

A Critic of Beauty Standards: Radical Feminism in Lowthorpe's *Misbehaviour* (2020)

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Submitted: June 29 2026

Accepted: July 14, 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the debate about beauty standards as a form of social control over women's bodies legitimized through media and popular culture, particularly beauty pageants. This issue is relevant because beauty standards are still produced and normalized as a measure of women's worth in the public sphere. This research uses radical feminist theory to analyse how the patriarchal system operates through the representation of women's bodies in the film *Misbehaviour* (2020). This theory is used to understand that the practice of objectification and surveillance of women's bodies is not simply an individual choice, but rather part of an oppressive social structure. The method used is a qualitative approach with an analysis of the film's text through a sociological study of literature, examining dialogue, narrative, characters, and cinematic visualization. The results show that the film *Misbehaviour* presents women's bodies as visual commodities that are publicly valued, while simultaneously demonstrating practices of surveillance and restrictions on women's movement. The film also presents women's resistance that is collective, ambiguous, and full of negotiation, both within and outside the patriarchal system. These findings imply that beauty standards are not merely an aesthetic issue, but rather an instrument of power that functions to normalize gender inequality in society.

Keywords: Radical Feminism, Objectification, Patriarchy, Beauty Standards

INTRODUCTION

Beauty pageants are often viewed as a form of appreciation for women and a space for freedom of expression. However, behind the grand stage and the spotlight, these contests often reinforce practices of control and objectification of women's bodies. Through this depiction, the film *Misbehaviour* (2020) explores how beauty standards are not simply about appearance, but rather a tool of patriarchal control over women's bodies.

Building on this depiction, it is important to understand that beauty standards do not arise naturally. They are a powerful social construct in women's lives. The media, including films, plays a significant role in shaping images of the ideal body, a beautiful face, and

appropriate feminine behavior. In many cases, these standards are narrow and do not allow for women's diversity. Women are often positioned as visual objects, judged based on dominant male preferences. This demonstrates that beauty is not neutral but is closely linked to patriarchal power relations that regulate women's bodies and identities.

This understanding of beauty standards as a social construct is clearly evident in the film *Misbehaviour*. Philippa Lowthorpe's film *Misbehaviour* (2020) depicts the true events of feminist protests against the 1970 Miss World pageant in London. The film depicts a group of female activists opposing beauty contests, believing they demean women and reinforce racist, sexist, and patriarchal beauty standards. Through conflicts between pageant organizers, contestants, and feminist activists, the film demonstrates how women's bodies are treated as if they were products and judged based on certain criteria sanctioned by the social system.

Considering the context of the story and the conflict depicted in the film, this study begins with the assumption that the film *Misbehaviour* can represent radical feminism as a critique of beauty standards rooted in the patriarchal system. The resistance depicted in the film is not only symbolic but also demonstrates women's collective awareness of rejecting social control over their bodies and identities.

To examine this assumption more deeply, an appropriate theoretical framework is required. Therefore, this study uses radical feminism to understand the critique of beauty standards in the film *Misbehaviour* (2020). Radical feminism views patriarchy as a social system that places women in an unfair position, particularly through control over their bodies and appearance. Beauty standards make it seem as if women must meet certain criteria to be socially accepted. Media, including films, often reinforce these standards through their visuals and narratives. However, films can also serve as a space for resistance by presenting critiques of social norms that oppress women.

In addition to the theoretical basis, this study also considers relevant previous studies. Several previous studies have discussed the issue of feminism and beauty standards in film. Sabira (2024) in her thesis entitled *Resistance Towards Traditional Beauty Standard of Miss World 1970 in Misbehaviour (2020) Film*. This study analyzes how the film *Misbehaviour* represents resistance to traditional beauty standards institutionalized through the Miss World 1970 pageant. Using a textual analysis approach and a cultural criticism perspective, Sabira found that female characters, including feminist activists in the film, demonstrate a form of resistance against the objectification of the body and the assessment of women based solely on physical criteria. In line with this, research by Hariyanto (2022) focuses on the Miss World 1970 pageant in the film *Misbehaviour* and shows the existence of patriarchal oppression against contestants, both through rules, body control, and power relations that position women as objects of public assessment. Another study by Luthfiyyahningtyas et al. (2024) on the film *200 Pounds Beauty* shows how beauty standards are shaped by patriarchal ideology and reinforced by film media. Furthermore, Razali & Oktaviana (2023) found that the representation of radical feminism in film can shape the audience's social cognition in criticizing oppression and gender inequality. Although these studies make important contributions, there are still areas of research that have not been widely explored. Most previous studies have focused on beauty standards, stereotypes, or beauty myths without deeply examining radical feminism as the main framework of analysis. Therefore, this study offers an update by placing the film *Misbehaviour* within the perspective of radical feminism and the sociology of literature.

