Fictions of the Past: Staging Indianness, Identity and Sexuality Among Young Women in Indo-Trinidadian Beauty Pageants

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Abstract

> Beauty contests are places where cultural meanings are
> produced, consumed *and* rejected, where local and global,
> ethnic and national, national and international cultures and
> structures of power are engaged in their most trivial but
> vital aspects (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996, 8).

"The contestants paraded around the stage in a very slow, graceful manner which also matched the slow, languorous music that accompanied this segment. The girls displayed their outfits in numerous ways; some held up the heavily decorated shawls at intervals, some made hand movements that seemed to display their clothing while also appearing to add to their grace on stage. Smiles were transfixed on their faces, as they were told to constantly remember to smile, and many of them gave very coy, playful, demure facial expressions. All of the traditional garments revealed the arms of the contestants, while most displayed a bit of the stomach and back. For this segment, most of the contestants wore saris, which were fitted tightly around their bodies, revealing their figures" (Ragbir 2010, 73).

Introduction

This description was part of my observations at the Miss India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant, one of the sites for my study. Beauty pageants are specific sites that produce and make visible perceived feminine ideals. Thus far, there has been no actual research on staging as it pertains to "Indianness" in a pageant context in Trinidad. Furthermore, there is a gap in the analysis on young Indo-Trinidadian womanhood that many have sought to address (Kanhai 1999; Hosein 2004, 2012; Mohammed 2002) and which I believe a study on beauty pageants as a site that is geared towards young Indo-Trinidadian women can help address. This paper is part of a larger body of work that looks beyond the surface of Indian pageants in Trinidad to explore issues of sexuality, identity, visibility and the tensions and ambivalences between modernity and tradition which are highlighted in the relationship between India, namely "Bollywood", and its diasporic nations.

Patricia Mohammed's (2002) concept of gender negotiations is relevant in highlighting how women manoeuvre and strategize within patriarchal constraints; as well as highlighting the resistance and contestation by Indo-Trinidadian young women in beauty pageants but within the patriarchal space. Hosein (2012) points out that theorizations of late twentieth century "patriarchal bargaining" need to include both forms of negotiation and navigation. In a contemporary context of womanhood having multiple and shifting demands, young Indo-Trinidadian women have to navigate different ideals as well as negotiate the expectations of each. Indian women who were not a part of the public sphere could become nationally visible through Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants, thereby negotiating their visibility and all that came along with pageant participation within a patriarchal space—or a space of competing patriarchies—the Indo-Trinidadian patriarchal space and that of the wider society. They could also navigate between competing and different prescriptions of womanhood in the process of finding the balance of identities and practices appropriate to different spaces and situations.

This paper must be read through a clear understanding of what is meant by "creolization"[1] and "modernity" in this context. I use these terms keeping in mind Hosein's (2012) reading of gender differential creolization, i.e. Indian women cannot access creolization in the same way that Indian men can because Indian men can gain status from both an Indian and creolized reputation, whereas in contrast, Indian women lose status from a creolized reputation and therefore risk shame. This is because of creolization's association with Afro-Trinidadian femininities, masculinities and sexualities. Here, the intersections of creolization and modernity are useful for teasing out how these young women draw on multiple modernities—white, creole, Indian and Indo-Trinidadian—to navigate their terms of ethnic belonging. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that Indo-Trinidadian girls access notions of modernity from India that are directly influenced by the West.

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[1] "Creolization" is a troublesome but useful term. Troublesome because there are so many interpretations of the word, useful because it confronts the issues related to ethnicity and ethnic relations in a multi-racial society.

While beauty pageants on the whole objectify and commoditize women, I acknowledge that power relations are more complex and thus pageants can give Indian women power, voice and visibility that may not be afforded to them in other aspects of their lives. In this context, this article seeks to answer the following questions: how do young Indo-Trinidadian women negotiate and navigate between multiple sites of modernities that become visible on a beauty pageant stage; what does this say about their identity and how do they, on stage, negotiate their sexuality?

Finally, I compare Tejaswini Niranjana's (2006) study on chutney singing in Trinidad to Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants to highlight and further problematize prescriptions of "modernity" and "tradition" and to show how this space presents Indo-Trinidadian young women in a different light from chutney: one that is fantasized, imagined and symbolic. Beauty pageants, although an avenue for visibility and agency, present a remarkably different space, since Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants represent a renouncing of chutney, while, at the same time, embracing contemporary Indian modernity. I will note here that I have not done any specific research on chutney music or its impact on Trinidadian womanhood. My limited analysis in this paper is only for the purpose of providing a much needed counterpoint to female Indo-Trinidadian diasporic claims regarding the Indianness of chutney music and beauty pageants. Niranjana's in-depth and enlightening work on chutney music informs this comparison.

Methodology
My background as a former Indian beauty pageant contestant and winner has guided my interest in pursuing this research. After competing and winning, I was involved in helping pageant producers screen young women and I was a judge for the Mr. and Miss India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant. When I became a student of Gender and Development Studies, it became clear to me that pageants were traditionally seen and are still seen by many feminist scholars as "unfeminist"; indeed, the famous women's liberation protest at the 1968 Miss America Beauty Pageant is considered one of the catalytic events of the modern Western feminist era (Lawson and Ross 2008). However, many contemporary feminist writers have since recognized that pageants can be considered not only a site for further exploration but a possible space of feminine empowerment (Banet-Weiser cited in Reischer and Koo 2004, 312).

