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The “Miss Curvy Uganda” pageant: representation, commodification and exploitation of women’s bodies

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ABSTRACT

In early February 2019, Godfrey Kiwanda, a Uganda Junior Minister of Tourism proposed a beauty pageant dubbed, “Miss Curvy Uganda,” to publicly showcase voluptuous Ugandan women as means of attracting foreign tourists to generate more foreign currency earnings. The proposal drew sharp criticisms that appeared in the national media, ecumenical community gatherings, and public forums across the country. Feminists, ecumenical and cultural communities reviled the expressed opinion of the Junior Minister to commodify human bodies in the twenty-first century world. All the critics, motivated by moral and cultural arguments, agree that exploiting human, particularly female bodies, for generating revenue is reprehensible as the practice denigrates and debases humanity. This paper presents the paradox of the pageantry within the politics of patriarchy that exploits showcasing female bodies for generating revenue as well as the transformation of contemporary conscience in a neoliberal post-colonial economy.

KEYWORDS

Commodification; patriarchy; exploitation; museumization and female bodies

Introduction

Sociological theories have offered critical examinations of different forces in society and how these forces influence societal expectations, norms, and values. Sociological theories articulate the notions of gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity. Gender, as a social construction, denotes diverse ways in which meanings and attributes are attached to being male and female. The attribution of meanings/social characteristics to male and female leads to social classification and stratification of gender in subtle ways (Edwards 1989; Holmes 1997; Hussein 2004). To arrive at the meaning of gender, Edwards, a feminist theorist, argued that gender is a socially imposed division of sexes into male and female characteristics (Edwards 1989; Scott 1986). In extending and classifying the concept, the term “gendered culture” was coined by Holmes (1997) to understand the social construction of maleness and femaleness. Society constructs norms and assigns meanings and expectations of group roles based on the prism of gendered differences.

Within African society, culture is made possible by the existence of a communal set of values, customs, representations, a shared system for interpreting and communicating diverse lived experiences. To understand the world, the actions of the individual

member of a culture engender diverse connotations and representation in the process of social interaction. Certainly, connotations or meanings are not simply something naturally fashioned by a supernatural force awaiting human discovery but, are a result of human construction through social processes within a given society and generation. It is through the social processes that Jackson (1993, 660) positioned one feature of gender characteristic as “men and women are relational, socially constructed, culturally specific and negotiated category.” It should be noted that one of the social processes through which persistent social construction of differentiation permeates society is represented through the media. Social constructivists’ scholars such as Stuart Hall argued that social interest groups construct meanings using representational systems or languages (Hall 1997a). For gender to remain a social construct, there must be an interest group in society that sanctions the classification process.

Social meanings are, therefore, never fixed (Marecek *et al.* 2004) and/or predetermined. They ascend out of collaborative translation emanating from what is communicated and the interpretation, by society, of that which is communicated. Further, making sense of true meaning outside socio-cultural constructions, represented through images, words or play is an uphill task (Hall 1997b; Marecek *et al.* 2004). Meanings, as also lauded by Hall (1997a), are expressed through the works of representational systems that in diverse forms are depicted through objects, events, words, and human bodies. For the context of this paper, suggestive bodies of women showcased through Miss Curvy Uganda pageant represents an affront to the culturally acceptable understanding of women and their roles in society.

With the social construction of gender grounded in the introduction, I now structure the rest of the paper as follows. The first section gives a brief background to Miss Curvy Uganda beauty pageant. The second part situates the pageant within a constructionist theoretical framework. The third section argues that the pageant, much as it is claimed to promote the talent of the women with plus-size bodies is driven by patriarchal ideology meant to commodify, exploit and dominate women. The fourth section raises a critical analysis of the pageant, arguing that the idea behind it is biased and risk museumizing the female bodies in the virtual space for exploitation. The fifth part moves beyond the barrage of criticisms against the pageant by adopting possibilities associated with the contest. It argues that the pageant fashioned a platform that demonstrated the agency of plus-size African women who were traditionally marginalized from beauty contests due to their large body sizes. The section deconstructs the dominant public opinion that beauty contests are only for the skinny ladies. And the last part offers concluding remarks.

