

Portrayal of the Exotic in Advertisements; The Indian Scenarios

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Abstract

Post colonialism and advertisements are two apparently disparate entities which could reveal the psychological and cultural imperialism that reigns the modern society, when one is analysed through the looking glass of the other. The modern societies often fail to realize the existing sovereignty of white superiority and continue to look at things from the perspectives of the coloniser. And this Eurocentric perspective has assumed normality in such a way that the descendants of the colonised have recognised themselves as the essential other. This could be further elaborated using the apparatus of advertisements in Indian society. The consciousness itself of the skin colour is not an inherently colonial way of thinking. But “fair is lovely” concept was injected into the psyche of the enslaved by the imperialists and the perpetual repression using this notion gradually converted it into an inseparable part of the innate value systems on which the identity itself is built. And the panacea was treating the Indianness in the politics of beauty, or the ‘desi’ aspects of our lives as the exotic or the other and celebrating that as a progressive initiative towards finally accepting the roots of oneself. This paper intends to analyse this detour further in the lights of post colonialism, which was not entirely to a different tangent, rather falls right into the coloniser’s stream of thought. One could argue that this adherence to the ‘superior’ oppressor’s philosophies is to obtain a vicarious pleasure of being the oppressor himself through identifying oneself with the coloniser’s way of thinking.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, cultural imperialism, advertisement, coloniser, Indianness

I. Introduction

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By default, being a consumer, is a significant fragment of individual identity from one’s birth. The supermarket or ‘the regular, unsophisticated’ market provides the necessities of life and helps the masses to survive without having to go out of their ways to ensure the procurement of those for their families and themselves. The commercialization of this practice has helped the emergence of catalysts such as advertisements, which ensure the consumer’s unobstructed narrow-vision of the world around. Advertisements are the tools to convince the buyer of the necessity of a particular product. And this commercial tool creates mostly an unnecessary need for various products in the minds of the buyer. Now stop reading, run the eyes to the immediate surroundings and count the items that one could see which are not really inevitable for the survival and the absence of which would not make much of

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a difference. And this number can help one to gauge the depth of your fall into the decoy of consumerism. It has wound up the brains in such a way that free thinking is also being restricted with the plantations of colonial ideas which invokes the submerged complexes to the surface.

Post colonialism and advertisements are two apparently disparate entities which could reveal the psychological and cultural imperialism that reigns the modern society, when one is analysed through the looking glass of the other. People who have had the 'physical' colonial experiences are just memories to feed the patriotic notions of the subsequent generations, who rejoice in their emancipation from slavery and complain at the incompetencies of their imbecile governments without any attempts at being actual benefactors themselves. What these modern societies fail to realise is that they are still under the sovereignty of white superiority and continue to look at things from the perspectives of the coloniser. Even though the content is seemingly innate and indigenous, the whole framework of the ways of the world is that of the oppressor. When the aboriginal elements come to the forefront somehow, it's treated as barbaric and regarded as something humiliating to the yet to be sophisticated imperial slaves. The mental and psychological tools to fathom the diverse aspects such as intelligence and development, of the individual, society, and the nation, that give them the identity of being the unique self, are built upon the colonial values and perceptions. And this Eurocentric perspective has assumed normality in the being of ex-colonies in such a way that the descendents of the colonised have recognised themselves as the essential other. This could be further elaborated using the apparatus of advertisements in Indian society.

Advertisement used to be just an incentive to product sales. But over the years with the advancement of visual media its impact has been transformed or recognized. Manipulating the consumer into buying the product is ultimately the apprehended agenda. The inventive verbal embellishments embraced by the product ironically attain power to influence the multitudes when they closely follow the colonial guidelines of looking at the world. They re-establish the repressed, deep-rooted insecurities of the colonized minds.

The consciousness itself of the skin colour is not an inherently colonial way of thinking, rather, one could find it being mentioned even in the descriptions of the characters in the ancient epics. "Valmiki in Ramayana describes Rama as a charming, well-built person of a dark complexion". Draupadi and Krishna, two of the most revered, admired and celebrated characters in 'Mahabharata' are depicted with the skin of nimbus-clouds-colour, that is, black in colour. 'Shiva' and 'Kali' the venerable Hindu deities are also described as dark skinned in these ancient texts. Black and white were presented as colours rather than symbols of inferiority and superiority. But it's fascinating how the visual media today portray these characters as white or blue. They find it more appropriate to cast a fair skinned actor and paint him or her blue rather than casting actors of black complexion. In India where people of all colours and shades dwell, majority of the actors who work in the visual media which claim to reflect the society are white-skinned: "No human utterance could be seen as innocent. Any set of word could be analysed to reveal not just an individual but a historical consciousness at work" (40).