The pageants chosen to be a part of this study have been selected on the basis of their availability at the time, as well as the willingness of the producers to open up their pageants for research. The Mastana Bahar Pageant was a particular choice because it is the oldest established Indian pageant in Trinidad. There is a sense of Mastana being more on the conservative side; there is no Modern Wear segment; the Mastana audience is generally an older, Indian crowd; and much emphasis is placed on tradition, which for the pageant segment would mean adherence to traditional notions of Indian womanhood. Even audience members tend to be on the conservative side, and if they are not they are often chastised for it. A letter written to a Trinidadian newspaper complains, "…in recent Indian Variety and Mastana Bahar shows, I have seen girls in maxis [ankle-length dresses], but with their necks, arms and backs exposed, I do not think this is right for any girl who participates in Indian culture...I would appreciate very much, if the organisers of these Indian programmes could encourage our Indian girls to dress in a more decent and

graceful manner" (Niranjana 2006, 116). This letter highlights how Indian tradition and culture can be read through the female Indian body and how Indo-Trinidadians (both male and female) look to Indian cultural shows like Mastana Bahar to maintain those ideals. Somewhat contrastingly, while the Miss India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant still looks to culture and tradition, it is more liberal in that it has embraced a more Western and "modern" sense of Indianness. One example of this is the pageant's "Modern Wear" segment, where contestants are allowed to wear Western-style dresses. Interestingly, the Miss Divali Nagar Pageant has a "Traditional Indian Wear" and a "Modern Indian Wear" segment; both are different takes on how Indian clothes are worn and adorned. For example, in the traditional segment, a young woman would try to appear as "traditionally Indian" as possible. She would show less skin, have her hair in an elegantly styled-up do, wear lots of Indian jewellery and would model to a slow, reverent melody. In the modern segment, her hair may be worn loose, the Indian wear would expose more skin, and she would model a bit faster and more jovially to an upbeat, modern Indian film song.

The pageants chosen are not representative of all Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants because there are others that I have not observed or been affiliated with and the young women in this study do not represent all Indo-Trinidadian young women. For my study, I have focused on young women between the ages of 15 and 25 who have entered a local beauty pageant, mostly from the areas of South Trinidad and Chaguanas (areas where there is a higher concentration of Indo-Trinidadians). They are Hindu, Christian and Muslim young women (I note that Muslim young women are largely underrepresented in beauty pageants, as Muslim codes of conduct for girls/women are different, and in some ways, much stricter and so fewer of them are contestants compared to Hindus). Christian young women also take part but are few in number; this may be because the Indian pageants are so closely linked to Hinduism. In the minds of many, Indian pageants are synonymous with Hindu pageants. As Patricia Mohammed points out in *Gender Negotiations* (2002), although several religions are present in India, Hindu values penetrated and dominated, and these values were brought to the Caribbean. I have not, however, looked deeply into the issue of religion but it is acknowledged here because the majority of the young women who enter the Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants are Hindus.

Many of the young women who enter an Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageant often go on to enter others after that, depending on if they win or not. Additionally, the pageants that are a part of my research are the more widely recognized when it comes to media coverage and prizes.[2]

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[2] Prizes for some of these pageants are very vague and I have been told that they change constantly. There is a monetary reward that can range anywhere between $3,000 and $10,000 TTD, as well as special prizes such as hampers from sponsors. In the Miss India T&T Pageant the winner gets the chance to compete internationally but not the Miss Mastana Bahar Pageant winner; however, winners in the Miss India T&T Pageant must wait until the end of their reign to receive their prizes. When I was the winner of Miss Mastana Bahar in 2002 I received all of my prizes within a week and every time I visited the show after winning, the producer always gave me several hampers to go home with.

I will also acknowledge that although there are no rules that state Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants are for "pure" Indo-Trinidadian young women only, they are certainly dominated by them. There are very few cases of mixed-race young women entering the pageants, and even fewer cases of them winning. One of the pageant coordinators for the Miss and Mr. India Trinidad and Tobago {T&T) Pageant told me that you have to have Indian lineage but you do not have to be "pure" Indian. Yet in the pageants I have observed for my study, all of the contestants seem to identify themselves as Indian and did not declare outwardly any mixed status.

I conducted three in-depth interviews with pageant officials, 14 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with pageant contestants, three reflective narratives and additional interviews with others involved in the pageants. I also conducted participant observation research over a period of four months with the Mr. and Miss India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant. I was able to participate by helping in the practice of the question-and-answer segment, helping the young women in their modelling and training exercises and giving them feedback when asked. For the Miss Mastana Bahar Pageant, I utilized non-participant observation.

Indo-Trinidadian womanhood
Indian men and women's assimilation into Trinidadian society did not necessarily mean that they began to identify with the predominantly Afro-Trinidadian culture. In fact, Indians for the most part exercised an Indian identity that has sometimes been seen as the manifestation of "Indian nationalism" (Niranjana 2006, 30). Being West Indian[3] was seen as being Afro-creole and Indians sought to distinguish themselves from this while producing their own narratives of what it meant to be Indian. This has led to claims of "Indianness", which refers to an assertion of Indian identity through several means, for example, according to Niranjana (ibid, 33), when East Indians in Trinidad make the claim to Indianness, it is addressed to a divided audience. Attempting to erase the differences from India rather than to mark it, East Indians assert a racial similarity in relation to the "mother country" and a racial difference to "others" in Trinidad.

If Indians were seen as the "other" in Trinidad by the rest of Trinidadian society, Indian women were doubly "othered" on the basis of their race, ethnicity and gender. With the construction of community and family life in early twentieth century Trinidad, Indian women were put under strict patriarchal codes that meant they were controlled in various spheres of their lives. Part of this control came out of the fears of Indian men that Indian women would have relations with non-Indian men and that they might become "loose" like the African women. As Shalini Puri (1997, 126) states, the creolization of the Indian woman is identified in terms of a change in her sexuality. The strict codes for Indian women thus meant their relative invisibility from the larger society, and especially, the larger Afro-dominated creole context.

