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Fair and anxious: on mimicry and skin-lightening in India

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Skin-lightening or ‘fairness’ creams – with their troubling colonial overtones – are big business in India, an over $200 million industry that comprises the largest segment of the country’s skin cream market. Although corporations like Unilever have been widely criticized for profiting on colorism, they continue to produce advertisements that equate light skin with beauty, success, and empowerment. Through an analysis of the fairness motif in advertising and popular media, I first show how skin-lightening creams are positioned as alchemic agents of self-transformation. Secondly, as the use of skin lighteners continues to grow in the global South, I ask: how are we to understand this aspiration for lightness? Rather than viewing this kind of cultural mimicry as a form of false consciousness, I argue that it represents an anxious love for the ‘other’ that is conditioned by power relations.

Keywords: India; mimicry; globalization; colorism and racism; identity

‘Is wanting to be fair about personal freedom? Or is it about gross racism? Is the fairness industry really unfair and ugly? … What is it about fairness that makes it this national aspiration?’ (Barkha Dutt, host of the talk show, We the People, on the popularity of ‘skin-lightening’ or ‘fairness’ creams in India)

A row was to be expected when Hindustan Unilever, the largest consumer goods company in India, launched a skin-lightening application on Facebook called ‘Be Prepared,’ through which one’s profile images are digitally whitened and ‘prepared for different occasions.’ The application, as well as Dutt’s question above, highlighted an uncomfortable and stubbornly enduring issue; in India, skin-lightening creams – with their troubling colonial overtones – are big business, an over $200 million industry, according to one estimate, which is growing at 10–15% annually and comprises the largest segment in the country’s skin cream market (Timmons, 2007). The bulk of consumers are reportedly between 18 and 35, though recent survey research suggests the age profile of users is getting younger (Singh, 2008). As Emami, maker of a product called Fair & Handsome, explains: ‘A fair complexion has always been associated with success and popularity. Men and women alike desire fairness, it is believed to be the key to a successful life.’

The attention we lavish on the skin and the care that we give to it are expressive of certain societal pressures. As Mary Douglas (1982, p. 65) notes, ‘The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains

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In this article, I argue that ‘fairness’ is a key modality through which exclusion operates in globalizing India. As a benchmark for beauty, its exclusionary power is most vividly felt in advertising, modeling, film, and television (Shevde, 2008). The fairness fetish, moreover, pervades the job and marital markets and is deeply entwined with gender, class, and caste discrimination. In reality and in advertising fantasy, then, skin color functions as a form of symbolic capital that shapes life chances (Glenn, 2008; Twine, 1997). Although corporations like Unilever, L’Oreal, Emami, and Shiseido have been widely criticized for profiting on colorism, understood as a bias toward ‘fairer’ or whiter skin, they continue to produce advertisements that equate light skin with beauty and success, with flight and fancy, with choice and empowerment.

The characters in these commercials are always ashamed or shamed (by friends and family) for having dark skin and for not doing enough to lighten it. Each ‘is sealed in his own peculiarity,’ to use Fanon’s (1952, p. 45) memorable phrase. The anxieties their complexion prompts about self-worth and social position are etched on their concerned faces. That is, until fairness cream enters the scene and, like a deus ex machina device, disperses the darkness. Thus the advertisements do not whitewash inequalities and prejudices, they revel in them. The solution they offer is for you to ‘whitewash’ yourself and take advantage of those very social ills. They do not point to a post-color future; they tell us what to do to get ahead today. They are parables of darkness and light. They are tales of metamorphosis: the lowly caterpillar becomes a sprightly butterfly; the ugly duckling becomes the most beautiful bird of all.

As the use of skin lighteners continues to grow in the global South, particularly among young, urban, educated men and women, how are we to understand this aspiration for fairness?

The wish to lighten one’s skin is a way of fleeing the contingency of life, forged as it is in a crucible of status insecurity, economic uncertainty, and western hegemony. It is the flight from something pitied (darkness) and the chasing of something prized (fairness). Global processes intensify these aspirations, eliciting both curiosity about other ways of being and anxiety about one’s place in the world (Bauman, 2003; Ghosh, 2011). One is tempted to view this kind of mimicry as a form of false consciousness: foolishly abandoning one’s proper roots, one’s cultural home and hearth, as it were, in favor of something farther or fairer. Instead, I argue that it represents an anxious love for the ‘other’ – a limpid other which partakes of both local and foreign qualities. It is a love shot through with status concerns and conditioned by power relations, as in Foucault’s notion of ‘control by stimulation’ (1980, p. 57). This is because the desire for fairness is ultimately a desire for distinction: a wish to be numbered among the privileged and the worldly and not the common and the ordinary. On its own, it is hardly pernicious. But viewed as a thread in the dense weave of cultural, political, and economic life, its meaning is quite complex and consequential.