Based on this background, this research focuses on the following problem formulations: 1) How the film *Misbehaviour* (2020) represents the social conditions of society regarding the position and role of women in the beauty pageant culture in the era depicted, 2) How the ideology and perspective of director Philippa Lowthorpe is reflected through the narrative, characters, and visualization of the film *Misbehaviour*, 3) How does the film *Misbehaviour* (2020) represent radical feminist criticism of beauty standards and the practice of objectifying women's bodies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In feminist studies, radical feminism is a school of thought that focuses on uncovering the roots of women's oppression. This school views patriarchy as a social system that places women in an unequal position compared to men. Patriarchy operates not only through legal regulations or economic structures, but also through customs, cultural values, and how society views women in everyday life.

In line with this view, Tong & Botts (2024) explain that radical feminism places a significant emphasis on social control over women's bodies. Women's bodies are often regulated by certain standards of appearance, behavior, and roles deemed appropriate. This type of control often goes unnoticed because it is considered normal within society's culture. However, these rules limit women's freedom to determine their own identities and choices regarding their bodies.

One of the most powerful forms of social control over women can be seen through beauty standards. If radical feminism highlights women's bodies as the domain of patriarchal power, then beauty standards become a key tool in this practice. Beauty standards are images of ideal bodies and appearances constructed by society, such as a slim figure, an attractive face, fair skin, and certain feminine attitudes. These standards do not arise naturally, but are shaped and disseminated through culture and media.

Furthermore, beauty standards work by making women feel the need to conform to social acceptance. The media, including films and beauty pageants, often reinforce this image by portraying women as visual objects judged based on their physical appearance. From a radical feminist perspective, this situation indicates objectification, where women's bodies are treated as objects of judgment rather than as subjects in control of themselves.

Thus, radical feminism views beauty standards not simply as aesthetic matters, but as part of a patriarchal system that controls and oppresses women (Tong & Botts, 2024). Critique of beauty standards is an important step in dismantling how patriarchy operates in social life, while also creating space for women to reject judgments that limit their bodies and identities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a text analysis method to examine the film *Misbehaviour* (2020). The film is analyzed as a social text through a sociology of literature approach to understand the representation of women's positions and gender power relations depicted. According to the sociological approach to literature, a writer does not only present the social reality in its unadulterated state. In order to help his fictional characters discover their own "fate," as well as to find significance and worth in the social realm, he performs essential chores. One of the best sociological barometers for gauging people's reactions to societal pressures is literature by great authors, which portrays human anxiety, hopes, and dreams.

Furthermore, the social values and emotions of a society are always reflected in literature. (Damono, 2020)

Furthermore, the primary data source that is used in this research is the film *Misbehaviour* by Philippa Lowthorpe, while supporting data are obtained from e-books and journal articles discussing radical feminism, beauty standards, and film studies. Data collection was carried out by watching the film repeatedly, then identifying scenes, dialogues, and visuals related to beauty contests, the objectification of women's bodies, and forms of resistance by female characters. The data are analysed descriptively and interpretively using radical feminist theory to explain the critique of patriarchal beauty standards represented in the film.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This results and discussion section examines the representation of women in the film *Misbehaviour* (2020), particularly within the context of beauty pageant culture and the patriarchal power relations that accompany it. The analysis is conducted using a radical feminist perspective to examine how beauty standards, the objectification of women's bodies, and practices of control and surveillance are institutionalized through the film's narrative, dialogue, characterization, and cinematic visualization. Based on the analysis of narrative, dialogue, and character construction, the film presents a comprehensive critique of patriarchy as it operates through the entertainment industry, mass media, and social norms that regulate women's bodies and roles. The discussion focuses on how women's bodies and roles are constructed, negotiated, and questioned in various social spaces, including the institution of beauty pageants, mass media, the domestic sphere, and the women's movement. Through this approach, the results and discussion section not only presents the findings of the representation analysis but also discusses its implications for understanding patriarchy as a social system that operates structurally and in layers in popular culture.