A major means in which culture, myths and symbols gave Indo-Trinidadian women their gendered values in Indo-Trinidadian society was through the Hindi cinema. The first

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[3] West Indians were presumably every purebred or mixed person who had not migrated from India (Mohammed 2009, 64)

Indian film screened in a Trinidadian cinema, in 1935, was *Bala Jobhan*, and this one and the continuous stream of films that followed from 1935 on had a remarkable influence in nurturing ideas of Indianness and Indian culture among Indian men and women in Trinidad. For the children of those migrants who were born in Trinidad, this represented the India they had never seen. They saw India in the landscape, the clothing, and the practices of religion which were transmitted on the screen, the fictional characters who lived out the morals which their priests preached that they should replicate in their own lives (ibid, 79-80). Indian women now had proof of the behaviour that they were expected to mimic, but even having this access to Indian traditions did not mean they were as "Indian" as the Indians living in India (when evaluated by the standards of Indians in India), and this was highlighted especially with regard to women.

Disciplining Indian women's sexuality during the indentureship period in the Caribbean was more about securing a sexual contract between Indian women and multiple patriarchies in the name of both Victorian morality and economic rationality (Wahab 2008, 6). Planters wanted the Indian male workforce to be stable and this became dependent upon successfully policing Indian women's sexuality. At the same time, Indian men also wanted the subservient, passive female that they had come to expect in India. Later on, notions of respectability for the Indo-Trinidadian woman would still hold value and prominence. Therefore, the Indo-Trinidadian woman was uniquely positioned in a site where she had to deal with the expectations of competing patriarchies: the expectations of Indian womanhood from India, the expectations of Indian men in Trinidad and, additionally, the entire Trinidadian patriarchal society itself.

In an effort to be "seen", to be visible in Trinidad, many of these women took to the Indo and national public stages where their femininity and sexuality were being visibly renegotiated. For Indian women in Trinidad, being in the public eye meant stepping outside of their very private homes and being part of a public that was considered Afro-creole.

The image of the Indian woman was contrasted with her African counterpart: the African woman, the ex-enslaved, the urban *jamette*[4] of Carnival whose sexuality was othered. The latter was seen as vulgar, promiscuous, loud and disruptive (Niranjana 1999, 236). The transformations among Indians had to do with finding ways of inhabiting and changing their new home through a series of complex negotiations with other racial groups, especially the Africans. Exposure to "Western" ways came to the Indians through interaction with the Afro-Caribbean as well as through contact with the European. Even today when Trinidadian Indians speak of Westernization, they often treat it as synonymous with "creolization"[5] (ibid, 238). Yet, Hosein (2004) argues that creolization and modernization are intersecting, but not interlocking processes. While the idea of

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[4] A Trinidadian term for a brash, shameless, highly provocative woman, usually associated with the Afro-Trinidadian woman.

[5] It must be recognized that this article was written by Niranjana in 1999; with regards to Westernization today; however, globalization through the media, Internet and several other arenas have come to play a more important role in Westernization in Trinidad. But in her article, she is attempting to link chutney-soca, which is an East Indian phenomenon, with creolization and the degradation of "Indian culture".

"creole" is racially identified and can bring with it shame and dishonour, the term modernization offers options for expanding the boundaries of respectability. Seeming modern and cool (modernization in this sense is associated with status and "whiteness") can give value to certain behaviour, which for Indian girls would normally be seen as inappropriate, in a way that creolization cannot.

When Indian women take to the stage as singers or dancers, or as politicians, the protracted struggle over "culture" and "authenticity" takes a new turn, not only in the national arena between different ethnic groups but also within the Indo-Trinidadian community itself. The chutney-soca[6] controversy of the early 1990s has provoked some rethinking of what claims to Indianness involve in Trinidad. The singers, and the (specifically female) participants in the chutney dances, were denounced by many in the East Indian community for what were termed their "vulgarity" and "obscenity" (Niranjana 1999, 240). The public sphere is here considered to be an "African" and masculine realm, so the making public of chutney (and its Englishing) necessarily involves making it available to the gaze of Afro-Trinidadians. The disapproval of "vulgarity" can be read also as an anxiety regarding miscegenation, the new form of chutney becoming a metonym for the supposed increase in relationships between Indian women and African men (ibid, 240).

When women, such as Drupatee Ramgoonai, took to the stage with chutney music, the visibility of Indo-Trinidadian women increased and became controversial. With its highly charged sexual lyrics, raunchy dance moves and female chutney singers' and dancers' "vulgar" clothing, female Indo-Trinidadian sexuality came under fire and "the cultural or should we say encultured body of the East Indian woman proliferated discourse...the controversy seemed to indicate an intimate connection between the musical form and the East Indian woman's sexuality" (Niranjana 2006, 119).

Many Indian women were relatively confined to their own Indian and private contexts, but by providing a platform for Indo-Trinidadian women, chutney singing made these women known as individuals to the rest of society; although Indo-Trinidadian pageants did not accomplish this national visibility in quite the same way, they were still visible to the public. It should be noted here that media coverage of these pageants is not as widespread as that of the national pageants and has decreased in recent years. Despite this, though understudied, beauty pageants provide yet another space for Indo-Trinidadian young women to negotiate and navigate their visibility, their identity and their sexuality on the public stage.

Indian beauty pageants in Trinidad
There are several Indian pageants to date that take place in Trinidad. I have chosen to focus on what I have deemed to be the more "popular" ones, based on media coverage and my own observations. The pageants discussed here are the Miss India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant (which also incorporates a Mr. India T&T Pageant) and the Miss

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[6] While this term is very broad, it can simply be described as a spicy blend of "Indian" music that incorporates creole soca music (even soca music itself was arguably seen to be an Indian-influenced type of local music derived from calypso).

