Melanin on the Margins: Advertising and the Cultural Politics of Fair/Light/White Beauty in India

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Abstract

The recent commercial boom in women’s skin-lightening or “fairness” cosmetics in India is part of the larger context of escalating lifestyle consumerism in Asia’s emerging market nations. This monograph examines the cultural politics of gender, nation, beauty and skin color in the persuasive narratives of Indian magazine advertisements and television commercials for fairness cosmetics and personal care products. We situate advertising’s compact stories of ideal femininity within the sociology of colorism’s transnational links to hierarchies of race, gender, caste, ethnicity and class and the rapid economic growth in the skin-lightening cosmetics sector in India over the past decade. Deconstructing advertising’s visual and linguistic fields of meaning, our analysis dissects the rhetorical themes of bodily and personal transformation, modern and traditional science, and heterosexual romance that operate together to inflate the currency of light-skinned beauty. In conclusion, we outline recent challenges to the hegemony of colorism in India and suggest directions for future research that can build on this monograph’s scrutiny of advertising’s regulatory regimes of beauty.
The well-publicized launch of Zee channel’s television drama *Saath Phere-Saloni Ka Safar* (Seven Paces — Saloni’s Journey) on October 17, 2005, marked a significant cultural moment in the popular terrain of feminist politics in globalizing India. In September 2005, a national media campaign — billboards and television and radio commercials — promoting the serial’s first episode targeted commuters and audiences in Mumbai, Bangalore, Calcutta, Hyderabad and Delhi. The words “Saath Phere” in the serial’s title reference a sacred ritual in traditional Hindu weddings, the seven paces which brides and grooms take together around the holy fire to signal the finality of their conjugal union. *Saath Phere*, as its producers claimed, was a heroic tale of love, romance, and marriage that chronicled Saloni’s painful journey from “darkness to lightness,” not merely in a metaphorical allusion to salvation, but quite literally a liberation from the pain she endured as a woman imprisoned within the melanin of her dark skin:

Despite being revered as goddesses and having our ancient history peppered with women who were great leaders and scholars, it’s no secret that in modern times, the various biases faced by Indian women are more often ignored than addressed. One of the most baseless yet damning of these biases is the over-riding pre-eminence of fairness, or a fair complexion. By the logic of antonym, dark skin is till today considered one of a woman’s biggest disadvantages; almost a curse. (Zee TV uncovers, 2005)

In a testimony to *Saath Phere’s* cross-cultural resonance, an Indian viewer writes that Saloni’s predicament reminded her of Michael Jackson’s
obsession with lightening his skin color to deny his racial origins (Tare, 2006) and an African-American viewer in turn claims that she identified with Saloni because she knew what it felt like to be “left out and sometimes mistreated due to the color of your skin” (Lebronfan, 2006). Departing from these enthusiastic responses to the show, some media critics and feminists we spoke with in India pointed to the limits of Saath Phere’s alignment with progressive politics; the heroic female protagonist was not really dark, she was “dusky” and stunningly beautiful with long black hair and a slim body, and in the end she succumbs too easily to the pressures of matrimony.

Despite its limitations as a serious challenge to feminine beauty ideals, Saath Phere does attempt to grapple with the consequences of deeply embedded cultural norms that prescribe light or “fair” skin as an essential ingredient in Indian women’s beauty. Saath Phere’s ostensible mission to provoke debate in the relatively silent arena of gender and epidermal politics in globalizing India was certainly a timely proposition. The television show reached a national audience in the midst of a booming commercial investment in women’s skin-lightening cosmetics and skincare solutions, a recent development that can be traced to the escalation in vanity and lifestyle consumerism in India over the past fifteen years. An India Today magazine report on the triumphant economic orbit of the beauty industry in India documents the “galloping sales” in skin-lightening products in the year 2000: “The past two years have especially been a fairytale success. At least 12 new fairness out-of-a-tube brands have entered the market taking the number of fairness creams available to more than 30” (Sinha, 2000, p. 48). The spate of skin-lightening cosmetics and personal care products introduced in the Indian marketplace promise women consumers that they can inhibit or diminish melanin production and defend facial skin against UV rays thus revealing more “beautiful” skin that is several shades lighter than the original skin color.

The expansion in the skin-lightening sector in India over the past decade has followed in the wake of accelerated state-sponsored economic reform, that is, the central government’s decision to dismantle socialist state policies that had hindered private or “free” enterprise, and hence inaugurate the creation of a robust global capitalist consumer economy. One key imperative of the economic liberalization process, planned during the late eighties and implemented in the early nineties, centered on encouraging domestic and multinational companies to produce and market lifestyle commodities to India’s burgeoning middle-class consumers. In 1996, Business Today announced the unexpected results of a landmark government-funded national survey that shattered the myth of a thrifty and unsophisticated South Asian middle and lower middle consumer class; a majority of those surveyed had expressed a “ravenous appetite” for clothing, auto-

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mobiles, fast food, wrist watches, and cosmetics, higher-order commodities that signaled a widespread desire for upward mobility (New marketplace, 1996, p. 8). Paradoxically, Saath Phere’s dramatic story of Indian women’s experiences with skin color discrimination was thus launched simultaneously as a slew of facial skin-lightening products in the global Indian marketplace renewed age-old associations between light skin color and its embodiment of higher social and economic status.

This monograph examines magazine advertisements and television commercials for an array of national and multinational brands of fairness cosmetics in order to map the semiotic contours of the dominant cultural narratives that both reproduce and inflate light-skinned feminine beauty’s currency in globalizing India. Advertising, a commercial genre whose persuasive rhetoric does not merely sell goods, but also educates citizens in emerging markets to embrace consumerism’s “aspirational space” of upward mobility, offers a compelling archive for our analysis of the narratives of gender, class, and nation through which light-skinned beauty emerges as a visible, accessible, and seductive marker of social status (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 91). As Rajagopal (1998) argues, advertising acts as an institution of sentimental education in India, one that coaches new audiences to assimilate the signposts that symbolize upward mobility: “Advertising, as a language that extols the virtues of buying specific goods, at the same time educates consumers into particular technologies of the self, and specific modes of comportment. This tutelary activity hardly occurs in a vacuum, but tends to follow the cues of the political sphere proper” (p. 16). Circulating within shifting fields of gender relations, advertising’s pedagogical doctrines of femininity — fairness, slimness, youthfulness, light skin, long legs, and big eyes — in India’s vibrant media landscape initiate new global-national subjects into the mobile selfhood of consumerism’s therapeutic narratives.

Although this monograph examines the epidermal politics of advertising in postcolonial India, it is important to note that discourses of race/class/ethnic/caste mobility embedded in popular representations of “fair” beauty that circulate within the subcontinent are neither linear nor uni-dimensional. Hence, we modify studies of whiteness that have asserted its racial supremacy or its universal appeal to argue that practices of skin lightening and their commercial discourses do not necessarily imply Indian women’s desire to erase their ethnic identities and become the “superior” white racial other. Numerous anecdotal accounts, authors’ experiences of growing up in India, and a survey of South Asian-Canadian women (Sahay & Piran, 1997) suggest that interpretations of the terms “fair” and “fair-skinned” vary tremendously in India’s diverse multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic population. The normative palette of idealized light skin color in India may be anchored to a flexible and complex process of racial and ethnic coding that fluctuates within a crisscrossing matrix of global influences (travel and media consumption) and local social formations (region, ethnicity, class, family, education, religion). The precise shades of “fair” skin that Indian women may aspire to possess can thus
range from the white skin color associated with Northern European Caucasians to olive skin color associated with Southern European Caucasians and the North Indian Punjabi community.

Framed within this conceptual horizon, our monograph explores the ways in which magazine and television advertising’s compact yet communicative visual-linguistic representations of beauty anchor light skin color’s promise of transcendence to discourses of bodily and personal transformation; modern and traditional science; and the male gaze of heterosexual romance. Discourse, as Foucault reminds us, harnesses its explanatory power from spatial metaphors; discourse is thus always part of a discursive formation, ‘a system of a regular dispersion of statements’ (quoted in Reddy, 2006, p. 62). This monograph’s textual analysis of the symbolic codes of advertising argues that audiences are persuaded to register discourses of beauty as part of a larger system of overlapping statements — global mobility/local authenticity, tradition/modernity, and nationalism/cosmopolitanism — about particular geographies.

of overlapping statements — global mobility/local authenticity, tradition/modernity, and nationalism/cosmopolitanism — about particular geographies, namely “modernizing” India and its closer alliances with the west. Furthermore, our investigation of representations in commercial media texts responds to the recent arguments of socialist feminist media scholars, who have called for analyses of media texts that pay close attention to the less visible political-economic processes that shape commodity culture’s visible surfaces of meaning. Hence, this monograph’s detailed overview of the fairness cosmetics industry in post-liberalized India situates the cultural politics of advertising within the profit-driven stakes of domestic and multinational companies that are eager to harness the purchasing power of India’s expanding urban and rural female workforce.

Joining scholars in critical globalization studies (Applebaum & Robinson, 2005) who have advocated for systematic inquiry into globalization’s uneven trajectories in different locations, the broader goal of our analysis of advertisements for skin-lightening products is to reveal the disturbing ways in which media culture in India can revitalize hierarchies of gender, class, and caste in the midst of the euphoria over globalization’s potential to erase social differences and usher in the democratizing spirit of modernity. The sample of advertisements we examine here are not solely responsible for marginalizing dark-skinned women in India. In fact, the section of the monograph that reviews representations of beauty and skin color in a wide-ranging set of media — films, music, and children’s comics — demonstrates that dark skin has been a source of stigma for Indian women long before the arrival of globalization; however, the intensified promotion
of light-skinned beauty in advertising since the onset of economic liberalization points to the role that market forces can play in exacerbating divisions of gender, caste, region, and class. Chowdhury and Halamkar (1998) argue that the impetus towards upward mobility in globalizing India has contributed to the inflation in the currency of light skin color: “The Indian obsession with fair skin is often painfully obvious. Now, the train of the globalising middle class, far from leaving our color consciousness, is only hitching its carriages of old prejudices and attitudes to new engines” (p. 58). The scope of this monograph’s qualitative methodological approach is limited to a textual analysis of the manifest and latent meanings of advertising’s portfolio of images and words; hence, the analysis does not claim to account for advertising agencies’ creative production processes, audiences’ polysemic interpretations, or for the possibilities of women’s everyday resistance to hegemonic representations of fair skin in commercial media culture.

Our analysis of discourses of fairness and femininity in advertisements produced in the context of India’s transition from socialist modernity to global capitalist modernity draws from and contributes to international media studies, postcolonial feminist studies, and the sociology of colorism. First, although we focus on the epidermal politics of commercial products that target women consumers in India, the analysis of advertisements presented here has implications for numerous regions of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East where sales of skin-lightening products have increased dramatically in recent years. In 2005 alone, 62 new skin-whitening products were introduced in the Asia-Pacific region, thus consolidating “a trend that has seen an average of 56 new products introduced annually over the past four years” (Fuller, 2006, p. A3). A New York Times report with an image of a Hong Kong subway advertisement for skin-lightening treatments notes the aggressive marketing of visions of “pale beauty” in Asia where supermarkets and pharmacies distribute “vast selections” of creams: “In Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan, four of every ten women use a whitening cream, a survey by Synovate, a market research company found. The skin-whitening craze is not just for the face. It includes creams that whiten darker patches of skin in armpits and ‘pink nipple’ lotions that bleach away brown pigment” (Fuller, 2006, p. 3). Cheaply-priced creams and bleaches that promise to brighten and lighten skin are the “rage in many African countries” where women are beginning to report serious dermatological and medical problems — hives, rashes, bumps, scaly skin, ringing in the ears, and nausea — after prolonged use of these products (Baxter, 2000; Jenkins, 2001; Simmons, 2000). Miré’s cultural analysis of the dubious sales and marketing practices of the global skin-whitening industry notes that multinational companies have aggressively promoted more expensive, high-end whitening cosmetics to affluent Asian women in Japan, where the 2001 skin-whitening market was worth $5.6 billion, and in China, where the 2002 skin-whitening market was estimated at over $1.3 billion (Miré, 2005). She reveals a less-known, but growing market for high-end skin-whitening creams — older white women in North America and Europe, who are targeted online with fade creams that fall under the catego-
ry of anti-age skin care products. Advertisements for these newly reinvented creams claim that they can diminish brown “age spots” on white skin, thus presenting “skin whitening as a legitimate intervention designed to cure and mitigate the disease of aging” in white women (Miré, 2005).

Secondly, as Rajagopal (1998) explains, given the austerity of India’s public culture until the late eighties, the burden of creating “a libidinal economy that helps secure and reproduce the physical economy” has fallen on the shoulders of advertising and its partners in the culture industry (p. 17). Yet, despite its growing influence in coaching Indian consumers to embrace new habits of consumption, advertising remains a rather “neglected area” of study in international media research on India with Bollywood films and entertainment programming on television (dramas, music television, and mythological series) monopolizing the attention of scholars in communication, cultural anthropology, and sociology (Munshi, 1998, p. 574). Our scrutiny of advertising discourse in this monograph builds on the small but steady stream of work that has begun to address the professional practices and imaginative products of the Indian advertising industry (Chaudhari, 2001; Fernandes, 2000; Kumar, 2004; Mazzarella, 2003; Munshi, 1998; Rajagopal, 1998; Zacharias, 2003). Drawing sustenance from a set of recent inter-related developments — the arrival of multinationals, the increasing reach of satellite and cable television, an expanding range of English-language and vernacular magazines and newspapers, and rising levels of literacy — the advertising industry in India grew by an average of 30 percent a year from 1991 to 1997, and the total billings of leading national advertising agencies amounted to Rs. 4000 crores by the mid-nineties (Jeffrey, 2000, pp. 58-63). The heightened competition in the domestic market for fairness products in the year 2000, for example, forced Hindustan Lever Limited to increase its advertising spending by four times (Sinha, 2000).

Echoing the work of postcolonial feminist scholars, this monograph’s critique of the cultural politics of femininity in fairness cosmetics advertisements in India approaches the commodity texts of beauty culture as elements of a larger ideological and historical terrain, one that has been shaped by nationalist and patriarchal legacies and the priorities of state and market institutions (Basu, 2001; Callahan, 1998; Oza, 2001; Reddy, 2006; Scott, 1996; Sunder Rajan, 1993). Commodity images of beauty culture that participate in the task of redefining “modern” Indian womanhood rely on a vocabulary of desire that seeks to reconcile traditional norms of modest beauty, thrift, and domesticity with the seemingly modernist pleasures of glamour, self-indulgent consumption, and luxury as a route to self-fulfillment and a more cosmopolitan identity. Reddy’s analysis of Femina magazine tracks beauty not as a “physical attribute, but as a telos toward which the female subject, transformed into a consumer subject and essentially Indian, moves through these decades of globalisation and national chauvinism” (Reddy, 2006, p. 77). India’s economic transformation from a third world, quasi-socialist nation into a global capitalist player finds a “symbolic parallel in the beautiful Indian woman who has become linked to the world outside”
through victories in global beauty pageants and fashion shows and exposure in international advertising, film, and television (p. 62).

Finally, as our extended discussion of colorism in the following section shows, the significance of skin color for the social construction of race, gender and class identities has been a sustained topic of interest in the United States and Europe; however, very little research in the humanities and social sciences has explored systematically the cultural resilience of hierarchies of skin color in Asia and Africa. This monograph’s exploration of light skin color’s currency within the social boundaries of postcolonial India considers the ways in which skin color operates as a form of social capital in a non-White community, and thus challenges dominant Euro-American myths of a homogenous “brown” South Asian population.

The first section of the monograph, which considers the sociological and historical dimensions of “colorism” in the United States and in India, outlines the cross-cultural ways in which distinctions of skin color have mirrored the structural hierarchies of race, gender, class, and caste. The second section situates skin-lightening advertisements in post-liberalization India within a broader framework of historical and contemporary cultural representations that have reinforced the norm of light-skinned beauty; we argue that the meanings of advertising gain credibility and solidity through their inter-textual relations with other domains of representation. The third section sketches the details of the methodological approach we employ to study the visual and linguistic content of advertisements; we describe our fieldwork in India, outline the archive of advertisements, and explain briefly the deconstructive strategy of our textual analysis. The fourth section, a comprehensive economic overview of the buoyant fairness industry in India, makes visible the muscular scaffolding of global and local capital that upholds and surrounds the discursive practices of print advertisements and television commercials. In the absence of any systematic research to date on the increasingly profitable commerce in women’s skin lightening in India, we hope this section will serve as a resource for continued exploration of the epidermal politics of popular culture in South Asia. The fifth and main section of analysis decodes three persistent and intersecting thematic patterns of meaning — rhetorical motifs of transformation, traditional and modern science, and romance and heterosexuality — that advertisements construct to sell the allure of skin lightening to Indian women consumers. The sixth and concluding section outlines recent challenges to the hegemony of fair skin in India and speculates on the possibilities for future work that can extend the scope of this monograph’s textual analysis of advertising.

