

## **Representation of fair-skin beauty and the female consumer**

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**Abstract :** Concepts related to complexion particularly fairness often used interchangeably with pale skin, are associated with class-based hierarchies attributed to cultural commodification. The desire for fair skin in India is spurred by transnational influences wherein the significance of whiteness is formed by Western standards as well as traditional paradigms of beauty. The charm of models with varied Asian skin tones is increasingly replaced by the overarching popularity of Caucasian and fair-skinned models in the print media and television advertisements. The diversity of brown skins being visually dominant, Indian advertisements reflect the general aspiration for the appropriation of fair skin associated with Caucasians. Advertisements for fairness products promise whiteness to 'non-white' consumers, who use cosmetic products to become fair and fairer. The illusionary and transformative power of fairness products becomes the testimonial for propagating a general consumerist ethos. This aspiration plays an important role in constructing ideals of beauty. Endorsements of the efficacy of fairness creams re-enforced by some leading Hindi cinema actors as idealized beauty icons, are significant in perpetuating this obsession, since their images in Indian advertisements are viewed by a wide consumer segment. Though counter-initiatives for reversal of this quest are increasingly espoused by Bollywood professionals who are significant opinion makers, the desire for fair skin continues across society, blurring the line between illusion and reality. This paper explores the quest for fairness in India as a socio-cultural marker of contemporary society through the semiotic analysis of select advertisements and discussion on the motivations underpinning the exponential growth in the market for skin-whitening beauty products.

**Keywords** - *Advertisements, Fairness, Image, India, Skin-whitening products*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The quest for 'whiteness' is significant in the construction of an idealized image of female beauty in Asian cultures (Li *et al*, 2007) which is often associated with notions of fair skin. The beauty ideal of white skin in Asia predates colonialism and the introduction of Western notions of beauty (Wagatsuma 1967). Fairness carries embedded associations with the upper classes, wealth and prestige in Asian cultures (Rhada, 2007). The lightness of a woman's skin is related not only to the way her beauty is perceived, but also to her social status, employment opportunities and marriage prospects (Leslie 2004). However the desire for fair skin is not limited to Asia. It is also seen across the world especially among non-white cultures in Africa, South America and Middle-East which have their own customs and practices of skin whitening. Li *et al* (2008) have analyzed advertisements for skin whitening products in India, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea to conclude that fair skin has become a 'central desideratum' of Asian consumer culture. Concepts related to complexion particularly fairness, often used interchangeably with pale and white skin and associated with socio-economic and social structures indicative of hierarchy, are attributed to cultural commodification. In India, fair skin is often considered a social marker of aristocratic heritage and class. The internet and mass media are significant in contributing to the coverage of widely accepted paradigms of beauty. How are the idealized manifestations of beauty created through the image-making process reinforced by skin whitening and lightening product advertisements targeted at Indian women? This paper explores the quest for fairness in India as a socio-cultural marker of contemporary society through a discussion on the motivations and manifestations of the fairness myth underpinning the exponential growth in the market for skin-whitening beauty products and female consumerism.

### **II. ADVERTISEMENTS OF FAIRNESS PRODUCTS**

The power of advertising extends to the creation and perpetuation of a mythical land of fairness where images are often linked to the fascination for fair skin. The advertisements underplay the 'original' skin tone since the ideal of whiteness is portrayed as an achievable goal. These 'performative' (Butler, 1993) representations mark the diffusion from image to everyday practice. Advertisements of fairness products promise whiteness to 'non-white' consumers, particularly to young adults of both sexes who use cosmetic products to become fair and progressively fairer. Whiteness is thus equated to fairness products that can be purchased and applied. Representations of skin whitening cater to the aspirations of both Asian women and of men - some advertisements highlight the desire for male approval thereby endorsing fair skin as something

essential to femininity (Goon and Craven 2003). Advertisements and television commercials for skin-whitening products have an embedded promise for those who see the face of the transformed person. Through the focus on the fairness product, aspiration is created around the face. What is visually evident is that the representation of reduced colour on the face has an underlying reference to a global look. The aspirational value of fairness creams are niche category products in the beauty industry, reinforced through the selection and portrayal of models in print and digital media. Advertisements present an alternative way of 'reading' the model image as an index of a particular kind of desire. The model becomes a barometer of the current state of attitudes of women, race and consumerism (Entwhistle and Wissinger 2012). Since the stereotype of 'whiteness' becomes a significant determining factor in the selection of the model or movie star for fairness creams and lotions, the selection of pale-skinned models representing a globalized [read Western] ideal of beauty, iterates the promise to make users fair-complexioned over a specific period of time through the use of the product. In other words, fairness creams espouse the desirability of fair skin equating it to beauty. The complexion of the model becomes instrumental in establishing and promoting beauty standards, albeit artificial, as a reference highlighting the contrast between reality and illusion. Through subtle cosmetic application which conveys a 'natural' look *sans* makeup, photographs of models provide testimony to the possibility of transformation. Ironically fair skin appears to be associated with the *implication* of naturalness which contrasts with fairness created by makeup.