Naturally Fair Mastana Bahar Pageant. I also did some research on the Miss Divali Nagar Pageant. My intention was to observe these pageants as they took place; particularly, observing the choice of clothing, the way the pageants were structured, the dialogue, the music, the ambiance, the young women themselves. The Miss India T&T Pageant specifically captured my interest because it contained both a "traditional wear" and a "modern wear" segment. Also, since I knew the producers well (as I was once a participant in this pageant), I was afforded one-on-one access to the young women for interviews and observations that spanned a few months leading up to the pageant. This proved very useful because the young women (and men) were required to meet once a week for pageant practice. This consisted of a series of pageant-related exercises such as walking in heels, learning to do stage turns in a sari and practising for the question-and-answer segment.

The first organized mainstream Indian pageant was the Miss Mastana Bahar Pageant, called the Miss Naturally Fair Mastana Bahar Pageant since its endorsement of the *Naturally Fair* brand in 2002 (*Naturally Fair* is the brand name of a range of skin lightening products manufactured in India)[7].

The Miss Mastana Bahar pageant began in 1975 as part of the Indian Cultural Pageant, which was a live stage show that took place at the Queen's Park Savannah. This was the first major Indian-centered pageant and the current producer, Mr. Kayal Mohammed, informed me that it all started because women constantly approached the organizers, wanting to be a part of the Indian cultural show, but were unable to sing or dance. They also did not feel comfortable entering the larger, national pageants but had a love for modelling and pageantry[8]. At that time in Trinidad and Tobago, Indians were actively becoming a much more visible force politically and economically. Viranjini Munasinghe (2001, 19) argues that Indo-Trinidadian protests of discrimination and alienation intensified in the 1980s, a period marked by the consolidation of Indo-Trinidadian social mobility, increased cultural expression and a historically unparalleled display of Indo-Trinidadian confidence in the political arena. Yet their visibility should not be seen as an attempt to become integrated with the dominant creole culture; nor did the creole hegemonic class try to integrate them into society. According to Munasinghe, the 30 years of rule by the People's National Movement (PNM)[9] had left behind two principal legacies: first, the widespread consensus that "the people who were of the state and who possessed it were Negroes" and second, the proclivity to mute ethnic differences for the good of the nation. An Indo-Trinidadian PNM minister (Shamshuddin Mohammed) once said that he had repeatedly been attacked by others in his party for his efforts to propagate Indian culture and even opted to leave Indian cultural events out of Independence Day

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[7] I acknowledge that this in itself is problematic and certainly requires further probing and examination, which I have done in my larger body of work.

[8] Hosein (2004) and others have argued that Indo-Trinidadian females rather than males have been made to be markers of difference within a creolized society. The majority of Indian girls, therefore, would by choice participate in beauty pageants but within the context of appropriate Indian womanhood (Indian pageants). Going outside of these borders can result in females losing their "Indianness", femininity and difference, which mark their Indo-Trinidadian female honour.

[9] The People's National Movement (PNM) is one of the main political parties in Trinidad and Tobago and also considered to be highly Afro-dominated.

celebrations because "it only parrots what is going on in India and as such goes against the grain of Independence" (ibid, 19). This is relevant here because if it became important to mute ethnic difference in Trinidad and render an entire group of people "invisible", then Indo-Trinidadian women would be made to feel even more so. Hence, the desire for Indo-Trinidadian women to negotiate their space of visibility, even (or especially) within an Indian context, would be increased. Additionally, the crises of belonging Indians felt in Trinidad at that time only made them look more to India for that sense of home and belonging.

The national pageant, the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Pageant, began in 1963, right after Independence and since then there have been only a handful of Indo-Trinidadian contestants. From the interviews with Indo-Trinidadian young women I have conducted, it seems clear that their two main issues with entering the National Pageant are the swimsuit segment (concerns about Indian women putting their bodies on display in a swimsuit segment will be discussed later in this chapter) and the stigma that became associated with the national pageant because of its being so Afro-dominated. Yet, some Indo-Trinidadian women have entered the national pageants in an effort to represent their country on an international stage, which is generally not the case with the local Indian pageants.[10] The many Indian women who wanted to model or to be in a pageant felt more at ease doing so within the boundaries of appropriate Indian womanhood, i.e. within the Indian patriarchal boundaries of what was considered appropriate for Indian women and girls to maintain their markers of difference in a creolized society, and Indian beauty pageants gave them this opportunity.

Differing spaces
As previously stated, beauty pageants present a remarkably different space—Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants represent a renouncing of chutney and, at the same time, they depict contemporary Indian modernity. Chutney singing in Trinidad has been well documented and analysed by Tejaswini Niranjana (2006). For the purpose of this paper, I will reference chutney as a point of comparison to the pageant space, simply because they are both spaces of visibility for Indo-Trinidadian women, yet the spaces are remarkably different from each other and produce opposing interpretations of Indo-Trinidadian women.

In her groundbreaking study on Indo-Trinidadian women and chutney music, Niranjana (2006) asserts that rather than looking to India and Indian nationalism, the analysis of contemporary discourses of East Indian women's sexuality has to be placed in the biracial framework of Trinidad. As mentioned previously, Indo-Trinidadian women are contrasted with their Afro-Trinidadian counterparts; Indo-Trinidadian women must avoid "becoming African". Niranjana acknowledges that while what is "proper" for Indo-Trinidadian women is enabled in part by the colonial and Indian nationalist

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[10] In previous years before this study was undertaken in 2008–2009, the Miss India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant sent their top three winners to international Indian pageants, the biggest being the Miss India Worldwide Pageant, which was held every year in different diasporic locations. Young Indian women from different nations would compete. However, funding to send the girls, sponsorship, and so on, would be necessary and was sometimes an issue.

reconstructions of ethnic and racial identities, this assertion in Trinidad today is part of a Trinidadian reconstruction of such identities, whose major players include both "Indian" and "African". Thus,

> …the East Indian attempt to resolve the question of women...can be seen as aligned with the effort to consolidate the meanings of cultural and racial identity at a time when the new political visibility of 'Indians' is providing newer spaces of assertion for women as well as men (ibid, 123).