a. Objectification Practices and Beauty Standards

The film *Misbehaviour* depicts beauty pageant culture as a social space that positions women primarily as objects of public entertainment. In the context of 1970s society, women's bodies were treated as visual commodities, openly, systematically, and legitimized by the mass media. Beauty pageants functioned not only as entertainment but also as a social mechanism that produced and affirmed certain standards of beauty.



Figure 1. Judging scene from the swimsuit session at the 1970 Miss World pageant.

Source: *Misbehaviour* (Lowthorpe, 2020)

The image above demonstrates that women's bodies are placed at the center of attention in a public event, where participants are viewed more for their physical appearance than as individuals with abilities and personalities. In the swimsuit section, women are publicly judged and compared, making their bodies a spectacle for the audience and judges to enjoy. This demonstrates that women are treated as objects of entertainment, rather than as subjects with a

role and voice. This scene also demonstrates how beauty pageants make physical appearance the primary measure of a woman's worth, reinforcing the notion that women's bodies are something worthy of display and evaluation. Thus, this image illustrates how women's bodies are made part of public entertainment and indirectly reinforces the view that women's worth is determined by their appearance.

These quotes, "Show us your legs." "Give us a wink." "This is camera three's big derriere shot." (Lowthorpe, 2020), demonstrate that the language of beauty pageants explicitly reduces women to body parts that are assessed quantitatively and visually, so that a woman's worth is determined by her body's conformity to established ideals. This objectification is not positioned as a deviant practice, but rather normalized as part of entertainment production.

Furthermore, based on the image below, it can be understood that this situation demonstrates the unequal position between women and men, where women's bodies become objects of open attention, assessment, and comparison.



Figure 2. A scene from the judging session of the Miss World 1970 contestants by male judges.

Source: *Misbehaviour* (Lowthorpe, 2020)

Assessments focused on physical appearance reinforce the notion that women's worth is determined by the extent to which they meet certain beauty standards. Thus, this scene illustrates how beauty pageants function not only as entertainment but also as a space that normalizes the objectification of women's bodies and reinforces the view that women exist to be seen and judged by others, especially men. Through the use of cameras that represent the dominance of the male gaze, as well as technical instructions that direct women to display certain bodies and expressions, the film emphasizes that beauty pageant culture functions as a social instrument that normalizes the objectification of women's bodies.

In addition to objectification, the film also depicts the practice of surveillance and control of women's bodies as part of accepted social norms. Contestants do not have complete freedom of movement over their bodies, as every activity is monitored by organizers and official chaperones. This practice demonstrates that women's bodies are treated as something that must be guarded, controlled, and disciplined.

The following quote "Everyone has to have a chaperone. Just a statutory padding check, dear. I'm afraid you can't do that without me." (Lowthorpe, 2020), shows that surveillance does not always come in the form of violence, but through administrative and procedural language that sounds neutral. Ideologically, this practice emphasizes that women's bodies are not entirely their own, but rather become objects of institutional control. In the social context depicted, this control is accepted as normal, so that patriarchy works subtly and systematically.

The film *Misbehaviour* represents beauty standards as an instrument of patriarchy that assesses women's worth based on their bodies and physical appearance. These standards are not natural, but are formed and legitimized through the institution of beauty pageants that have

cultural and media authority, so that women's bodies are reduced to a set of visual criteria that determine their worth and social value.

The phrase "No defects... knock-knees, wonky teeth." (Lowthorpe, 2020) shows how women's bodies are treated as objects of inspection, where any nonconformity to ideal standards is constructed as a "flaw." From a radical feminist perspective, this practice reflects a patriarchal control mechanism that makes beauty standards a tool of social discipline, not simply an aesthetic preference. Thus, the film emphasizes that beauty standards function as a mechanism of power that regulates the social recognition and exclusion of women.

Based on the image below, it can be understood that the body searches of contestants demonstrate how women's bodies are not only assessed but also directly monitored and controlled by the beauty pageant system.