**Colorism Within and Across Geographic Borders:**

**Skin Color, Social Hierarchy, and Gender**

Skin color, as interdisciplinary scholars of slavery and colonialism have documented, has played a pivotal role in the social construction of race in Europe and the United States (Rothenberg, 1995). The ideological justifica-
tion for skin-color based hierarchy — the project of epidermal signification — inaugurated in the late seventeenth century marked the beginnings of the modern science of race and its generation of scientific models of racial superiority (Wiegman 1995). Wiegman (1995) argues that nineteenth century colonialism’s corporeal science of race, which was based in an empiricist visual logic, scrutinized the bodies of natives — skin color, brain, hair, breasts and buttocks — to prove their innate inferiority and thus legitimize the institutions of slavery and territorial conquest. Although frowned upon today as incendiary labels of overt racism, the quotidian terms of racial difference that flowed through the First World’s colonial past — Africans as “Darkies,” East Asians as “Yellow Orientals,” Native Americans as “Red Indians” and South Asians as “Dark Natives” — remind us that skin color served as a foundational category in shaping the binary of white self/non-white other. Numerous analyses of popular and material culture’s historical artifacts in the First World — advertisements, films, sitcoms, cartoons, dolls, and consumer products — illustrate the binary alignment of the “superior” white race with civilization, cleanliness, godliness/ intellect and the “inferior” black race with barbarism, slovenliness, bestiality, and stupidity (Gray, 1995; Hill-Collins, 1999; Kern-Foxworth, 1990; Manning, 1998).

More recently, scholars in the United States have shifted the lens of inquiry from binary models of racism (white/non-white) to consider more complex forms of racialized prejudice that has created power inequalities among and within communities of color. These scholars have drawn our attention to the ways in which the cultural capital of skin color has benefited light-skinned black and Latino/a men and women, thus creating hierarchies of power and inequality within communities of color (Banks, 2000; Celious A. & Oyserman, 2001; Falconer & Neville, 2000; Gomez, 2000; Hall, Russell, & Wilson, 1992; Hall, 1995; Hill, 2000; Hunter, 2002; Keenan, 1996; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Among others, Banks, a legal scholar, defines the practice of “colorism” as an insidious form of discrimination based on internal color, class and gender stratification that affects dark-skinned black men and women both inside and outside the black community (Banks, 2000). Her investigation of court cases in which dark-skinned black defendants have claimed to be victims of skin color discrimination probes the “degrees or layers of blackness” that create hierarchies of status and privilege within the black community. Hill (2002) traces the origins of colorism to the historical division of slave labor in the United States; light-skinned black men and women were recruited to work as domestic servants in the private sphere of the white master’s home while dark-skinned blacks were required to work on plantations. The oppressive practices of racial segregation sharpened distinctions of gender and class in the Black community, and light skin color, a visible marker of socio-economic status, became an avenue of upward mobility for blacks who could pass as white (Herskovits, 1968; Keith & Herring, 1991; Neal & Wilson, 1989). Slavery’s perpetuation of class divisions associated with skin color filtered gradually into the social life of the black community. Elite black fraternities, churches and clubs of the early 1900s instituted a brown-bag test to determine who could enter; men
and women who had skin darker than a brown bag were denied admission (Hill, 2002, p. 78). Sociological research from the 1920s also suggests that in some black families at the turn of the last century, dark-skinned children were more likely to be assigned menial tasks than light-skinned children (Gibson, 1931).

The authors of Skin/Deep: How race and complexion matter in the color-blind arena argue that skin color, even after the formal dismantling of slavery and segregation, has continued to be a divisive force in the black community in the post civil-rights era (Herring, Keith, & Horton, 2004). A pioneering study on the impact of skin color on access to professional occupations notes that black politicians and Baptist ministers tend to be darker than black lawyers, doctors, and ministers from other congregations and upper-class churches (Holtzman, 1973). National survey data from the nineties reveal that light-skinned black men and women attain a higher socioeconomic status because they are likely to be preferred as employees and colleagues in White-dominated workplaces and social settings (Hill, 2000; Hill, 2002). Light-skinned Black men in the ten-year period 1970 to 1980 were more likely than dark-skinned Black men to have college education and professional degrees (Keith & Herring, 1991), and a more recent study in 2000 discovered that light-skinned Black men were less likely to face unemployment (Johnson & Farrell, 1995). Similarly, in her research on Latino communities in the Northeastern part of the United States, Gomez (2000) found that lighter skinned Latino men had more education, owned more expensive homes, and were more likely to be married. In Espino and Frantz’s (2002) comparative research on the occupational status of Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican populations, they discovered that dark-skinned Mexicans and Cubans faced more labor market discrimination than lighter skinned Puerto Rican citizens.

Skin color discrimination or colorism, much like the standards of weight in modern beauty and fashion norms, is a gendered phenomenon that has affected women to a much greater degree than men. In the context of the United States, which has a long history of celebrating whiteness as an essential component of female beauty, black women who have attained celebrity status — Lena Horne, Vanessa Williams, and Halle Berry — tend to be lighter-skinned than their male counterparts — Paul Robeson, Nat King Cole, and Sidney Poitier (Hill, 2002, p. 80). Male and female subjects in one study, when queried about the attractiveness of women with five different skin tones, consistently rated “very light brown women” as more attractive. The very same study reveals that light skin was not as strong a predictor of physical attractiveness for men: men in the category of “light brown” rather than “very light brown” were considered most attractive (Hill, 2002). Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (education, reputation, taste and linguistic skills), Hunter contends that light skin operates as a form of social capital for black women because women who possess this coveted attribute of beauty can mobilize it to change their economic and cultural status. Her analysis of national survey data shows that light-skinned black women had higher education, earned higher incomes, and

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had spouses of higher economic status (Hunter, 2002). Thompson and Keith (2001) write that black women experience a “quadruple” oppression due to their multiple marginalities along the axes of gender, class, race, and skin color. Their analysis of gender differences in their survey data shows that skin tone affects black women’s self-esteem to a greater degree than black men, but dark-skinned black women with the lowest incomes reported the lowest self-esteem. These authors conclude that the relationship between gender, class, skin color and low self-esteem in the black community can be attributed to women’s exposure to interrelated “messages from peers, the mass media, and family that show a preference for lighter skin tones” (Thompson & Keith, 2001, p. 352).

Popular media including magazines and television are also guilty of perpetuating the unequal relations between gender and colorism, that is, of penalizing dark-skinned black women to a much greater extent than dark-skinned black men. Keenan’s (1996) analysis of magazines — Fortune, Black Enterprise, Glamour, and Essence — over the period 1989-1994 compared editorial photographs of black celebrities, politicians, and average citizens with full-page color advertisements that featured black models. He found that black male and female models in advertisements were lighter skinned on average than those in editorial photographs, and hence he speculates that these models were lighter than the population at large. Keenan also discovered that black female models in advertisements were much lighter in skin tone than the black male models. In a more recent study of Ebony magazine’s February 2003 issue on the “10 hottest couples,” Wald (2003) found that without an exception, the 10 black women featured in these commemorative photographs had lighter skin tones than their Black celebrity husbands. Other stories in the same issue — “Seven ways to blow her mind” and “An inside look at raising girls” — reinforced the dominant visual pattern of coupling light-skinned black women with darker skinned black men, and advertisements in this issue also favored very light-skinned black women. Reproducing the gendered representations of colorism that scholars have found in magazines, such recent television shows as Girlfriends, The Bernie Mac show and My Wife and Kids also pair light-skinned black women with dark-skinned black men.

Unlike recent scholarship in the United States, which shows a great degree of consensus in tracing colorism to the institutionalized racism of slavery and segregation and internalized racism within the black community, there is very little work that can explain affirmatively the historical origins of skin color discrimination in India. In his descriptive inventory of colorism’s pervasive influence in many parts of Asia including Korea, Japan and the Phillipines, Hall (1993/2003) observes that the idealization of light skin tone within many ethnic communities on the Indian subcontinent, but especially for Indian women, has been “all but ignored in the scholarly literature” (p. 95). Drawing on the arguments of scholars in the United States, skin color prejudice in postcolonial India could be traced to the lasting impact of British imperialism, the historical legacy of internalized racism that has lingered on the subcontinent long after the formal demise of the
colonial empire. A large body of work on colonial discourse and Orientalism in the fields of literary criticism, cultural studies, film studies and history has deconstructed representations of the colonized in novels, popular cinema, advertisements, travelogues, diaries and legal documents (Aloula, 1966; Faris, 2002; Lalvani, 1995; Mani, 1991; Shohat & Stam, 2002; Stoler, 2002; Stoler & Cooper, 1997). These postcolonial critiques have underscored European colonialism’s racist construction of the “dark native” as barbaric, savage, primitive, exotic, passive, unruly and incapable of self-determination. Echoing the ideological legacies of slavery in the black community, British colonialism’s racist anti-miscegenation laws and its exclusion of Indian citizens from full participation in structures of power may also have contributed partly to the phenomenon of colorism in India’s ethnic communities.

A second explanation for the genealogy of colorism in India could take us back deeper into the ancient history of the settlement of the subcontinent, in fact, to a much earlier record of foreign invasion and conquest that predates British colonialism. According to the myth of Aryan might and superiority, strong, light-skinned tribes from Central Asia (Eurasia) invaded India around 1500 B.C. and moved steadily from the northern region to the southern region. With the advantage of fire, horses, chariots, technological skills, and sophisticated military strategy, the powerful and more civilized Aryan race (also considered to be the progenitor of the Caucasian race) is believed to have conquered the Dravidians of South India, indigenous tribes of “primitive, dark-skinned, and phallus worshipping peoples” who were driven further south into the peninsula (Gordon, 1996, pp. 62-63).

Finally, a third and closely related explanation for colorism in South Asia locates skin color prejudice within the rigid occupational hierarchy of Hinduism’s caste system, a prescriptive model for a large-scale division of labor that the Aryans introduced to India. The hierarchical ladder of caste positions Brahmans (intellectuals and priests) first, Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) second, Vaishyas (merchants and traders) third, Shudras (servants and manual workers) fourth, and Untouchables (workers who process animal and human waste) as the last category of people who are outside the caste system and beneath all the others. The very term for caste, varna, which literally means “color” and the coding of different castes in the epic story Mahabharata according to color — Brahmans (white), Kshatriya (red), Vaishyas (yellow), Shudras (brown), and untouchables (black) — could well suggest that the desire for the visible capital of light skin color in India indexes individuals’ struggle to claim upper-caste and class status. If the historical organization of caste’s occupational and skin color hierarchy drives colorism, then the legacy of caste might also explain the greater burden placed on Indian women to be light-skinned. In the patriarchal logic of caste, which made birth the sole criterion for claiming status, women were charged with the responsibility of reproducing and maintaining the purity of caste, and hence a woman’s light skin symbolizes the potential for the continuity of upper caste status.

Although it is beyond the scope of this monograph to summarize the
vast anthropological and historical literature on caste in India, it is important to note that sociologists and historians have disputed both the legitimacy of caste as a skin color-based system of socio-economic classification and the veracity of the Aryan theory of racial conquest (Mazumdar, 1989). A list-serv exchange on the H-Asia list, an Internet resource and discussion forum for “historians and other Asia scholars to easily communicate current research and teaching interests...and to test new ideas and share comments,” captures the diversity of scholarly opinions on religion, caste, and skin color prejudice. On the one hand, Pankaj (1995) and Velayutham (2002) propose that the Hindu system of caste or varna in India does connect skin color to the cultural and socioeconomic status of specific castes, and on the other hand, Gould (1995) argues that the word varna’s association with color coding merely connotes a system of “counting or classification” that has little to do with skin color. Guha (2002) agrees that it is “incontestable that most South Asians in the last few centuries have had a strong aesthetic preference for light skin color, especially in women,” but that wholesale cultural and religious explanations cannot account for dark-skinned major gods in Hinduism (Krishna and Rama) or for the dark-skinned damsels in the Ajanta cave paintings. Mazumdar (1989) argues that despite the “fact that there is virtually no evidence” of Aryan invasion, Indian, upper-caste Hindu nationalists seized upon the Aryan race theory as scientific proof of their racial proximity to European masters, thus fortifying their distinctive racial and religious identity and their superior status vis-à-vis lower castes and untouchables (p. 49). In the absence of conclusive historical research on colorism in South Asia and the ideological contexts that have shaped the writing of Aryan race theory, we can only speculate in this monograph that colorism in India may be related to interwoven beliefs and assumptions about light skin and its historical signification of superior racial, regional, and upper-caste/class status.

There is very little sociological research on colorism in the South Asian community in comparison to the black community in the United States; however, a few empirical studies of the Indian diaspora in North America have pointed to the tightly knit relations between light skin color and norms of ideal feminine beauty. The historical reasons for colorism in the United States and India may be different, but Hunter’s argument for considering skin color as a form of “social capital” for black women works equally well in the case of Indian women (Hunter, 2002). Three different studies of Indian immigrants in the United States and Canada show that dark-skinned women report strong feelings of marginalization and discrimination, and a majority of these women associate light skin with attractiveness and
increased opportunities in the heterosexual romance and marriage markets (Grewal, 2003; Rahman, 2002; Sahay & Piran, 1997). Rahman’s survey of a small sample of middle class Indian Hindu women in New Jersey shows that skin color, along with other such variables as caste and occupation, determined these women’s access to upwardly mobile, educated, and professional male spouses. One upper-caste (Brahmin) woman in Rahman’s survey notes candidly, “A darker girl is often a liability to her family. It is difficult to arrange a marriage for her. Even a dark Brahmin girl has a low value in the marriage market” (p. 23). Grewal’s work among South Asian Muslim women in Michigan documents the ways in which colorism’s gendered tracks cross boundaries of religion. A majority of the Muslim women that Grewal (2003) interviewed observed that their community stigmatizes dark-skinned women as unattractive. One interviewee expresses her frustration, “I know people see me as dark, and I know people don’t ask me [for marriage] because of that...and I want to marry a professional man, so it’s hard.” In their survey of South Asian-Canadian women, psychologists Sahay and Piran note that although their young student respondents did not express a desire to be white-skinned (Caucasian), even the medium- and dark-skinned women who challenged the South Asian community’s beauty ideals as unfair and restrictive said they would prefer to have a lighter (olive) skin tone (Sahay & Piran, 1997).

In summary, differences of skin color, when translated across geographic boundaries articulate historical and structural hierarchies of race, class, caste, gender, ethnicity and region, and as sociological research on colorism in the United States and India suggests, non-white women perceive light skin color to be an asset that can be mobilized to move up the social and economic ladder. Unlike the sociologist Rahman (2002), we are more cautious about arguing that experiences of colorism in the black community in the United States and in South Asian national and diasporic communities are identical or homologous; the vastly different histories of the black community in North America — the forced relocation and slavery of blacks and the civil rights movement — and the British colonial occupation of South Asia, along with the diverse influences of religion, region and caste in India, preclude us from making such a claim. For example, unlike light-skinned blacks, light-skinned South Asians do not face the paradoxical challenge of being able to pass as white yet having to assert racial belonging and legitimacy, that is, of being authentic racial insiders. Hunter (2002) writes that light skin is a source of privilege for black Americans, but in the post civil-rights era of racial pride in the United States, it can also be interpreted as a sign of racial in-authenticity: “Women and men with dark skin are more likely to be seen and accepted as legitimate members of their ethnic groups, are less likely to have their group loyalty questioned, more likely to be perceived as ‘racially conscious’, and are less likely to be accused of trying to assimilate...”(p. 35). On the reverse side, women in the diasporic South Asian Muslim community in Grewal’s study argue that Indian parents, who arrange a dark-skinned daughter’s marriage, may offer a larger dowry to the groom’s family as a form of fiscal compensation for her less than ideal phys-
ical beauty, an option that is unlikely to be available to black women in the United States (Grewal, 2003). Thus, rather than arguing that colorism in India mirrors patterns of colorism in the United States, our case study of advertising and beauty in India’s global economic context seeks to contribute new comparative knowledge of colorism, culture, and commerce in a non-western, postcolonial nation.

Embedded Advertising: Cultural Representations of Colorism and Beauty in India

Scholars of advertising have argued that the discourses of modern magazine advertisements and television commercials are simultaneously citational and generative (Cronin, 2000; Jhally, 1990). In performing its citational function, advertising borrows its symbolic language from other normative representations and social discourses, and in enacting its generative function, advertising’s aesthetic and moral narratives reposition or accentuate these borrowed meanings in a manner that encourages the consumption of goods and services. The citational meanings of the fairness advertisements we examine in this monograph emerge in relation to a diverse gallery of media discourses in India that have consistently promoted light skin as a compulsory requirement for feminine beauty. Besides the advertisements for skin-lightening cosmetics we study here, almost all magazine and television advertisements produced in India feature light-skinned models. On browsing the pages of the dozen national and global glossy women’s magazines that target middle-class Indian consumers, even a casual reader would learn quickly that light skin color and flawless skin devoid of pores and blemishes define ideal feminine beauty. In Reddy’s analysis of beauty in Femina, India’s oldest and largest circulation women’s magazine, she makes the observation that “with the exception of a handful of women, dark-skinned models are virtually absent from the pages — and covers — of Femina from 1997-2002” (Reddy, 2005, p. 77). Interweaving fairness into a seamless package of essential physical attributes, the faces of the young and beautiful Indian models in advertisements for perfumes, clothing, shoes, toothpaste, luggage, processed food and travel are light-skinned with smooth complexions, shining black hair, and slim bodies. Sengupta, director of film services at Ambience Advertising, states bluntly that the illogical color bias in the modeling industry in India, a nation where “most people are varying shades of brown and black,” runs deep in the collective social psyche: “There is no logic to this. Brands of products like shampoos, which don’t have anything to do with skin colour, do not have a precedent for using a dark model. It is as if the entire concept of beauty is associated with fair skin” (Chowdhury & Halankar, 1998, p. 59).