While I agree with Niranjana, I illustrate through a reading of beauty pageants that Indo-Trinidadian young women both assert their visibility within a cultural space in biracial Trinidad that demarcates them from what is considered "African" and look to India and Indian modernity as well as tradition. They emphasize respectability and certainly utilize an Indian influence on the pageant stage, yet although not as overtly as chutney, they maintain a public and national visibility of sexuality as well as femininity.

The modernity that is asserted by these young women in beauty pageants is influenced by the West (directly as well as through creolization) and also through modern India (which is also Western-influenced). Thus, Indo-Trinidadian modernity is neither Indian nor Afro-creole but both creolization and Indian (from India) modernity are produced as well as negotiated. Additionally, pageants look to an Indian modernity of the past[11] to criticize the Indian modernity of the present. One major way this can be seen is through "the swimsuit issue"; although young women in Indian pageants are allowed to model swimsuits onstage, in Indo-Trinidadian pageants this is not permitted and is viewed with disdain. To interrogate these claims, I will examine how Indo-Trinidadian young women's ideals are shaped and how this is manifested on the beauty pageant stage.

'Bollywood'

"The sense of belonging that Bollywood films foster—the sheer sense of security and shared joy, the commonality of experience despite the geographical separation of so many thousands of miles—is second to none. It works more because Bollywood is one of the things that bind us together as Indians, never mind where we live" (Bhattacharya 2003 cited in Bandyopadhyay 2008, 82). "Bollywood" as an industry has had a significant effect on the construction of identities in the diaspora. Of course, Bollywood means more than films, though these are a major part of it. Songs, dance, even pageants are part of the Bollywood industry. In Trinidad, images, characters, storylines and music evoke specific feelings of "Indianness" and are ultimately associated with "tradition", the "past", and a separate and India-derived ethnic identity (Vertovec 1992, Ali 1993 cited in Hosein 2004, 192).

Bollywood movies and music videos, actors and actresses were constantly used as reference points and as inspiration for young women in Indian pageants. Yet many aspects of Bollywood also seem to be disturbing to them. The new era of Bollywood which has taken up a more "Westernized" mode of dress, attitude and even culture does

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[11] Less overtly sexual, less Western-influenced.

not sit well with the girls in my study (this once again highlights their ambivalent struggles with tradition and modernity. I got the impression that if they wanted to see sex and the body on display they would rather see it in Hollywood than Bollywood). In fact, they prefer the more traditional, conservative, older Bollywood that is slowly disappearing. All of the female pageant contestants that I have interviewed expressed this view. A 27-year-old former Mastana Bahar contestant expressed that "India was losing its traditional values and this could be seen in Bollywood movies that now have kissing and lesbianism". Another pageant contestant, 19 years old, stated "India's high prostitution rate is linked to Westernization and a loss of Indian values".

Thus, Bollywood, and for that matter, India, no longer seem to be an unproblematic model for Indo-Trinidadian girls; there is a shift in the meaning of Bollywood in relation to Indo-Trinidadian female identity. This phenomenon is quite a turn of events from previous notions of India as the ultimate archetype for Indians in the diaspora. So what is it about India that now seems to be garnering this mixed reaction? From my data, I can conclude that Indian girls within the pageant do consider India and Indian culture their main inspirations. A 19-year-old Miss India Trinidad and Tobago contestant remarked, "I want to be as Indian as possible. I get more respect if I wear Indian wear every day." However, they connect this with a traditional view of India and, due to globalization and modernity, India no longer fits the static icon of its "traditional" past. The pageant setting promotes contrasting ideals; girls are expected to conform to a traditional notion of Indian womanhood but, at the same time, promote Bollywood and their connections to India. However, this promotion of Bollywood does not mean a promotion of modernity *per se*; only certain "acceptable" facets of Bollywood are tolerated in the pageants by both the producers and the contestants. The other paradox comes from my observations and conversations with the young women when they are outside of the pageant setting.

During practice sessions, when on lunch break, contestants in the Miss India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant utilize the opportunity to socialize with each other, both males (as there is a male section of this pageant, the Mr. India Trinidad and Tobago Pageant) and females. There were often conversations about going to clubs on the weekends; some of the girls socialized outside of the practice sessions in these settings and there was even a "lime" organized for all the pageant contestants to go to a prominent club in the Chaguanas area. From the conversations I have had with contestants, none of them were revealed as smokers but all (apart from the 14- and the 15-year-old) said they drank on occasion. One of the former winners of the pageant claimed that her parents are strict Hindus, who do not even eat meat and she also is a vegetarian, but she also revealed that she loves to go out to clubs and she drinks alcohol socially.

It is as if young Indo-Trinidadian women want to be creole in real life (that is, be modern, fit into Trinidadian creolized culture) but want to be Indian when desired, and need India to stay as an icon of Indianness for them to have a reference point of what that means. Therefore, India's own modernity can be seen as threatening to their own ability to challenge creolization in Trinidad (at least on a pageant stage) since their notion of what is traditional, what is respectable, and so on, rests in their channelling of this from India.