Through an analysis of the fairness motif in advertising and popular media, I explore the cultural politics of color and show, first, how skin-lightening creams are positioned as alchemic agents of self-transformation. Next, I analyze the dynamics of mimetic desire and their entanglement in the Indian cultural system of distinction. The marketing of fairness is then examined in greater depth. And lastly, I reflect upon the stigmatization of dark bodies that accompanies the valorization of fairness.
The trouble with fairness

The exact origins of colorism in India are unknown. It is popularly suggested that such prejudice predates colonialism, beginning with the subjugation of dark-skinned Dravidians by fair-skinned Aryan migrants from the north probably around 1500 BCE. As Johnson writes, ‘It is generally understood that the caste system was introduced by this nomadic group, and was based on the concept of varna or colour, where the light-skinned Aryans used this racial structure to separate themselves from the conquered dark, indigenous population’ (2002, p. 217). This interpretation – and the many like it – gives the unfortunate impressions that caste and color hierarchies were isomorphic. That India’s diverse and heterogeneous populations could offer such clean and convenient phenotypic distinctions stretches credulity.

Indeed, evidence for both the idea of caste as a color-based system of distinction and for the theory of Aryan racial conquest is lacking. Nonetheless, the theory has considerable staying power as many light skin Indians attribute their complexions to such a heritage.) And while one of the meanings of varna in Sanskrit is color, it is understood in this context to refer to the castes described above. Still, these categories were hardly neutral: ideas of purity and pollution undergirded the caste system, as Brahmins were said to embody the sacred and Sudras and untouchables were identified with darkness and filth. Caste hierarchies interacted with other forms of stratification to make life lovely for some and miserable for others. The most we can say, then, is that the enduring preoccupation with fairness owes to a shifting constellation of regional, caste, and class relations over time as well as to cross-cultural contact and conquest, as the Dutch, Mughal, Portuguese and the British all made their way through the region. It was the last who made the deepest impression.

The British Empire approached India with both trepidation and arrogance. It revered many of its complex traditions, but was rather eager to undo those that got in the way of moneymaking and the consolidation of power. It also saw fit to politicize identities relating to caste, class, ethnicity, and religion in ways that would facilitate the work of governance (Bose & Jalal, 2011; Dirks, 2011). As a result, relatively fluid identities became fixed. Orientalist knowledge and the imperative to justify their own rule, moreover, inclined the British to champion lighter skinned groups as intelligent and martial and attractive, while dark-skinned peoples were portrayed as effeminate and dimwitted. The politicization of identity was particularly pronounced in the period leading up to the subcontinent’s vivisection and independence as emergent groups jockeyed for position.

Although far more diffuse and indirect in their influence, corporations, too, play a role in shaping the prevailing modes of cultural distinction. As with the British, they simultaneously reinvent and exploit existing prejudices. The notion of a deracinated global citizen ‘passing’ seamlessly across boundaries supplants colonialism’s racial dualisms. But to move freely, one must be of a particular type. Thus to understand the underpinnings of the popular aspiration for fairness, it is essential to consider how corporations go about constructing color difference.

In a television commercial for Fair & Handsome, a popular skin-lightening cream made by Emami, a romantically-troubled young man with a darkish complexion sidles up meekly to a fair-skinned woman. Before he can utter a faltering word, his nagging, light-skinned sister interrupts: ‘Brother, once again you’ve finished all of my fairness cream?!’ Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan appears and, like a big brother, shakes his
head with amused disgust: ‘A man using a woman’s fairness cream …?’ A chorus of men jeers. Clad in a jean vest, Khan breaks into song and explains that women’s fairness cream is too weak for a man’s ‘rough and tough’ skin. (So tough that, in one version of the commercial, Khan actually strikes a match against the benighted man’s hide-like skin). What he needs is Fair & Handsome, the only cream that is infused with ‘American double-strength peptides’ – a pseudoscientific claim meant to establish the product’s First World potency and legitimacy. He applies the cream, his skin lightens, and a beautiful young woman waltzes into his arms. Female voices sing, ‘Hi handsome, hi handsome.’ The cream promises to make one *gora* in four weeks. The proper contextual translation of *gora* is probably fair-skinned, though I should add that the term is also used to refer to a white person.

Another commercial shows a stocky, swarthy man running into dark corners to secretly apply women’s fairness cream. He is doubly ashamed: of his dark skin and of having to use a feminine product, and he thus pulls a hood over his head. A handsome, buoyant stranger accosts him singing: ‘When you want to be fair-skinned / Quietly, quietly where do you run? / Why do you put on women’s fairness cream?’ A similar sequence ensues – although there is also time for a short dance routine – and the now-dashing man is swarmed by a gaggle of gorgeous gals. Such is the association of fairness with social worth and attraction. Vaseline’s *Sport Whitening Cream* is promoted by boyish actor Shahid Kapoor; Garnier *PowerLight* by muscular film star, John Abraham.