Illustrating the mobility of fair-skinned Indian beauty in the global modeling industry, Aishwarya Rai, India’s former Miss World, Bollywood film star and international supermodel, graces the pages of magazines in the United States in advertisements for L’Oréal cosmetics. Endorsed by none other than Oprah Winfrey as the “most beautiful woman in the world” in
2005, Rai’s brand of beauty — very light skin, thin nose, full pink lips, and almond-shaped large green eyes — captures the standards of contemporary Indian beauty that can travel both within and outside the nation. Interviews with insiders in the advertising and modeling industries suggest that the widespread demand for fair models has hindered the success of dark-skinned models, even if these women have surpassed other industry standards for weight and height. Nina Manuel, a model who is described as “gorgeous with striking features, endless legs, and skin like polished brass,” has had to accept the realities of a color conscious society: “In advertising, dark skin is a complete no-no. Whenever I’ve done a commercial or a print campaign, I’ve been bathed in white, but there’s nothing to be done about it” (Chowdhury & Halarnekar, 1998, p. 58). The whitened female bodies that have populated the spaces of media culture — billboards, magazines, and television — in India over the past decade have their antecedents in the images of postcolonial whiteness that first began to appear in the late eighties, images that symbolized the dramatic economic changes that were underway at the time (Zacharias, 2003). Zacharias (2003) argues that a deluge of dynamic signs of “whiteness, whitened bodies, and hybrid foreign bodies,” with their seductive promises of consumer empowerment in an India that was opening up to the global economy, conveyed the “infinite possibilities of transformation and mobility to the socially ascending postcolonial viewer” (p. 398).

Representations of ideal beauty in media texts from earlier decades including magazine advice columns, children’s comic books, matrimonial classifieds, films, and popular music point to an urban, middle class preoccupation with light skin that predates the current wave of light-skinned women in advertisements. Beginning in the early seventies and continuing in this decade, beauticians’ advice columns in Femina and Women’s Era have featured readers’ questions about the best methods to lighten facial skin color. For example, one reader in Femina’s July 2004 issue requests Dr. Jamuna Pai to recommend a fairness treatment: “I recently married into a family where everybody is fair-complexioned. I get constantly taunted for my dark skin, and am desperate to know how to become fair. Is there a way to reduce the melanin?” (p. 68)” Skin care experts in magazines have typically advised women to use natural remedies like turmeric, lemon, cream, and other easily available “kitchen” ingredients to lighten skin color. In the realm of children’s popular media, Amar Chitra Katha comic books, a genre of popular literature that claims to educate middle-class Indian children about their history and heritage, perpetuate colorism in their distinctively ornate illustrations that pit heroic/good, light-skinned characters against villainous dark-skinned characters (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). These stories of gods, goddesses, kings, demons and historical events associate light skin with divinity, strength, beauty, virtue, compassion and upper-caste status in contrast to dark skin, which signifies violence, brutality, stupidity, bestiality, deviance, low-caste status, promiscuity and anger.

It is not uncommon to find blatant evidence of skin color prejudice in matrimonial classified advertisements in Indian newspapers and on com-
mmercial matrimonial websites. Matrimonial classifieds and online websites are modern media tools that facilitate the continuation of the arranged marriage system in the widely dispersed Indian national and disporic communities that can no longer rely on traditional marriage brokers and kinship networks to locate potential spouses. Our informal analysis of Sunday newspaper classifieds in *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *Hindu*, and *Indian Express* in 2001 and 2002 shows that various permutations of the phrase "wanted fair, beautiful, and cultured girl" pepper men's requests for responses from brides in contrast to women, who rarely mention a desirable skin color for bridegrooms, and far more women than men describe their own complexion as fair or light-skinned. In these classifieds, some prospective grooms, who claim to earn high salaries and have professional degrees, green cards or U.S. citizenship, write that they prefer brides with "fair" or "wheatish” complexions. A classified advertisement in the *Hindustan Times* (June 23, 2002), one among several other similar descriptions, declares: "Delhi-based affluent, high status cultured Punjabi Arora industrialist family is looking for a very beautiful, fair, slim, tall, educated, bride from cultured family for their only son." Matrimonial websites reveal a similar pattern of inequality in relation to gender and skin color, and the "open disclosure" language of some parents' confessions about the "problem" of their daughter's dark skin reveals their feelings of shame and regret: "NEGATIVE POINTS — My daughter is not of fair complexion. Of course she is not very dark, but with no amount of extrapolation she can be called as fair" (quoted in Adams & Ghose, p. 431). Saifee's personal essay on the commodification of skin color criticizes the popular online marriage site Shaadi.com for creating filters that allow users to search for and select potential partners based on skin color: "In fact, the Shaadi.com option of filtering profiles through a skin tone complexion drop-down menu (ranging from fair to wheatish to dark)...perpetuates the South Asian tradition of privileging fair-skinned over dark and promoting prejudice based on skin color" (Saifee, 2006).

India's popular film and music industries have also participated in marginalizing dark skin, particularly in relation to women, for decades. Although there are a handful of dark-skinned heroines, who have achieved success in Bollywood films, a majority of the high-earning film actresses are young and light-skinned women. Until recently, the few dark-skinned film actresses — Rekha and Smita Patil — of the Bollywood film industry, who managed to break the color barrier, wore layers of make up to camouflage their natural skin color: "In the dreamworld of films, change might just about be seeping in. Indeed amidst the super-fair Karisma Kapoors and Raveena Tandons, the biggest female star, the outspoken, unconventional Kajol is a smoky shade of brown" (Chowdhury & Halarnkar, 1998, p. 59). Skin color discrimination has also percolated further down into the lower echelons of the film world's hiring practices. Shahrukh Khan, one of the highest paid film stars today, has reportedly stipulated that dancers in his extravagant musical scenes must be "white-skinned college girls who smell good" (Joseph, 2000, p. 70). As the Indian film industry has globalized and
gone “upmarket” to cater to overseas audiences. frustrated dark-skinned female dancers or “extras,” members of the Cine Dancers Association, are increasingly facing unemployment because directors, film stars, and choreographers perceive slim and light-skinned dancers as indispensable for the cinematic production of an upper class aesthetic (Joseph, 2000). In popular songs or musical hits derived from Hindi films, a lucrative source of revenue and the financial foundation for the launch of many film productions, male heroes frequently refer to their female object of admiration as “gori” (fair-complexioned) — hit songs from the films Main Khiladi Tu Anari, Suhagra, Coozie No. 1, Baazigar, Aaina, Khudda, and Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge are a few examples of the ideological linking of feminine beauty with light skin. Female stars rarely, if ever, address their lead male romantic leads as “gora.”

Finally, imitating the expert role of U.S. women’s magazines, popular magazines in post-liberalized India publish regular editorial photo collages and articles that seek to educate Indian women on the latest trends in beauty and fashion. A February 2001 Femina article “How white is too bright” evaluates the effectiveness of scores of skin-lightening creams that are available to consumers today even as it ironically describes dark skin as a “natural” part of the body:

It isn’t our fault. The desire to be fair complexioned is so ingrained in our psyches that we’ve created a super category of beauty products...While the rest of the world may ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ over our strong features and dusky complexions, Indian women have tried on everything from ‘besan’ to fairness creams in the hope of lightening their natural pigmentation. (Manral, 2001, p. 33)

In 2000, 2001, and 2002, numerous editorial images of fairness creams and cosmetics including Shahnaz Husain Pearl Cream, Lakmé Fair Perfect Crème, Elizabeth Arden Visible Whitening Lotion, Avon VIP Fairness cream, and Fair & Lovely Lotion and Ayurvedic Cream that appeared in the standard beauty features of magazines — Promotion and beauty buzz (Cosmopolitan), Beauty news and style file (Femina), Red hot now (Elan), and Beauty buys (New Woman) — supplied editorial endorsement and free publicity for these products. Cosmopolitan’s unabashed promotion of Lakmé Fair Perfect Crème in its February 2000 issue confirms the product’s ability to help women secure men’s attention: “Discover the secret to fairer, flawless, and luminous skin with Lakmé Fair Perfect Crème...Use it and watch all the guys drool” (Promotion and beauty buzz, 2000, p. 90).
semiotics of fairness and femininity in advertisements for skin-lightening products thus intersects with the cultural politics of beauty and skin color in a larger system of representations in India’s popular domain.

Methodology: Analyzing Advertising’s Representations and Narratives of Beauty

This monograph’s qualitative approach to the analysis of advertising discourse situates magazine and television advertisements within the political economy of the beauty industry, and explores the dominant, thematic patterns of meaning that structure advertising’s representations of light skin color as a desirable feminine commodity. During fieldwork in India in the summers of 2001, 2002 and 2003, we collected magazine and television advertisements, children’s comics, product catalogs, in-store promotional material, magazine advice columns, and matrimonial classified advertisements from different newspapers. The 78 print advertisements analyzed here include full-page advertisements from the following English-language magazines: Women’s Era, New Woman, Femina, Savvy, Elle (India), Reader’s Digest, Cine Blitz, Stardust, and Filmfare. Our sample of magazine advertisements spans the five-year period of 1999-2003, a time frame in which skin-lightening products secured the highest gross sales in comparison to all other sectors in the cosmetics industry in India. We taped a quarter of the sample of 45 television commercials and ordered the rest from the agency TVAD Index in New Delhi, one of India’s largest advertising and news monitoring firms. Our archive of television commercials includes commercials in six languages — English, Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil — that were aired on national and regional channels. Fairness creams, lotions, soaps, body oils and facial bleaches are some of the examples of domestic and multinational products that were advertised in the sample of magazine advertisements and television commercials. Advertisements for sunscreen lotions are also part of our sample because manufacturers of these lotions were quick to jump on the “fairness” bandwagon by claiming that their products prevented any further darkening of facial skin color.

We gathered economic information on the skin-lightening cosmetics industry from marketing trade publications, business magazines, and the specialized marketing databases of the Administrative Staff College of India, Hyderabad. Both authors interviewed beauticians and beauty salon managers in Bangalore and New Delhi to learn about the demand for beauty services that promise women fairness. We visited stores, supermarkets and beauty counters in department stores in three large cities in India — Hyderabad, New Delhi and Bangalore — with three goals in mind: to document the range of products that represent the spectrum of fairness cosmetics (see Appendix), purchase a sample of products so we could examine the aesthetics of packaging (see Figure 1), and study the retailing practices that target different socioeconomic segments of consumers.
In our textual analysis, we approach advertising, not as a “soft” or secondary partner to marketing and sales, but as an orchestrated and imaginative process that can “materialize the social categories of the consumers it names” (Cronin, 2000, p. 41). Cronin argues that advertising campaigns do not “merely uncover sections of society and present them to clients” as distinct socioeconomic segments, but they actively “mobilize the idea of the target market” through differentiated forms of textual address (p. 41). As global and national corporations seek out different categories of consumers in post-liberalization India, their advertising narratives can illustrate the collective re-imagination of gender, class and national identities in the midst of a changing political culture in which an abundance of commodities has come to signify India’s assimilation into global modernity. Studying the textual codes of advertising, as Rajagopal (1998) suggests, can give us glimpses into the birthing of new vocabularies of desire and mobility in India:

Ads can illuminate how markets are being reshaped — not only in terms of divisions of price and income segmentation — as in ads for low end versus premium products, for instance, but also and perhaps more importantly, in the aesthetic forms and rhetorical structures through which the attention of consumers is sought, and their desires aroused. Advertisements, being at the interface of economy and culture, help illuminate the realm where aesthetics and utility are made to merge. (p. 17)
Rajagopal also argues against the conventional Marxist view of advertising as the ideological output (superstructure) of the material base (economy); rather he insists that advertising and the market economy have their own specific materiality (modes of production and subjection) with each sustaining and working itself through the rhetoric of the other.

A number of scholars have noted the key role that advertising plays in constructing femininity, and well-known advertising critic Jhally (1990) has observed, “in modern advertising, gender is probably the social resource that is used most by advertisers” (p. 135). Images of women and representations of gender identity in advertising have been the primary areas of inquiry in feminist media studies in the United States and Europe. Goffman’s pioneering approach to performances of gender in advertising, the basis for many textual analyses of media representations, centers on the aesthetics of femininity in advertisements; he argues that advertising’s posed portraits have the ability to look natural and familiar, but on close inspection, reveal a hyper-ritualized and conventionalized narrative of feminine and masculine displays of attitudes, values, and behaviors (Goffman, 1979). Feminist critiques of advertising images have also relied on the insights of semiotic approaches to deconstruct representations of femininity and masculinity. Synthesizing the work of such semioticians as Barthes, Berger, Williamson, and Leymore, Jhally (1990) explains that the construction of meaning in advertising takes place at the denotative level and connotative level, with the first level being the literal meaning of the advertisement and the second level being the more embedded “mythic” meaning that references external knowledge of social norms, power relations, and the cultural politics of gender, class and sexuality. McKee’s recommendations on excavating the embedded contextual and inter-textual meanings of texts were also helpful in shaping this monograph’s methodological and analytical approach to studying representations of beauty and colorism in advertising texts (McKee, 2003).

The first stage of our analysis began with a long preliminary soak in the initial, comprehensive pool of 120 magazine advertisements (hereafter referred to as ads) and 45 television commercials; however, we narrowed the sample to 78 magazine ads and 37 television commercials after eliminating repeat advertisements. We charted and organized the sample based on the variables of product type, manufacturer, price, distribution outlet, magazine placement, date, absence or presence of products and models, and core narrative themes. After examining the ads closely and identifying three dominant rhetorical themes of transformation, scientific authority, and heterosexual romance, our deconstruction of denotative meanings within these themes addressed the following questions: What stories of outer and inner transformation do these advertisements narrate in order to capture women’s attention? How do advertisements rely on the authoritative codes of modern and traditional science to explain their product’s unique abilities to lighten women’s faces? In what ways do discourses of beauty, heterosexual romance, and the male gaze prop up these advertisements’ persuasive appeal to young, single women? Based on Berger’s exhaustive recommenda-
tions for deconstructing print and television ads (Berger, 2004) and the integrative semiotic framework that Lemish and Lahav (2004) developed in their study of Israeli masculinity in advertising, our analysis considers the following cues:

1. Verbal: Words used in ad copy, headlines, slogans, sidebars, and captions of images; inter-textual references; use of metonymy and metaphor; use of voice-over; dialogue; plot; persuasive appeals (examples: fear, informational, social approval, etc.).

2. Sound: Music and audio effects

3. Visual: Composition (use of colors, lighting, graphic arrangement of linguistic text); portrayal of product; clothing; camera distance and angle; use of props; setting.

4. Models: Facial expressions; hair, body size and posture; clothing.

The analysis in this monograph does not claim to offer a comparative critique of advertising in different media outlets; instead, our goal here is to deconstruct the semiotic contours of the three dominant rhetorical themes that spanned the entire archive of advertisements and commercials.

**Mining Pigment For Profit: The Political Economy Of Feminine Fairness In India**

Matching the recent expansion in the magazine, fashion, and apparel industries in India, the cosmetics and toiletries sector has also benefited from the economic reforms implemented in the early nineties. Soon after the release of national survey research in 1994, which showed that middle-class Indian consumers represented the third largest export market following Russia and Poland, the Swedish giant Oriflame established Mumbai as its regional hub in Asia (Anand, 2002). Within a short span of four years, from 1996 to 2000, there was a 25 percent increase in gross domestic sales in the cosmetics and personal care sectors, and the size of the Indian cosmetics market in 2000 was estimated to be about $160 million (World at their Feet, 2000). In 2002, the cosmetics and toiletries market — soaps, shampoos, make-up, deodorants, perfumes, hair oil, lotions, and creams — was estimated to be Rs. 3000 crore (approx $682 million), and within this...
broader range of cosmetics products, the skincare segment alone amounted to Rs. 1.200 crore (approx $273 million) in 2002 and Rs 1.300 crore (approx $295 million) in 2003 (Challapalli, 2002; Goswami, 2003).

