

Too Quick to Judge

BY LIZ LANCE



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Last September, I trudged up the red-carpeted steps inside the International Club in Sanepa, heavy messenger bag and camera bag slung over one shoulder. My pants were flecked with mud, my hair haphazardly pulled back into a ponytail, sweat dripped down my face. It was the end of the monsoon, hot and humid, and I was in search of the 15 or so young women competing for the Miss Nepal title.

I returned to Nepal in late August 2008 on a Fulbright fellowship to document the effects of mass media on beauty and body image in young women in Nepal. Since my first stay in Nepal in 1998, I had seen significant changes in Nepal's media landscape and also in how young women dressed and presented themselves in public. Modesty seemed to be out, and tight jeans and cleavage-baring shirts were in. With my own history of rebelling against my American Southern upbringing that valued dainty women who drawled their way into the arms of eligible young men, I began my research with a strong agenda. I

was going to spend time with beauty contestants and models and expose them for the insecure attention-seekers they must be, all the while blaming the media and advertising industries for promoting unrealistic standards of beauty to women and blaming these young women's parents for encouraging their daughters to be exploited. Oh, yes, I had an agenda.

As I walked through the set of French doors into the tired, dark room where the contestants were rehearsing, I tried to be inconspicuous, as inconspicuous as a six-foot-tall blond *bideshi* woman lugging 20 pounds of gear can be in Nepal. I also walked into that room full of assumptions and judgement about the kind of women who would subject themselves to being judged on their appearance. They must be silly, uneducated girls, I reasoned, more interested in showing off their bodies than using their minds, not critical enough to question the ideals served up to them by the media. I was afraid of being outed as a feminist in a room

full of beauty queen wannabes. And suddenly I was a cliché – a 30-year-old woman intimidated in the presence of thinner, prettier, better-dressed women 10 years or more her junior. The next day I wore mascara.

But then I started to spend time with these Miss Nepal contestants and other young women: an aspiring young singer, a tough mountain bike champion, a beauty parlour proprietor and a single young woman from Eastern Nepal trying to survive in Kathmandu. These women may spend a lot of time putting on their makeup, threading their eyebrows or choosing their clothes, but they are not silly or uneducated. Nor are their parents allowing them to be exploited, exactly. Their parents encourage and support them in their professional ventures, be it mountain biking, singing or competing in a beauty contest. As I formed closer relationships with these women and they opened themselves up to my questions about beauty and how they view their bodies, I naturally reflected on my own answers to those same questions. And I realised what a hypocrite I had been to walk into that room of Miss Nepal contestants loaded with my agenda six months earlier.

I like to think of myself as an educated woman, a critical media consumer, someone who is confident in herself and comfortable with her own body. But I would be lying if I said I didn't fantasise about what it would be like to be thin, to wear a bikini, to turn the heads of people as I walked down the street. The truth is that every woman in this world who has been exposed to any media has a conflicted perception of her body image. And I can't condemn these young women for their conflicted body image any more than I can condemn myself. If an educated young woman wants to participate in a beauty contest, she's smarter than I've ever thought of giving her credit for, because her participation is going to open professional doors for her, and there

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shouldn't be anything wrong with that. There isn't anything wrong with that.

So what if one woman says to me that she thinks it's better to be darker-skinned than fair-skinned but still wears facial lightening cream? So what if a beautiful young athlete expresses pride in the muscles she's built up over the past five years, but still thinks they're too unfeminine to show off in public? And so what if the singer tells me that women don't need to wear makeup to be beautiful, but insists on applying eye shadow, *gajal* and lipstick on me before we go out one night, all the time telling me how beautiful I look.

I still demonise the media and advertising industries for propagating outrageous standards of beauty, here in Nepal and across the world. And I still think the idea of a beauty contest with male judges crowning one woman the most beautiful of all is patriarchal and archaic. But I no longer judge these women I meet and talk to about beauty. Instead, I hope for them to find confidence, success and happiness without worrying about measuring up to societal standards, the same as I hope for myself. Wasn't the whole point of the feminist movement to let women make their own decisions and take control of their bodies without judgement, even if they choose to wear Fair and Lovely skin cream? ■

And so it came to pass...
The cry for all things new! Anew!
But why is it that I'm not jumping for joy?
Why is there a hollow feeling?
What could it be that's reeling?

It's been a stressful day,
Triggering something within.
The wool is off my eyes,
And what I see is not pretty as a picture.

So I thought I'd write a song,
To dabble in words the ramble in my head.

I'm sick and tired
Of the lies, the deceit
Sick and tired
Of people not seeing beyond their feet.

I'm sick and tired
Of the news, the views
Sick and tired
Of raging wars and refugees.

I'm sick and tired
Of the insinuations, the games
Sick and tired
Of the politics in different names.

I'm sick and tired
Of the majority, the minority
Sick and tired
Of policies with no longevity.

I'm sick and tired
Of the masks, the facade
Sick and tired
Of playing to a dumb charade.

I'm sick and tired
Of the pollution, the corruption
Sick and tired
Of knowing there's little solution.

I'm sick and tired
Of the mob, the mute
Sick and tired
Of the slogans that bear no fruit.

Of the problems that face us
Of the lack of will to face up.

I'm sick and tired
Of being sick and tired
So I will let this rest
For tomorrow I know
This song I wrote
Only to forget. ■

Send in your free verses to mail@yzine.com.np