Though the diversity of brown skin tones is visually dominant in India, advertisements reflect a general aspiration for the appropriation of fair skin associated with Caucasians. The popularity of Caucasian models in the media 'reflect the post-colonial structure of commoditization which continues to be influenced by a colonial past' (Goon and Craven 2003). The implicit message of the 'face' presented by the model thus becomes indicative of a hegemonic economic-cultural ideal. Indian models with dark skin are increasingly replaced by Caucasian and fair-skinned models. The presence of Caucasian models in Indian advertisements of skin whitening products is indicative of the globalization of definitions and ideals of beauty. Simultaneously they are adequately generalized to cater to the aspirations of Indian women. The illusionary and transformative power of fairness creams and lotions as antidotes to dark skin or the natural process of tanning becomes the testimonial for propagating consumerism. Advertisements of fairness products promise whiteness to 'non-white' consumers, who use cosmetic products to become fair and fairer. The cosmetics industry presents beauty products embodying transformational myths subject to the suspension of disbelief by consumers through advertisements which create evidence for an attainable visage of beauty aided by the media. Images are 'socially constructed ideals of beauty' which are 'internalized' by the viewer as the consumer (Gill, 2003). Skin whitening practices contribute to the construction of a global face of virtual beauty which, in turn, becomes a fulcrum for the international business of beauty.

Advertisements of fairness products frequently draw consumers' attention to everyday issues such as harsh sunshine and pollution that act as impediments to healthy skin. The implicit message underpinning such advertisements appears to be that the daily use of these products can control and reverse the process of skin darkening and improve the complexion even under different weather conditions. Advertisements emphasize new technological developments as well as ancient formulations which are believed to contain ingredients for enhancing fair skin. The superficial application of these products thus offers an alternative to invasive surgery. Lipsitz argues that the 'investment in whiteness' is a reference to whiteness as an invisible currency that is an 'expense or cost literalized in the purchase of skin-whitening products' (Lipsitz, 1998). With contemporary meanings of whiteness and the dual impact by Western images as well as traditional Indian aesthetics, the quest for fairness has led to an exponential growth in niche cosmetic products industry. This can be partially attributed to the underlying perception that whiter skin is more desirable and therefore costs more. Interestingly, the pursuit of fairness transcends gender stereotypes and attitude to physical appearance. Over the counter sales in beauty and wellness products in India is estimated at INR 27.6 billion (Statista, 2015). Evocative aspirations leading to the suspension of disbelief and skepticism which play an important role in constructing ideals of beauty have resulted in skin whitening and lightening products to become the single-largest product category in India.

### **III. FAIR & LOVELY**

Fair & Lovely, the 'largest selling skin whitening cream in the world' marketed by Unilever in Asia, Africa and India in particular, illustrates the issue (Karnani, 2007). Fair & Lovely manufactured by Hindustan Unilever Ltd. (HUL) which is the Indian subsidiary of Unilever was launched in 1975. Dermatologists dispute the efficacy of Fair & Lovely since it does not contain chemical ingredients that can create a permanent change; nor does it claim to be a pharmaceutical product (Islam *et al.*, 2006). The commercial success of this fairness cream has been instrumental in the expansion in product range which now includes Fair & Lovely Multivitamin, Fair & Lovely Anti Marks, Fair & Lovely Winter Fairness Cream, Fair & Lovely Ayurvedic Balance, as well as Fair & Lovely Menz Active, a fairness cream for men. Currently it is the largest brand of fairness products with a market share of 53 percent (Khan and Khan, 2012). Advertisements for the Fair & Lovely fairness products

are underpinned by the implicit promise of dramatic skin-whitening results. The picture on the product packet cover sold in India displays the face of a dusker woman who, in four successive stages of skin-lightening, changes into a startlingly fair-skinned person. The metamorphosis of the woman's complexion is accompanied with the simultaneous transformation in her expression from sombre to joyous. The visible contrast between the 'before and after' appearance of the model is also enhanced by her resultant heightened confidence (Karnani 2007). This change is both external and emotional-psychological underscoring the message that fair skin is essential for femininity and thus fuelling the continued cycle of female consumerism.