Figure 3. Scene of the body inspection of the Miss World 1970 contestants.

Source: *Misbehaviour* (Lowthorpe, 2020)

This physical inspection process demonstrates that women's bodies are seen as something that must meet certain standards and therefore worthy of being examined, regulated, and corrected. This situation reflects the practice of surveillance of women's bodies, where women do not have full control over their own bodies, but must conform to the rules and judgments of external parties. Thus, this scene illustrates how beauty pageants play a role in disciplining women's bodies, namely shaping how women present, manage, and evaluate their bodies to conform to beauty standards determined by a system dominated by patriarchal values.

b. The Social Conditions of Society Shown in the Film

In the societal context of the 1970s, women were still strongly associated with domestic roles as wives and mothers, while women's involvement in public spaces, such as higher education, the workplace, and political activity, was often seen as inconsistent with prevailing norms. This situation led many women to face social pressure when they tried to break out of these traditional roles. The character of Sally Alexander represents a woman who experienced a clash between the demands of domestic roles and participation in the public sphere. As a single mother who returned to higher education and became involved in the women's movement, Sally faced social pressure that questioned the legitimacy of her choices, so that women who were active in the public sphere were often positioned as "deviants" from traditional roles.

Based on the image below, it can be understood that discussions within the Women's Liberation Movement group became an important space for Sally Alexander and other women to share experiences and build awareness about their position in society.



Figure 4. Scene of an internal discussion of the Women's Liberation Movement group.
Source: *Misbehaviour* (Lowthorpe, 2020)

This scene shows how Sally followed her desire to engage in social and political activities in the public sphere. Through conversation and support from fellow women, Sally's personal experiences are presented as part of a broader problem experienced by many women, such as the double burden and limited roles determined by social norms. Thus, this scene shows how women's collective spaces functioned as a place to transform personal experiences into shared awareness, as well as a form of resistance against the patriarchal system that limits women to domestic roles and hinders their participation in the public sphere.

The following quote "*Seems to me liberation just means getting someone else to do your job for you*" (Lowthorpe, 2020), which occurs when Sally returns home and is criticized by her mother after attending a discussion on the women's liberation movement because she left her child with her, represents a social view that reduces women's struggles as a form of neglect of domestic duties. This criticism coming from the family circle shows that patriarchy does not only operate through public institutions, but is also embedded in private relationships, so that the film shows Sally's inner conflict in negotiating her role as a mother and activist, while also emphasizing that women's struggles are often present in everyday decisions that are full of risks and social consequences.

The film also represents beauty pageants as a global political arena, particularly in the context of apartheid at the time, where the presence of black contestants is presented as a strategic response to political pressure, rather than as a fundamental change in values.



Figure 5. Interactions of Miss World 1970 contestants showing relations of power and supervision in the beauty pageant system.

Source: *Misbehaviour* (Lowthorpe, 2020)

Based on the image above, it can be understood that the interactions between contestants not only reflect personal relationships, but also indicate the existence of power relations and control within the broader beauty pageant system. In the context of global politics at that time, particularly the issue of apartheid, the presence of black contestants can be seen as part of a strategy to respond to political pressure and international criticism, not merely a form of genuine acceptance of diversity. The film shows that the representation of black women in beauty pageants is more symbolic and political, used to build a positive image of the organizers

in the eyes of the global public. This scene shows that the bodies and identities of contestants are not only regulated by beauty standards, but are also used as tools for political interests, so that women are again positioned as controlled parties within the larger system.

Furthermore, the quote "Tell them to find a decent-looking black girl." (Lowthorpe, 2020) is depicted in a situation when the organizers of the 1970 Miss World pageant asked for a black woman from South Africa as a representative who could be involved as the first black contestant in the event. At that time, the apartheid policy was a hotly discussed issue, so the dialogue shows that racial representation was treated instrumentally as an image tool. Also, through the character of Jennifer Hosten, the film presents the perspective of a black woman who is aware of the symbolic meaning of her presence on the Miss World stage.

