CRITIQUE ON CHILD BEAUTY PAGEANT REFLECTED IN DAYTON AND FARIS' *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*

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Abstract

This research aims to identify (1) what kind of critique on child beauty pageant reflected in *Little Miss Sunshine* and (2) to identify how the critique on child beauty pageant is exposed by the movie. To answer these objectives, this research applied qualitative research method and employed Catharine A. MacKinnon's theory of Dominance Feminism. The findings of this research show that there are two important points. First, Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine* criticizes the existence of (1) social power construction (gender hierarchy and (2) women's objectification. The existence of social power construction is shown by the existence of (1) sameness approach and (2) difference approach as methods of measuring women through patriarchal perception. Meanwhile the women's objectification is revealed to be (1) the existence of social standard to objectify women and (2) the existence of pornography as a method of sexually objectifying women. The critique on child beauty pageant reflected in Dayton and Faris' Little Miss Sunshine is represented by through (1) the shots to reveal the whole mood, (2) the angles emphasizes how the subject matters, (3) the color to build an emotional and (4) the music to suggests the spirit of the film. Hence, those findings reveal the critique on child beauty pageant and to give awareness about the existence of gender domination that lives within the society.

Keywords: feminism, second wave feminism, dominance feminist, film theory, film elements.

INTRODUCTION

Woman, as it is structured in the patriarchal society, is the closest creatures to beauty that people may easily recognize. The recognition does not go far from the approaches that men in the patriarchal society use to measure women through their outer aesthetic. The moment when society is constructed in such way is a reflection of existence of gender hierarchy or social power construction (MacKinnon. 1991:220-221).

The ideology of the hierarchy living within the society is believed not only by men, but also by women. Because of that, women, in general are more vulnerable to body norms. Because of this vulnerability, women tend to try to get as close as possible to the standard created by the patriarchal society. The problem

increase even more when the capitalists use women's body as a tool of marketing.

One of capitalists' methods on objectifying women is by holding a beauty pageant event. In this event, young girls wear minimum clothes and maximum makeup to impress the juries and the audience. The first beauty pageant took place in Atlantic City Hotel, US in 1921 to attract tourist to stay longer in the hotel. The beauty pageant was first called The Fall Frolic that later in 1922 changed its name into Miss America.

After being successful at adult beauty pageant, the event started to spread into child beauty pageant. The first child beauty pageant was a children's floral parade and beauty contest held at Ocean Park, California on May, 1922. Although there was this children's floral parade at that time, but it is agreed that the first modern child beauty pageant was started in New Jersey in 1961 (Hannah Miet, 2013). This pageant got more popularity and changed its name into Little Miss America. After that, the pageants developed into more various sections, like party wear, swim wear, photogenic (facial beauty) and talent show. This kind of development started in 1970's.

Regardless of its development, the critique started to rise about the negativity of child beauty pageant. One of them is a journal by Henry A. Giroux. The journal

was published in 1998 entitled *Nymphet Fantasies: Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence.* In his journal, Giroux argues that child beauty pageant is a form of politicization of child innocence that is supported by the state. He also provides some information about missing children in the United States and the pedophilia cases that increase from time to time. He also states that the existence of child beauty pageant is an irony in the state, because, despite the fact that the number of pedophilia and missing children cases are increasing, the states still legalize the child beauty pageant. It is believed that capitalism plays a big role in this event. Thus, this kind of critique of child beauty pageants started to spread as the consciousness of children's nature began to increase.

The media for the critique may be varying. Literature can be one of some medias to criticize this situation, because it can be a media to reflect the reality using letters and narrative. However, film is also an effective tool to depict and criticize the child beauty pageant, because both literature and film share the ability to employ the device and the structure of the narrative. Sequences of images on screen tell a story that is equivalent to the sequence of words on page (John Midega, 2010). Thus, film analysis can be included in to the field of literary analysis. Post-

structuralism, according to Bernard E. Harcourt (2007: 1), concentrates on the point when human can impose meaning to identify ambiguous space in the writings or any forms of artistic actions or even human everyday life (Harcourt, 2007:1). Film, at this point, has elements of story equals to the literary elements used by conventional written literary works.