Background to the “Miss Curvy Uganda”

The Republic of Uganda, a landlocked country, straddles the Equator with numerous flora and fauna that could be exploited for tourism. It has the largest number of freshwater lakes in Africa, many feeder rivers with astounding falls, many mountains girding the east, west, northern and southern parts of the country holding fantastic various nature reserves awaiting development in addition to the already well-marketed national parks. Nature tourism is an important source of foreign income-earning to the country, leveraging the viability of hotel and affiliated cottage industries. However, numerous opposition groups comprised

of cultural conservatives, feminist groups, religious communities developed against the Miss Curvy Uganda pageant, a private sector-led initiative of Godfrey Kiwanda, the Junior Minister for Tourism. Kiwanda, without consulting key stakeholders in society including women groups for ideas of promoting tourism, reportedly added “curvy and sexy” Ugandan women to the list of commodities to attract foreign tourists. In fact, this beauty pageant which is dubbed “Miss Curvy Uganda,” aims to select sexy looking curvy women to compete in a beauty contest like others held across the country and globally. What is unique about the initiative is that while other beauty pageants target young slender ladies, Miss Curvy Uganda targets young plus-size ladies for their voluptuousness. The organizers argue that voluptuous women have traditionally been discriminated against from beauty pageants based on their size and hence, the contest is an opportunity to showcase them. Anne Mungoma, the CEO of Miss Curvy Uganda, argued that “This event is a beauty pageant for the natural-plus-size, which we must embrace and appreciate. We want the beauty queens to express themselves as free human beings with agency.” Certainly, there is nothing wrong with organizing a pageant for any group of people in society. However, concerns should be raised over commodification and objectification of women in society through social events like Miss Curvy pageant. And as Hall (1997a) argues, we give objects, people and events meaning by the contexts of interpretation in which we locate them – interpretations which of course can be not only condescending but also commodifying and objectifying (Figure 1).

In his public promotion of the pageant idea, Kiwanda egregiously opined during the launch, “we have naturally endowed nice looking women that are amazing to look at.” He nonchalantly wondered, pointing at “a sample” of selected smiling young ladies standing by his side at a press conference in the Capital City, Kampala, saying, “why don’t we use these people as a strategy to promote our tourism industry?” (Murungi 2019). Kiwanda left no doubt that the “Miss Curvy Uganda” had been launched to search for sexy curvaceous women and the finalists will be selected in June 2019. Within a day of hitting the headlines of major newspapers, television stations and social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc, the pronouncement was massively decried, reflecting objections from home and the diaspora. Women activists, as well as political, cultural and religious leaders responded with dismay, while others called for resignation of Kiwanda.



Figure 1. Uganda’s junior Minister for Tourism posing for a group photo with some of the curvaceous ladies at the launch of Miss Curvy Uganda, in Kampala Uganda. **Source:** The *Daily Monitor Newspaper* Wednesday February 6, 2019.

Many critics in the cultural, political and faith-based fraternity argued that it was culturally irresponsible that Kiwanda should brazenly commodify and objectify women's bodies for generating revenue. Most of the critics viewed the private initiative as a complete violation of women's dignity, cultural/spiritual purity and a negation of their resilience to earn a living through dignity in the face of tough economic times. The Kiwanda's proposal had an irrational suggestion in that while it alleged to promote tourism and upsurge government revenue, it miserably failed to appeal to moralists in a society where the demarcation between tradition and modernity is discernibly obvious. In promoting the idea, Kiwanda undoubtedly failed to realize that in a traditionally cultured and religiously structured society still struggling with the legacy of colonization and neocolonialism, his approach will surely instigate resistance from community groups.

Situating Miss Curvy within a constructionist theoretical framework

A proper understanding of the "Miss Curvy Uganda" pageant must be placed within a social constructionist's theoretical paradigm to the study of representation through the media. Consequently, this paper draws from the works of a British Sociologist, Stuart Hall (1997a; 1997b), Marecek *et al.* (2004) and Anand (2007) to inform the analysis. To properly situate this theory in the discussion of Miss Curvy Uganda, I adopted in my approach, a position somewhere between a "pragmatic and advocacist" orientation. The pragmatic orientation I adopted in this discussion can be categorized as "dialectical pragmatism" (Onwuegbuzie *et al.* 2009). These scholars see pragmatism as embracing a philosophy of carefully listening and examining multiple perspectives before taking any form of realism. With this orientation, I can objectively (as possible), extrapolate multiple perspectives (Romm *et al.* 2013) broadcasted over different communication channels in reaction to the Miss Curvy Uganda shortly after it hit the mainstream media. For neutrality in the discussion, the diverse perspectives entail juxtaposing the voices of those for and against the Miss Curvy Uganda and interlacing these with my own opinion.