Fair & Lovely has been in the midst of controversy for some of its earlier advertisements. An earlier television commercial portrayed the father of a dark-skinned girl who bemoans his fate for not having a son since his daughter's salary is meagre. The girl then uses Fair & Lovely to lighten her skin, which subsequently enables her to get a better job as an air hostess and brings a smile of contentment on her parents' faces. A series of advertisements continued to convey the overt message that dark skin is an obstacle to better employment opportunities for women and that the use of the fairness cream can lighten the skin and thereby transform lives (Karnani, 2007). Strong condemnation of such advertisements by women's groups for being 'discriminatory on the basis of the colour of skin,' and 'an affront to a woman's dignity' (Leistikow, 2003) and for being 'highly racist' (BBC News, 2003) may have been instrumental in changing the advertorial stance. To reinvent its brand image, recent advertisements feature a model presumably representing the new Indian woman who uses Fair & Lovely while insisting on gender equality to pursue her career aspirations even in the face of parental cajoling and pressurizing her to marry. Her articulated desire to work for a period of three years in order to be "equal" to men, attempts to equate fairness with empowerment of women. The subliminal message in such advertisements appears to be that personality development and desirability is synchronous with fair skin. Bollywood actor and brand ambassador Yami Gautam was earlier seen in advertisements where her peaches and cream complexion causes astonishment mingled with a tinge of envy among friends. Recent advertisements portray her in an advisory role suggesting the use the Fair & Lovely to a young girl so as to avoid skin-darkening under the harsh sun and pollution. This advertorial shift is presumed to enhance product diffusion in a trickle-down mode to a wider female consumer base. The recent venture into Hindi film production with the movie 'Ki and Ka' (Dir. K Balki, 2016) presented by Fair & Lovely provides a light-hearted narration of the reversal of roles of a married couple, in a bid to underscore gender equality.

#### **IV. CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENTS**

The word *Gori*<sup>i</sup> is often used in Hindi songs and advertisements, indicating the synchronicity of beauty with fairness. Models and movie stars become the idealized beauty icons whose images in Indian advertisements are viewed by a large consumer segment. Endorsements of the efficacy of fairness creams re-enforced by some leading actors of Bollywood become significant in perpetuating the obsession for fair skin. Dusky-skinned Bollywood actor Priyanka Chopra who had earlier featured in an advertisement for Garnier Light Ultra fairness cream has expressed her regret<sup>ii</sup> for having endorsed the skin-lightening product. Being called *kaali*<sup>iii</sup> by her family 'in jest' when she was a child, she admits to have not understood the impact of the epithet till she became a teenager (The Guardian, 2016). Her recent international television series *Quantico* has made her a global celebrity and a role model who is aware that her opinions have significance for dusky-skinned women worldwide. Among other cine-stars, Deepika Padukone has been the face of Neutrogena Fine Fairness Cream SPF 20, Sonam Kapoor has endorsed L'Oreal White Perfect Fairness Cream, and Katrina Kaif has promoted Olay Natural White fairness cream. However, in the face of criticism for endorsements of fairness products, the actors have discontinued their association with these brands. Interestingly, the advertisements related to fairness creams for men that are promoted by male actors indicate that the beauty regimes do not have any gender specificity. Actor and Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan features in the advertisement for Fair and Handsome, a fairness cream by Emami which is a competitor of HUL, relating his own superstardom to his hard work and this fairness product. Such endorsements are perceived as the promotion of the superiority of fair skin in a nation where dark-skinned people often face discrimination. Though Khan has received large numbers of online petitions<sup>iv</sup> urging him to disassociate himself from the product, he continues to feature in the advertisements.

Women with olive-tone, honey-tone or wheat-tone skins which are typical of India do not feature in such advertisements. This points to the disassociation between beauty and 'brownskin womanhood' (Entwhistle and Wissinger 2012). The problem with the image-led focus is that it is too reductive where beauty is defined in superficial physical terms. While the pervasive stream of advertisements for fairness products are enticingly promoted by film stars and fashion models, actors Nandita Das, Frieda Pinto, Chitrangada Singh, Kalki Koechlin, Ranbir Kapoor, Randeep Hooda, Swara Bhaskar and Upen Patel have taken a decision not to endorse fairness products in order to discourage bias towards racial stereotypes. Supermodels Lakshmi Menon, Noyonika Chatterjee, and Ujwala Raut are exotic dark-skinned Indian beauties whose charisma is complemented by their professional accomplishments. Lakshmi Menon has achieved international fame as a

ramp model for Jean Paul Gaultier in 2006 followed by several prestigious campaigns for high end brands and stores, editorials in highest selling fashion magazines, and has been the first Indian model to feature in the 2011 Pirelli calendar photographed by Karl Lagerfeld. Yet she attributes her initial unsuccessful stint in Indian mainstream fashion to her “dark skin” claiming that she does not “fit into the Indian fashion scene that’s obsessed with Bollywood starlets and white skin”<sup>v</sup>.

