

A Comprehensive Study of Lux Soaps in India: Negotiating Gender and Advertisements

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Abstract: For the last few decades advertising has become a challenging media. Each and everyday the challenge grows bigger. The demand of the society, the demand of both advertisers and consumers and that of common people is in big question now. The challenge so far is felt in the equation of gender as it remains foregrounded within advertisements. Gender, in its curious connotation, is a socially constructed term which is intertwined with the mythical concept of beauty. The advertising industry is aware of it. They sponsor beauty products in large scale. Lux soap, the 'Face of India', is also a part of this campaign. The beauty myth and its place in the corpus of gender can be mapped through the advertisements of Lux in the last 91 years; a study which can reveal only how, with time, the images of Film Stars have changed, questioned and subverted the very core of patriarchy.

Key words: *gender, advertisement, beauty, metrosexuality, own gaze*

Lux soap is a beauty product for the last 91 years in India. Lux soap which was known as 'sunlight flakes' laundry soap earlier, gradually established itself as a domestic brand in the United Kingdom in 1899. In 1900 its present name was rechristened. It was launched in India in 1929. At present, Lux is sold in 100 countries with a turnover of 1 billion Euros alone in 2005. Out of five, every three women use it in their daily lives. As it is a trusted brand in Indian market for the last 91 years featuring almost every female star of the Bollywood industry (Shah Rukh Khan being the exception), the advertisement of Lux can be studied as a document which paved a new horizon of gender.

The discourse of advertisements have a certain meaning and ideology. Meaning, as it is latent within the discourse, is a social mirror. We often identify ourselves with the product we buy. This identification usually leads to a negation between the real and the hyperreal and calls for a postmodern spectrum. The term ideology may seem an outdated practice which "mediates what we know, how we feel, and the way we live" (Williamson vi). Gender is an integral part of such introspection. It simultaneously adds meaning to the macrocosm of advertisements. Meaning can be ambiguous and multifarious both. The advertisements of Lux Soap, therefore, prompted me to draw attention not only "to describe sexism in a text, but also to analyze the way that point of view, agency, metaphor or transitivity which are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender (...)" (Mills 1). In the light of the preceding statement I have contextualized Lux advertisements of 1941 to 2020 in the backdrop of its milieu. For that I have divided them into two parts: from 1941-1980 (Leela

Chitins – Prema Narayan) and 1981-2020(Sridevi- Saifeena) . Four images of Lux Soap have also been added in the last few pages (pp.8-11) to show the major changes that took place.

1941-1980 is the developing phase of Lux advertisements. Featuring Leela Chitins as the first Indian brand ambassador, Lux began its journey in 1941. Its popular slogan was the ‘beauty soap of film stars’. Beauty myth is an intrinsic part of our daily life. Women in India would secretly desire to become as beautiful as the film stars. A feeling of guilt arises from the secret ambition of being so. Conflict is also felt elsewhere- to be naïve or to be sensual or to be both? Film stars like Nargis (1940s), Renuka Roy (1940s), Suraiya(1940s), Meena Kumari (1940s), Nirupa Roy (1950s), Madhubala(1950s), Nanda(1950s), Waheeda Rahman(1960s), Vyjayanthimala(1960s), Mala Sinha(1960s), Tanuja(1960s), Sadhna(1960s), Kalpana (1960s), Helen (1960s), Hema Malini (1960s), Saira Banu(1970s), Jayaprada (1970s), Babita(1970s), Sharmila Tagore(1970s), Rekha (1970s), Padmini Kolhapure (1980s), Zeenat Aman (1980s), Poonam Dhillon (1980s), Prema Narayan (1980s) are representative of such dilemma.

Leela Chitins in her 1941 debut has been portrayed as a stereotypical Indian woman. She is secretive, sensual and simple. Her personality glorifies her femininity. It prepares her for the male gaze. Surprisingly, Nargis, Waheeda Rahman and Vijayanthimala, actresses from two different ages are coded as “teen deviyans”. The advertisements claim them as “classic beauties” of the silver screen. Their sacredness is being emphasized through “deviyans”. The beauty of Renuka Roy and Nirupa Roy are reflected in the image of their truthfulness and simplicity . Suraiya is the stereotypical Indian woman who impresses others by her simplicity. Simplicity and sensuality are the two precipitating factors which allure common Indian men. But the star value is added to Lux with the enticing and surreal beauty of Madhubala. Its credibility as a beauty soap of stars started with her.

It can be easily inferred from the catchy phrases of Lux soap advertisements that the modifier fair gives a certain weight to existing belief. A fair woman’s chance of getting married is better than that of a not-so-fair one. Engaging on this belief Lux promises to give not only a cleaning experience but also a fairer and softer skin. The glory of fair complexion continues with Saira Banu, Sadhna, Jayaprada, Babita and Sharmila Tagore. The coyness of Tanuja and her kind of complexion draws our attention to the upcoming years. The seductive beauty of Helen and the divinely Hema Malini caters to the taste of Indian audience. Contrary to this, Rekha, the controversial black beauty of Indian cinema, breaks the image. She becomes a mouthpiece of “I know how to get and what”. By coining this sexual innuendo the advertiser allures Indian women to be coy and seductive both.

Coyness and innocence are binary opposites; as is fair and ugly. But the advertiser makes them grey owing to the continuous demand of the market. Globalization enhanced this process as “After 1985, in an effort to revive the stagnant economy, some measures towards economic liberalization were introduced and there was growth in the economy. GDP reached an average of 5.5% in the 1980s (India TradePoint, 1995) and per capita income increased by

40%.”(Ciochetto 1). In the 1990s the liberalization of the economy continued, some of which was externally imposed: investment expanded from 1994-1995 but it was often erratic. Industry expanded as well though there were also many casualties.