Returning to social constructionist theorists therefore, meanings in society are constructed through the use of representations, images and languages (Hall 1997a). In this sense, meanings are socially constructed and communicated through diverse objects, artefacts, people, word expressions, films, photography or even the power of ideas (Hall 1997a; 1997b). This postulation feeds into the assessments of Marecek, Crawford, and Popp (2004) that concepts and categories are not direct and unequivocal reflections of reality. Rather, what people consider to be reality takes its form and meaning from the concepts made available to them. Building on Hall (1997b) and Marecek *et al.* (2004) ideas is the latter works of Anand (2007) on western colonial and neocolonial discourses which ostensibly is mirrored in dichotomizing power dynamics in the politics of representation. In Anand's (2007) argument, diverse forms of representations have been carefully crafted and deployed to belittle and dehumanize non-western "Others," to yield premeditated prejudiced discourses that underpins western hegemony over non-western societies – mainly the colonized. Feeding this postulation into historical colonial context, European colonization of Africa, America and Asia generated myriads of representations of the Indigenous peoples and cultures in derogatory and at times, intrusive ways.

For instance, Anne McClintock (1995) describes how most of the representations were purposely fashioned to depict erotic imagery and representations of women in the colonized space. To portray African land as virginly suitable for European settlements, the fathers of colonization assembled ancient connotation of men with erotic sexual activeness while women were depicted with sexual passiveness/submission-ready for male domination. Drawing from Hall (1997a)'s ideas, therefore, the politics of representation reduces the "Others" being represented through an image, objects, human bodies, etc. to an essentialized orthodoxically less than human status to be exploited by the re/presenter. This reinforces and affirms the superiority of the re/presenter over the re/presented – in the context of this paper, the sexualized women bodies – curvy breasts and backsides, identically marked for sale like commodities in the open markets.

With the theory of social constructionist's emphasis on the distinctions between poetics and politics of representation espoused, the imaginary and conceptual foundations for understanding and articulating the misrepresentation of women's bodies as sex objects for male exploitation is grounded. And in the gaze of Anand (2007), representation does not only produce and reproduce knowledge about the "Other," but it creates the "Other" and, in this context, – a dehumanized and inferior women whose bodies are marked for exploitation.

Patriarchal ideology driving Miss Curvy

An examination of different forces and their influences on society is often incomplete without including gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity in the analysis. With the controversy engulfing media outlets over Miss Curvy Uganda pageant, it becomes more apparent to examine the dominant driving forces behind this private initiative. Accordingly, some of these questions are significant: What is the main motive behind Miss Curvy Uganda? Why did the male Minister launch the initiative with ladies dressed and standing in ways intended to produce feelings of sexual attraction? Why was the initiative announced through the press conference by a male Minister and not the female Director of the pageant? These and many others lead critical scholars to open the Pandora box of ambiguity in search of rational rejoinders.

Within the evolving postmodern culture, the media has enormous influence in defining the concept of right and wrong, frame debates about socio-political and economic concepts, inflect craving, memory and fantasy in the minds of the audience. According to Shohat (1997), the media shapes identity and their existence are tied to the very core of identity production. The use of the media to broadcast images of curvy women bodies poignantly produces gendered inferiority complex over women. It relegates them to less than human status, to that of animals caged in the zoos for the desiring appetite of tourists – mainly males. This imagery, illustrated in the protruded breasts and backsides of the women, characterizes the female bodies as an erotic fetish enticement for male appeasement.

The point here is that the unchallenged social construction and definition of women's bodies by patriarchal politics disguised under the Miss Curvy pageant presents negative implications on efforts to bridge gender gaps in Ugandan/African society. This is because it gives way to manipulation and objectification of women's bodies as sexual tools, which undermines the complex web of relationship between self-esteem, growth,

and the social upliftment of women. It reduces women to an inferior position within Uganda's national socio-economic system. This reinforces the negative stereotype and conflates power dynamics in the oppression of women. It also demonstrates that in some section of society, patriarchy gains its strength and hallmark by situating itself over women using financial gain or promise of it, as a sort of proxy defense. In the lens of Sapiro (1994), it is suggestive of another dimension of patriarchal ascendancy, thus men are the possessors (of women) and women are the possessed (property of men). This reflects power manifestation which is not limited to external forces that restrict and constrain people (cf, Marecek *et al.* 2004) but rather, modern systems of power operate differently by intensifying surveillance and control over others.

Patriarchal dominance depicted in the subtle motivation behind the pageant positioned the Minister and men by extension, as the benevolence actors desiring to do good for their country (Catungal 2011). But the benevolence of patriarchy, regardless of the "good intention" as claimed by few supporters of Miss Curvy produces and imitates hegemonic, colonizing and condescending discourses over women. The curvy bodies and stylistic positions of such bodies before the camera represents suggestive gestures. Such gestures are reflected in objectifications of erotic signals exhibited through imageries as mere sexual objects always on standby for the adventurous tourists. In the rendition of Calefato (2010, 351), this is an expression of patriarchal dominance through socially constructed spaces "where desires and values are expressed, where power is noticeably enforced and manifested." This is more so common where the body of a woman is at the center of discussion, and where the power that defines gender in forcible and demeaning strategies such as Miss Curvy Uganda are perceived by some women (the represented) as expression of freedom, their rights, and secularism. The assertions of rights over their bodies strengthens hegemonic masculinity and reinforces female debasement with acclamation over male accomplishment as authors of financially profitable ventures. Elsewhere, Murray (2013) states that the message of such beauty contest functions as a social myth where the denotative signs of liberation oppose the connotative signs of oppression in women's depiction. Regrettably, assertion of "rights over our bodies" positions women as not being self-loving but instead colluding with masculinist manipulation in accepting a socially constructed albeit degrading status in society.

