls' performance in answering these questions, we must take into consideration how tired they must have been after those rigorous displays of breasts and hips. Yet despite this consideration, the girls' answers were very disappointing. Most answered the questions in an off-hand, light-hearted manner which sounded nice and flashy, but lacked any substance. One contestant in particular did not give us any hint as to her future career plans, although the question was clearly phrased. Another asserted that Lebanon was so different from all other Arab countries because whereas they are all deserts, Lebanon has greenery. Yet another was terribly perplexed about whether a married woman should work or if she should devote all of her time to her chil-

dren. In the end, we didn't even know if the poor girl had an opinion on this important topic. Oh, but worse was yet to come!

Five finalists had been chosen. Everyone was eagerly waiting to see who would be the eventual winner. Four of the girls were led into a small, sound-proof glass chamber to prevent them from hearing the common question that would reveal the crucial, deciding differences between them. The question was not difficult: "What case concerning Lebanon would you raise if you had the chance to make a presentation before the United Nations?" It was quite a shock for the audience when they heard each girl answer the question in roughly the same manner. All of the finalists stressed that Lebanon is a beautiful country, and now that the war is over, people have every reason to visit us, adding that the Lebanese people love each other so very much and, most important of all, Lebanon is a wonderful place to go shopping! One girl of the five finalists did manage to distinguish herself, however, she did not even know what the United Nations was!

None of the finalists offered a single, serious case to present before the august world body, not the extreme poverty affecting our country, not the harsh military occupation and recent military incursions, not the ecological disasters, nor the psychological impact of the long war. I could not believe my ears! These could not possibly be educated and refined college girls, supposedly sophisticated and polished enough to represent Lebanon abroad! Is this the idea we want to give the world about our country's women? Does this contest really present Lebanese society's ideal of woman?

The Miss Lebanon contest was a beauty contest and nothing more. Selections of the finalists and the ultimate "winner" were made according to the most shallow, ephemeral and superficial conception of beauty: physical beauty. The young woman selected to represent our country should not be chosen on the basis of how much she weighs or how round her hips are, but on the basis of her character and intelligence. It is time that we looked at young Lebanese women in a deeper way. It is time we liberated our minds from the tyranny of the image. We have been imprisoning them for too long.

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