Finally, the line, "There will be little girls watching tonight who'll see themselves differently because I won." (Lowthorpe, 2020), emphasizes the symbolic significance of her victory for the representation of Black women, even though it continues to occur within a problematic system. By centering the narrative on women's experiences through Sally Alexander, Jo Robinson, and Jennifer Hosten, the film showcases the complexity of women's strategies and consciousness within and outside of the patriarchal system.

c. The Author's Ideas of Radical Feminist Critique of Objectification and Beauty Standards

The film consistently constructs a visual and narrative contrast between the stage space of the beauty pageant and the space of women's movement. The stage space is depicted as a space of discipline, control, and performativity, marked by instructions such as "Alphabetical order, please." At that time, the contestants were required to line up in alphabetical order to appear one by one on stage and be highlighted by the media present to cover the developments of the Miss World 1970 pageant.



Figure 6: Media and judging attention in the 1970 Miss World pageant representing the objectification of women through the public and institutional gaze

Source: *Misbehaviour* (Lowthorpe, 2020)

Based on the image above, it can be understood that the media spotlight and the judges in the Miss World pageant place pressure on women to consistently project a pleasing and perfect image before the public, as emphasized by the line "Keep smiling. The whole world is watching." This line indicates that contestants are judged not only by the judges in the room but also by a global audience through the media, placing women's bodies and expressions under constant scrutiny. In contrast, the women's movement space is filled with discussion, debate, and critical political language, as reflected in the statement, "If the word 'racism' describes one tyranny, doesn't 'sexism' describe another?" This contrast demonstrates the director's ideological alignment with the dismantling of patriarchal structures. The stage space represents

systemic control over women's bodies, while the movement space symbolizes collective awareness and resistance.

Furthermore, in the film *Misbehaviour* (2020), the director demonstrates an ideological alignment with the Women's Liberation Movement by focusing the story on the activists, rather than solely on the glitz and glamour of the Miss World pageant. This is clearly evident in the protest scene at the Royal Albert Hall, where activists stage a live demonstration inside the event, chanting slogans like "You're being exploited!" and "End this shameful cattle market!" By featuring the demonstration as a key part of the plot, the film emphasizes that beauty pageants are understood as social and political issues, not mere entertainment. Focusing on the activists' actions suggests that the director is more concerned with criticizing the Miss World system than with the glamour of the event, thus reinforcing the film's ideology of rejecting objectification and supporting women's struggles against patriarchal culture.

In an interview with HeyUGuys (2018), Lowthorpe also recounts her personal experiences as a child: she loved Miss World and even imitated the beauty queens' styles, while her feminist mother disliked the event and considered it inappropriate. The tension between these personal experiences is reflected in the film through the director's portrayal of Miss World as something that once seemed "normal" and entertaining, but was later sharply criticized as a symbol of patriarchal culture. Thus, the film is not only a historical reconstruction, but also a reflection of the director's feminist ideology, inviting the audience to see beauty pageants as a system that needs to be questioned and critiqued.

The film also critiques the role of media and entertainment culture in perpetuating sexism. The character of Bob Hope is used as a symbol of the normalization of sexist humor in the public sphere. In the scene where Bob Hope, as the host, makes sexist jokes on the stage of the 1970 Miss World pageant and receives spontaneous criticism, Bob Hope sparks criticism for making the statement "I consider feeling women all the time." Obviously, this was responded strongly by the demonstrators because Bob Hope, as the host, said it at a Miss World competition which in fact was the opposite, "Shame on you, Bob Hope!" added one of the demonstrators, marking the rejection of this normalization. Through this scene, the film emphasizes that humor is not a neutral space, but rather an ideological tool that can reproduce gender power relations. The film also does not romanticize the women's movement, differences in strategy, internal conflicts, and tensions between characters are shown openly. Jo is depicted as more radical and confrontational, while Sally is more reflective and cautious, which shows that social change is a complex and negotiable process.

The film *Misbehaviour* rejects the notion that beauty pageants are neutral simply because women "choose" to participate. The film's narrative emphasizes that individual choices cannot be separated from the social structures that direct and limit how women are valued and interpreted. "The system which accords value solely on the basis of a culturally imposed physical standard." "The only other forum... weighed, measured, and publicly examined... is a cattle market." This analogy emphasizes the radical feminist critique that the objectification of women's bodies is not an individual practice, but rather part of a structural system that treats women as commodities to be measured, compared, and ranked.