Fairness or skin-lightening solutions have surged ahead of competing facial skincare product categories over the past ten years to claim the largest market share in the cosmetics and toiletries market in India (Sinha, 2000). Showing a steady growth, the fairness products segment was Rs. 300 crore (approx $68 million) in 1999, Rs. 500 crore (approx $114 million) in 2000, Rs. 600 crore (approx $136 million) in 2001, and Rs. 700 crore (approx $159 million) in 2002 (Challapalli, 2002; Godrej aims to cream, 2000: Godrej Fairglow fairness cream, 2001; Varma, 1999). Fairness cream brands estimated at Rs. 720 crore ($164 million) captured over 52 percent of the Rs. 1,300 crore (approx $295 million) skin care market in 2003 (Goswami, 2003). According to Sachdeva (2001), the fairness cream market had been expanding at the average rate of 25 per cent per annum since the early nineties, faster than the overall cosmetic market growth of 15 percent per annum. In 2002, fairness creams constituted 70 percent of the total sales for Avon, a recent multinational player in the fairness market in India (Prasad, 2002). The primary consumers of skin-lightening products are young girls and women in the age group 15 to 30 years old, and the industry has spread its tentacles far and wide to target consumers across a wide spectrum of socio-economic categories. While Vicco Vajradanti's turmeric cream and facial bleach were the sole products in the early seventies that claimed to lighten facial complexion, the staggering diversity in the fairness product portfolio today includes over a dozen creams and lotions, massage oil, sunscreen lotions, gels, bleaches, talcum powders, soaps, face washes, face packs, body oils, under eye creams, capsules, skin exfoliators and tonics.

The major players in the fairness market in India span domestic and multinational companies with domestic companies securing the largest share of the market in the last five years. Among the domestic companies, Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL, Indian subsidiary of Unilever) is the leader with a 70 percent share, followed by CavinKare with more than 11 percent, and Emami with 5 percent in 2003 (Goswami, 2003). Godrej, Himalaya, Torrel, Ayur, Dabur, Pankajakasthuri, Chakola, Biotique, Olivia, Fem, Shahnaz Husain, Blossom Kochhar, Everyuth and Mythili represent other minor domestic players in the fairness industry. Since the early nineties, multinational companies — Revlon, Clinique, Elizabeth Arden, L'Oreal, Vichy, Nivea, Oriflame, Avon, Ponds and Synergie — that have been eyeing the growing purchasing power of Indian women have also added skin-lightening products to the range of cosmetics they sell in India.

Hindustan Lever's Fair & Lovely facial cream has been the leader in the fairness market for the last three decades. The company created Fair & Lovely in 1971, following the patenting of niacinamide, a chemical that reduces hyper-pigmentation and lightens brown skin including acne and age spots by blocking the transference of melanin to the surface of the skin. After initial test marketing in South India, Fair & Lovely was available throughout India by 1978, and Hindustan Lever reports that sales of the
brand have nearly doubled to Rs 500 crore (approx $114 million) within the two-year period 2002 to 2004. Consumer surveys confirm Fair & Lovely’s high name-recognition in national markets. The cream was ranked number fourteen in the nation-wide Brand Equity Survey of Most Trusted Brands in 2002 and among women, the primary target audience, the brand was ranked number four (Narayanaswamy, 2003). Fair & Lovely’s share of the fairness cream segment is close to three quarters, and extending their oldest brand, the company has introduced several new fairness products: herbal cream, soap, facial cleanser, under eye cream, oil control gel, and talcum powder. Lever’s recent launch of their most expensive “specialist premium skin care sub brand — Perfect Radiance — under the Fair & Lovely umbrella” exemplifies the product development strategies that domestic companies have utilized to minimize the threat of multinationals’ upscale products (Shatrujeet, 2004, p. 18). The premium brand Perfect Radiance offers twelve skincare solutions including face wash, masks, and wipe pads. As Shatrujeet (2004) explains, Perfect Radiance pushes the “ordinary” middle-class Fair & Lovely brand upward into a more elite consumer ethos: “The brand is no longer focusing purely on the middle class mass market consumer. It is trying to get consumers from different socio-economic categories to buy into the brand and the Perfect Radiance range is a clear case of imbuing Fair & Lovely with a premium sheen” (p. 19). Hindustan Lever is also India’s biggest spender in advertising — the company spent Rs 696.58 crore (approx $158 million) in 2000 on national advertising, three times more than the number two spender (XII Agency Report, 2002). Finally, Hindustan Lever, an ambitious multinational company in its own right, exports the Fair & Lovely brand to more than 38 countries in Asia and Africa.

In 2002, in response to bubbling criticism of its growing fairness cosmetics line, Hindustan Lever decided to link its corporate philanthropic mission directly with the primarily female markets they have pursued for three decades. The company launched the new non-profit venture, Fair and Lovely Foundation, to empower “women in India to change their destinies through education, career guidance and skills training” (Fair and Lovely Foundation website, 2006). The projects of the foundation range from scholarships to fund women’s education and free courses for aspiring beauticians to collaborative ventures with state governments and private sector organizations to train women for professions in garment design and healthcare.

Although Hindustan Lever’s Fair & Lovely cream dominated the domestic fairness market during the nineties, smaller companies began to launch competing brands in the late nineties. Roy (1999) describes the threat that the newcomer CavinKare’s Fairever fairness cream posed to the established Fair & Lovely brand: “Add audacious to ambitious. When you consider that with every move CavinKare is actually taking giant HLL head on….Fairever’s phenomenal success has taken not just the industry by storm but has actually made the HLL juggernaut pause and look around” (p. 1). CavinKare’s Fairever was the largest contributor to the company’s turnover of Rs 85 crore (approx $19 million) in 1998-1999, and thus became the very foundation for its future expansion in the cosmetics market (p. 3).
Some new competitors in the fairness market differentiated their products from existing brands by exalting the superior properties of their unique herbal ingredients, namely sandalwood, neem, Kumkumadi oil, Multani mitti, licorice, and rose. These indigenous herbs and plant derivatives have historically been a part of Indian women’s traditional homemade skin care regimens. When CavinKare launched Fairever, it touted the skin-lightening power of saffron, and when Godrej announced the addition of Fairglow cream to its extensive portfolio, the company stressed the natural superiority of ingredient Natural Oxy-G, a unique bio-extract of vegetable origin (Godrej aims to cream, 2000; Roy, 1999). Other new brands introduced in the last decade promised consumers quicker and more reliable results in lightening skin color. Godrej claimed that its Fairglow soap, the first skin-lightening soap introduced in 1999, could render skin fairer in two weeks, half the turnaround time specified by other brands that typically promised results in four to six weeks (Singh, 2000). The launching of Fairglow soap signaled the beginning of the frenzied extension of the fairness category to new sectors of the market beyond facial creams alone. In 2005, adding a new twist to the steady expansion of fairness products for female consumers, Emami Ltd. announced the launch of Fair and Handsome, a fairness cream for Indian men that was test-marketed successfully in the South Indian city of Hyderabad.

Cosmetics companies’ creative pricing, packaging, and retailing strategies are designed to sell fairness products to Indian women across the socioeconomic spectrum. The top three leading domestic products, which target lower middle class and middle class women, are priced competitively with a 25 mg tube of Fair & Lovely costing Rs. 24 (approx 54 cents), Fairever costing Rs. 25 (approx 54 cents), and Naturally Fair costing Rs. 22 (approx 49 cents). Examples of the high-end range of fairness products are Shahnaz Hussain’s Shahfair (vitaminized whitening cream) priced at Rs. 140 (approx $3) for 25 gms and Estee Lauder priced at Rs 400 (approx $9) for 75 gms. Fairness products are sold in a wide variety of commercial outlets and in different kinds of packages. These products are available in exclusive salons, upscale supermarkets and department stores, neighborhood beauty parlors, pharmacies, corner grocery stores, and bazaars. Some fairness creams are sold in small sachets costing five to ten rupees (approx 11 to 22 cents) in small grocery shops to lure poor rural and urban women to make their first impulse purchase (Challapalli, 2002). Hindustan Lever has been hailed for this single-serve strategy of selling personal care products: “Smaller unit packages, enough for a single immediate use, enable poor consumers to buy a product that they otherwise could not afford, thus unlocking their purchasing power” (Hammond & Prahalad, 2004). Giving away free products has also become a popular marketing ploy to attract new customers. Emami Ltd.’s buy-one-get-one-free option, Godrej’s free Fairglow...
soap with Close Up toothpaste, CavinKare’s free Fairever cream with Doylare soap, and Assam Cosmetics’ free All Fair Natural fairness cream with Mysore Sandal soap are examples of bundled packaging strategies to stimulate first-time use of fairness products. Emulating Mary Kay’s selling strategies in the United States, multinational companies such as Oriflame and Avon are utilizing sales representatives and mail order catalogues to sell skin-lightening creams directly to individual women.

Dermatologists and beauticians have seized the opportunity to expand their services in the midst of the rising currency of skin-lightening commodities in urban and rural India. In recent years, some physicians in Mumbai have reported that as many as 50 to 60 percent of cases being referred to them are women who want to lighten their skin color. Contrary to the widely held perception that clients of beauty services are primarily upper-middle class Indian women, these physicians note that their patients, who belong to different age and socio-economic groups, are willing to pay Rs. 400 (approx $9) to Rs. 800 (approx $18) for a single consultation (Olivera, 2001). While Indian beauty parlors have offered affordable facial bleach treatments that lighten skin color since the seventies, in the last ten years, many parlors’ menu of high-end, expensive facials includes fairness treatments that promise to prolong skin-lightening effects. As Perry (2005) notes in his report on India’s beauty industry, “Lightness is big business...India’s 60,000 beauty salons do a roaring trade bleaching faces and blasting skin with tiny sand blowers.” Our interviews with beauticians in 12 beauty parlors in Bangalore revealed that eight of them routinely featured fairness treatments with prices ranging from Rs. 450 (approx $10) to Rs. 800 (approx $25). Owners of the parlors informed us that requests for skin-lightening facials peaked during religious holidays, and most often, customers ordered these special facials in anticipation of their attendance at weddings, job interviews and other public events.

In summary, the fairness cosmetics industry has expanded by leaps and bounds in the last ten years in terms of gross sales, diversity of products, number of corporate players, target markets, and allied services in the beauty and skin care sector. Although our overview of the political economy of fairness products has focused on India, we speculate that this industry has witnessed a similar growth in other parts of Asia and Africa. According to a 2002 Wall Street Journal report, Chanel, Ponds and Shiseido have been aggressively marketing “whitening” products to Malaysian women, and in Hong Kong, the sale of “facial whitening products” grew by 35 per cent both in value and volume in 2001, thus outpacing the overall facial moisturizing category, which grew by 18 percent in volume and 15 percent in value (Prystay, 2002).

Shedding Darkness, Gaining Lightness: Fairness and Feminine Beauty in Advertising

We begin our textual analysis here by noting some of the overarching patterns we discovered in our sample of fairness ads and commercials. First,
the visual composition of magazine ads promoting upscale brands of fairness cosmetics in India mirrors advertising conventions in the West; these ads do not draw on images of female models to animate commodities or create a distinctive brand image. Expensive global and national skin-lightening brands — Clinique’s *Active White Power*, Elizabeth Arden’s *Whitening Capsules*, and Fair & Lovely’s *Perfect Radiance* — borrow their advertising aesthetics from the visual codes of high art. Showcasing their merchandise as valuable artifacts displayed in a museum, these ads position magnified images of commodities against the backdrop of pale surfaces. Intimate, close-up shots of tubes and jars surrounded in luminous light address women as discerning consumers of tasteful, high-quality cosmetics. Second, ads and commercials that feature female models create a seamless narrative that sutures youthful femininity — the subject position of the young, single woman who anticipates romance and marriage — to the desire for light-skinned beauty. Third, illustrating global market modernity’s influence on local sartorial trends in fashion and appearance, female models in these commercial narratives rarely wear the bindi, a circular mark in the center of the forehead that signals an Indian woman’s religious identity as a Hindu. Fourth, although the use of celebrities was not a predominant trend in these ads, it is noteworthy that the few actresses and supermodels — Aishwarya Rai, Lisa Ray, and Madhuri Dixit — who endorsed fairness creams and sunscreen lotion are light-skinned women. Finally, the predominant use of invisible and anonymous male voice-overs to introduce and conclude television commercials (30 out of 37) that center on young women’s anxieties with their appearance associates masculinity with expert knowledge and omniscient authority.

**Before and After, Before and After: Selling Myths of Outer and Inner Transformation.**

Studying the historical evolution of advertising in the United States, Lears (1983) argues that advertising’s emphasis on individual transformation, self-improvement, and immediate gratification arose in the context of the creation of a robust national consumer culture in the early part of the twentieth century. He writes that the therapeutic ethos of the new image-oriented print media culture of that period emerged in tandem with the gradual erosion of earlier values that stressed disciplined consumption, thrift, frugality and self-denial, a process that paved the way for individuals to consume and still be released from the guilt of sin and narcissism. Advertising’s therapeutic ethos, as Lears (1983) notes, was anchored to economic and cultural developments — the spread of a market economy, weakening of traditional influences of family and community, creation of national markets, urbanization, and proliferating media — and the dominant collective values expressed in public culture: “To thrive and spread, a consumer culture required more than a national apparatus of marketing and distribution, it also needed a favorable moral climate” (p. 4). There are obvious limits to extending Lears’ historically specific analysis of advertising and the rise of the therapeutic ethos in the United States to India; however,
his arguments about the economic context and the “moral climate” in which consumer culture begins to persuade individuals to seek out the immediate gratifications of the marketplace are useful to consider here. The tremendous growth in advertising in India in the past decade has taken place in a context in which the market’s language of commodity consumption, unlike an earlier public ethos of progress that emphasized thrift and poverty alleviation, has become the primary perceptual filter to envision a developing nation’s conversion into an emerging market (Fernandes, 2000).

Vivid illustrations of outer/physical and inner/emotional transformation in fairness advertisements' compressed narratives of beauty distill the newly emergent consumer culture's therapeutic ethos of fulfillment and gratification. These “before and after” narratives of transformations in corporeal exteriors and psychic interiors convey the promise of membership in an idealized community of beautiful, desirable, and confident individuals. Ads for food and home products including the well-known campaigns for detergents (Surf and Nirma) from the eighties suggest that images of magical transformation are not new in globalizing India: however, the recent yoking of transformation to the rhetoric of feminine beauty’s power to gain recognition for Indian women on the global stage has a markedly different resonance. From Indian beauty queens, who have won numerous Miss World and Miss Universe titles, to beauty parlors in villages and the beauty counters of Revlon and L'Oreal in urban supermarkets, the triumphant reworking of the feminine body as a hyper-visible commodity has signaled India’s ascent from a third world nation to a powerful player in the global economy (Parameswaran, 2004). Tropes of “before and after” transformation in fairness ads that map a progressive, temporal movement from a less desirable past into a newly imagined future resonate with public images of the “body beautiful” that stand in for the nation’s success and economic mobility.

The personalized “product in action” or testimonial narrative, a creative strategy that invites consumers to imagine themselves in an idealized state of the future, captures the magical experience of instant transformation in ads for sunscreen lotions and fairness bleaches and creams (Jhally, 1990). Within the sample of ads that rely on this strategy, lower-priced fairness products use a more direct “before and after” makeover approach in order to display proof of visible and measurable outer transformation in facial skin color. Magazine advertisements for Fem Fairness Bleach and Avon Essentials Sunscreen Lotion fragment models’ close-up faces into two halves to showcase the contrast of dark (“clogged and sun damaged” as copy suggests) and light skin (“unclogged, breathing and protected”). Cavinkare’s Fairever cream, Lakmé’s TPI Sunscreen Lotion, and Hindustan Lever’s Fair

These “before and after” narratives of transformations in corporeal exteriors and psychic interiors convey the promise of membership in an idealized community of beautiful, desirable, and confident individuals.
& Lovely Dark Circle Remover Creme juxtapose two identical versions of the model’s face, a darker “before” face on the left that belongs to the past and a new light-skinned “after” face of the future on the right that offers evidence of the product’s effectiveness. In a few of these binary images of “before and after” transformation, the eyes of the old and new selves of the model gaze at each other, thus recognizing and bearing witness to the material existence of the improved, lightened self. In a different variation of the “before and after” binary, an ad for Fair & Lovely Fairness Face Wash links the change in the model’s facial skin color to a subtle transformation in her emotions. Instead of looking at each other, the cropped darker and lighter faces look away to gaze directly at readers — a bright pink arrow pointing from left to right declares that it “takes 30 seconds a day” to travel from the sad face of the left (mouth closed and slightly downcast eyes) to the more gently contented face (mouth slightly parted) on the right that has water dripping from it.

Other magazine ads for fairness creams take a different temporal approach to linking the disappearance of pigment in the model’s facial skin with the gratification of being transformed into a beautiful woman. These ads stretch out both the process of skin lightening and the gradual animation of the model’s face over the number of weeks that the consumer has to apply the product to render skin “noticeably fairer.” A two-page ad in Savvy magazine for Fair & Lovely Advanced Formula bears the headline “Six weeks to a fairness like never before” beneath six faces of the same wholesome female model. As the reader’s eyes move from left to right, the young woman’s facial skin continues to lighten with each face appearing larger than the one before, and a smile that grows wider and wider until the sixth and largest face displays the lightest skin and the most exuberant smile. Ads for Avon PT White Face Cream and Emami Naturally Fair cream use the same therapeutic strategy of calibrating fairness and happiness together to show readers what lies ahead: after four weeks, PT White’s young and lightened model beams with happiness and the four progressively lightened faces of Naturally Fair’s model illustrate how women can acquire the “shimmering fairness of real pearls in just four weeks.” In her analysis of the “covert rhetoric of racializing aesthetics” in skin-whitening ads, Miró (2000) notes a similar emphasis on bodily transformation in online ads that claim to change Asian women’s “yellow” skin tones into “radiant white.” Magazines’ visual maps of Indian women’s changing skin color that are anchored to weekly schedules construct a narcissistic and anxious feminine persona, a subject who monitors the exterior surface of her body as a perpetual “work in progress.”