Men’s lightening creams are relatively new; the products were previously marketed almost exclusively to women. A controversial commercial for Fair & Lovely, the largest-selling fairness product in the world, shows a middle-aged couple in a darkish kitchen. Pure light radiates from side windows, producing a touching chiaroscuro-effect. Seated rather glumly at a small table the jowly husband glances up from the newspaper and asks his wife for more tea. She tells him sharply and with raised hand that there is not any milk on account of their meager pension. (One cannot help but notice that he needs to lighten his black tea; otherwise it cannot be drunk.) He sighs and says ruefully, ‘If only I had a son.’ His daughter overhears the lament and runs to her bedroom in tears. Downcast but determined she says, ‘I will become the son.’ She comes across a job posting for an air stewardess at ‘British Airlines’ but, caressing her face anxiously in the mirror, she wonders how she could ever land such a prestigious job. Just then a commanding voice issues from her television promising to ‘change her life.’ After a four-stage lightening process, the young woman’s face is luminous. She walks confidently down a bright, airy corridor in a smart pink *shalwar kameez* to her job interview. (In another version she wears a skirt suit.) Her beauty dazzles the interviewers; a nearby pilot cannot help but stare. She is hired and the family’s problems disappear. They even sit for tea at a glamorous hotel. Fair families are happy families. The implications of the commercial are quite clear: women earn less than men, and non-fair women far less, hence the family’s troubling, milk-deprived economic straits. India has one of the highest rates of female infanticide and foeticide in the world. The wish the father makes about having had a son rather than a daughter is thus not an idle wish. Possessing relatively dark skin, the commercial implies, reduces one’s chances of netting a high-earning husband. Studies of Indian matrimonial advertisements and websites reveal that skin tone is one of the most noted characteristics in describing women to potential male suitors (Vaid, 2009). As an executive director for Hindustan Unilever put it, *F&L* commercials show ‘how the product can lead to a transformation, with romance
and a husband [being] the payoff” (Luce & Merchant, 2003, p. B1). The rewards, in other words, are material and ethereal.

Does advertising provide a window onto the concerns and desires of consumers? It is difficult to know and much probably depends on the product in question. What we can say is that bold advertising has not, at the very least, damaged the image of fairness creams as they remain among the most popular cosmetics in India as well as in Africa, Latin America, East and Southeast Asia and their diasporas. And we do know is that colorism is a distressingly persistent phenomenon and that companies exploit and build on existing prejudices. The desire for lightness is not, then, a mere instance of people being duped into self-loathing. It is better understood as an irrationality born of wider irrationalities: the profanely ordered stratification of class; the divinely ordained hierarchies of caste; the racially coded contours of the global system. Let us now analyze the dynamics of mimetic desire in greater depth.

Mimetic desire

There is a pathos to globalization and perhaps something of an inferiority complex develops among the privileged strata of the ‘darker nations,’ which calls to mind Fanon’s late-colonial diagnosis of the affliction in Black Skin, White Masks (1952). As Ahluwalia (2003, p. 334) notes:

Fanon demonstrates how the effects of colonialism permeated the black body and created a desire to wear a white mask, to mimic the white person in order to survive the absurdity of the colonial world. Fanon wrote about the sense of alienation, of being an object in a world of objects created by colonisation.

Skin and self are united in one’s persona, which, according to Agamben (2011, p. 46), originally means mask. It is through the mask, he says, ‘that the individual acquires a role and a social identity.’ The violence of colonialism and the ‘epidermal schema’ it imposed on the subject population created a situation in which one was ‘forever in combat’ with one’s image (Fanon, 1952, pp. 112, 194). This self-image became so distorted and fragmented that it was barely recognizable, even and especially to oneself. Fanon (1952, p. 112) movingly describes the spectrality of the shattered self: ‘I moved toward the other … and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea.’ As with the donning of metaphorical white masks, skin-lightening positions itself as an antidote to this feeling of dislocation and estrangement. As a South African hair stylist who has been getting special injections to bleach his skin for over ten years remarks: ‘I pray every day and I ask God, “God why did you make me black?” I don’t like being black. I don’t like black skin’ (quoted in Fihlani, 2012).