Beyond objectification, the film also depicts body control as a mechanism of patriarchal power through restrictions on movement, the requirement for companionship, and institutionalized surveillance. From a radical feminist perspective, this normalization of control

demonstrates how patriarchy operates systemically by limiting women's autonomy over their bodies and spaces, so that women's bodies are not only valued but also regulated.

Jennifer Hosten's victory in the 1970 Miss World pageant represents the ambiguity of women's resistance within a patriarchal system. On the one hand, the victory has important symbolic meaning, but it still occurs within the framework of a system that objectifies and limits women.

The line "But making us compete with each other over the way we look... doesn't that make the world narrower for all of us in the end?" (*Misbehaviour*, 2020) emphasizes the film's critical position that symbolic change, such as the victory of Black women, has important representational impacts, but does not necessarily dismantle patriarchal structures. From a radical feminist perspective, as long as women are still forced to compete based on physical appearance, the system continues to limit broader liberation. Through this ambiguity, *Misbehaviour* shows that individual victory does not always go hand in hand with profound structural change.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that the film *Misbehaviour* (2020) represents beauty pageant culture as a social space formed and maintained through patriarchal power relations. Through the events of Miss World 1970, the film shows how women's bodies are made the center of social assessment and legitimacy, while their subjectivity and intellectual capacity are sidelined. This representation is in line with the perspective of radical feminism which views patriarchy as a comprehensive social system that regulates women's positions through control over the body and feminine image (Ulum et al., 2026). Objectification in the film is not presented as an individual practice, but rather as an institutionalized and socially normalized mechanism, which from a radical feminist perspective shows how patriarchy works through the normalization of social rules that seem normal, but essentially limit women's autonomy over their own bodies (Jensen, 2021). From a radical feminist perspective, the film rejects the liberal narrative that positions women's participation in beauty pageants as a form of free choice, because such choices are always framed by unequal social and cultural structures (Esteve, 2022). The critique of patriarchy also extends to the domestic sphere through the character of Sally Alexander, who demonstrates that patriarchal power relations operate across spaces, from the public stage to family and personal life. This confirms the radical feminist view that patriarchy is a system that permeates women's private spheres and closely links oppression in the public and domestic spheres (Gupta et al., 2023; Putri & Hafsah, 2023).

Furthermore, *Misbehaviour* presents women's resistance as a layered, ambiguous, and negotiable process. The differences in strategies, internal conflicts, and social and personal risks emphasize that resistance takes place within the still-dominant patriarchal structure. These differences in strategies, internal conflicts, and social and personal risks emphasize the contradictory nature of this resistance, as understood from a radical feminist perspective. Within this framework, the film emphasizes that women's liberation cannot be achieved solely through individual victories or symbolic representation, as such changes do not necessarily dismantle patriarchal structures as long as women are forced to compete based on physical appearance.

CONCLUSION

This section This research concludes that the film *Misbehaviour* (2020) represents beauty pageants as a social space deeply tied to patriarchal power structures. Through its depiction of the 1970 Miss World pageant, the film demonstrates how women's bodies are positioned as objects of public judgment, while their subjectivity and intellectual capacity tend to be marginalized. Beauty standards are not presented as neutral aesthetic preferences, but rather as social constructs that function to regulate, discipline, and control women's bodies within a patriarchal system.

From a radical feminist perspective, the objectification of women's bodies in this film occurs not only at the individual level but is a structural practice legitimized through media institutions and popular culture. The normalization of surveillance, physical examination, and restrictions on contestants' movement reflect how women's autonomy over their bodies is limited by institutional power. Furthermore, the character of Sally Alexander demonstrates that patriarchal control operates not only in the public sphere but also permeates the domestic sphere, so that women continue to face social pressures when attempting to negotiate traditional roles with participation in the public sphere.

Furthermore, the film presents women's resistance as a complex, ambiguous process that occurs within unequal power relations. Jennifer Hosten's symbolic victory underscores the importance of representation, particularly for Black women, but also demonstrates the limitations of individual change within a system that continues to objectify women. Therefore, *Misbehaviour* asserts that women's liberation cannot be achieved solely through personal achievement or symbolic recognition, but rather demands structural change in the social systems that perpetuate beauty standards and gender inequality.

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