The embracement by some section of women, of female bodies' manipulation as objects of tourist attraction constitutes what Hussein (2004) termed gender ideology. Socially constructed, gender ideology has multiple dimensions that vary from one society to another. For instance, Hussein (2004) cites the example of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh where male children are given nutritional advantage over female children – the ramification: high malnutrition, starvation, sickness and even death among female children. Within Ugandan society, one aspect of socially constructed and informally practiced gender ideology is the favor given to boys over girls on issues of family property inheritance, right to education especially where a choice must be made between boys and girls in the event of scarce financial resources, performance of most domestic errands by girl child while boys get more time in sports and games after school, etc.

In South Western Uganda for example, another obnoxious gender ideology is the ancient story of Punishment Island locally called *Akampene* Island on Lake Bunyonyi in Kabale district. People from the region still narrate the story that until the early 1900s, a voyage to *Akampene* was not for any good cause but a source of pain and agony to a

mother, a mother to a girl who was considered to have brought dishonor to her family. The community still talks of a notorious history of *Akampene* Island where girls who were discovered to be pregnant out of wedlock would be canoed, forever banished from their families and community. They were left to face slow and painful deaths for bringing dishonor (conception before marriage) to their families. This was a deterrent punishment meant to send a strong signal to other girls. In the voyage entourage according to oral narratives, there would be fleets of canoes full of scornful, spiteful and taunting young men armed with heart of abhorrence towards the pregnant girls for bringing dishonor to her family. However, the boys responsible for the pregnancies that sent numerous girls to *Akampene* Island were often left unscathed and continued with their lives, possibly sending more girls to the Island. This is akin to honor killings still practiced in parts of some Asian societies. This social construction of prescriptive differences according to Freire (1970) delineates the basic elements of the relationship between male oppressor and the oppressed female. Such prescription represents the imposition of one domineering will over others, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into one that conforms with the prescriber's perception (Freire 1970), in this case the women into accepting the transgression of their bodies in public domain.

Museumization of female bodies in the virtual space for exploitation

Suffusing another dimension to the discussion, the imagery linked to the Miss Curvy Uganda pageant clearly marked the dialectic between the curvy bodies on display and the motive of the male propagators. Again, to imbue the ideas of Calefato (2010), it is through this dialectic that we also come to understand the limitations of the female bodies, that such bodies are easily objectifiable for representations and reductively assessed as mere objects and/or commodities for archival in virtual museums.

The most condescending pageant ever organized in the history of Uganda by a group of self-centered and short-sighted individuals, Miss Curvy Uganda is nostalgic of outdated capitalist manipulation and exploitation of raw materials from the powerless societies. In this case, the commodification and marketization of women's bodies for display in the virtual space reduces women to mere objects of museumization with the risk of attracting sexual predators. The idea championed by the Minister, reflected in his dishonorable act of displaying the curvy female bodies for soundtracks of the press presents a woman's body as only good for sexual gratification and such must be exploited at will by anybody with financial prowess. This patriarchal and colonizing mindset has no place in a civilized society of the twenty-first century. It is not surprising that a group of feminist activists in Uganda have sought legal response against such irresponsible gesture. It is deplorable that governments official in the twenty-first century manipulate the bodies of citizens for material gains (Johnston and Taylor 2008; Bloul 2012). This move reflects colonial bequest and patriarchal authority. It plays right into the dominant discourse of "female oppression by male in developing societies" often reproduced, validated and disseminated by the mainstream western media.

Weighing on the Miss Curvy pageant, the President of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni castigated the Miss Curvy Uganda pageant arguing that he will not allow young girls to expose their bodies. In his statement, while addressing journalists at the Presidential Investors' Round table discussions in February 2019, Mr Museveni said the proposal

had never been endorsed by Cabinet, adding that there is no justification for tourists to come to Uganda to purposely look at beautiful women. In his remarks reported by Misairi & Tajuba in *Daily Monitor of February 8th, 2019* the president argued:

This was not a Cabinet decision. People should not come here to see women. I don't like the idea that we are marketing our women for tourism. We should take time and look at this. I have my private view on all these [*sic*] but I haven't discussed them. Certainly, I would not allow my grandchildren to show their body appearance.

