

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

The definition of beauty has been constructed along with the times and changing social values. While previously defined by physical appearance, beauty has now expanded into a more comprehensive ideal that now includes intellect, personality, and social awareness. Beauty remains a significant construct for women and continues to be shaped by cultural pressures and evolving beauty standards (Sayekti & Fitria, 2023). Beauty is no longer limited to symmetrical facial features, fair skin, or slim figures, the modern standard of beauty reflects broader dimensions emphasizing intelligence, advocacy, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to society. This transition is evident in the realm of beauty pageants globally, including those held in Indonesia. Beauty pageants are a global phenomenon that not only display aesthetic ideals but also reflect cultural values and national identity (Crawford et al., 2008). Research on beauty pageants often focus on perceptions of the female body, the standardization of beauty, as well as gender and sexuality (Balogun, 2012).

Sarah Banet-Weiser, in her book *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity*, explains that beauty pageants deserve intellectual attention from the public and should not be regarded merely as entertainment. Beauty pageants not only reflect social constructions but also embody elements of nationalism, modernization, and globalization. In a cultural

context, beauty pageants play a significant role in representing national identity and cultural diversity on a broader stage. Women who compete in these pageants are expected to demonstrate intelligence, goal orientation, independence, strong character, confidence, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to society (Banet-Weiser, 1999). These women become representatives who are expected to preserve and promote the values upheld by their home countries. National-level beauty pageants do not only aim to select role models who represent national pride, but also to send representatives to compete on international stages. This is where cultural values and national identity must be preserved and shared globally through beauty pageant competitions. Beauty pageants have become an important part of global culture, reflecting societal views on beauty, social values, and national identity. Beauty pageants are a global phenomenon that showcase women's beauty and attract hundreds of viewers from various backgrounds, ranging from young children to adults (Ofori-birikorang & Dedzo, 2021). Similarly, in Indonesia, one of the oldest beauty pageants, Puteri Indonesia, has become a popular platform among Indonesian women for many years. However, the existence of beauty pageants continues to spark complex debates concerning their meaning and impact on the public representation of women.

On one hand, beauty pageants are often criticized for reinforcing societal stereotypes that women are valued primarily for their physical appearance. As explained by Maulida (2018) in her study, many Indonesian women believe that the concept of female beauty has become closely associated with having a slim body, particularly since the emergence of the Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant. This

perception is further reinforced by the fact that many beauty pageant titleholders pursue careers in the entertainment industry after the competition, making participation in beauty pageants increasingly sought after by Indonesian women. Maulida also highlights the commodification process within the Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant, as seen in the minimum height requirements for contestants during registration and the portrayal of beauty that aligns with the pageant's standards. Ayu & Sunarto (2021) argue that the use of the female body as a form of aesthetic exchange in the context of beauty pageants is an idealized means of conveying superficial messages and culture. Unrealistic standards and issues of female objectification within the Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant have drawn criticism and protest, at times even leading to violations that prevented representatives from participating in international competitions. The history and concept of beauty pageants demonstrate that women's bodies are placed under the control of judges, to be measured and evaluated according to predetermined physical standards.



**Figure 1. 1 Grand Final of Puteri Indonesia 2023**

The Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant is often viewed critically due to the visuals presented during the Grand Final Night, where dozens of contestants from various provinces across Indonesia appear with relatively similar body shapes and heights, supported by facial features that align with specific beauty standards. Although Puteri Indonesia has made efforts to be more inclusive by showcasing diverse forms of beauty and skin tones that reflect the uniqueness of each Indonesian province, criticism continues to arise from various groups.

Critics frequently point out that beauty pageants still tend to shape and uphold narrow beauty standards, implying that only women with certain physical characteristics are given the spotlight. Nonetheless, Puteri Indonesia has attempted to challenge beauty stereotypes by including intelligence, personality, communication skills, and courage as part of the judging criteria. However, the perception that visual appearance remains the dominant factor in determining the winner of the Puteri Indonesia is still widely held. As a result, the pageant is often seen more as a competition for physical beauty rather than as a platform for women's empowerment that promotes values of diversity, intellectuality, and social contribution.

Interestingly, on the other hand, the Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant is also viewed as a platform for women's empowerment, offering equal opportunities for personal development, expression of aspirations, and the strengthening of their presence in the public sphere. Puteri Indonesia is the first beauty pageant in Indonesia with a clear vision and mission to select a female representative who

embodies the culture and values upheld by Indonesian society. It promotes the "3B" criteria; Brain (intelligence and broad knowledge), Beauty (external and internal beauty), and Behaviour (good personality and conduct). However, starting in 2024, Yayasan Puteri Indonesia has expanded its core values and criteria to include two additional elements, forming the "5B" concept; Brain, Beauty, Behaviour, Brave, and Be Right. The foundation was originally established by Dr. Hj. B.R.A. Mooryati Soedibyo, S.S., M.Hum., and is sponsored by PT Mustika Ratu Tbk.

The Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant was first organized by Yayasan Puteri Indonesia following a period of governmental restrictions. The inaugural edition, held in 1992, was won by Indira Paramarini Sudiro, representing DKI Jakarta. As of the time of writing, Yayasan Puteri Indonesia continues to hold the pageant annually (Januar, 2022). Yayasan Puteri Indonesia states that women selected as provincial representatives undergo a rigorous selection process, with the primary requirement being the fulfillment of the "Brain, Beauty, Behavior, Brave, and Be Right" criteria. Specifically, the key qualifications for becoming Puteri Indonesia include having an appealing appearance, being enrolled in or having completed higher education, demonstrating a well-rounded personality, showing bravery in facing fears, and understanding as well as embodying societal values and norms, serving as a role model for all Indonesian women. Those who place in the top three are given the opportunity to participate in international beauty competitions (Ayu & Sunarto, 2021).

Puteri Indonesia is a beauty pageant that aims to empower women, promote Indonesia's rich cultural heritage and tourism, engage in community activities, and

inspire the younger generation to build self-confidence and contribute to society. The event is held as a representation of the Indonesian nation, prepared to compete at both national and international levels, with the hope of advancing progress in the fields of economy, tourism, culture, and trade. Moreover, the titleholder of the Puteri Indonesia pageant is expected to serve as an icon in introducing Indonesia's natural and cultural wealth. Puteri Indonesia is also encouraged to engage in social activities across different regions, providing education, outreach programs, social assistance, and entertainment. As a national representative, Puteri Indonesia acts as a cultural ambassador in various national and international forums, with the mission of introducing and presenting Indonesian values in the areas of tourism, culture, environment, economy, and trade (Hariyanti & Huda, 2023).

The selected Puteri is expected to serve as an inspiration and role model for all women and the broader Indonesian society (Januar, 2022). Contestants in Puteri Indonesia are also required to have the capability to voice important social issues. This requirement has led many participants to actively engage in raising awareness about current social conflicts and challenges through advocacy campaigns they have developed. Each contestant is required to present an advocacy that aligns with their personal background and values. These advocacies may address a wide range of topics, including education, health, environment, tourism, gender equality, women's empowerment, and more. Participants are expected to design advocacy strategies and conduct campaigns through social media in order to promote and disseminate positive change, both for public benefit and personal development.

According to the official website [www.puteri-indonesia.com](http://www.puteri-indonesia.com), as of 2024, Yayasan Puteri Indonesia holds four international beauty pageant licenses, allowing the top four titleholders Puteri Indonesia, Puteri Indonesia Lingkungan, Puteri Indonesia Pariwisata, and Puteri Indonesia Pendidikan & Kebudayaan to automatically represent Indonesia in global competitions. Puteri Indonesia 2024 competes at Miss Supranational, Puteri Indonesia Lingkungan 2024 continues to Miss International, Puteri Indonesia Pariwisata 2024 takes part in Miss Cosmo, and Puteri Indonesia Pendidikan & Kebudayaan 2024 competes at Miss Charm. The year 2024 marked a significant victory for Yayasan Puteri Indonesia, as two of its representatives competing in Miss Supranational 2024 and Miss Cosmo 2024 successfully secured the main crowns at their respective international pageants. This achievement is expected to raise the standards of future Puteri Indonesia competitions in selecting representatives who not only inspire the Indonesian public but also bring pride to the nation. Such accomplishments further strengthen the desire among Indonesian women to honor their country and make meaningful contributions to society.

As one of the three titleholders of Puteri Indonesia 2023 and a student of Communication Studies, the researcher draws upon this position to provide an in-depth account of how personal experiences within the Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant can offer insights into the role of women in the public sphere through an autoethnographic approach. This method enables the research to explore experiences from an insider perspective, an aspect often inaccessible through studies that rely solely on external observation. By presenting reflective narratives,

this study aims to offer new perspectives on the internal dynamics of beauty pageants, particularly concerning how the Puteri Indonesia 2023 titleholders construct the meaning of female beauty amid public expectations. This research is expected to contribute not only to academic discussions on communication and social construction but also to provide a deeper understanding of how the Puteri Indonesia 2023 titleholders construct and demonstrate that beauty pageants can serve as platforms that extend beyond physical appearance to support broader women's empowerment.

## **1.2 Research Question**

How do the Puteri Indonesia 2023 titleholders construct the representation of women within the context of the Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant?

## **1.3 Research Objective**

To examine how the Puteri Indonesia 2023 titleholders construct the meaning of female beauty within the Puteri Indonesia beauty pageant.

## **1.4 Research Significance**

### **1.4.1 Theoretical Significance**

This study contributes to feminist discourse, particularly third-wave feminism, which emphasizes the relationship between women and popular culture. By adopting this perspective, the research enriches the understanding



of how women construct identity and beauty within the context of beauty pageants. Furthermore, this study expands the application of autoethnography as a method that validates personal experience as a legitimate source of data in social and cultural analysis.

#### **1.4.2 Practical Significance**

Practically, this research provides insights for women who wish to participate in beauty pageants regarding how they may negotiate identity and values within the competitive space. It also offers the public a deeper understanding that the concept of beauty is not merely normative but is a result of ongoing social and cultural construction.