Staging Indianness

While Indo-Trinidadian women are part of both the chutney and the beauty pageant stage, what is produced and staged on each is in contradiction. As Patricia Mohammed (2002) has outlined, a key consideration for Indians since their arrival has been the negotiation of their ethnic and gender identities. How have Indo-Trinidadian young women in beauty pageants negotiated their identities? How is this identity different from the identities of women on the chutney stage? The symbolic Indian girl in the Indian beauty contest is not part of the everyday realities of these young women. Outside of the pageant, these contestants, for the most part, are not stereotypically traditional. They must adapt, at least for the stage, the image of Indian womanhood that is required of them. Thus, they must negotiate their identities onstage to portray the ideal, traditional Indian girl; a passive, mild-mannered virgin, yet ambitious and educated. The chutney stage hosts a blatant display of female sexuality through the lyrics as well as through clothing and dance. It is anything but passive and mild-mannered. And it speaks to the working-class women rather than to the middle and upper classes that look to India to maintain their respectability and tradition.

The rules and regulations with regard to appropriate female behaviour in Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants suggest to me that even in the setting of a pageant, Indo-Trinidadian young women are expected to maintain their Indian codes of behaviour, especially because they are on display to the public eye. They are not just representing themselves "out there", they are *symbolizing* something even bigger than the individual. They are representing their family, religion, culture, heritage, and their future—the whole spectrum of what it means to be an Indian woman. King O'Riain (2005, 3) notes that by invoking cultural norms, the good behaviour that pageant officials want the queens to exhibit becomes oddly racialized. Hosein (2004, 3) observed in her study that young Indo-Trinidadian women performed a kind of "symbolic womanhood" at extended family gatherings, religious settings and cultural functions. This representation could be very different from their everyday lives and other ways of dressing and carrying themselves. This concept of "symbolic womanhood" is important in giving definition to the girls' portrayal. "Self-regulation, performance, and tactics of masking and manipulating femininity are part of girls' attempts to deal with competing pulls in society. Young women's dress and behaviour cannot be simply seen as aspects of assimilation or cultural loss because girls carry themselves in ways that enable them to access belonging across a range of sites" (Hosein 2002, 2004).

One site of negotiating their claims to "goodness" while intertwining their fantasy of an India of the past with the more global, modern Indian image is in the "Bollywood Gown" segment. Some girls have opted to be more revealing than others in this segment, despite their claims that they prefer a traditional, conservative Bollywood image. This has led me to conclude that although many young women do not necessarily agree with or endorse this newer Bollywood image that closely resembles a Hollywood image (at least not publicly or in the context of the pageant), they still seek to find a balance between conservative and sexy Bollywood for the pageant. Young women seem to be okay with the sexiness of Bollywood and sexiness generally, but are not allowed to say so in the context of the pageant and may in fact value the pageant stage as one that enables a particular kind of exalted, on-a-pedestal, transcendent, "princess"-like symbolic womanhood to be made visible—a form of womanhood at odds with chutney shows,

music videos and even Bollywood depictions, one in which they may be invested, among others, but have few other spaces to engage with, embody and perform. Of course, family and religion can also play a role here in restricting the choice of clothing. Interestingly, a "modern wear" or "Bollywood gown" segment in a pageant also becomes a way of mediating between an India of the past and an India of the present, but from my data I can conclude that Indo-Trinidadian girls within the pageant context for the most part expressed a general discomfort with the more extreme aspects of contemporary India of Bollywood (kissing in movies and music videos, bathing suit segments in pageants, etc.).

Figure 1: Miss India T&T Contestant in Hollywood/Bollywood Gown
http://www.vikashdancers.com/vikashdancers/mrmissindiatnt/history.html

Another very important point that could possibly explain Indo-Trinidadian young women's discomfort with the modern, sexy Bollywood image is that there is a need for them to show their differences and their distinctiveness from Afro-Trinidadians, thus emphasizing a resistance to creolization. Of course, as mentioned before, this is not to say that in the everyday, private lives of these girls, they do not dress sexily or modern or Western. But the public Indian female image, associated with ideals of beauty, pageantry and royalty or "queendom" must illustrate a traditional, conservative, high class and high caste Indian woman. Hosein (2004, 170) asserts "different configurations of ethnicity and femininity are at work when it comes to Indo-Trinidadian girls. The first is cast as Indian, modest, morally decent yet old fashioned. The other is Western, sexual, trendy and mainstream, but also at times, considered immoral". While the demands of Indo-Trinidadian womanhood frame a narrow path for young women, their ambivalence suggests that they must also navigate "tradition" and "modernity" in terms of ethnic belonging.

Bringing the point back to chutney, Niranjana (2006) clearly demonstrates that when Indo-Trinidadian women took to the chutney stage this was a blatant disavowal of middle-class, pure, respectable Indian womanhood. This sort of thinking was crafted out of Indian nationalism and the arguments against indentureship; the disavowed East Indian woman is the other to the ideal Indian woman of India. Pageants, on the other hand, disavow chutney and this working-class, overtly sexual, "licentious" space for women. Pageants present the fantasized Indian woman that is in direct contrast to the woman in chutney; she is pure, traditional, respectable and modern without displaying the facets of modernity that would have young women appear too Western and too creole.

One can say that within the specific context of the pageant, this diasporic Indian womanhood vs. the Bollywood Indian womanhood dynamic shows up. It does not show up in chutney or music videos as these do not look to India for constructions of identity, femininity or sexuality, nor in Indian participation in Carnival[12], nor in other times and places where young women identify with Bollywood stars and aesthetics. In other words, the pageant is a specific site where specific visibilities are given room, ones not given room elsewhere, where young Indo-Trinidadian women can be lifted above the complexities of everyday femininities, can access a space of ideal femininity that doesn't actually exist and never really did, enact a particular fantasy of womanhood, "the past", "tradition" and India which is lost in other sites of Indo-Trinidadian culture as well as India itself, and therefore makes visible a particular fiction of Indian female modernity that is highly esteemed, valued and rewarded, despite or perhaps because of the fact that everyone—producers and contestants—knows it does not exist. This is why the young women themselves participate in protecting this staged space from swimsuits, westernized Bollywood and Afro-creole culture the way that they do: it is the only site they can appear as pure as Sita[13], as devoted as Draupadi[14], as untouchable as Rapunzel and as much the star of their own fairytale as Cinderella, an ordinary girl who became queen—sexually desired, idealized, yet unique, innocent, chaste, pious, untouchable—and in the end, rewarded for their efforts.