The president's assessment was reverberated by the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Stanley Ntagali who condemned the pageant from a faith-based perspective. He argued that the pageant undermines the dignity of women and all that the church has worked for to advance girl-child education and equal opportunities for women to play their part in national development. In the Archbishop's words, the pageant is "a disgusting display of exploitation and brings shame upon the families and the country" (Ntagali 2019). Arguably, presentation and promotion of such a program position the government as a cultural transgressor and regress the country to primitive periods where women were treated as chattel. Undoubtedly, it clouts a huge hole in the government's recent effort to abolish bride price with the claim that it exposes women to domestic violence and male exploitation.

Inferring to the discussion from the theoretical framework taken earlier, the constructionist perceptions help readers to differentiate between semiotics and discourses of representation (Hall 1997a; Marecek *et al.* 2004). While the semiotic method examines how an object is represented and the politics behind the representation, the discourse of representation transcends this borderline by investigating the effects of representation. Notably, Hall (1997b, 6) explains that the discursive approach

Examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced, and studied.

This background is vital in the examination of Miss Curvy Uganda, the sexualized images fashioned, disseminated and museumized in the virtual space that engendered widespread condemnation nationally and across international borders. I argue that the hegemonic discourse of the curvy bodies fashioned by the power of the camera (photographic depictions) have the effect of reestablishing ancient imperial relations through the process of redefining for the world, the purpose of an African woman's body as a sex object. This is inexplicably promoted in the Minister's tone when he asserted "Why don't we use these people as a strategy to promote our tourism industry?" This tone is emblematic of dominant groups that produce subjective knowledge to yield more credible and effective socioeconomic and political perspectives for struggles they are engaged in (Akena 2012). One thing that the champions of the pageant failed to realize is the fact that no tourist in the right sense of mind would traverse thousands of miles from his/her country just to see curvy women's bodies. In any case, are curvy women not also found in the different societies where tourists come from? What makes the curvy in Uganda such a special interest for tourists? The Minister's egregious statement is an open invitation to sexual predators with financial muscles to sexually exploit

women. As Munini Mulera, a social critic and a columnist in the *Daily Monitor Newspaper* asserted “displaying Ugandan women’s bodies may indeed attract some tourists, but not the kind [of tourists] any civilised society would want in its midst” (reported in the *Daily Monitor of February 11th*, 2019). Treading this line of argument in reaction to the Miss Curvy Uganda, the Association of Uganda Tour Operators (AUTO) Board Chairperson expressed dismay, as reported by Kyama in *Daily Monitor of February 2019*:

The Minister’s remarks are not only embarrassing to the tourism industry, but also to Uganda as a country. Uganda has quite a number of [*sic*] tourism products that can be marketed to the world. Turning our women into tourist attractions will only be a shameful act (Kyama 2019).

Additionally, within the context of most African society, the virtual space museumization of the female bodies and the victims’ acceptance of this process as their rights, transgresses traditional cultural therapists’ yardstick for defining socially acceptable behavior. Although there exist no cultural normative standards upon which to measure socially acceptable cultural behoove, the museumization of the female body feeds right into the discourse of ethnocentrism that most cultural therapists seek to circumvent. It also aligns with individual interest within the political circle who exploit messages of women’s freedom in the neoliberal postcolonial economy as social empowerment to garner partisan currency and gain social prestige (cf, Murray 2013).

As Murray further states, in neoliberal postcolonial economy, understanding of dominant ideology of beauty involves absorbing representation and socially constructing the meaning of seductive girls. The process of objectifying and sexualizing women’s bodies can be equated to a “cultural bomb” espoused by African playwright Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986). The effect of cultural bomb was to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, languages, identity, agencies, and eventually in their bodies as we see for the case of Missy Curvy Uganda pageant. Through cinematography, the camera was used as an instrument of oppression that monitors and ultimately analyzes the behavior of the young ladies thereby showcasing their bodies as an attraction to potential sexual predators. In agreement, Charlotte Kamugisha, a member of the Association of Uganda Tour Operators (AUTO) described the idea behind Miss Curvy Uganda as absurd to the Ugandan society. She, as reported in the *Daily Monitor of February 11th*, lamented:

If you say that you are going to parade curvy women as tourist attractions, then that simply means that women are sexual objects. This is entirely not good for the country. Let us hope that the Minister will eventually come out and apologize to Ugandan women in particular [*sic*]. We, as the tourism fraternity, are disappointed with the Minister’s remarks.