Through the film, the directors try to criticize the social power construction and women's objectification using film elements.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses qualitative research design. Since the object of the research is Dayton and Faris' movie entitled *Little Miss Sunshine*, the data collected for this research were in the forms of language features such as pictures, words, phrase, clauses, and sentences, taken from the primary data source. Scrutinizing is used to get a clear understanding of the content of the movie. Then, the researcher collects the data by making simple notes about the pictures words, phrases and clauses related to the topic. The next step, the researcher reads the data in order to have a clear interpretation. In the last step, the data are categorized in which the first data is used to explain the critique on child beauty pageant found in the movie and the second one is used to explain how the critique is exposed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Critique on Child Beauty Pageant Reflected in Dayton and Faris' Little Miss Sunshine.

Inside the society there is a hegemony which is the men hegemony, which leads the society in to the patriarchal kind of society we know today (MacKinnon.1991:ix-x). Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine* movie, gives a good critique to the social power construction in the patriarchal society. Women objectification is also explicitly criticised in the movie. The researcher divides the aspects into two categories: the social power construction, which uses two approaches: sameness approach and difference approach, and women's objectification which involves the social standard and pornography.

1) Critique on Social Power Construction

a. Critique on The Sameness Approach

In the Little Miss Sunshine contest, the contestants are judged based on how they look like. Sameness approach focuses on how close the contestants look like to the standard of the committee of the beauty pageant. The nearer the contestants look like to the standard, the closer they are to the crown, because the better they

are seen in the eye of judges of the beauty pageant. The scene bellow is one of the examples:

> **Another TINY BLONDE GIRL sings while flouncing and prancing across the stage, blowing kisses and twirling a parasol**. She skips around the MC, flirting and batting her eyes. **The audience -- charmed -- starts clapping along. As she finishes, the audience rises as one in a standing ovation.** Richard is the only one to remain seated. His face sinks as reality finally hits him -- there's no way Olive will win. He gets up and departs. (Screenplay of Dayton and Faris, Little Miss Sunshine, 95-96).

From the scene criticizes how the contestants try to look as exact as possible to the term that is standardized and commonly known by the people in that state. Blond hair, attractive movement and charming smile are the standard that is commonly believed by the people there. The closer the contestant is to the description, the more attention she gets. This is because the approach used to judge the contestant is by measuring how close she is to the measurement created by the patriarchal society. Thus, the sameness approach, or the approach on how near a woman is from the standard of beauty created by patriarchal society is one of the problems that is being criticized by the movie.

b. Critique on Difference Approach

The distance of women from the standard of how women must look and act like, created by men in the patriarchal society is one method of judging woman which strengthen the existence of social power construction. The imperfections, lacks, and inability to fulfill men's term and standard become the approach to discriminate and divide women in to categories.

In Little Miss Sunshine pageant, this method is used to judge Olive, because of her inability to fulfill the standard of the child beauty pageant. The difference approach method is shown in one of the scenes in the movie:

> MC: Okay! Well! Take it away, Olive!
> He retreats. **She is alone on stage. Some 12 YEAR OLD BOYS in the audience decide to be cruel. One of them "moos".**
>
> **BOY ONE: Moooo!**
> **GIGGLES and SHUSHES.**
> **Another boy chimes in.**
> **BOY TWO: Arf! Arf! Arf!**
> More GIGGLES and SHUSHES. Miss California, at the judges table by the stage, looks around sternly. She feels bad for Olive.
> Olive is confused. She doesn't understand these noises. (The Screenplay of Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine* page 102)

The Scene criticizes the audience that discriminates Olive by the way she looks. Olive is not blond, skinny and

charming. She cannot flirt, become smooth and attractive on the stage, the reaction of the audience shows that Olive is judged based on how far she is from the measurement of the patriarchal society. She is considered ugly, so she is discriminated and humiliated.