Economic liberalization uplifted the socio-economic construct of the middle and the upper-middle class. The latter part of the 1980s was a witness to the rising of the urban middle class. ‘It rests on the assumption that the shift in the Indian state’s economic policy in favour of globalization has accompanied a shift in public discourse as evidenced in the media’ (Chowdhuri 1). Therefore, the pre-globalized and the globalized advertisements underwent vast socio-economic as well as political changes. Gender, being an integral part of such change finds a new dimension. The shift was from the ideal homemakers to the ‘globe trotting corporates’.

This paradigm shift is also evident in the advertisement of 1981-2020. The shift from Sridevi (1990s) to Saifeena (2020s) is a remarkable change in gender roles. Although Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit strictly adhere to their predecessors, Swarup Sampat and Kajal advance towards a newer definition. They are lustful and tomboy both.

But there was a phenomenal change in the representation of gender in Lux advertisements in the year 2005. As the brand reached its 75th year, it endorsed Shah Rukh Khan being surrounded by four epitomes of beauty-namely Hema Malini, Sridevi, Juhi Chawla and Kareena Kapoor. Shah Rukh Khan earned much controversy revealing the ‘raaj’ of his beauty. In 2020, Saifeena (Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor) took the step further. In a moonlit dinner Saif Ali Khan unveils ‘chaand sa roshan chehra’ of Kareena Kapoor.

I have added four different images of Lux Soap in this paper. The first one is of Leela Chitnis, second Kareena Kapoor having a chocolate bath, third of Shah Rukh Khan and finally of Saifeena (portmanteau of Saif Ali Khan and Kareena).

From all the above mentioned advertisements we cannot but ignore the patriarchal hierarchy that exists within. In some cases when the target audience is the common people, stereotypical advertisements portray women as the feminine, seductive and sensual; precisely, an ‘object’, a ‘commodity’. Whereas just in the opposite case, men are portrayed as ‘individuals’. They also seduce but mostly with a woman in the background, satisfying both the ‘male’ and the ‘female gaze’. Leela Chitnis, as her image is portrayed in the advertisement, is the stereotypical Indian woman. She obeys what the society wants; feminine, secretive and simple. She is a star yet a homely woman. Such image has been exploited and manipulated by the advertisers to reach their target consumers. Barthel stated that ‘women still control some 80% of the buying power’ (7). With the advent of Globalization, the buying power of women has increased. Women are lucrative consumers who do justice to the product. Modern women’s buying capacity probably motivates the advertisers to reshape their Lux advertisements. Thus, in the following years, there is a remarkable change in the rhetoric of Lux advertisements. It took a long time to endorse Lux soap as a beauty product not only for fair women but also for not-so-fair one. The shift from

Leela Chitnis to Rekha questions, challenges and subverts the stereotypical concept of Indian women. Patriarchy may find it oppressive, subjugative but Lux paved the way for that.

A question may arise as to whether this soap is meant only for women or not. Most probably to cater to the aesthetic taste for both men and women, Lux, in 2005, introduced Shah Rukh Khan as the metrosexual man. Metrosexual is a portmanteau of metropolitan and heterosexual man, coined in 1994, who enjoys shopping, fashion and similar interests traditionally associated with women. “The metrosexual trend can be seen both as men expressing femininity and as masculinity being defined more broadly. During this time the acceptable male gender role expanded and became more inclusive of divergent expressions of male identity. It no longer stood in stark binary contrast to the feminine, because part of metrosexual masculinity embodied traditional notions of feminine traits” (Anderson 6). It is often assumed that capitalism introduced to this newly defined gender role. A part of their agenda is to spoil the retrosexual man with shopping spree like women- to make them more conscious of their image and identity. Difference is also sought in the manner Shah Rukh Khan is represented. He is surrounded by a galaxy of female stars who help to delineate the secret of his beauty. Interestingly, there could be either female stars or Shah Rukh Khan alone.

Finally we move on to the two contrasting images; one which depicts Kareena Kapoor indulging herself in a chocolate bath and the other in which Kareena Kapoor alongwith her husband Saif Ali Khan savour a moonlit dinner. In the first image it is noted that Kareena Kapoor takes a fresh chocolate bath with Lux which makes her bold, lustful and attractive.

But this image does not last long. In the Lux advertisement of 2020 Kareena Kapoor plays the role of traditional Indian woman who conforms to the hierarchy of patriarchy. She represents the stereotypical Indian woman by being sensuous, loving and beautiful to her husband. Saif Ali Khan compares her beauty to that of a moon- quiet and soothing. She no more questions patriarchy and surrenders to it.

Lux soap advertisements undertook a gendered journey which was multifaceted- from stereotypical role of Indian women to metrosexual men and finally conforming to the traditional Indian men and women both. In this journey it unknowingly gave birth to the metaphor of ‘other’. Otherness is found in metrosexual to retrosexual- from satisfying ‘male gaze’ and ‘female gaze’ to ‘own gaze’.

As Shah Rukh Khan marked the beginning of a new history, it threatens gender bias and poses a question- shall we remain happy with ‘male’ or ‘female gaze’ or we shall break the myth and advance towards a new era where our ‘own gaze’ will be satisfactory and celebrated. The answer is yet to come.

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