Further resistance to the pageant came from Uganda’s Minister of State for Ethics and Integrity, Fr. Simon Lokodo who, swore to halt the pageant using the law, labeling it as another shrewd strategy to promote pornography that was outlawed in Uganda. In Lokodo’s view, the initiative is malevolent as it itemizes and demeans the dignity of women. In a telephone interview with the *Daily Monitor Newspaper*, Lokodo is reported to have stated that the Miss Curvy pageant initiative is ill-minded, with intent to demean women’s dignity arguing further that it sends wrong message to young girls. The message that those without curves should go and enhance them – which have possible health implications on the young girls.

Altogether, objectifying women's bodies for sexual pleasure feeds into McClintock's (1995) postulations that many of these representations were tied to erotic imagery and existing representations of women. For instance, McClintock analyzes the example in H. Rider Haggard's novel, *King Solomon's Mines* where the reader is presented with a treasure map that charts a path passing between two mountains labeled "Sheba's breasts" and eventually arriving at the eponymous mines. McClintock (1995, 3) reads and interprets the map as "the diagram of a female body ... spread-eagled and truncated – the only parts drawn are those that denote female sexuality" ostensibly ready for exploitation by male European colonizers. The same imagery is repeated in Jan van der Straet's image of Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci "rediscovering" America. In this illustration, we see, as photographically depicted and described by McClintock (1995, 25)

A fully armored Vespucci stands erect and masterful before a naked and erotically inviting woman, who inclines toward him from a hammock.

The modest interpretation one can draw from this photography is the representation of Indigenous American land as passively pending the violent intrusion of European civilization. But this intrusion is faced with possible dangers lurking in the background of van der Straet's image. The danger here is presented with the existence of cannibal culture (*an expression of fear of the unknown*) – of the "uncivilized" native American ways of life that must be conquered by the "civilized" Europeans. The implication of this example on the Miss Curvy is that it espouses skewed power relationship between the presenter, the Minister and the presented, the paraded ladies. The skewed power relations determine the development of knowledge that splits and truncates the women's body from their humanity in society. The narrative of the male Minister is given unwarranted attention over the "silent narratives" of the women in display. Another way in which power is exacted in the Miss Curvy episode is when the paraded ladies are not given the opportunity for self-representation. This retells a story of images of young energetic male Africans paraded in the Libyan dark market by avaricious Arabs businessmen in early 2018 covertly captured and broadcasted by CNN media house. The visibly young energetic men were paraded with coerced smiles on their faces but behind the veil of the "smiling faces," one can read deep-seated powerlessness to resist their ordeals. Perhaps, giving the women the opportunity to represent themselves would have played a great deal to erode the reductive unitary image created by the condescending display.

The act of parading women's curvy bodies for tourism is undoubtedly an open transgression on women. It obliterates the achievements registered by most African society on bridging gender gaps and reduces women to mere exotic products for sexual manipulation. The fact that the idea is being championed by a male Minister is telling of the unequal power relations and patriarchal dominance still smoldering in contemporary society. Readers may be skeptical of the unequal power relationship claim with the argument that the brain behind Miss Curvy is a woman and that some sections of young women have embraced the pageant. However, in a society where unemployment rate is skyrocketing (at 83%) among young people aged 15–24 years of age (World Bank 2009), Mulera (2019) reminds us that many women have been socialized to believe, without questioning, that their bodies are commodities to be sold as an alternate source of income. This is a dishonoring of women, it belittles, dehumanizes and fetishizes them as a form of a sexual object for predatory indulgence.

Another dimension to examine in the lopsided power dynamic at play in the Miss Curvy Uganda is the fact that Ugandan society has equally well-endowed young men. But it is surprising that none of the endowed male bodies is being added to the list of tourists' attractions. Cynically, some section of women (as mentioned earlier) including the chief Organizer who are most likely enticed by material gains or promise of it, have openly expressed their support of the pageant. Conflating the Miss Curvy and the tourists' attraction idea, one only wonders what would happen to the young ladies after the tourists are done with seeing their sexy and curvaceous bodies. It is a common practice for visiting tourists to buy artefacts or things they can carry back to their country. However, since the young ladies cannot be bought like artefacts for carrying home by prospective tourists, the alternate way out for those interested in exploring beyond mere seeing is to sexually exploit. Isn't this an indirect way of promoting prostitution, which is outlawed by Uganda's constitution? As a nation, we need to critically rethink and assess the significance of this pageant and view it as a form of refined violence against women taking new shape right in our sight. We therefore cannot afford to idly standby. In a related piece, Murray (2013) writes about the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty with less celebratory tone by asserting that such beauty pageants based on physical attributes of female participants, objectifies and employs the bodies of women to promote ideological and economic consumption by the audiences.