Biologists generally define mimicry as the display of a misleading signal that serves to trick another animal (usually, a predator). Analogically, human mimickers fake the possession of an attribute by exhibiting some signal associated with it. But unlike exquisitely brindled butterflies that take on the characteristics of their surroundings, the intention in the case at hand is not to blend in to one’s surroundings but to stand out. That is, instead of camouflaging, the attributes of the admired other are pressed into the service of social distinction.

But not all mimicry involves deception or calculation; it also denotes the sensual, ‘pre-rational,’ and childlike tendency to copy, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1986), and
Habermas (1984, p. 382) all pointed out. They saw in mimicry a riposte to an overly rationalized and hateful world. Through assimilation, imitation, and play, we accommodate the world rather than bending it to meet our desires. That is, in experiencing our sensuous similarity to other people, nature, and things, we yield to them instead of trying to dominate them. We also unintentionally mirror the behavior of others, which is a fundamentally social impulse. In so doing, the boundary between the self and other, subject and object, becomes porous and malleable.

Masking and whitening are distortions of our mimetic heritage. They negate the self and affirm the other with a view to fashioning a fairer, more fetching persona. It is for this reason that I describe lightening as animated by an anxious infatuation with the other. As Kierkegaard (1844/1981, p. 42) notes, ‘Anxiety is a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy,’ a simultaneous feeling of attraction and repulsion toward something ‘adventurous’ and ‘enigmatic.’ Whereas mimicry once signified a kind of selfless love, agape, this is a selfish and possessive eros. It is also a love that is acutely status-conscious. It is a desire to be part of an elect group, however shakily defined, and to distance oneself from benighted others. This is what gives mimetic desire its impetus and its rivalrous status charge.

This flight and chase involves jouissance: an attempt to transgress certain proscribed cultural limits – to somehow move up the class or caste hierarchy, to become global, to become the fairest of all – to feel this special pleasure. One simulates, one passes, one becomes. In so doing, one breaks down barriers between the self and other; there is space to play with one’s being and there is room to maneuver. But one does so secretly, under cramped cover of darkness (like an embarrassed character in a Fair & Handsome commercial). You also leave something behind, generating a painful nostalgia for one’s darker self, one’s darker past. (To use Bhabha’s (1995, p. xiv) terms, one remains ‘tethered to’ one’s ‘dark reflection.’) It is pleasure and pain together, an enjoyment interwoven with lack and alienation. An unbearable lightness.

Cultural hegemony is thus not simply imposed; rather it is lived and acted out in unpredictable ways. Mimicry’s inherent creativity is forfeited by this retreat into the small consolations of the careworn self, a withdrawal based on fear. From here it is not a long way to Cooley’s (1998) ‘looking glass self’: the self that frets about its complexion in the mirror. So while it easy to discern the dread that goes into trying to look fairer, we should also acknowledge the element of openness as well. (There is, after all, affection in affection.) And by neglecting the latter, we lose an appreciation of the seductive powers of consumerist mimicry. Paradoxically, the popularity of skin-tanning in the West signifies something similar: the privilege and leisure to luxuriate (rather than toil) in the sun’s rays, or, even more, in their indoor simulacra, which one has to pay for. Previously it was common for European and American women to use powders and bleaches to whiten their skin as a signal of their delicacy and election (Glenn, 2008). The lightening market has since been rekindled by concerns over sun overexposure and age-related ‘blemishes.’ Thus are fetishes and prejudices invented, inverted, and recycled in different contexts.

White beauty

Fair & Lovely was launched in 1971 by Hindustan Lever Limited following the patenting of niacinamide, a form of vitamin B3 that has been shown to lighten skin tone (Hakozaki et al., 2002). By 1978, F&L was widely available throughout India and, according to
Runkle (2005), now has ‘an estimated sixty million consumers in the subcontinent and exports to thirty-four countries in Southeast and Central Asia as well as the Middle East.’ Before the economic reforms of 1991, which are credited with liberalizing the Indian economy, F&L was one of a handful of commercial beauty and skin care products available to Indian consumers. Today there are scores. Deregulation invited a steep rise in imports, of course, but it was the dramatic expansion of the urban middle class that put India on the map for multinational corporations (Karnani, 2007). While estimates of its size vary – most put the middle class at somewhere around 250 million – it is the fastest growing demographic sector in the country. Over the next 15 years, its buying power is expected to triple, making India one of the most important consumer markets in the world (Yardly, 2011). It is this population, with its status insecurities and its cosmopolitan aspirations, to whom much advertising is increasingly addressed (Mazzarella, 2003).