On several television commercials’ more elaborate plots, the transformation in Indian women’s skin color is embedded within larger narratives of social surveillance that combine dark-skinned women’s jealousy of other attractive women with the healing power of female bonding and solidarity. In the beginning, the protagonist of these commercials is ashamed of her dark skin and pessimistic about changing her appearance. The catalyst for her transformation is a beautiful, lighter-skinned, and happier friend, sister,
or acquaintance; these women generously share their beauty secrets (the fairness cream they use) thus helping the unfortunate protagonist overcome her shameful problem. A commercial for All Fair cream shows one concerned mother urging her sulky and desperate younger daughter to stop using every product on the market when her pretty and “glowing” older sister (whom she refuses to respect) had already discovered the perfect solution to lighten her facial skin color. Entering a bustling wedding scene in a soap commercial, one woman standing in the corner of the camera’s frame gazes enviously at the bride, her beautiful sister who greets her and then hands her a bar of Godrej Fairglow soap. Another commercial begins with a scene of a woman meditating and praying for a transformation, a last resort after a futile two-year quest for light-skinned beauty. When a beautiful friend walks in, the dark-skinned protagonist’s mother advises her to use the light-skinned friend’s Freshia beauty cream. At the end of the commercial, a group of young men meditate outside the newly transformed woman’s house when she stands on the porch, and her kind benefactor says, “See, these men are meditating for your attention now.” In these “before and after” commercials, unhappy women dressed in dull and neutral clothing with their hair tied up are transformed into beautiful, smiling women dressed in pink and white with their long hair flowing behind them as they are surrounded in luminous light. Beautiful, light-skinned women, as these stories argue, can be the source of dark-skinned women’s pain and self-hatred, but these very same women redeem themselves when they help their flawed sisters and friends attain a similar standard of perfect beauty.

The hegemonic production of feminine fairness in these magazine and televisual tales of beauty takes place not only in such overt enactments of magical transformation, but more insidiously through normative representations of the unhappy “before” face. The light skin tone of the very first problematic “dark-skinned” face that appears to need remedial correction signifies advertising’s symbolic disavowal of dark-skinned Indian women. For example, the 2002 Femina’s 40th anniversary issue commemorating 40 women’s achievements carries a two-page ad illustrating Fair & Lovely’s six faces moving incrementally from darkness to lightness, yet the skin tone of more than a quarter of the heroic women featured in the magazine including Bhanwari Devi (a village woman who launched a national campaign against gang rape) whose photograph appears on the page immediately following the Fair & Lovely ad, is much darker than the “before” face in this ad. Similarly, the website for the Fair and Lovely Foundation posts photographs of young “enterprising women” who have won scholarships—many of these Indian women’s skin color is much darker than the facial skin color that Fair & Lovely claims it can lighten. Furthermore, regardless of advertising’s failure to reflect the diversity of real Indian women’s skin color, these representations of beauty are hegemonic precisely because they may bear little relationship to reality. Consumers may not be aware that advertising’s images of transformation in women’s skin color are a result of innovations in digital technology. Digital artists fragment computerized images of models’ faces into units called pixels, and then manipulate the quantities of the
colors cyan, magenta, yellow, brown, and black to produce variations in skin tone (Chowdhury & Halarnkar, 1998).

Some advertisements, particularly those that promote newer arrivals and higher-priced products, narrate a different story of transformation, one that emphasizes light-skinned beauty as an empowering route to enhanced self-esteem and feminist consciousness. Unlike visual images whose rhetoric of transformation is based in the “before and after” dissection of women’s faces, these ads shift the focus of the therapeutic ethos from women’s flawed corporeal exteriors to their weak and imperfect psychic interiors. The headline of an ad for Lakmé Fair Perfect Creme in Femina magazine informs readers that this cream offers women “flawless skin and a whole new image.” Using the motivational language of self-help discourses, the ad copy urges women to transform their inner selves: “Its hydrating base penetrates easily into your skin to transform you from within...it’s time to meet a whole new person. Yourself.” Another ad for the same product portrays a beautiful, light-skinned young woman whose face and upper body resemble images of Cleopatra; her straight black hair falls from a middle parting, her eyes are outlined dramatically, and she wears a thick gold choker close to her throat. The bold headline that straddles two pages asks readers to think beyond the surface beauty of the body: “Fairness is only half the story. Why settle for fair skin when you can get a new identity.” Cavinkare’s premium brand Fairever cream’s slogan “there is nothing that cannot be changed” and Revlon Touch & Glow’s advertising headline “discover the confidence that fairness brings” draw on the same theme of transformation that has penetrated deep into the hearts and minds of consumers.

Three other magazine advertisements for fairness cosmetics also exemplify a persuasive approach to beauty as a means to alter one’s psychological interior, and hence embrace a new form of personal power. An ad for Fair & Lovely proclaims that this cream helped one woman, who smiles widely for the camera, replace her timid personality with a bold and assertive demeanor that won the world’s approval: “I often wondered what fairness creams did. Frankly, I wasn’t sure...I just had to try it. The difference now is not just a fair me. But a new confident me. Fair & Lovely changed the way I face the world...and the way the world looks at me.” A glamorous model, dressed in a lacy see-through blue blouse, speaks directly to Savvy magazine’s readers about the similarities between feminism and Fem Bleach, a product that emancipates consumers with the promise of “lasting fairness from within”:

The attitude of men towards women you’ll agree isn’t exactly fair. But as makers of the new Fem Perfumed Blue Bleach, we’d like to restrict this debate to fairness of just one kind: that of your complexion. And though we can’t promise that equality of the sexes will be achieved once you use Fem Perfumed Blue Bleach, one thing’s assured; your complexion will soon put men where they belong; in the dark ages...you’ll find its action goes deep (like that of
committed feminism) to bleach even the roots of your facial hair.

_Himalaya_ fairness cream’s glossy back cover ad in _New Woman_ assures readers that it can launch their careers in the Bollywood film industry. A close-up image of a young woman’s face, projected on a film screen set above rows of plush red seats creates the setting of a luxurious, upscale theater. The copy urges women to reveal their “hidden beauty,” and thus look ahead to a future of celebrity stardom: “Just how far can your refreshing beauty take you? Fan mail, film offers? You’ll never know till you try.”

The television commercial for the same _Himalaya_ cream takes the print ad’s brief narrative of Bollywood stardom further into a realm of surreal fantasy. A young woman sitting in a theater, accompanied by her grandmother, gazes at a romantic scene in a Hindi film. The hero suddenly steps out of the screen to walk towards the protagonist. When the hero takes the young woman’s hand, the grandmother chimes in to exclaim that _Himalaya_ cream has the power to change destiny. The next few scenes represent an ordinary female fan’s metamorphosis into a celebrity; standing in the midst of a chaotic Bollywood film set, the protagonist, now a rich film actress, raises her face to the make-up artist as the hero smiles to signify his approval. One commercial for _Samara_ fairness cream shows a father and daughter standing in a colorful garden outside their upscale home. Looking first at her father and then at the viewer, this woman registers her protest against the widespread preference for sons in South Asia: “My father never wanted sons...I was dark, but took charge of my future with Samara cream. He’s proud of me.” _Fairever_ ’s slogan “it doesn’t take long to change your destiny” becomes an allegory for a village girl’s transformation into a successful doctor. After witnessing a pregnant woman’s prolonged pain due to the lack of medical facilities in her village, this girl reads the inspirational slogan on _Fairever_ cream’s package and decides to obtain medical training in America. On her return to the village, an admiring crowd greets the beautiful doctor, and when she accidentally drops her cream, a poor girl picks it up and asks the doctor, “Are you educated?” These “feel good” stories of women’s transformation into autonomous, empowered and mobile subjects construct a form of commodity feminism, a consumer discourse that raids feminist values, goals, and meanings in order to articulate a depoliticized and updated brand image (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Goldman, 1992). The different creative articulations of commodity feminism in these advertisements for beauty products are designed to reach the growing numbers of young

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Indian women, who have joined the professional, manufacturing, and service sectors of the workforce in the last decade.

**SCIENCE IN SHINING ARMOR: RESCUING MODERN AND TRADITIONAL WOMEN FROM BIOLOGY**

Advertising’s representations of western science, one among the many institutional forces that shape the symbolic realm of gender in post-liberalized India, address middle-class Indian women as modern consumers, enlightened subjects who expect the marketplace to harness the benefits of scientific research and technological advancements. Munshi’s analysis of the multiple avatars (mother, daughter-in-law, homemaker) of the “New Indian Woman” examines the ways in which the language of popular science mediates between traditional Indian femininity and liberal feminism in 1990s advertising texts (Munshi, 1998). The “New Indian Homemaker” in recent advertising does not reject her confining role nor does she demand her spouse’s help at home; instead, she embraces the renovation of domesticity as scientific discourse:

While emphasizing the importance of the woman’s role in the safeguarding of her family’s health, the ads simultaneously underscore the scientific processes involved in the purification of drinking water. Lengthy scientific methods detail the process of water purification...all the advertisements [for washing machines] share a common characteristic: scientific discourse is plentifully employed in their sales pitch towards the consumer. References to ‘agitator wash technology, neuro fuzzy sensors, fuzzy logic controlled processors, anti-static, latest state of the art bubble technology’ etc. abound. (pp. 582-583)

Similarly, advertisers of cereals and fruit juices, aware of the modern Indian woman’s “maternal angst over the children and family health,” trumpet the scientific properties of their products (p. 583). Nutritional charts and tables with information on vitamins, acids, fat, carbohydrates and fiber in food advertising speak to the anxieties of the harried working woman, who juggles the responsibilities of career and motherhood. Advertising’s scientific re-packaging of the Indian woman’s traditional role preserves the gendered hierarchy of domestic labor even as it invests housework with a “glamorized status and modern appeal” and elevates motherhood to a professional managerial skill (p. 584).

The vocabulary of scientific modernity that Munshi explores in advertisements for food and electronic appliances in an India that has been courting globalization also permeates the visual and linguistic fields of fairness advertisements and commercials. In the case of fairness ads that address their messages of ideal beauty and corporeal perfection to young women, discourses of science, technology and pharmacology blend together to enact the pseudo “biomedicalization of women’s bodies” (Miré, 2000). A close
examination of the discursive techniques that foreground western science in these ads and commercials reveals the cultural production of dark skin as a problematic and unruily disease that can be identified, managed, and controlled with the proper beauty regimen. Varying representational formats of western science in fairness ads converge at the site of the female body to construct Indian women’s dark skin as a defective “pathological target” that is amenable to medical diagnosis and treatment (Miré, 2000).

The visual symbolism of particular graphic design and illustrative techniques legitimates the rhetoric of “effective” western science in some magazine advertisements for skin-lightening products. Full-page print ads for Revlon Touch & Glow Advanced Fairness Cream contain inset diagrams that offer visible proof of the dermatological science that fuels these commodities; the scientific neutrality of such laboratory diagrams of the body offsets the emotional subjectivity of female models’ faces. These line drawings illustrate the movement of pigment cells, the discoloration of the epidermis (uppermost layer of skin), and the reduction of melanin in the inner layers of the skin. Such diagrammatic portraits of the body that are embedded within geometric shapes of circles, squares, and rectangles simulate the magnified clinical vision of the microscope. Several ads for fairness creams and lotions (Avon PT White, Fair & Lovely, Lakmé Fair Perfect, Kaveri) and sunscreen lotions (Garnier Synergie and Lakmé) claim to offer women superior protection from the sun’s darkening effects; these ads include boxed diagrams that show the power of the product to deflect the sun’s rays from the surface of the body. Elizabeth Arden’s ad for its Visible Whitening Capsules foregrounds a bar graph next to a magnified image of capsules in a clear bottle to explain how its pure 100% Vitamin C blocks melanin production more effectively than inferior products that peddle weak derivatives of the same vitamin. Straight lines emanating from products and models’ faces with short explanatory text at the end of each line in ads for Fem Fairness Bleach and Avon PT White Fairness Cream resemble the radiating lines that label human body parts in anatomical charts.

The didactic language, neutral tone and terse pace of ad copy, and the liberal sprinkling of medical jargon in a number of ads immerse fairness products in the smog of scientific authority. Addressing consumers as rational subjects, these discursive advertising tactics affirm the systematic and linear path towards beauty that lies dormant in jars and tubes. Large black copy highlighted in pink on a sheer white page in L’Oreal Plenitude White Perfect’s ad declares that its “multi-action whitening essence” works in three steps, with the steps organized visually as an itemized list (1, 2, and 3). The product “gently exfoliates dark cells,” then “fights against the formation of melanin,” and finally, “continuously prevents sun darkening.” This explanation ends with a precise description of what the consumer can expect after the execution of these three steps: “The result: your skin is fairer, your complexion more uniform.” Another ad for L’Oreal White Perfect hinges the terms “dermo-expertise” and “melanin block technology” to a methodical list of substances in the cream that can transport consumers “from research to beauty.” Ads for a series of fairness brands — Emami,
Hindustan Lever, Ponds, Lakmé, Elizabeth Arden, Revlon, and Avon — deploy bullets and asterisks to outline the step-by-step protocol of their skin-lightening process. A Lakmé sunscreen ad showcases copious information, organized in a user-friendly question and answer format, on the dangers of exposure to the sun: the phrase “We know” in this ad’s headline projects the superior and concerned tone of public health experts, who provide impartial advice to citizens. Finally, strategic announcements of fairness solutions’ respectable institutional origins — Debur Research Foundation, Ponds Institute, Hindustan Lever Skin Centre, Revlon Research Centre USA, Jolen Laboratoires Noveau USA, and Garnier Laboratories — and the insertion of skin technologists’ and dermatologists’ testimonials in some ads add the flavor of scientific expertise to manufacturers’ claims.

A stream of pharmaceutical jargon that flows through numerous magazine ads contributes further to the valorization of bio-medicalized interventions into the cultural terrain of beauty. References to chemicals and vitamins in fairness creams — patented BHA, bio-complex, mexoryl SX, phytoclar, PT 40, Parsol 1789, Kojic acid, Vitamin C, Vitamin B3, Vitamin E, UVA I, UVA II, UVA 10, UVB, UV Guard, UV filters, AHA (moisturizer) AVA (Advanced Vitamin Agent), SPF 5, SPF 15, and SPF 20—blur the line between the claims of the beauty industry and dermatological science. A steady semantic barrage of such phrases as “oxygenation action, oxygen infusion, melanin dispersion, fairness enhancement formula, oil-free formulation, proven treatment, hydro-firming, safeguard, superior technology, research, testing, development, neutralize, revitalize, rejuvenate, hypoallergenic, non comedogenic, pH balanced and nutrisome system” attests to the cross-pollination of cosmetic and pharmaceutical discourses in these commodity narratives on the ideal (cured/healed/lightened) feminine body.

Television commercials for fairness cosmetics take up similar themes, but offer more dramatic and animated representations of the skin-lightening process. Flashing and intermittent close-up images of the skin’s outer and inner layers with dark spots disappearing rapidly from view fill the screen in commercials for Fairever, Emami, All Fair, and Fair & Lovely. A quick montage of intimate scenes that scan the changes taking place beneath the skin’s outer surface supplements oral commentary on Fairever cream’s unique four-step process — protection, control, enhancement and retention — which prevents melanin from rising to the skin’s surface. The earliest ad campaign for Fair & Lovely’s first brand extension — its Advanced Vitamin formula — features a large white capsule cracking to release white powder that seeps into the layers of the body to drive dark pigmentation away. The television commercial for Godrej Fairglow cream superimposes a young female model’s changing face on an enlarged section of the epidermis and dermis as a male voice-over describes the properties of the special ingredient Natural Oxy-G. Emami’s 30-second prime-time commercial shows a medical expert, a beautiful woman dressed in a white coat, speaking directly to the viewer about the problems of dark and patchy skin. Another young woman, frozen in her chair in the commercial’s opening scenes and then stretched on a bed in the operating theater as the medical expert thrusts a
magnifying glass close to her face, embodies the submissive patient who accepts her humiliating diagnosis in order to secure the best treatment for her condition.