2) Critique on Women's Objectification

a. Critique on the Social Standard

Within the society, there is a social standard. Related to gender, the patriarchal society put women into some divisions. As mentioned before, sameness approach and difference approach are the approaches used by men to judge women based on men made measurements. The right given to men to judge women and standardize the limit is called the women's objectification. The scene that shows women's objectification based on the social standard can be seen bellow:

> **RICHARD: Olive, can I tell you something about ice-cream? (she nods) Ice cream is made from cream, which comes from cow's milk. And cream has a lot of fat in it...**
> SHERYL: Richard...
> **RICHARD: What? "She's gonna find out anyway." Right?**
> OLIVE: Find out what?
> **RICHARD: Well, when you eat ice-cream, the fat in the ice-cream becomes fat on your body...**
> SHERYL: Richard, I swear to God...!
> OLIVE:What? What's wrong?
> SHERYL: Nothing, honey. Nothing's wrong.
> **RICHARD: So if you eat lots of ice-cream, you're gonna become big and fat. But if you don't, you'll probably stay nice and skinny.**

Sheryl puts her head in her hands.

(Screenplay of Dayton and Faris' Little Miss Sunshine, page 31-32)

The Conversation above criticizes the social standard that is shown by Richard's words. Richard introduces the standard of society that to be beautiful means to be skinny, especially if Olive wants to be a beauty queen. For that reason, he warns Olive about the bad side of eating ice cream, because it makes her fat, while women in the Miss America pageant are usually skinny, simply because that is the standard that is recognized by the society.

b. Critique on Pornography

Women's objectification has various forms, with pornography as one of them. Sexual desire towards the opposite sex is natural, not obscene, nor even objectification. Problem exist when what plays the most with stimulating male's desire is by being as near as possible with the stereotype of beauty created by male dominated society. As talked about before, inferiority and femininity are tangled, along with being sexual object for men, in real life. Pornography is seen as a distortion of reality, which may affect

reality. The Scene that criticizes pornography is shown below:

> Onstage, an MC steps up to a microphone. A DRUMROLL.
> MC: Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the 14th annual Little Miss Sunshine pageant! Let's welcome the contestants!
> MUSIC. Big APPLAUSE.
> **Twenty-five little girls parade out on stage in swim-suits. Twenty of them are blond -- some bleached. They've been arranged from shortest to tallest.**
> Olive -- at least two inches taller than everyone else -- is
> at the end of the line.
> **The girls parade around in a loop, waving and smiling. They end up in a line running across the stage.**

(Screenplay of Dayton and Faris' Little Miss Sunshine, page 90)

Wearing such exposing outfits, these little girls are required to not just stand still and do nothing, instead they have to smile and wave all the time and then the juries will take some notes containing the points these pageant participants achieve from being objectified and almost naked. By showing this scene, the movie exposes its critique towards pornography. This scene shows the exploitation of little girls, in other word, pornography. These girls are required to act like adult by being sexual and sensual, while they are just little girls who still cannot consent any sexual act, because their bodies are not even ready for that, seen by their delicate young age.

2. How the Critique on Child Beauty Pageant is exposed in the movie.

a. The Shots

1) The Extreme Long Shot

This shot is used to let the audience know about the setting of the movie.

(Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine* in minute 21:25)

This scene captures the morning when the Hoovers start their journey to California. Using and old VW car, the almost bankrupt family decide to go to California to take Olive to pursue her dream of becoming a beauty queen that does not go far from being sexualized and objectified.

2) The Long Shot

The long shot is taken full body to show the characterization of the subject.

(Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine* minute 01:13)

The scene shows that Olive is normal girl with bulky stomach, which is

seen as unusual to be a beauty queen. This unusual look is intentionally shown as foreshadow for the problems that will possibly be faced by the main character that can lead into further critique about beauty pageant.

3) The Medium Shot

This shot is taken from knee to waist up and is supposed to take more detail expression and dialogue.

(Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine*
minute 76:19)

In the scene above, medium shot can be used to criticize the social standard and pornography advertised by child beauty pageant. This can also give a closer look about how these little girls are objectified and sexualized by wearing adult woman's sensual attribute, which is totally not for little girls, since they are not meant to be ready to have any sensual and sexual activity judged by their delicate young age.

4) The Close Up Shot

The Close up shot is usually used to take small object, like human face. It is used to show the importance of things. It is also used to take small object as a

symbolic significance of that thing (Giannetti, 2002:13).

(Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine*,
minute 00:38)

This scene is a symbol of how media affects people through want they see. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, the media is seen by Olive and what she sees in the media affects her dream, expectation, and standard of beauty, in other world, her reality. This scene is seen by researcher as a method to criticize the social standard advertised by media that affects people in general by showing Olive's eyes and the reflection of TV screen at the same time.

b. The Angles

1) The High-Angle Shot

The high angles reduce the importance of a subject in order to convey a character's self-effort. The character will seem so harmless and insignificant photographed from above. This angle is useful for showing the viewers an overview of the scene. In addition, this angle decreases the importance of setting.

(Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine*, minute 69:15)

As seen in the scene above, the Richard drives an old broken VW car that can hardly slow down. Even though the condition seems to be impossible for him, but Richard still try to turn around to the location of the competition. The high angle shot signifies the effort of the Hoovers to get Olive to join the competition. This helps to criticize the way this family act to unconsciously support the objectification of their little girl.

2) The Eye Level Shot

For the eye level shot, placement of the camera four or five feet above ground corresponds to height of the observer. This shot permits people to make up their minds about what kind of people are being presented (Giannetti, 2002: 16-17). The camera is placed at same level as the object or character. This angle is used because it is seen neutral for the scene.

(Dayton and Faris' Little Miss Sunshine, minute 42:25)

The scene does not show the full dance that Olive will perform in the contest; instead, it reveals a very different thing. This scene shows that Olive, as a young little girl, shows an obedient attitude to her grandfather. It symbolizes how a norm can be passed through generations without questions, simply because it comes from the elders. Thus, the scene reflects the social standard within the society.

3) The Low Angle Shot

According to Giannetti (2002: 17), in this angle, the shot in which the subject is photographed from below. This shot increases a short actor's height. Low angles are often used in propaganda in scene depicting heroism. In taking shot, this angle is taken from below the subject opposing the high angle shot. The use of this shot also increases the importance of characterization.

(Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine*, minute 90:46)

As seen in the picture, the police is considered important because he is the one who is in charge about the consequence that the Hoovers may accept because of their behavior in the contest. This scene

criticizes how a state can easily supports the system that objectifies and sexualize women, especially little girls just because it is considered common in that state.

c. Color

Color tends to be one of some important elements in film because it can build the emotion in appeal, expressive and atmospheric of the film. In general, bright colors tend to show cheerfulness and happiness. Then, cool colors such as blue, green and violet tend to show calm, peacefulness, aloofness and disregard. Warm colors such as red, yellow and orange tend to danger or violence, aggressiveness, and motivation. Garish colors tend to show about the glamor of the world of show business.

(Dayton and Faris' Little Miss Sunshine, minute: 78:50)

The directors use warm color to represent the competitive atmosphere between the contestants in the pageant. This color is significant because the whole movie is about the struggle to get involved in the competition and also the competition itself. Red is the color that Olive always wears in the movie. The color represents Olive's motivation to be a winner in the beauty pageant contest. Thus, warm color is the most compatible color to represent competitive atmosphere in the story.

d. Music

Music presents a kind of overture to suggest the mood or spirit of the film. Music can suggest not only classes, location and ethnic group, but also foreshadow (Giannetti, 2002: 222). In other words, music can be used as a clue to the viewers to get prepared for the unpredictable scenes. Anxiousness, happiness, anger, tension and so on can be reflected through music.

In Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine*, the critique on child beauty pageant is reflected by a song delivered by Rick James entitled *Super Freak*. Here is some part of the lyrics:

She's a very kinky girl
The kind you don't take home to mother
She will never let your spirits down
Once you get her off the street, ow girl
She likes the boys in the band
She says that I'm her all-time favorite
When I make my move to her room
It's the right time
She's never hard to please

The symbol of gender hierarchy, women's objectification, and pornography in the song do not only apply to Olive, but also to other contestants. This song and Olive's performance are the punch line of the whole movie for what is actually wrong with the child beauty pageant as the

product of patriarchal society. Thus, the choice of this music to really criticize the child beauty pageant is very precise, effective and symbolic.

CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis, the conclusions are drawn into the two major points. First, Dayton and Faris' *Little Miss Sunshine* criticizes: (1) the existence of social power construction (gender hierarchy) which consists of sameness approach and difference approach as methods of measuring women through the patriarchal perspective. Second, (2) the existence of women's objectification, which is revealed to be (1) the social standard that exist as a method of objectifying women's through their outer aesthetic and (2) pornography as a method of sexual objectification against women as child beauty pageant as the event or in other words the capitalists that execute the tradition.

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