Recently, Hindustan Unilever launched another lightening product called Pond’s White Beauty. Its marketing strategy centered on a series of five ad novellas. The first segment begins with a close-up of a heart-shaped locket breaking. The actors, Bollywood stars Priyanka Chopra and Saif Ali Khan, emotionally part ways in an airport terminal, each with half of the locket. (The ad’s melodramatic style itself borrows heavily from Indian cinema, complete with a swelling orchestral score.) Three years later Khan has taken another lover, the striking actress, Neha Dhupia. They encounter Chopra, a former Miss India, on the street. Khan notices her and removes his sunglasses, but he is pulled away. Chopra is distraught. She then espies a television commercial in a store window display: ‘New Pond’s White Beauty gives you a radiant white-pinkish glow. Pale white or pinkish white, you choose.’ The camera then freezes on the starkly contrasting profiles of Dhupia and Chopra: the former light and pale, the latter flat and dark. Chopra tries the cream to predictable success and she, Khan, and the lockets are harmoniously rejoined. In an airport of course: these things always seem to take place in denationalized settings like airports, as jet-setting, flight, and speed are crucial components in the globalism of the ‘new’ Indian middle class. We also see three stages of lightening: the first image is of a darker, ruminative Chopra with her eyes cast down; in the second, she stares ahead with a hint of a smile, as if guarding a secret; and the third reveals Chopra in all her ‘pinkish white’ glory, eyes cast gleefully upward. The episodes were aired in 15-day increments on 46 channels. ‘Every episode leaves you at that point where you want to know what happens next,’ says Zenobia Pithawalla, senior creative director at Ogilvy and Mather, the ad agency that designed the campaign (Shah, 2008). But the audience always knew what was going to happen: she was going to choose whiteness and her pale-pink complexion would reverse her amorous fortunes. That fairness transfigures is a foregone conclusion; its virtue was never in question. The suspense resides in the journey: how exactly she would change, how his head would be turned by her sudden beauty, how her competitor would be left in the dun dust.

Another commercial shows various women struggling to shield themselves from the sun’s harsh rays. Fear not, Fair and Lovely’s active sun blockers ‘protect the skin from tanning.’ In another, an aspiring model frets about her confoundingly dark winter complexion, which F&L also proposes to lighten. But perhaps one should give the companies the benefit of the doubt and assume that by fairness they mean merely brightness or youthfulness. (As F&L notes on its website: ‘Skin Lightening Creams are the preferred mode of Skincare in almost all Asian countries, just as anti-aging creams are in Europe and the USA.’ Is dark skin, then, a form of premature obsolescence in their view?) A short F&L ad, however, puts paid to even this generous interpretation.
Two female employees of the high profile, global call center industry are shown measuring their complexions against a color strip like those found in hardware stores.\footnote{The strip is a numbered spectrum that runs from brown and tan to pink and white, giving the lightening process an aura of scientific precision. (It is a neat illustration of ‘the narcissism of minor differences’ [Freud, 1930/2002, p. 90]). The one with the fairer skin chides the other for only applying the cream intermittently, and hence the poor returns on her investment in fairness: she has upgraded only one shade. She applies the cream more diligently, night and day, the eventual results of which prompt her to smile broadly and toss her hair joyfully as she walks through the office in slow motion. The backing track swells gently in concert. A female voice croons. Her amazed colleague cries, ‘wow!’}

Just how far is too far? Consider Clear and Dry Intimate Wash, an Indian feminine hygiene product that, according to its maker, Midas Care:

\begin{quote}

is designed to address the problems women face in their private parts. Clean and Dry Intimate Wash offers protection, fairness and freshness. To be used while showering, its special pH-balanced formula cleans and protects the affected area, and even makes the skin fairer. Life for women will now be fresher, cleaner, fairer!\footnote{A primetime commercial for the body wash depicts a couple in a light-suffused and spacious modern apartment. The woman slides a black mug across a glass coffee table to her husband who is reading the paper on a white leather couch. The camera zooms in on her glum and worried visage as a disembodied voice sings softly, ‘Kho gaye hum kahan?’ meaning ‘where have we disappeared to,’ or ‘what has happened to us?’ We then see her in the shower dispensing the product with a smile. An animation follows in which the wash gently lightens a hairless feminine crotch. Red rose petals float upwards in the background. The text reads: ‘Freshness + Fairness.’ The product claims to keep the skin ‘fresh and protected from infection all day’ and also to ‘brighten darkened skin in that area … making it many shades fairer.’ The woman’s shame at possessing a dark and potentially infected body is thus eased, the fairer sex made fairer. Her body is also made to appeal to his sexuality, his desires. Elated, she playfully steals her partner’s keys and slips them into her pocket. She then beckons him with a naughty forefinger. Awed, he spins her around in his arms, the relationship saved, rejuvenated, cleansed.}

Selling dreams

What shocks most about these advertisements is the direct and unvarnished language; it is not euphemized. The pre-lightened characters exist in what McClintock (1995, p. 30) calls ‘anachronistic space.’ They are figures of lack and dull-wit, holdovers from a bygone era (Behdad, 1994; Chakrabarty, 2007). By contrast, their post-treatment faces seem almost mythic; they appear as essence, as the enticing embodiment of modernity. They are positively \textit{enlightened}. The advertisements encourage viewers to objectify themselves, so to speak, and to work on their skin. As with ‘liberation marketing,’ the appeals are basically narcissistic, betokening individual rather than social transformation: \textit{You} can change, \textit{you} can be accepted, \textit{you} can be beautiful.