On the one hand, such representational modes of western science in a sample of print and television ads attempt to cloak skin-lightening cosmetics with the cosmopolitan aura of scientific modernity, yet, on the other hand, numerous other advertisements deploy the nationalist rhetoric of traditional (domestic and herbal) science to convince consumers that certain brands bear the stamp of ethnic/local authenticity. These calculated inventions of modernity and tradition in the commercial discourse of beauty products draw on the impulses of a larger field of cultural representations in globalizing India, one that has witnessed the simultaneous and intertwined production of the global and the local in the sign systems of public culture. Recent scholarship on media culture in post-liberalization India has demonstrated that sweeping reforms in the service of globalization has not led to the wholehearted embrace of “western values” or the premature death of allegiances to local — national, regional, and religious — categories of identity (Asthana, 2003; Fernandes, 2000; Grewal, 1999; Kumar, 2004; Rajagopal, 1998). Rajagopal (1998) argues that the economic imperative to develop a genuinely mass market in post-liberalized India, one that is different from the limited elite audience of the postcolonial phase, has instigated a “search for new sources of value within advertising, with local culture increasingly being used to endow goods with symbolic distinction” (p. 17). Indian advertising’s imaginative reliance on religious imagery, and locally rooted relations of gender, caste and class illustrates the transformation of dispersed “insular regional markets” into larger and more consolidated national and global markets (p. 16). The paradox of capitalism’s flexibility and mobility, as Grewal (1999) puts it succinctly in her critique of the global “Indian” Barbie doll dressed in a sari, resides in the elasticity of its economic and cultural practices, that is, in its ability to recuperate the semiotics of the local — ethnicity and religion — in order to sell lifestyle commodities to new “multicultural” markets in South Asia. The aesthetics of science in advertisements for skin-lightening products, a sector of the beauty industry that has expanded to target diverse segments of consumers in a national market, exhibits precisely such a paradoxical revival of national pride and time-honored religious tradition alongside the rhetorical equation of western science with modernity.

The birthing of a new branding strategy based in the nationalist rhetoric of indigenous natural science, an authentic source of ethnic beauty for Indian women, takes place in 2000 when competition in the fairness market intensified and multinationals’ whitening cosmetics began to threaten the domination of established national brands. Emami Corporation was among the first candidates (Cavinkare, Dabur, Ayur, Lotus Herbals, and Hindustan Lever) to launch a campaign of ethnic marketing that promised Indian women a “natural” alternative to the chemical artifice of western science. Emami’s advertising discourse resuscitates a nationalist past of traditional Ayurvedic science that guarantees consumers a gentle and long-term route
to the achievement of beauty. An advertisement for Emami Naturally Fair’s herbal cream toys with a clever pun in its headline to warn consumers about the dangerous side effects of chemicals in competing fairness creams: “Do you know the darker side of chemicals in other fairness creams?” This ad lists the potential damages — blemishes, dehydration, and ageing — that “hydroquinone, hydrogen peroxide and ammonia” could inflict on the delicate surface of the epidermis. After fulfilling its educational mission, the ad promotes the superior qualities of Naturally Fair, a “breakthrough formulation” of 11 rare herbs that are 100% natural and 100% safe: “A blend of ancient Ayurveda and international herbal science, it is the only fairness cream that works gently from within. To give you a long-lasting fairness without any side-effects.” Small, colorful drawings of listed natural ingredients — milk, coconut, sandalwood, and cucumber — are arranged in a row beneath the testimony of an Ayurveda expert: “Chemical fairness creams impart only a superficial fairness and they harm your skin in the long run.” In another ad that also promotes Emami’s “revolutionary and safe blend” of botanical extracts and natural sunscreens, the aesthetics of the young and fresh-faced model — a young woman dressed in plain white, with pale pink lipstick accentuating her wide smile — echoes the white and pink colors of the tube of Naturally Fair. The cream’s outer cardboard package reinforces the advertising campaign’s emphasis on traditional skin care for the Indian woman. One side of the package bears a taxonomy of the skin-lightening process with a list of herbs and natural ingredients that help to execute each step: for example, Melanin Dispersion (Spanish saffron), Stress Relievers (Cucumber), UV filters (Aloe Vera and Liquorice), and Conditioners (Rose Water and Sandalwood).

The aggressive pursuit of ethnic marketing also turned into profitable terrain for the launching of new products in the domestic fairness cosmetics industry. Cavinkare, a small and unknown company located in South India, jumped on the fairness bandwagon with the introduction of Fairever, a new fairness cream based in pure saffron and milk. The commercial promotion of these natural ingredients of Ayurvedic science, which are also a part of Hinduism’s culinary and religious traditions, aligns fairness creams with everyday cultural practices that have become linked to a Hindu nationalist imaginary in India’s post-liberalized public culture. A colorful full-page ad in Femina, suffused with a glowing light orange color, carries a close-up shot of a young woman’s calm face in soft focus. The headline “How does saffron help make you fairer?” sits above a tube of the product surrounded by bright orange saffron flowers, and text in smaller type supplies the answer, “The effect of saffron in lightening skin color and making it glow have been well documented in Ayurvedic texts.” Other Fairever ads display young women gazing reverently at elaborately engraved silver bowls that contain strips of bright orange saffron floating on top of milk. Such imagery of the product’s sacred and pure origins harnesses the semiotics of Hindu prayers and rituals in which devotees offer milk, sweets and fruits to gods and goddesses.

One Indian trade publication hails Himlaya Drug Corporation for being
at the vanguard of the “modern traditionalists,” who cashed in on the patriotic “made in India” platform of natural skincare (India’s cosmetics industry, 2002, p. 12). Himalaya’s magazine ad campaign for its Active Ayurveda Fairness Cream produces national authenticity and cultural continuity through the idiom of women’s inter-generational bonds; a small image of an older, grandmotherly Indian woman dressed in a simple white sari and traditional bindi on her forehead complements ad copy that describes the blends of rose, walnut, and orange in its 100% natural cream. Evoking similar tropes of organic, homegrown beauty, Dabur’s publicity campaign for Samara fairness cream (a name derived from Sanskrit), a blend of saffron, milk, and papaya, embeds the tagline “Beauty therapies for the Indian woman” in all its fairness ads. A half-page Femina ad for Samara features a young woman, dressed in a simple white tank top, her neck curved and hands touching her cheek in a vulnerable pose, gazing directly at readers to tell them that there was “finally, a fairness cream that does not wage chemical warfare on your skin.” In Reddy’s analysis of Dabur’s ad campaign for its entire Samara skin care line, she foregrounds the rhetorical mobilization of a Hindu mythological iconography that conflates the purity of nature with the purity of the traditional Indian woman whose domesticity, fidelity and spirituality were historically held up as symbols of the Indian nation’s strength and resilience (Reddy, 2006).

Waiting in the wings, Hindustan Lever, the domestic leader in the skin-lightening beauty sector, soon shot back with its own patriotic versions of new product development and advertising. While advertising for Lever’s regular Fair & Lovely brand relies on female models’ displays of “before and after” transformation, the visual branding of its new Ayurvedic fairness cream parleys a colorful and appetizing portrait of organic ingredients into the consumable sensations of cultural familiarity and historic authenticity. Full-page ads in Femina, Savvy, and Filmmaker for Ayurvedic Fair & Lovely that bear the headline “Discover the 5000 year old Ayurvedic Secret to Fairness” reproduce the aesthetics of a sumptuous culinary smorgasbord of herbs and spices that are ready to be blended into a gourmet meal. The text below the headline declares that Lever now presents “Kumkumadi Tailam, a unique blend of 16 ayurvedic extracts.” An appetizing array of bright brown, green, blue, red, and purple roots, flowers and fluids, laid out on a contrasting pure white background and identified with esoteric Sanskrit labels — pattanga, padmakesara, ajaksira, etc. — evokes the symbolic flavors of pure, raw and uncorrupted national culture.

Such quasi-religious nationalist imagery in the commercial discourse of skin-lightening products finds its most comfortable home on television, a medium whose national and socio-economic reach far exceeds the magazine industry in India. Rajagopal’s nuanced analysis of a television commercial for Ganga soap unpacks the significance of a fragmented collage of images of the river Ganga in Benares set against the vocal backdrop of a traditional chorus/bhajan that extols the “pure, health-enhancing” qualities of the river’s holy water (Rajagopal, 1998, p. 14). Examining the ways in which markets take on the project of yoking patriotic citizenship to consumerism,
Advertising’s reliance on religious imagery to construct familiar, nostalgic scenes of consumer desire and desirability in a liberalizing India coincides with the rise of Hindu nationalism in the political and cultural spheres of influence.

Television commercials for Samara, Santoor, Ayurvedic Fair & Lovely, and Fairver mine the cultural symbolism of religion and ritualistic imagery to burnish the nationalistic aura of their brands. In these narratives, devotional music that recalls the sentimentality of Hinduism’s popular representations accompanies colorful visual scenes of milk, saffron, rose petals, and sandalwood raining down from the divine skies to fall directly into silver bowls. Desperate young women with “patchy skin” in two different commercials for Ayurvedic Fair & Lovely set out to excavate indigenous knowledge on beauty from ancient texts on Ayurveda. As these models turn the yellowing pages of old manuscripts written in Sanskrit script, the screen dissolves into a lush green landscape with a waterfall, and an assortment of spices and herbs fall into an elaborately carved mortar and pestle. Santoor’s Tamil commercial for South Indian audiences foregrounds the entrepreneurial spirit of its young female model, who appears to be assertive and modern, but depends on her culture’s “ancient and natural” resources — sandalwood and turmeric — to acquire light-skinned beauty. A commercial for Fairver upgrades such mystical discourses on beauty’s divine and authentic origins to a fetishistic level with its exotic tale of a mysterious female astrologer’s predictions about a young woman’s bright future. Wandering through an upscale, urban housing development, a solitary young woman draped in a flowing pink dupatta (long scarf) discovers a colorful tent on the side of the road with an astrologer inside. When the astrologer predicts a future of wealth and happiness for the protagonist, she responds with skepticism, “For someone with my complexion? Are you sure?” The astrologer silently places a small silver box in the young woman’s open palm, and then the narrative invites viewers to witness the spectacle of the protagonist opening the lid to reveal saffron. Together, the opening of the box, the woman’s stunned expression, and the ensuing scenes of saffron pouring down simulate the religious viewing practice of “darshan,” which can be read to mean the “exchange of human sight with the divine that supposedly happens inside a temple or in the presence of an image in which the deity has become manifest” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 173).

In contrast to these commodity discourses of skin lightening that invoke
global modernity (western science/dermatology/pharmacology) or national tradition (Ayurveda or natural/herbal/organic ingredients). Lakmé, a leader in the domestic cosmetics industry, adopted a new advertising approach in 2002 that maneuvered western science itself into the essentialized rhetoric of national difference and racial otherness. Lakmé was among the first companies in India to concoct the creative strategy of marketing sunscreen lotions as fairness products, that is, as lotions that not only ensured protection from sunburn (SPF), but also prevented further darkening of Indian women's sensitive skin. Lakmé executed its newly minted mission to brand sunscreen lotions as authentic products for Indian women's racially different bodies with an ad campaign that deployed two creative themes: the logo of a striped umbrella with the slogan “umbrella for Indian skin” and the invented pseudo-scientific term TPI or Tan Protection Index 70, which claimed to address Indian women's unique dermatological needs. Four Indian dermatologists we interviewed for this study disputed both the credibility of the term TPI and its foundations in established scientific research. Lakmé's two-page print ad in Filmfare with the tagline “the umbrella for Indian skin” features two close-up images of supermodel Lisa Ray's light-skinned face, one face with dark patches on the cheeks labeled as “after using sunscreens with SPF” and a second clear and smooth face labeled as “after using Lakmé sunscreen with TPI 70.” A bold headline on the far left side asks readers if they know enough about their own skin: “Is your sunscreen made for Indian skin? Now, it's easy to find out.” Ad copy on the far right pitches the product's indigenization of western science: “Because Indian skin darkens more than European skin, you need more than just SPF...unlike ordinary sunscreens which contain SPF, only Lakmé Sunscreen Lotion has Tan Protection Index (TPI) 70 specially formulated for Indian skin.” Ironically, another Lakmé sunscreen ad that has the same light-skinned, bi-racial model (one European parent and one Indian parent) with her signature light green eyes promotes TPI's custom-made compatibility with Indian women's ethnic skin: “Indian skin needs special protection. People in a tropical country like India have a different profile of melanin (size, shape, and distribution) than European skin ... Lakmé has TPI (70) and is specially designed for Indian skin.” Ads for sunscreen lotions that try to package themselves as skin-lightening commodities claim that these products harness dermatological science to protect women's bodies from the dangers (darkening, wrinkles, cancer, and excess melanin) of India's “excessive” tropical climate. These cautionary advertising narratives on a fragile feminine beauty that needs constant protection continue a historical trajectory of constructing public spaces —
nature and the outdoors — as alien and inappropriate for the "respectable" middle-class Indian woman. Encased in the secure embrace of a sunflower's petals, _Lotus Safe Sun's_ female model, who appears to emerge out of the flower, raises her hands above her head to deflect direct sunlight; ad copy proclaims that the "sun, the source of all life and energy is sometimes the source of misery too ... fortunately, help is at hand." Lakmé's youthful and modern representative (sporting a ponytail and dressed in a tank top) cups her hand above her forehead as she squints in the sunshine, and ad copy superimposed on a bright yellow drawing of the sun teaches her that "unfortunately, even five minutes in the sun causes skin damage." Light-skinned models in _Garnier Synergie's_ full-page magazine ads enact similar protective hand gestures to keep the sun at bay; these models' posed performances translate visually the product's slogan "Keep the moisture in and the sun out." In Lakmé's ad campaign, the female model's body displays forensic evidence of the sun's potential to destroy feminine beauty. The strap of a tank top has slipped over a young woman's shoulder to expose her skin under the strap; she looks down at the lighter color of the exposed skin while the text above the darker part of her shoulder reads "see what 5 minutes in the sun can do."

Commercials in Lakmé sunscreen's television campaign promoting its Tan Protection Index 70 also contain a discourse of moral panic about the damages of extreme heat and sun exposure in India's tropical climate. In one commercial, celebrity supermodel Lisa Ray's performance blurs the line between fiction and reality; she enacts the role of a fashion model participating in an outdoor summer fashion show. Ray walks into a large tent, a changing room, to greet her co-workers, who are getting ready to step out on the runway. She holds up a bottle of Lakmé sunscreen and advises the other women to use the lotion immediately. One model inquires if she needs sunscreen at all because she never spends more than a few minutes outdoors — a silent Ray picks up the woman's hand and slips off her wristwatch to reveal the light skin underneath. Ray and the other models walk down the runway to the sound of a jingle that praises the lotion's unique "anti-darkerening properties." Another commercial features Lisa Ray demonstrating the superiority of Lakmé's TPI over regular creams' SPF. In the beginning scene, Ray, shown sitting outdoors, places a self-sticking circular patch on each of her upper arms; a split screen image shows two arms, one with a patch labeled as "SPF" and another with a patch labeled as "TPI." An ensuing quick scene captures an antique sundial with a hand racing around the perimeter to complete one minute, and then viewers witness the patchy imprint of the ineffective SPF on one arm in contrast to the even and smooth skin tone produced by TPI on the other arm.

The most vivid commercial in this campaign conceptualizes the sun as a phallic instrument of violence, a force of nature that can penetrate, fragment and burn women's bodies. The opening scenes showcase a large, close-up image of a feminine face, and then a magnifying lens appears in front of the face. The sun's intense yellow rays pass through the glass to scorch a spot on the face that begins to blacken with fumes emanating from
the sunburned skin. Just as viewers might begin to flinch, the camera zooms out to show us a young boy holding the magnifying lens in front of a billboard that displays supermodel Lisa Ray’s face. In a self-reflexive, postmodern move, the commercial’s next scene reveals the model Lisa Ray herself interrupting the boy’s mischievous prank to assess the damage done to her portrait; the voice-over narrates the dangers of momentary sun exposure and the preventive benefits of alpine mint in Lakmé’s lotion. Selling the same message, a magazine ad for Lux Sun Protection soap argues that even minutes under the sun can cause “skin darkening, dryness, and wrinkles.” Light-skinned and green-eyed Aishwarya Rai, an actress and former Miss World, stands with wet hair slicked back and arms elevated in front of her face as if to ward off the sun. The sun’s rays passing through a magnifying lens collide with the surface of Rai’s body as if to burn her skin, but the coating of Lux soap’s UV guard forces the rays to bounce away from her arm.

Undoubtedly, these fairness ads draw from established dermatological research on the harmful effects of sun exposure on the body; however, these ads’ exaggerated narratives of sun damage also reiterate patriarchal social norms that discourage young girls and women from being outdoors. Well-known model Bipasha Basu, novelist Chitra Divakurni, and writer Rupa Gawle recall the advice they received often from mothers and female relatives about the sun’s irreversible darkening of skin tone (Chowdhury & Halarnkar, 1998; Divakurni, 2001; Gawle, 2002). Dark-skinned Basu confesses that she avoids taking strolls on her favorite beaches as an adult, and Gawle remembers her grandmother admonishing her not to “go out in the sun or drink coffee or tea because you will become even more dark.” Divakurni writes that her parents, who were anxious to preserve her complexion, did not encourage or support her participation in outdoor athletic activities: “Taking swimming lessons? Never, you’ll turn your skin black as coal.” Divakurni explains that her depression about her dark skin tone worsened, and eventually she even stopped playing table tennis, one of the few sports she was allowed to pursue because it was an indoor activity. Divakurni’s personal account of her restricted mobility outdoors and her constrained involvement in sports reverberates on the national level in the news report “Desire for fair-skinned brides stumps women’s cricket in India” (2004), which documents the slow growth of women’s cricket in a country where men’s cricket has enjoyed immense popularity for decades. Mamtta Maben, captain of the national women’s cricket team, laments her difficulties in recruiting and retaining women cricket players in India: “So many talented women players do not take up cricket because it is a grueling sport and you are out in the sun for at least seven to eight hours...most Indian men want to have a bride with fair skin.”