Examined through an antiracist lens, the Miss Curvy pageant fits into the category of covert racism where in some instances, the racialized groups develop complacency in the narratives produced by the racists. One way to look at this is through raising question such as, what if the curvy bodies marked for tourist attraction were the sisters, or even daughters of the organizers? Would they be fetishized for tourists' desire? My inference is that the narrative would be different. The organizers indubitably would be on the street carrying placards to protest or respond with legal action against the promoters of such initiative. The pageant, I argue, is a selective application of antifemale prejudice which is a new wave of gender ideology (Hussein 2004) permeating society through far-right bigoted creed. To borrow from Hall's (1997b) terms then, the politics of representation is a fashioned policy of producing a non-dominant group based on certain essentialized and stereotypical thoughts that reduce the group being produced to a subservience level. And when a group is categorized as subservient in society, it becomes justifiable to inferiorize their personality through disdainful depiction. This serves to buttress their (the subservient) socially constructed and imposed subsidiary position in society.

In wrapping up the discussion in this section, it is important for readers to understand that what really matters in the Miss Curvy Uganda pageant is the general ideas and motives overriding the photographic depictions of women. Undeniably the women were strategically (*strategic in the way the smiling ladies were stationed around the male Minister – the smiles are a subject beyond the scope of this paper*) positioned and their bulging/alluring breasts and backsides (*naturally endowed bodies*) were exhibited through the canon of male authority and gender prejudice over women. This representation of women problematizes the cultural issues of breast size, backside shapes and body weight that signify female sexuality (Murray 2013) and overshadows women's efforts to genuinely resolve challenges of self-esteem. Through simplistic and binary reduction of skewed depiction – the rich cultural diversity, traditions, language, artistry,

customs of Ugandan society are summed up into an erotic depiction of female bodies. The bodies are then archived in the virtual space museums for showcasing in the living rooms of western society especially Europe, north America and Australia – for, this is where most tourists to Uganda originate.

Situating the debate within contemporary culture

The contemporary viewpoints tend to emphasize independent and informed agency of participants. Viewed from this angle, the pageant may have provided a platform to demonstrate the agency and resilience of women in a highly patriarchal society. Two months after attracting widespread outrage from moralists and critics, the inaugural beauty pageant was held (on April 26, 2019) in Kampala, Uganda's capital. The decency, elegance and brilliancy of the twenty-five participants dominated the show that many Ugandans had bitterly castigated. Contrary to the earlier impressions the pageant had generated which led to wide condemnations, the focus of the actual pageant took many by surprise. As postulated by social constructionist theory, the actual Miss Curvy competition caused a change in opinion (of the pageant) among largely conservative sections of society. It was premised on physical decency and aptitude tests to which the judges subjected finalists. The aptitude tests focused on how the girls would use the title *if they won* for societal transformation, upliftment of women in a predominately male society and promotion of moral values. The change in opinion according to Marecek *et al.* (2004) feeds into social constructionists' interests in understanding how people shift among different accounts as they move through differing situations.

Regarding the promotion of the objectives of the pageant, the contestants pledged to inspire and empower their peers economically. In a similar context of beauty pageant, scholars have observed that women's participation in the social construction of beauty can serve as a meaningful source of empowerment (Johnston and Taylor 2008). For Miss Curvy, the contest provided a platform for demonstration of fortress by the contesting ladies to promote women's talents for economic enablement. What remains to be seen is how the winner, Miss Nansasi Belinda will utilize the national and international fame generated by the contest for women's economic upliftment.

Another common response by the contestants to the aptitude tests focused on rallying women to fight against stereotypes held by the public against the plus-size women as they call themselves rather than "fat women" label, condescendingly ascribed to them. As with the Land mine survivors' pageant in Angola, the Miss Curvy contest provided the platform to get a message across. The message that illuminates socio-economic empowerment of talented women who are proud, dignified and comfortable with themselves (Bloul 2012; Murray 2013). It is important to acknowledge that throughout the history of pageants in East Africa, only the skinny ladies have participated and eventually won beauty contests. The concept of beauty was thus socially configured to denote "skinny, spotless skin, and tall figure" which traditionally excluded the medium and plus-size ladies. The Miss Curvy pageant debunked this conventional public opinion and shifted the discourse of beauty to that of inclusivity and showcasing special talents. This was hinted by the pageant organizers who lauded the contest for its resounding success declaring that it featured Uganda on major international media houses for a positive reason. Major international media

houses like BBC, AFP, the Chinese news agency flew their crews to Uganda purposely for the pageant. Without reservation, the pageant provided a platform for global recognition and nation branding (cf, Crawford *et al.* 2008). In the *Daily Monitor* of April 2019, one of the organizers succinctly echoed

Unlike the chaotic scenes like riots and protests which usually attract foreign media, the Miss Curvy contest was probably one of the first social events in the country which attracted international media.