## V. COUNTER CAMPAIGNS

A counter measure to the deeply entrenched CULTURAL perceptions on beauty by Women of Worth (WOW), a non-governmental organization based in Chennai<sup>vi</sup>, is the ‘Dark is Beautiful’ campaign. Launched in 2009 and re- invigorated in 2013 with the active support of Nandita Das, acclaimed actor in Indian and international films, it aims to change Indian mindsets about skin by creating awareness about on-screen myths regarding skin colour, accepting both fair and dark as beautiful. In order to change the regressive attitudes underpinning the widespread obsession for fair skin particularly in a country where most people are dark and have inferiority complex about it, Das backed the campaign with a series of print advertisements telling every person to “Stay UNfair, Stay Beautiful” with the objective of empowering women by giving them confidence about their natural beauty. In consonance with the concept of celebrating ‘beauty beyond colour’<sup>vii</sup> Das has never made an effort to camouflage her skin tone or to digitally alter her natural skin colour, either for her films or for red carpet appearances at Cannes. Her stand on the matter challenges and counters the hegemonic standards which equate beauty with fairness. Her stand proclaims her motto that true empowerment for women lies in financial independence which, in India, is largely associated with education for the girl child, and the need for social changes to eradicate prejudices that insidiously pressurize women to buy skin whiteners. Her confidence and comfort with her own skin colour has been inspirational for many women, encouraging them not to succumb to the pressure of pursuing the dream of fair skin.

The nation-wide debate over the comments made by the hosts of the roast show *Comedy Nights Bachao* on Colors TV in September 2016 arose with its one-point focus on the skin tone of actor Tanishtha Chatterjee who was on the show to promote her latest critically acclaimed film, *Parched*. Offended at the repeated references to the colour of *jamun*<sup>viii</sup> and her skin tone, Chatterjee walked out of the show. Her Facebook post read:

*“Upper caste equals fair skin equals touchable. Lower caste equals dark skin equals untouchable... Yes, I have pronounced it. Probably most of us will not admit that our hatred for dark skin also comes from caste bias.”*

The articulation of her humiliation and frustration through interviews has met with support from film industry colleagues about India’s pervasive prejudice regarding skin colour has struck a chord with many readers. The overwhelming response to her Facebook post has led Agnes Joseph, spokesperson for the Dark is Beautiful campaign to state:

*“About 95% of people in India are dark-skinned, yet a lot of us are forced to lighten... It’s the influence of the media and cinema which is constantly projecting light-skinned women, so the normal population thinks that’s what it takes to look beautiful.”*

This statement underscores the socially constructed notion of beauty, and the significance of its manifestations which may be orchestrated by the media. Representations are read as ‘symptomatic’- analyzed not as specific cases but as evidence of wider construction of beauty that are perceived to embody and spur the desire for emulation and reproduction (Entwhistle and Wissinger 2012). Advertisements focus on the sale of products through images which are distributed across the country, as a result of which the wider social impact often tends to be relegated to a secondary position. In projecting positive evaluations of fairness products the persuasive ability of advertisements lies in convincing consumers of the illusory dream of fairness which can cement their involvement with the product.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The social pressure of feeling non-beautiful due to dark skin is leveraged by whitening cream manufacturers in India. The emphasis on technology in the skin whitening and lightening product plays an important role in creating a myth regarding the transformative power of the advertised product which promises fair skin both for desirability and empowerment. Lightening of the skin tone becomes a social norm that psychologically compels consumers to follow the trend which further perpetuates ‘marketplace mythologies’ (Thompson, 2004). Advertisements have the capability to construct, reinforce and disseminate social representations. The persistent screening of advertisements replete with assurances, subtly or overtly, influences values and beliefs and thus behavior of the target viewer segment. The relentless impact of advertising for skin-lightening cosmetics tends to capitalize on the Indian consumers’ insecurities about their skin tone and fascination with pale skin. Even though it is not possible for superficial application of fairness creams to permanently alter the natural skin colour which is determined by melanin content of the skin, advertisements continue to perpetuate this illusion by encouraging the obsession for fairness.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Hindi word for fair and beautiful girl
- <sup>ii</sup> <http://www.dnaindia.com>
- <sup>iii</sup> Hindi word for dark skinned girl
- <sup>iv</sup> <http://www.change.org>
- <sup>v</sup> *The Heart has its Reasons*. Brunch. May 29, 2016
- <sup>vi</sup>. Capital of Tamil Nadu state in India
- <sup>vii</sup>. The campaign was initiated in 2009 by the activist group, Women of Worth, to celebrate the concept of 'beauty beyond colour'
- <sup>viii</sup>. A dark coloured plum

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