In speaking of shades of fairness, the commercials portray the color hierarchy as taken for granted: this is the way things are, they seem to say, and they are merely abiding by the prevailing social norms. Yet an internal \textit{Fair & Lovely} marketing memo shows
Hindustan Unilever, which is owned by the British-Dutch company Unilever, wrestling apologetically and defensively with these rather touchy issues:

Currently our brand of skin lightening cream generates more than $60 million and holds the majority of the market in India … Unfortunately we have made some promotional mistakes over the past few years … Our portrayal of women was taken as an insult to many who saw it. Our campaign was called insulting, unethical, racist, and an inaccurate portrayal of women in India.

It is also just as important to recognize the strengths our company already possesses in this market so we can continue to utilize the assets we already have. Presently skin lightening creams are very popular in India. Women have a need for this product and as long as they continue to, we will continue to supply them with Fair & Lovely.

Speaking from a cultural standpoint it doesn’t seem that these needs will change any time soon. Women perceive fair skin as a standard for beauty in India because there is a cultural bias towards fair skin in India. The most beautiful Bollywood actresses are always fair skinned and families searching for a bride for their son always request that she be fair skinned. Skin color is also ‘closely identified with caste and is laden with symbolism’ in the country (Cateora & Graham, 2008). Even historically there is awareness for the desire to lighten skin in India. Charaka, a famous sage, wrote about herbs that would help make the skin fair over 3,500 years ago. This cultural standard for coveting fair skin is a strength for Fair & Lovely because it has created a desire for our product within our target market.

Right now the Fair & Lovely brand has been accused of being degrading to women based on our advertising campaign that suggests that for a woman to be successful or wanted by men, she must have light skin.11

It is argued, then, that this is not some sort of corporate neo-colonialism; rather, corporations are adapting their products to the unique demands and specificities of local markets. Unilever does not create color prejudice or the desire for whiteness, it merely responds to it. Or so goes the Unilever defense. And as if to dispel any doubt about the company’s anthropological sensitivity (and perhaps to combat charges of racism), it offers an Indianized, ayurvedic formulation. The company has also moved aggressively into rural and low-income markets by offering smaller, more ‘affordable’ sachets of the cream (as well as through a charitable foundation and scholarship program). As one Indian writer put it, ‘Fair & Lovely did not become a problem today. It’s been making inroads into poor people’s budgets for a long time. I remember being told back in 1994 by mothers in a Hyderabad slum that all their daughters use Fair & Lovely’ (Ninan, 2003).

But according to advertising executive Alyque Padamsee (2012), all this fussing over fairness is misguided. It is an honest and neutral preference, although fair faces do possess certain natural advantages:

It is hard to deny that fairness creams often get social commentators and activists all worked up. What they should do is take a deep breath and think again. Lipstick is used to make your lips redder, fairness cream is used to make you fairer – so what’s the problem? I don’t think any Youngistani today thinks the British Raj/White man is superior to us Brown folk. That’s all 1947 thinking!

The only reason I can offer for why people like fairness, is this: if you have two beautiful girls, one of them fair and the other dark, you see the fair girl’s features more clearly. This is because her complexion reflects more light. I found this amazing difference when I directed Kabir Bedi, who is very fair and had to wear dark makeup for Othello, the Black hero of the
play. I found I had to have a special spotlight following Kabir around the stage because otherwise the audience could not see his expressions.

Fairness is thus also associated with clearness, with transparency, with the ability to see one’s features. (As one *Fair & Lovely* ad puts it, the cream provides ‘more than just fairness; clear fairness’. Fairness makes emotions legible. Dark faces, by contrast, are inscrutable. Reading them requires a special spotlight. (Of course, the reason for the illegibility of Bedi’s expressions may have more than a little to do with director’s decision to have him blackfaced). Additionally, if all appearance is artifice, the reasoning goes, then trying to be fairer is no less innocent than wearing makeup or getting an expensive haircut.