**Beauty as an Empowering Spectacle: Commanding the Male Gaze**

The reality television show Extreme Makeover, as Weber (2005) argues, draws its appeal from a popular feminist discourse of gender equality and empowerment. A woman’s desire to alter her body, when filtered through Extreme Makeover’s unwritten claims to “topple the vast disparity between

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the haves and have-nots, between the beautiful and the plain, between the celebrated and the anonymous,” becomes a poignant expression of individual agency. The makeover genre frames feminine “ugliness” as a painful form of personal adversity that motivated and determined women can overcome. Female participants undergoing plastic surgery and other medical procedures under the gaze of the television camera routinely express their desire for the currency of beauty. The show’s representations of a democratized beauty culture appear to rectify the “distance between social ideals and lived experience” for those women who have been denied the power of flaunting and displaying the beautiful body as a spectacle (Weber, 2005). On Extreme Makeover, the transformed female body commands heterosexual male attention; women’s statements about men looking and staring at them suggest that their surgically altered bodies have earned them the power to incite male desire. Such discourses of emancipation or “trickle down theories of empowerment” in popular culture propose that women’s objectification as a spectacle for the male gaze affords them agency because beauty allows women to purchase other signifiers of status, thus expanding their base of power (Weber, 2005).

Although the fictional stories of fairness advertisements in India do not share the same narrative ground of “reality” with Extreme Makeover, these ads generate a similar rhetoric of beauty as a democratic terrain of personal power and agency. In a patriarchal culture that is preoccupied with channeling Indian women’s sexuality through the institutions of marriage and domesticity, beauty becomes the password to unlock the gateways to normative structures of romance, courtship, and marriage. Fairness ads that target young Indian women circulate in a cultural field that inundates viewers and consumers with popular representations (Bollywood films and television serials) that seamlessly link feminine fulfillment with heterosexual romance and the ensuing ritual of an elaborate wedding. These ads manipulate gendered social anxieties to promise Indian women, who belong to different caste or class positions, that they can have equal access to light-skinned beauty, and hence to the power of securing heterosexual male approval. We discovered differentiated modes of address along the axis of class within the sample of ads that explicitly cast women’s objectification for the male gaze as a source of empowerment and social mobility. First, the narrative focus on romance and marriage was more explicit on Hindi and regional vernacular television commercials than in English-language magazines. Second, manufacturers of lower-priced domestic products rather than higher-priced domestic or multinational products invest greater tele-visual capital in the rhetoric of equal empowerment for all women, who, regardless of their skin color, should be able to enjoy the limelight as beautiful brides. These ads for products that reside on the lower end of the price scale are also more prone to locate conjoined discourses of beauty and heterosexual male desire within the narrative motif of the arranged marriage, a powerful signifier of pan-ethnic Indian tradition. Resisting conventional notions of the “wedding” as the legitimate anchor for heterosexual romance, commercials and magazine ads for higher-priced fairness products pitch more open-ended stories of
erotic love and courtship. Fairness advertising's unevenly distributed discourse of “equal opportunity” beauty in the service of sanctioned and sacred heterosexual conjugality thus represents marriage as a more compelling and urgent project for non-elite women.

Magazine ads for Fairveer, Kaveri fairness milk cream, and Jolen Bleach suggest that the visual commodity of light-skinned beauty can act as a catalyst to bring romance into the lives of young, single women. Fairveer's wholesome model performs the visual script of young women's youthful and vulnerable yearning for romance. The model's wistful smile, gently angled neck, folded hands resting against her cheek, and dreamy eyes looking into the distance paint a portrait of feminine anticipation of romance. Ad copy positioned above her head inquires, “Is your destiny hidden in Saffron?” Text below the model's face outlines the prospect of heterosexual intimacy that lies ahead if a woman makes the decision to be beautiful: “Expect the unexpected, await the impossible... let the glow of fairness lead you to your destiny.” An ad for Kaveri fairness cream bearing the headline “Get Noticed” produces a similar magical aesthetic of a beautiful face that can precipitate future romance; a young woman looks up dreamily at the reader as she rests her leaning head on her folded hands. Jolen's full-page ad for facial bleach sutures the power of spectacle to women's agency in mobilizing their own happiness and fulfillment: “There's something wonderful waiting around the corner. Explore and seize your future.” Copy set beneath an image of a wide-eyed young woman with long hair flowing behind her encourages readers to invite public attention: “So stop dreaming. Get Jolen. And look your prettiest. Let them wonder: Who's that girl?”

While the above ads take an indirect approach to linking beauty with the fantasy of heterosexual coupling, a few other magazine ads invoke the embodied presence of a heterosexual male partner whose appreciation of the female body contains the potential to inaugurate episodes of love and intimacy. A young woman in her late teens with a beaming smile and a bright pink woolen cap on her head in a two-page ad for the new product Fair & Lovely Fairness Cold Cream represents women's transition from childhood to adulthood, from asexual innocence to sexual awareness. A large headline that runs across the two pages explains this young woman's cheerful exterior: “This winter, I discovered the only cold cream that also made me fairer. (And he discovered me).” Continuing the headline's mission, ad copy constructs a linear progression from beauty to heterosexual attention to romance: “Fairness vitamins work from within to add a touch of fairness to your complexion. And a touch of romance to your winter.” Another full-page ad for this cold cream in Elle (India edition) features the same smiling young model to signify beauty's productive generation of happiness, but in this case the copy outlines the concrete effects of fair beauty on heterosexual men: “What's more, your face glows with a fairness that is sure to take his breath away. And play havoc with his heart.” The slogan for these two ads “Watch cold winters transform into seasons of love” builds further momentum for the creative imagination of beauty as a normative requirement for the “warmth” of romance.

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Going a step further than these ads that depend on suggestive pronouns to craft an imagined male protagonist, ads for Oriflame’s *Love A’ Fair* and *Lever’s Fair & Lovely Advanced Vitamin Formula* materialize male models to promote beauty’s magnetic power to harness heterosexual male companionship. The discursive packaging of romance in the ad for *Love A’ Fair* deploys the concept of love that flows “naturally” from men’s instinctual visual appetite for the beautiful female body to sell the allure of “natural Swedish cosmetics” that can help women grow beauty. A tall and clean-shaven young man dressed casually in a loose white shirt looks down at his female partner, who returns his gaze with a gentle smile. The man’s captivated and focused gaze and his obliviousness to his surroundings code his romantic submission to the spectacle of beauty. Text positioned to the right of the romantic couple reads “Fairness you will fall in love with. Naturally.” An ad for *Fair & Lovely* also paints a picture of beauty as an irresistible physical force, but the romantic scene in this case takes place within the eroticized setting of a wedding where men and women may meet each other for the first time. An archived photograph stuck underneath the headline “The bride is meant to look radiant, but what’s your excuse” on the open page of a personal album recalls the sentimental nostalgia of female friendship. The picture portrays a smiling young woman in full frontal pose, dressed in a pink silk sari and gold jewelry, greeting a bride who smiles back tenderly at her friend. A blurry soft-focus image of a man in a suit, sandwiched between the two friends exchanging greetings, conveys the intense concentration of his gaze that travels across the room to focus on the woman in the pink sari. Cursive handwriting below the photograph dates the wedding as April 17th and then clarifies the role that *Fair & Lovely* played in seizing a male stranger’s erotic gaze: “My best friend never misses a thing. She certainly didn’t miss the glow *Fair & Lovely* had put on my face. And guess what, she teased, I’m not the only one looking.”

The fantasy of feminine beauty’s power to command undivided male attention dominates the discursive arena of television commercials. Arguably, when we consider the young female target audience for skin-lightening cosmetics, even those commercials that do not explicitly structure their narratives around heterosexual romance imply that young, single women’s beauty accelerates their social mobility (meet the right man, marry him, make the nuclear family). In the sample of 37 commercials we examined, only one commercial for *Nivea Fair Visage Cream* features a married woman, who claims that her husband began calling her more often from work after she used the cream. Commercials for *Emami Naturally Fair Talcum powder* and cream, *Fair & Lovely Fairness Soap*, *Fair & Lovely Fairness Cold Cream*, and *Himalaya Fairness Cream* borrow their visual and musical aesthetics of instant erotic desire from Bollywood films. The model for *Emami Naturally Fair Talcum Powder* glows luminously (a layer of yellow light outlines her body) as she sings a lyric about the crushed pearls in the powder that hasten the skin-lightening process. She caresses her upper body suggestively as she applies the powder, and then the last scene shows a handsome man holding her from behind. Women emerging from pools of
water with their clothes clinging to their bodies as men gaze at them with admiration in commercials for *Fair & Lovely Soap* and *Emanii Cream* pay homage to Bollywood's long tradition of sexualizing film heroines without violating censorship laws that prohibit female nudity. *Fair & Lovely's* touristic commercial for its new cold cream is set in a hilly white winter landscape (a popular backdrop for fifties Bollywood films), and a young man, inspired by the light-skinned beauty of the model in the commercial, breaks into a Bollywood style song and dance performance to express his love.

In the persuasive semiotic texts of fairness commercials, the corporate economy of light-skinned beauty authorizes the patriarchal economy of compulsory heterosexuality; these commercials propose that men's voyeuristic and entitled consumption of feminine beauty does not invade women's privacy nor does it constitute a form of sexual harassment. Indeed, these narratives argue that the disciplining surveillance of the panoptic male gaze empowers women because it celebrates their achievement of a normative standard of female beauty. Lakmé's Hinglish (part Hindi, part English) commercial for its *Fair Perfect Crème* enacts a disturbing performance that links the sexualized public male gaze with the powerful desirability of Indian womanhood disguised as white European beauty. A very thin, light-skinned woman dressed in upper-class western clothing — short brown skirt, cream silk blouse, black leather boots, and dark glasses — with dark hair framing her face steps onto a plane when two young men, who are already seated, spot her immediately. The young men's single-minded gaze tracks the woman's body as she looks for her seat. The men whisper appreciative comments to one another, and then one man speculates aloud that he has "heard that beautiful French women like Indian men." Looking at them directly, the smiling model, clearly not repulsed or offended by the men's collective leering gaze, retorts in fluent Hindi, "I have not heard this." The men's visibly shocked faces allow viewers to enjoy their foolish mistake; the beautiful, light-skinned woman "passing" as French is Indian.

In contrast to this story of Indian men's fascination for a fetishized European, upper-class female body, a Tamil commercial weaves the obsessive male gaze into a nationalist tale of the lightened Indian female body's power to police the racial boundaries of male sexual desire. An Indian woman's beauty, in this case, executes the moral work of channeling unruly Indian male desire so it does not stray from fulfilling the filial obligations of sexual citizenship. The opening scenes of the commercial, set in the intimate domestic space of a kitchen, reveal a young man conversing with his mother about his future plans to get married. The mother enquires with exasperation if the son would threaten her with a return to America if she pressured him to get married. Mocking his mother and escalating her anxiety, the son says that he intends to go back and marry a white woman, thus articulating a long-standing Hindu nationalist anxiety over the polluting influences of sexually promiscuous "foreign" (read white) women. At this juncture, a young Indian woman, a loyal consumer of *Fair & Lovely Ayurvedic Cream*, knocks on the door to enter, and the man stares at her,
ostensibly stunned by her beauty. The son continues to stare even after the two women greet each other, and when the young woman from the neighborhood pulls out invitations, he blinks only to communicate his fear that the object of his lustful gaze may be getting married. Unperturbed by this public display of male desire (bordering on leering), the young woman pauses before she says, “you’re welcome to attend my dance performance,” thus alleviating the man’s anxiety. The mother looks relieved; her son’s yearning gaze offers proof that the beautiful, young Indian woman has neutralized the threat of the white woman’s sexual allure.

A series of commercials for Hindustan Lever’s Fair & Lovely creams suggest that attractive heterosexual Indian men do not bestow their coveted sexual gaze on dark-skinned women. It is only when these women exercise their agency in the marketplace as consumers of skin-lightening cosmetics that they discover their power to erode men’s immunity to their charms. Fair & Lovely’s commercial for its cheaply priced, single-serve sachets of cream mines the institutionalized patriarchal gaze of the traditional arranged marriage. Prospective grooms and their families, who enact a ritualistic practice of “inspecting” future brides, visit young women’s homes to “gaze” upon the female body in order to evaluate its beauty and its docility. An anxious father in this commercial tells his wife that a sought after groom with an excellent job has agreed to “view” their daughter, but this groom had reportedly rejected three women. When the father expresses concern over the daughter’s dark skin, the mother raises her right palm confidently in front of his face to stem his flow of verbal anxiety. The father is puzzled, but viewers soon learn from the next scene that the mother’s palm with the five erect fingers also signifies the low price of the product (Rs. 5).

The next few scenes show the wedding celebration in which the husband admires his beautiful bride, who looks “more radiant every day.” The parents and the bride exchange smug smiles to acknowledge their success in capturing the hard-to-please groom. In another commercial for the same sachet, a difficult groom has shown some interest in the bride, but then refused to set a date for the engagement. The anxious parents are sure that the eligible groom will slip away from their grasp. Sensing her parents’ discomfort, the clever daughter gets help from Fair & Lovely to change her facial skin color. When the groom arrives for a social visit, he cannot take his eyes off the daughter’s beautiful face and bumps into her awkwardly, but then he recovers his poise to sweep her up in his arms and demand an immediate engagement.

A commercial for Fair & Lovely’s higher priced tube has an alternative narrative of the male gaze in relation to women’s altered beauty and the arranged marriage system. The hypothesis of this commercial states that the lightened female body’s inherent power to generate male attention, a power derived from purchasing commodities, can liberate women from the humiliating traditions of their culture. A dark-skinned young woman standing behind a pillar in her home surveys a depressing family scene in the courtyard; her father appears to be relieved that he may have finally found an acceptable groom for his plain daughter, but a picture of the groom tells
another story. The camera zooms in to show viewers a close-up image of the groom’s unattractive face (acne-scarred skin, chubby cheeks, large nose, and a thick mustache). A young girl child’s frowning face as she expresses her candid displeasure at the groom’s photograph conveys the message that dark-skinned women have to settle for less than ideal husbands. In a spirit-
ed act of resistance, the young woman decides to opt out of the arranged marriage system. She buys Fair & Lovely Ayurvedic Cream to lighten her skin, and when she walks through a shopping mall dressed in pink, a handsome young man, thoroughly distracted by her beauty, bumps into her. When the woman and the man smile at each other, the father and the little girl grin with happiness, and the father exclaims, “The perfect match has been made!”

Fair & Lovely’s discourses of ideal heterosexual romance and fulfillment do not condemn shallow and self-absorbed men, who ignore or abuse dark-skinned women, nor do they pronounce these men as unworthy candidates for romantic partnerships. In these stories, when men actively withhold their gaze to signify dark-skinned women’s low status in the social hierarchy, these rejected women embark on a quest to seduce the very same shallow men. A young woman in a Fair & Lovely commercial walks into a temple’s courtyard when she unexpectedly runs into a female friend whose good-looking brother (young, clean-shaven, dressed in pants and shirt) is preoccupied with a cell phone conversation. The protagonist gently requests the man to accompany her to the inner sanctum for worship, but the man interrupts her rudely to say, “I’m not interested.” He dismisses the woman with a quick return to the cell phone. The woman looks sad, but then decides that she will improve her appearance with the assistance of Fair & Lovely’s cream. In the next few scenes, viewers see the transformed young woman walking through the temple’s courtyard, but this time, the same rude young man ends his cell phone conversation to devour her beauty with his gaze, and then follow her up the stairs to the inner sanctum. Pleased that he has changed his mind, the young woman acknowledges his sexual interest with a knowing smile. In another commercial, a woman dressed in a dull blue sari teaches music to a group of children on the terrace of an apartment building when she spots a young man on the balcony of an adjacent apartment building. Neither her melodious voice nor her shy glances toward him have any impact on his demeanor. The man’s detached body language — he sips on his coffee with his face averted — signifies the dark-skinned woman’s failure to arouse his interest. The woman’s friend steps in to offer advice that will help the unfortunate singer acquire a “beautiful face that can match her beautiful voice.” The woman takes her friend’s advice to lighten her facial skin color, and the commercial proceeds to show the changed protagonist with a rehabilitated face (and new, well-tailored clothing) singing to her pupils. This time, the young man on the balcony swerves around to see the woman, and her light-skinned beauty mesmerizes him. He stares directly into her eyes as a light pink scarf, hung out to dry on the balcony, floats towards the woman to cover her smug smile.