Sexuality

> We will never permit vulgarity and bikini wearing in our competitions…we don't believe in the axiom the shorter the dress the greater will be the chances of winning the prize. We are very conservative in that. We only showcase the best of Indian culture and not the skin. We strongly oppose exhibiting women in a cheap manner on the dais (Dharmatma Saran, founder of the Miss India USA and Miss India Worldwide pageants, cited in Mani 2002, 125).

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[12] I am referring here to the annual Trinidad Carnival, which involves a range of activities that conclude with a parade of costumes on the streets of the nation's capital during a two-day period. The costumes, for the most part, are very skimpy and body-baring and the Carnival's historical roots as well as blatant displays of sexuality are associated with the Afro-creole.

[13] Sita, in Hindu tradition is the wife of Lord Rama, and is esteemed as the exemplar for all Hindu women in discharging her wifely and womanly duties, for example, virtue, respectability and devotion.

[14] Draupadi, wife of the five Pandavas, who in Hindu tradition is the exemplar of faith and devotion.

> Bikini wearing will never be allowed in my show, even if it is done in India (Kayal Mohammed, producer, *Mastana Bahar*).

In this section, I discuss the notion of sexuality within Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants, with specific reference to swimsuit segments, to highlight its taboo nature among Indians in Trinidad and how it has provided one of the most important bases for the Trinidadian (and I am certain other places as well) diaspora's rejection of India's global, modern image. Swimsuits are allowed in the national Indian pageants but are not currently allowed in any Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageant to date. Firstly, however, I argue that sexuality is produced and displayed onstage, even without the swimsuit segment, through an aesthetic of movement.

Malathi De Alwis' discussion of the implications of *lajja-baya*, or "norms of sexual modesty and proper behaviour" for Sinhalese women in colonial Ceylon, is important in examining the ways in which the category of "respectability" mediates the relationship between nationalism and sexuality, drawing attention to the patriarchal formation of respectable-yet-modern women in colonial Ceylon. With the influence of Christian missionaries and European fashions, the emerging Ceylonese nationalist movement sought to police the display of female bodies by advocating "indigenous" styles of dress for bourgeois women. The contentious relationship between norms of modesty and respectability sanctioned by the Ceylonese nationalist movement, and the clothing and behavioural styles encouraged by the "Europeanized" bourgeois class, were accentuated by the location of these debates within an emergent Ceylonese women's movement. De Alwis discusses her experience as a judge of a Sri Lankan beauty contest. The winner was evaluated not only on the appropriateness of her attire (all contestants were clothed in a style of dress particular to young girls in nineteenth century Ceylon) but equally importantly on her "walk or gait". However, the clothing of the contestants works only in conjunction with what De Alwis calls an "aesthetic of movement", i.e. the way she moved in the clothing (Mani 2002).

When I read this, I was immediately struck by the similarities to Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants. In many respects it is not the same due to the modern wear segment where there are such themes as the "Hollywood/Bollywood" gown and contestants can certainly choose to reveal some skin, but even then they are still bound by the constraints of appropriate Indian womanhood, i.e. they must always be cognizant of not revealing too much skin so as not to appear "vulgar" (or creole), which would not be considered fitting for a young Indian girl. We can more clearly see the similarities in the traditional wear segment of the competition, where the girls must parade in authentic Indian outfits (although most wear a very modernized version of Indian outfits as they see exemplified in current Bollywood fashions). Even clothed in Indian wear, trying to evoke purity and modesty, the contestants' movement of their bodies, which includes facial expressions, emanates sexuality, which is what De Alwis (Mani 2002) described in her own pageant context above. Additionally, sometimes the very concealing Indian wear can show just the slightest bit of skin, giving the audience just the right dose of hinted sexuality.

In the modern wear segment, contestants were afforded more room to display their bodies in revealing ways but always staying within the boundaries of appropriate Indian womanhood. The picture below demonstrates the contrast of ideals presented on stage: the clasped hands as if in prayer and the facial expression reveal the ideal Indian woman on the stage, yet the pose and the style of the dress to reveal the leg showcase sexuality. The slit in the dress is also not very high which would appear too outwardly vulgar and would cross the boundary of what is deemed appropriate. It becomes obvious from the discussion of the body and respectability that sexuality is produced in Indian pageants whether overtly or covertly so.

Figure 2: Meenakshi Sharma Miss India T&T 2009 winner,
http://ww.trinidadexpress.com/index.pl/print?id=161482065.html

Contemporary Indo-Trinidadian girls, despite their deportment in their private lives, try to maintain a traditional, conservative image of Indian womanhood that condemns the more provocative aspects of Bollywood, while also using certain parts of it to inspire themselves. The producers and promoters of Indian pageants in Trinidad pride themselves on not having (or needing to have) a swimsuit segment in their competition, even though it is done in Indian pageants such as the Miss Femina India contest. Being overtly sexual is not seen as being Indian according to traditional Indian patriarchal constructions of appropriate femininity. Handa (1997, cited in Hosein 2004, 167) argued that "managing sexuality" through dress and public behaviour is about avoiding shame

and ultimately about "marriage marketability". Handa (1997) further argued that "appropriate" dress is linked to "tradition" and "changing times" with a move to greater "immorality" (ibid, 168). This point came up several times in my interviews with both contestants and producers. They felt that Indians in India were slipping away from tradition. India has certainly embraced Westernization more readily than, for example, Indians in Trinidad, and it has been reflected in their beauty competitions, fashion, movies and music. Furthermore, beauty queens are utilized in India to promote modernity. Ahmed-Ghosh (2003, 205) asserts that beauty queens are used as symbols to "convince" the world at large that India has "arrived" on the global stage as a "modern" country on its path to "development".