An article in *Foreign Policy* praised *Fair & Lovely* for expanding consumer choice for the poor (Hammond & Prahalad, 2004, p. 32). Citing approvingly the comments of a street sweeper who said that the cream prevents the sun from taking such a harsh toll on her skin, the authors write, ‘She has a choice and feels empowered because of an affordable consumer product formulated for her needs.’ To Sam Balsara, President of the Advertising Agencies’ Association of India, it is simply a matter of meeting ‘the genuine requirements of young people’ (Ninan, 2003).

Yet, according to critics, the real question is the extent to which these ‘requirements’ are advertising-induced and the manner in which companies exploit certain anxieties and fears. As an advertising executive who refuses to work on skin-lightening products comments: ‘I’ve always maintained that advertising only reflects back to you what you actually desire, deep down. And that all research shows that. It’s a terrible thing. It’s a cynical exercise because, believe me, it only reinforces a bias which has been existing for thousands of years.’

The All India Democratic Women’s Congress came out strongly against the *Fair & Lovely* marketing campaign in 2003, describing the airhostess commercial in particular as ‘racist,’ ‘discriminatory,’ and ‘an affront to a woman’s dignity’ (BBC, 2003). India’s Information and Broadcasting Minister at the time was also critical, declaring: ‘I will not allow repellent advertisements such as this to be aired.’ As a result of public pressure, this ad and another were pulled, although Unilever continues to air advertisements with similar messages. The company maintains its commercials and products are about ‘choice and economic empowerment for women’ (Luce & Merchant, 2003). ‘*Fair & Lovely: The Power of Beauty*’ reads a recent tagline.

Mercifully, the leading skin-lightening creams appear to be safe, although the long-term effects of these products are unknown and many ingredients are not listed on packaging. What is known is that troubling levels of the cancer-causing chemical hydroquinone have been found in some illegal concoctions and bleach, steroids, and mercury have been found in other black market lighteners (Bray, 2002). Because of the high concentration of toxic compounds in some of these black market creams they have been linked with leukaemia and some liver and kidney cancers. Users have also been diagnosed with a severe skin condition called ochronosis, a kind of hyper-pigmentation that causes skin tissue to turn a blueish black shade. Reporting on an advertising campaign in Dakar for a skin-whitening cream called ‘Khess Petchin’ or ‘All White’, the BBC writes that doctors at the main dermatology hospital service in the city say they receive an average of 200 women per week in cases related to the use of skin-whitening products (Fihlani, 2012). Yet, as regards the most popular brands – which use blends of moisturizers, vitamins, sunscreen, and sometimes ‘ayurvedic’ components like saffron,
lodhra bark, and manjishtha – there is considerable doubt about whether they really work at all. As Nirmala Pandit, ‘a 26-year-old working woman’ who used the cream for eight years told *India Today*: ‘I should have turned into Snow White by now but my skin is still the same wheatish colour’ (Sinha, 2000). But according to Bollywood actor and *Fair & Handsome* spokesperson, Shah Rukh Khan, the actual color is beside the point. What matters are desires and aspirations. ‘I’m neither fair nor handsome,’ he told a reporter. ‘When your films do well, your reputation goes a long way. People start thinking you’re fair and handsome when you’re not. You sell dreams like this.’

Fairness in Khan’s rendering is fanciful. He was rudely made aware of the rift between dream and reality, however, upon his detention by Homeland Security agents at a New York airport en route to a lecture at Yale University in 2012. (He had also been held in 2009 at Newark airport shortly after *Newsweek* had named him one of the 50 most influential men in the world.) Khan surmises he was stopped because of his last name and Muslim identity. ‘Whenever I start feeling too arrogant about myself, I always make a trip to America. The immigration guys kick the star out of stardom,’ Khan remarked at the Yale lecture, which was delayed for several hours. ‘They always ask me how tall I am and I always lie and say 5 feet 10 inches. Next time I am going to get more adventurous. [If they ask me] ‘What color are you,’ I am going to say white,’ he said (BBC, 2012). Khan noted that his celebrity status meant he would eventually be cleared, but that the same could not be said of less celebrated others who somehow run afoul of the stringent border and immigration policies passed following the events of 11 September 2001. One wonders if a more consistent application of *Fair & Handsome*’s ‘double-strength American peptides’ would have saved them from racial profiling, indefinite detention, abuse, and deportation.