Magazine ads and television commercials thus seek to persuade women
consumers that an idealized, normative standard of beauty has the power to compel male attention, and hence to enforce male submission, but the sub-text of these stories channels the agency of feminine beauty through the constraining filters of patriarchy. Advertising's beautiful, light-skinned women, who possess the power to manipulate men, are also frequently silent, passive, and inarticulate subjects — it is women's physical beauty coupled with their coy docility that calls forth these discursive moments of feminine power. Women's power to meet or challenge the inequities of traditional expectations of beauty lies in their embrace of commodities in the commercial marketplace that continue to elevate light-skinned beauty's currency. Men have permission to gaze freely at beautiful women, but dark-skinned women who initiate the sexual gazing of heterosexual romance are punished for their transgressions. Grewal (1999) argues that such limited representations of female beauty as an empowering vessel of agency denote the rise of "patriarchal quasi-feminism" in India's emergent global consumer culture (p. 815). This new brand of Indian pop feminism based in the increased "currency of appearance as symbolic capital" also echoes the changing landscape of employment opportunities for rural and urban women of different classes in the burgeoning beauty, garment, modeling, and fashion industries (p. 816). Finally, a reductive and troubling narrative of conformist masculinity props up these representations of feminine empowerment — these commercials suggest that Indian men cannot control their sexual impulses, they choose romantic partners based on their appearance alone, and they endorse their culture's exclusionary norms of colorism and beauty.

**Lightened Bodies, Enlightened Minds:**

**The Complexion of Colorism in Globalizing India**

A 2007 *New York Times* report chronicles the unabated sales of skin-lightening cosmetics in India's new economic landscape: "Skin-lightening products are by far the most popular product in India's fast-growing skin care market, so manufacturers say they ignore them at their peril. The $318 million market for skin care has grown by 42.7 percent since 2001, says Euromonitor International, a research firm" (Timmons, 2007). According to this report, skin-lightening cosmetics have conquered half of India's skin care market, and 60 to 65 percent of Indian women have incorporated these cosmetics into their everyday beauty routines. Drawing on cultural relativism to defend *Fair & Lovely*’s dominance in the skin-lightening sector, Unilever's corporate representative in India, Ashok Venkataramani, argues that critics who take offense at these products that are popular with Indian women articulate a "very western way of looking at the world" (quoted in Timmons, 2007). Another corporate executive for L'Oreal India, which markets *Garnier* skin-lightening creams in South Asia, defuses charges of imperialism against his multinational company when he suggests that Indian women's "deeply rooted" pursuit of light-skinned beauty has little to do with European colonialism (quoted in Timmons, 2007). Such limited and
self-serving explanations that strategically invoke “foreign imperialism” or ahistorical notions of Indian women’s essentialist consumer desire ignore the interwoven (not binary) ways in which these products and their commodity images in public culture — advertising and associated media texts — renew and solidify hierarchies of gender, race, caste and class that have been forged within complex, amalgamated (“western” and “Indian”) and transnational structures of power.

Situating colorism within the histories of slavery and segregation, critical race scholars in the United States have argued that light skin color, particularly for black women, continues to signify the possibilities of social and economic mobility in the post-civil rights era. Advertisements for the scores of skin-lightening cosmetics that are being sold in globalizing India regurgitate colorism’s historical hierarchies of gender, race, class and caste simultaneously as they claim to liberate Indian women from the confining constraints of the very same hierarchies. Magazine and television advertising’s persuasive narratives of social mobility, articulated through the rhetorical themes of transformation, scientific authority, and heterosexual romance, issue a series of discursive statements to women consumers, statements that accumulate social capital for light-skinned beauty:

**Transformation:** You can change your skin color. You can see the change if you look hard enough. If you are loyal to our product, you can keep on changing your skin color. You will feel better if you change your skin color. You can achieve anything you want after you change your skin color.

**Scientific authority:** Trust our commodities, experts in western science — dermatology and pharmacology — have devised a systematic process for changing your skin color. Dark skin is unhealthy, become healthy, become fair. Trust our commodities, experts in India’s herbal and Ayurvedic sciences have devised a natural and authentic process for changing Indian women’s skin color. Stay indoors or you will become dark.

**Heterosexual romance:** You can attract the right man’s attention if you are a light-skinned woman. You will remain single unless you change your skin color. Take pleasure in men’s entitled sexual gazing. Men will ignore, reject, and abuse you unless you change your skin color. You can make these men admire you if you change your skin color. Men like you only for your beauty.

Together, these statements make yet another unequivocal statement that upholds the prejudiced logic of colorism in post-liberalized India: dark-skinned Indian women have no social currency, they are not beautiful, not
empowered, not mobile, not confident, and not deserving of happiness. Advertising cannot be blamed for being the sole perpetrator of colorism in India, but these commercially sponsored texts execute the pedagogic task of reminding India's expanding female consumer markets to imagine that it is their bodies' excess production of melanin, not historical and institutional structures of power, that retards their social mobility. Advertising's intense promotion of light-skinned beauty's power to change Indian women's bodies and lives at this historic moment "operates within and reinforces" the public significations of a changing nation that is striving to secure greater power in the global economy (Reddy, 2006, p. 78).

On a more optimistic note, individuals and collective social movements have challenged advertising's propagation of light-skinned beauty's currency in globalizing India. An extended string of individuals' responses posted on the Internet chat room "Sulekha Coffeehouse" illustrates the oppositional tenor of a lively debate that tackles skin color prejudice in India in relation to advertising, gender, caste, region, and class. Shobhan Bantwal's (2006) bold questions in her opening essay invite participants to share their opinions on colorism's pervasive influence on beauty norms in India, "Is having fair skin equivalent to being beautiful? Does dark skin automatically relegate one to the ranks of the ugly?" Numerous personal essays and anecdotes penned by South Asians in cyberspace and the blogosphere echo such a discourse of resistance to and curiosity about colorism's deep imprints in advertising, film, and everyday social practices in India. In 2002, a Fair & Lovely television commercial showed a girl's father lamenting his dark-skinned daughter's low salary; she applies the cream, changes her skin color, and secures a successful job as an airline stewardess. The All India Democratic Women's Association demanded that Hindustan Lever withdraw this commercial, but when the company failed to respond, the organization petitioned the National Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to ban Lever from airing it (Leistikow, 2003). After the government issued legal notices, Lever pulled two of its commercials, but refused to withdraw future advertising campaigns.

The television program Saath Phere — Saloni Ka Safar, discussed in the introduction to this monograph, and a Femina magazine cover story "Dark is beautiful: Why are we still carrying the dark skin prejudice" are examples of mainstream media discourses that have begun to question fairness advertisements' marginalization of dark-skinned Indian women (Bose, 2000). In Femina's cover story, cosmetologists, fashion photographers, beauticians and supermodels note that today's elite fashion industry in India has grad-
ually begun to recognize female models for their personality, poise and grace rather than their dark or light complexions. Indian women’s dark-skinned beauty, as this article argues, can signify “sensuality, exotica, and intense emotion,” in short, the symbolic attributes of a fetishistic Orientalist imagination. The writer enumerates examples of “dusky” fashion models who have secured prime corporate modeling assignments, but none of these models could claim a position on the far end of the spectrum of dark skin color, and this very same issue contains six ads for skin-lightening products. An astute reader also criticizes *Femina* for its contradictory editorial practices, that is, for devoting 85% of its pages to light-skinned women in the same issue of the magazine that carries a cover story on beauty and skin color discrimination (Edwards, 2000). Undoubtedly, *Femina’s* ambivalent discourse of desirable darkness dilutes its rhetoric of resistance; however, even these compromised discourses in mainstream media have the potential to divert readers momentarily from advertising’s routinized and prescriptive stories of light-skinned beauty.

Dark-skinned Indian women also occupy more positive and affirmative cultural space in select alternative and international films produced by diasporic Indian women directors. In films like *Fire, Bhaji on the Beach, Bend it Like Beckham, Mississippi Masala, Water, and Monsoon Wedding*, dark-skinned women’s roles, behaviors, and subjectivities signify women’s agency to genuinely resist and challenge the gender, class, and caste biases of arranged marriage, sexual abuse, marginalization of widows, inter-racial romance, homophobia, and constraining norms of femininity. Director Gurinder Chaddha critiques the malignancy of colorism in the film *Bhaji on the Beach* when an elderly Indian woman blames her daughter-in-law’s “ugly” dark skin for the break-up of her son’s marriage. *Monsoon Wedding*’s protagonist Ria, who is dark-skinned in comparison to her light-skinned cousin, takes charge of the film’s dramatic narrative, its searing social critique of patriarchy, when she confronts her affluent uncle about the sexual abuse he inflicted on her in the past. Fiction writer Amulya Malladi (2003) builds in a creative critique of colorism and racism in her novel *Mango season*; the book’s female protagonist expresses anger at a dark-skinned female cousin’s struggles with finding a spouse in the arranged marriage system and the protagonist herself negotiates her Indian family’s racist discomfort with her decision to marry an African-American man. Although these scattered voices of protest in alternative and elite media productions cannot match the collective commercial force of advertising in India, they do interrupt and question the normative discourses of beauty and colorism that regulate the public domain.

*Melanin on the Margins: Advertising and the Cultural Politics of Fair/Light/White Beauty in India*

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A more systematic exploration of mainstream and alternative voices of opposition to colorism's regulatory regimes of beauty in India's public culture would be a productive avenue for future research that extends our critique of advertising's representations of fair beauty. Advertising's discourses of colorism have moved into new demographic terrain in the quest to create global niche markets for skin-lightening cosmetics in India and elsewhere in Asia. Billboards promoting Emami's *Fair and Handsome Cream* and Hindustan Lever's *Fair & Lovely Menz Active* cream for men, along with more recent matrimonial ads from women who also request "fair and handsome" grooms, suggest that young men may eventually become profitable targets for the cosmetics industry that feeds parasitically on colorism (Sengupta, 2002, p. 57). Savvy magazine writer Sengupta's interviews with middle-class Indian men, who allegedly constitute 32 percent of the fairness market, provide a glimpse into the growing pressures on men to engage in skin care regimens that guarantee "clear and glowing" skin that looks a "shade or two lighter than what one is born with" (Sengupta, 2002, p. 56). Future research in media studies might explore the narratives of ideal masculinity that guide advertising's creative efforts to enlist Indian men to imagine that they too can exchange a lightened/whitened body for happiness and fulfillment. Audience research that investigates Indian women's responses to advertising's discourses of fair beauty would be another direction for future feminist scholarship that can build on this monograph's analysis of magazine and television ads. How does skin color discrimination affect the everyday lives of children and adult men and women in India? How does colorism percolate into the social and economic structures of occupational status and education in India? To what extent do India's different ethnic and religious communities subscribe to colorism? Following in the footsteps of critical race scholars in the United States, multi-disciplinary social science and humanities research on colorism's historical, sociological, psychological, and religious dimensions in India would flesh out our scrutiny of advertising's symbolic production of fair/light/white beauty.
Endnotes

1. In January 2007, the Food and Drug administration announced that it would review the safety of “fade creams” or anti-aging skin care products that U.S. consumers use to “treat dark age or liver spots in sun-exposed areas on the face or backs of the hands” (Rundle, 2007, p. D 8). The FDA’s concerns over anti-aging creams arose from the skin-lightening ingredient called hydroquinone, which has been known to cause permanent scars and disfigurement in dark-skinned women in Africa. The Wall Street Journal report on the FDA’s move to ban fade creams cites the work of two Dutch researchers, who have argued that topically applied hydroquinone may cause cancer.

2. See Berger (2004), chapter 8 (Analyzing print advertisements) and chapter 9 (Analyzing television commercials) for detailed lists of questions and methodological considerations that can guide qualitative analysis of advertising’s symbolic meanings. Berger provides examples of the different theoretical approaches that can shape scholars’ critical interpretations of advertising’s creative sign-system of words and images.

3. Emami’s negative advertising strategy, particularly its disparaging comments about damaging chemicals in other fairness creams, drew sharp criticism from the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). ASCI petitioned the Kolkata High Court to order Emami to withdraw ads that slandered the competition, but the Kolkata court ruled ultimately in favor of Emami (Mukherjee, 2000).

4. In Amar Chitra Katha comics for children, the dazzling beauty of curvaceous, light-skinned women—goddesses, princesses, and heavenly dancers—painted in pale pink captures men’s attention instantly, and sometimes, kings, gods, and male demons’ admiration for these fair women becomes the driving force for conflict and drama in these narratives (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Scenes in several mythological comic books—Malavika, Nala and Damayanti, Ramayana, Arjuna, and Mahabharata—portray the immediate and visceral impact of light-skinned women’s beauty on the men they encounter. In these illustrations, men stand in the background with their wide eyes and faces transfixed in expressions of awe as they gaze upon beautiful women. In contrast, large and sub-human figures of female demons, the only images of dark-skinned women in these comics, incite disgust, anger, and fear in men, who sometimes injure or kill these women to protect their kingdoms and families.

5. Television commercials’ active promotion of men’s sexual gazing displays the serious problem of “eye teasing” in India, a form of sexual harassment that women face on the streets, in public spaces, and less visibly, in private settings. Men’s lewd comments and aggressive sexual gazing, as several scholars have noted (Anagel Mc-Ginn, 1994; Bagilhole, 1997; Seesat, MacKinzie, & Mohan, 2006), constrains Indian women’s movements in pedestrian space, on public transportation, in educational institutions, and in the workplace.

6. Chatterjee’s influential critique of elite, nineteenth century Indian nationalist ideology notes that the purity and morality of the virtuous middle-class, upper caste Indian woman was articulated in contrast to the impurity and promiscuity of the immoral white woman and the low-caste Indian woman (Chatterjee, 1989). In Indian films from the fifties through the eighties, a westernized woman signified the figure of the ubiquitous vamp: unlike the modest, middle-class heroine, the vamp wore tight skirts, danced in bars and discos, sported short hair, smoked, drank alcohol, and swore in public (Zutshi, 1993).

7. In another variation, Fair & Lovely’s commercial that was broadcast in Kenya in 2000 manipulated the theme of love and romance to imply that women must use Fair & Lovely to not only to secure men in the first place, but also to ensure continued male loyalty and fidelity, that is, to “keep their men.” The commercial depicts a young man staring distractedly at a pretty woman with light skin walking by while his darker-skinned girlfriend, seated next to him in the college cafeteria, tries to engage him in a conversation (Simmons, 2000).
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Appendix
Authors’ Inventory of Skin-Lightening Products in India, 2000-2005

Avon
   Essentials Sunscreen Lotion
   PT White Fairness Face Cream
   PT White Fairness Hand and Body Lotions
   PT White Fairness Pressed Powder
   VIP Fairness cream

Ayur Sunscreen Lotion

Biotique
   Bio-Coconut Fairness Coconut Milk Cream
   Bio-fruit Fruit Fairness Pack

Blossom Kochhar
   Aroma Magic Fairy Lotion
   Skin Lightening and Radiance Lotion

Cadila Healthcare Ltd
   EverYuth Derma Care Daywear Matte Fairness Lotion
   EverYuth Derma Care Light
   EverYuth Clear Skin Lightening Crème

CavinKare Fairver Fairness Cream

Chakola Fairness Oil

Clinique Active White Light Reflecting Powder Makeup

Dabur Vatika Fairness Face Pack

Dhatkri Fairness Massage Oil

Elizabeth Arden Visible Whitening Pure Intensive Capsules

Emami
   Naturally Fair Fairness Cold Cream
   Naturally Fair Herbal Fairness Cream
   Naturally Fair Multactive Fairness Cream
   Naturally Fair Pearl Magic Gel
   Naturally Fair Pearls Cream
   Fair & Handsome

Estée Lauder Cyber White Network (includes creme, cleanser, mask, and powder)
Fem Care Pharma Ltd.
   Fem Blue Bleach
   Fem Fairness Bleach

Garnier Sun Control Moisturiser

Godrej
   Fairglow Fairness Soap
   Fairglow Saffron Fairness Soap

Himalaya Fairness Cream

Hindustan Lever
   Fair & Lovely Active Fairness Moisturiser
   Fair & Lovely Ayurvedic Fairness Cream
   Fair & Lovely Fairness Cold Cream
   Fair & Lovely Menz Active Fairness Cream
   Fair & Lovely Multivitamin Total Fairness Cream

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New Advanced Formula Fair & Lovely
Perfect Radiance Products (includes scrubs, crèmes, gel, lotion, and face wash)
Fair & Lovely Dark Circle Remover Crème
Fair & Lovely Fairness Face Wash

Jolen Cream Bleach
Kaveri Fairness Milk Cream
L’Oreal
   White Perfect Facial Foam
   White Perfect Instant Clear Toning
   White Perfect Moisturizing Lotion
   White Perfect Multi-Action Whitening Essence

Lakme
   Fair Perfect Crème
   Sunscreen Lotion

Mythili Herbal Fairness Cream

Nivea Fair Natural Fairness Day Cream

Olay White Radiance Whitening Lotion

Olivia Bleach Cream

Oriflame Love A’Fair Fairness Cream

Pears
   Naturals Fairness Cream
   Naturals Fairness Soap

Ponds Dreamfairness Cream

Revlon Touch & Glow Fairness Cream and Lotion

Samara Fairness Cream

Shahfair Vitaminised Whitening Cream

Torrel-Freya Fairness Cream

Vicco Vajradanti Turmeric Cream

Vichy
   Bi-White Intensive Whitening Corrective Care
   Bi-White UV Active Whitening Protection
   Bi-White Whitening Deep Cleansing Gel