It is no surprise that women would be used as representative of tradition; as part of the nationalist movement in India, the conceptualization of the Indian woman was in terms of femininity, purity, submissiveness, mothering, caretaking instincts, compassion and morality (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 208). Katrak (1992, cited in Ahmed Ghosh, 208) concludes that "the belief that women even more than men were the guardians of tradition, particularly against a foreign enemy, was used to reinforce the most regressive aspects of tradition". Indian women's vulnerability is always quoted to protect them from the corrupting influences of the West, which are always "invading and polluting the Indian middle class with movies, television shows and now beauty pageants, that will bring nudity, dubious morals and AIDS in their 'wake'" (Nair 1998 cited in Ahmed-Ghosh, 209). However, beauty pageants in India are located at the intersection of economic liberalization and the global approval of Western social norms. This, combined with their Indianness creates a hybridity that suits the national agenda, as long as traditional images of women are reinforced through state-controlled representations (ibid, 219).

In India, incorporating the swimsuit as part of their pageants can be seen as a move to meet international standards as well as to be considered a contender in the global arena. In Trinidad, incorporating the swimsuit as part of the local Indian pageants is seen as immoral and as a deviation from "Indian ways and culture". As the producers I have interviewed have said, if Indian girls want to parade in swimsuits onstage, they can join the national pageants. Thus, Indo-Trinidadians associate wearing swimsuits on stage with creolization as much as Westernization. Therefore, Indians are greatly underrepresented in the national pageant arena.

Figure 3: Priya Chanderbally, an Indo-Trinidadian contestant in the national pageant,
http://www.legacy.guardian.co.tt/archives/2008-02-23/features1.html

Following the interviews and my observations, I was able to conclude that Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageant producers police the sexuality and the bodies of the contestants in order to reject modernization, Westernization and even creolization. Sexuality must not be overtly staged because it does not fit with the image they intend to portray: the image of the traditional Indian woman, pure and virtuous. If Indian girls in Trinidad desired to wear a swimsuit on a pageant stage, they would have to enter the national pageants to do so. However, despite these claims of not promoting sexuality on the stage, it is still produced. Sexuality does not have to be overt and provocative; as the aesthetic of movement concept shows us, it can be produced with the movement of bodies. Furthermore, although Bollywood's newer sexy image is rejected and condemned by both contestants and producers, it is still used in several ways to promote the pageants, for example, the opening dance is usually to a Bollywood song, and the talent segment contains Bollywood song and dance. Thus, this highlights that there is still an overlap between traditional and modern on the Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageant stage as well as ambivalence over what these concepts mean to young female contestants. There is also the question of what is seen as constitutive of Indian culture.

The moralistic, virginal, respectable Indian girl that needs to be displayed on stage does not necessarily (or hardly ever) translates into the actual lives of the contestants. This is not to say that the contestants were revealed to be immoral and degrading to themselves and their culture, but rather that the archetype of the Indian woman that is presented on stage is not who they really are, thus enabling them to perform this imagined Indianness. This speaks to the symbolic nature of the pageant; it allows a particular Indian discourse to emerge that does not speak to other aspects of their lives. It encourages a fantasy of another place and another time (Khan 1995); a fantasy of femininity as decorative, statuesque and respectable.

Conclusion

Identity, sexuality and gender are all aspects of Indo-Trinidadian beauty pageants that have been explored in this study. Also relevant are issues of creolization and tradition vs. modernity. It is both very interesting and complex how Indians in the diaspora (in this case, Trinidad) try to hold on to Indian ideals of tradition, even in this era of Westernization and modernization across the globe. Perhaps, this is their attempt to resist creolization, or to resist, in a way, Westernization, or to define diasporic Indian alternative modernities. I believe in the case of Trinidad that all of these are plausible explanations.

I have attempted to show that chutney music presented a revolutionary space for Indo-Trinidadian working-class women that made them visible, empowered them and created controversies as they challenged traditional ideals of Indian womanhood. Beauty pageants are somewhat in opposition to this space; they seek to produce and maintain traditional ideals of Indian womanhood and reject chutney's overt sexual displays and raunchiness that are not in keeping with respectability and purity.

The pageant space becomes an imagined one that is created from an imagined past. Young women are able to be lifted above the everyday lives they lead, given the chance to be a queen, to feel like they are part of this "authentic Indianness" they have only heard about and seen in movies. Further, in a creole society, they are able to create boundaries from "the other" (while themselves being "othered" to Indian women from India) and demarcate themselves from Afro-Trinidadians.

While both chutney singing and beauty pageants are different spaces of resistance for Indo-Trinidadian women, they are still representative of a mode of visibility, even within specific contexts. Although the whole idea of a beauty contest may seem as frivolous as they come to some, I have to acknowledge that women use the resources and circumstances available to them to further themselves in whatever way, small or large, they can. Granted, many young women who enter beauty pageants do not view pageants as part of a well-oiled patriarchal machine, and in fact, choose to believe that they have empowered themselves and are inspiring others. Although this thinking may be ignorant of the realities of beauty contests, the young women are still not powerless vessels. They have found a space to represent something; whether it is their identity (real or imagined), their ethnicity, their culture, their country, they have found a space to have experiences that their real lives may not afford them, and they have found, even in small doses, power and a resistance to patriarchal power.

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