**Out of the light and into the dark**

In an analysis of 186 television commercials, Krishnan and Dighe (1990) found that of the 215 men that appeared in advertisements, only 10 were dark, while none of the 237 women were. Yet even within such a biased medium as television, there is anything but uncritical acceptance of the preference for fairness. The successful soap opera *Sapna Babul Ka Bidaai*, for example, which aired on Star Plus between 2007 and 2011, admirably foregrounded issues of color discrimination. The plot centers on the relationships between a father and his daughter and niece. The niece, Raghini (Parul Chauhan), joins her uncle’s household following the departure of her father for the United States. (He went in pursuit of a lucrative career and the two are never reunited; the father dies in a plane crash on his way back to India.) Raghini faces considerable prejudice and is rejected by a number of prospective bridegrooms who view her as dark and unlovable. Instead, they fancy her fair cousin. While well-intentioned, the show’s creators showed questionable judgment in casting a relatively light-skinned woman for the dark-skinned role. That is, Chauhan had to be cosmetically (and rather conspicuously) darkened – brownfaced, in other words – to accentuate the difference in the cousins’ complexions. Thus is color prejudice both contested and reaffirmed.

An episode of the popular talk show ‘We the People’ on the Indian television channel NDTV was dedicated to the question topic, ‘Are Indians Obsessed with Fairness?’ The show began with host Barkha Dutt asking, ‘Are we a country of closet racists?’ She interviews the actress Deepal Shah who says she has been (pheno)type-cast and denied certain roles because of her apparently dark complexion. Shah says she is viewed as
being ‘all about sexiness and being hot,’ and as a result has actively pursued more comely roles as a way of countering ‘the preconceived notions which have been conditioned in the society, not only in this industry but in every arena of life with regards to men and women both. What I’m trying to say is not that I want to be sweet. I am also sweet. I am also sexy; I am also sensuous. I am every character, what I want to portray.’

Dutt then turns to another guest, an unnamed ‘advertising honcho,’ and asks whether he would hire someone like Shah if the product he wanted to sell ‘was about a homely sweet girl? Or would you say, no, doesn’t fit the mold, wrong color of skin?’ His response was direct:

Advertising Honcho: Personally I would have no problem at all … But we are also ruled and governed by people that are our clients and that are agents who actually have a very strong say in the casting of what we do.

Dutt: Are you conceding her point?

AH: Of course … I’m going to be much more direct and brutal than even Deepal was. If you saw a dark and a fair girl side by side, who were equally attractive, okay. The dark girl would represent an eroticism where you would like to take her to the first hotel room that you could find. And the fair girl you would like to take home to mommy.

Dutt: This is racist and sexist … Are you being facetious?

AH: No. I’m being very serious. This is a very deep-rooted bias.

Dutt: And you factor this in while casting for your clients?

AH: No, I don’t factor it in at all. As a matter of fact, my biases are towards people who I think can deliver a performance. And that is my only criteria. And sometimes I have to fight tooth and nail for that … because they turn around and say, ‘She’s a little dark.’ I say, ‘So?’

Shah: This is what people think. If you’re dark … you’re sensuous, you’re everything but sweet.

Darkness comes to signify not only underprivilege and bad birth, but all sorts of earthy, voluptuous, and carnal things. As another guest on the show, the writer Jerry Pinto, put it, ‘There is an eroticization as Deepal pointed out. There is a fetishization of dark people as well.’ This is the mysterious appeal of darkness, its particular frisson. Its thrill is like that of defying a taboo. But, in the end, the difference is that between lust and love: it is the dark girl that you hide in a hotel and the fair girl that you ‘take home to mommy.’ The issue is hardly cosmetic, moreover, as a raft of studies has shown that what gets defined as ‘beauty’ is not just socially relevant but also economically consequential (Hamermesh, 2011). It means better pay in the same way that a firm command of English in India can be highly remunerative. And if fairness pays, it makes strategic sense to become lighter. Trying to ‘Pass’ as fair can even be interpreted as a form of unwitting resistance in which one buys into the dominant ideology and exploits the relativity of color distinctions.

And so it is that love and anxiety, fascination and insecurity, animate the aspiration for fairness. Similarly, while India’s economic reforms are applauded for opening the country more fully to the wider world, there is evidence that this kind of anxious desire to copy and rival the West is distorting the country’s development priorities. The desire is to chase the West and foreign capital and flee the India of tight regulations, inequality, and
poor infrastructure. As the state seeks to carve out post-industrial niches of white collar ‘mind work’ and aspires to some sort of superpower status, issues of poverty alleviation and broad-based growth are contemptuously ignored. Just as dark skin is portrayed in commercials as blemished and backward, these latter concerns are dismissed by elites as belonging to an older, provincial order: one of nepotism, corruption, and endless red tape. In its place emerges a ‘cosmopolitan’ agenda of liberalization, reform, transparency, and fairness.

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Notes

3. There is considerable debate about the category of Indo Aryan itself, its supposed homogeneity, and its geographical origins. It is also disputed whether early speakers of Indo-European languages were ‘indigenous’ to the subcontinent, which I cannot discuss here (compare Bryant, 2004).
6. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a1iXt1yPsK.
10. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9T9x9vVVMWw0.
12. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a1iXt1yPsK.

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