This quote from AniaLoomba's work 'Colonialism/Postcolonialism', reminds one that just like any individual each and every word has it's own identity and a reflection on it could provide one with novel perspectives on the historical consciousness at work. 'Fair' is a word that one uses to denote various things, such as, 'treating people equally', 'beautiful', 'not showing favouritism or discrimination', etc. But one of the meanings that

immediately occupy our minds as the consumers of the overwhelmingly commercialised thought process, would be 'light-skinned'. Fair has become a synonym of white-skin. 'Fair' derives from old English 'faeger', which came from the Germanic and Norse 'fager', which simply meant 'beautiful' without any association of skin colour. In Shakespearean plays and sonnets this word has been used in this 'original' sense. But with the advent of imperialist forces, the word gradually adopted a visual image of white skin to its various definitions. By the end of the colonial episode, the word was also used to mark the white skin colour, which both the colonizer and colonized use, casually, today. This notion conceived by colonialism has been taken up by the advertisements to promote their capitalist agendas.

"Fair is lovely" concept was injected into the psyche of the enslaved by the imperialists and the perpetual repression using this notion gradually converted it into an inseparable part of the innate value systems on which the identity itself is built. Some years ago, advertisements blatantly deemed tall, white, straight haired and speaking English with an accent the sophisticated, ideal and superior way of being. Markets flooded with fairness treatments and creams, hair-straightening oils and remedies. The above-mentioned qualities of the characters determined, the class that they belonged to and the products they should be using to project their superiority and enhance their status. If the picture attached to the advertisement is that of a 'dark-skinned' common man and presented in the vernacular language, the product is intended for the lower middle class or working class people. Another interesting choice of these advertisements is the promise to the dark-skinned people, of social mobility through the usage of their products and changing their complexion or having straight-hair.

The realization and questioning of the psychological and cultural imperialism in that portrayal made the advertising community to hesitantly take a step back and detour. And this detour was treating the Indianness in the politics of beauty or the 'desi' aspects of our lives as, the exotic or the other, and celebrating that as a progressive initiative towards finally accepting the roots of oneself. The fairness creams have modified themselves into skin-protection-creams for all shades and colours. The advertisements feature persons who are not sparkingly white-skinned but moderately white-skinned. And also, they have magnanimously cared to omit the drastic transformation of dark to white complexion part into just glowing and moisturisation of the skin. The enlightened hair oil advertisements take an unprecedented approach of showing curly and wavy hair in their visuals that accompany words of encouragement to the youth of India to embrace the Indianness. Make up advertisements are also slowly catching up to the trend of casting slightly less white-skinned actors instead of actors such as Kareena Kapoor, who is famous for her 'fair' skin, to represent the exotic appeal of their products. Even in the advertisements of products for regions of dark-skinned-majority, there would be no compromise on the casting of 'fair' actors with European features and then they go through the trouble of adding regional elements in the visuals to make it Indian and relatable. Fabric and jewellery advertisements are great examples for this. And these are only a few of the innumerable illustrations that could be used as evidences for the portrayal of Indianness as exotic.

However, when one tries to understand the history and identity of the word 'exotic', through the lens of post colonialism, there are a number of things that could be found. The meaning of the word according to the Oxford Dictionary is- "from or in another country, especially, tropical one; seeming exciting and unusual, because it is connected with foreign countries." And the origin of the word is from the Greek words, *exo* and *exotikos* which mean 'outside' and 'foreign', respectively. "Exotic could also be defined as an empty space that can be used to

denote both the repulsive and desired, the fearful and fascinating, the fantastic and phantastic.” All the adjectives mentioned in this definition are more or less used to describe the former colonies; more specifically the oriental colonies. So, the word ‘exotic’ in effect is a box of stereotypes. The word paints the visual images of the unsophisticated, barbaric, and primitive.

So, curiously enough, this detour of portraying Indianness as exotic and thus, worthy of appreciation was not entirely to a different tangent, rather it falls right into the coloniser’s stream of thought. Models with slightly less European features and words which are not conspicuously racist, are promoting the products now, but assuring the oriental inferior consciousness, the same results as before. The subliminal messages of the visual representations reiterate that being Indian is being exotic.

Being exotic is still fascinating to the colonizer. The colonized minds are thus reassured that by accepting the Indianness despite the notion that it is unsophisticated, would not make them more inferior. Most of the advertisements today, consciously or unconsciously re-establish the cultural and psychological imperialism. The identity of the word ‘exotic’ was briefly followed in this paper, and it has been established that being exotic is being foreign. So, accepting oneself as the foreign, or the other, as proposed by GayatriSpivak, shows the deep-rooted reign of colonialism in psyche of the colonized.

Even though the products are being sold in the name of preserving the exotic Indianness against the invasion of colonial value systems, these advertisements are in fact reinstating the inferior feelings that still exist in the sub-conscious of the colonized. These colonial values have become an inseparable part of the identity and collective consciousness of the enslaved. It could be argued that this adherence to the ‘superior’ oppressor’s philosophies is to obtain a vicarious pleasure of being the oppressor himself through identifying oneself with the coloniser’s way of thinking.

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