Linking the above statement with reactions to a 2005 Nepalese beauty contest, Crawford *et al.* (2008) argued that the actual pageant met with the enthusiastic approval of middle-class and educated Nepalese women. These fans threw their support behind the pageant because of its potential benefits to the contestants. They saw the pageant as a platform for instilling self-confidence and the ability for participating women to express themselves in public. This position feeds into the views earlier expressed by Miss Curvy pageant supporters that the contest would give the opportunity to the ladies to benefit economically. This was proved right when the contest winner, Miss Nansasi Belinda won herself a brand-new Jeep Cherokee. All the other contestants received different cash prizes. Therefore, the pageant, albeit generating controversies, served the function of dissipating stereotypes against stigmatized women especially those with plus-size bodies (cf, Barnes 1994; Johnston and Taylor 2008; Bloul 2012). Economically, it was beneficial to participants as all of them were awarded different prizes that were not available to non-participants. Additionally, the pageant opened a debate about tradition and modernity from the perspective that other countries are holding such contests. It demonstrated tolerance on the part of Ugandan government as being liberal for allowing such a campaign considered by conservatives as culturally and religiously inappropriate.

Finally, the pageant showcased Uganda as a tolerant country now keeping with the global trend since many other countries (Barnes 1994; Johnston and Taylor 2008; Bloul 2012; Murray 2013) are holding pageants that deviate from the conventional understanding of beauty contests. Returning to social constructionist's theory articulated earlier, it raised interesting debate about social phenomena related to sex, gender and the social interpretation/s of the same. As demonstrated in this paper, the theory offered a robust articulation and understanding of Miss Curvy, a socially contested event in a moderately conservative and patriarchal society.

Conclusion

As scholars and social justice activists, every encounter with domineering discourses over visible minority groups in society should ignite in us the impulse for action. In examining the showcasing over the media, of women bodies for exploitation, I am courteous of my role in setting up discussions and inviting reactions from readers many of whom will already have their own views. I am hoping that this will set ground for more critical gaze on some issues of domination we take for granted in society. It is my hope that the discussion in this paper will, to use the words of Mertens (2007), place central importance on the lives and experiences of groups in society that are often pushed to the margins. Examples of such groups are women, racial, ethnic minorities, the poor, and

more generally people in nondominant cultural groups whose voices, experiences and social struggles are often overlooked.

I am also hopeful that readers will find this paper evocative in drawing some proactive responses that specifically relates to systemic issues of injustices such as women abuse/exploitation, domestic violence and resistance to social construction of differences against women and other minority groups like persons with disability, the economically disadvantaged groups, etc. (Mertens 2007). It is the proactive responses that value and respect all women and other minority groups in society as human beings with broad range of intellectual variations. As a society, we should engage in a practice of identifying and celebrating the strength, intellects and industriousness of women, who are the carriers and transmitters of life, they are the source of life and mothers of the nation. Henceforward, there is much work to be done to arrive at a strong collective and impartial feminist voice, voice that articulates the meaning of true empowering female beauty for current and future generations (Murray 2013).

Finally, although the pageant took place with some degree of success two months after it drew widespread condemnations, the main argument in this article demonstrate otherwise. Bloul (2012) reminds us that beauty pageants are not only rituals but are also spectacles which invite the audience to stare at beauty and judge its display. The main judgement here is that the pageant, much as it is claimed to address social discrimination against ladies with natural plus-size bodies and promote their talents, does not in the long run produce the outcome the organizers anticipate. Rather, the discussion of the pageant has illuminated how disparaging a society can become when patriarchal ideologies are given space to flourish unchallenged. To integrate Murray (2013, 98) idea, Miss curvy pageant initiative is “... an oppressive ideology that reinforces the value of [plus-size] female beauty and its pursuit by garnering women’s agreement with its values of ideological and material consumption.” By re-focusing critical gaze on the pageant, I conclude with the submission that a combination of patriarchy, biased gender ideology, power and domination fueled by material greed produced Miss Curvy beauty contest – an idea that dishonors women.

I have, via this example proffered a different rendition of the pageant as an egoistic initiative aimed at exploiting, through patriarchal ideology, the young and mostly unemployed ladies for financial gains. I hope readers can see how imperative it is for the twenty-first-century society to endorse and comply with International Human Right principles and corresponding laws that advocate for fair, equal and equitable treatment of all people regardless of their perceived or real physical differences. Henceforward, it is my desire that the young ladies marked for exploitation, feminists and other social justice activists will realize the motivation as I see it, behind the pageant and develop counter narratives that celebrate the dignity and resilience of women.

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