



Analysing The Politics Of Globalised Beauty - A Study Of Select Images From Media Culture

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Received 13 October, 2018; Accepted 29 October, 2018 © The author(s) 2018. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has always been considered as a double-edged sword as far as indigenous cultures are concerned. Although the process has attempted to bring the world closer, indigenous cultures had to suffer the collateral damage for the most part. While it is not possible to ignore the positive sides of globalization — especially in the areas of communication and bridging borders — many questions arise when it comes to addressing how globalization and Globalized variants of many day-to-day concepts affect lives of the marginalized in society. Coming to India, which hosts an immense variety of indigenous and complicit cultures, the term ‘globalization’ has different types of meaning for different parts of society, who belong to different socio-ethnic-economic groups as well. Therefore, introducing and imposing something like ‘globalized beauty’ has a diverse set of connotations that must be discussed in relation to the concepts of politics, power, bigotry and social hegemony. In order to achieve all those objectives, those who try to impose globalized beauty use the inevitable help of media images, well-crafted stereotypes and other ways of subtle expression. Media images play the most important role when it comes to establishing the social superiority of the so-called ideal beauty, but sustenance of political hegemony is one of the many reasons for the portrayal. There is also an underlying connection between the imposition of globalized beauty and cosmetic industry of India, much like the other under-developed nations. In India, however, such a marketing strategy becomes deeply targeted towards certain classes of the society. To keep that strategy working, marketers and manufacturers use certain Images and ‘myths’ regarding concepts of individual beauty. Imposition of globalized beauty also means that the indigenous yardsticks of beauty in different cultures are disregarded and the members of different cultures are brought to a seemingly-global society, which is, as a matter of fact, as primitive as the old days in terms of equality or distribution of rights.

The Impact of globalization on Indigenous Cultures and Yardsticks

There is no certain information that traces the accurate origin of globalization. While some find that globalization had its origin and growth in the Modern period, especially after the World Wars, there are scholars who argue that globalization had its dawn in the Age of Discovery. Despite the debate over the specificity of origins, the current meaning of globalization was acquired in 1970s, after which there was a revolutionary breakthrough of global communication, with the help of the Internet, cellular connectivity and better transportation systems. The academia, however, classifies globalization into three areas, cultural globalization being one of them. Cultural globalization, in fact, refers to the transmission of ideas, meanings and values in such a way that social relations are intensified and extended. Although the concept of globalization expects all the cultures to be treated equally, there are some cultures in dominating position. In an ideal world, all the indigenous cultures will be accepted and treated equally by globalization but that still stays a dream. Currently, however, many of such cultures are being suppressed when a Globalized version of values are being brought to the dominant position. Globalized beauty, a recently-added term to the Academia, is one of such concepts that has different political, economic and social connotations. In a way, the proliferation of globalization can destroy certain indigenous cultures by trying to blend them with a larger, world-centred and standardized norms, values and perspectives. More importantly, such a proliferation disregards even the basic yardsticks of indigenous societies, especially when it comes to concepts like Beauty.

The term ‘globalized beauty’ was introduced to denote the globally-accepted definition of beauty, which prioritized fairness and white colour over everything else. This concept of ‘ideal’ and ‘accepted’ beauty was thrust upon the various indigenous cultures and sub-cultures that were made to be suppressed by the thrive

of globalization. This oppression has affected the ways common people see and judge the concept of being beautiful as well. More importantly, by destroying most of the indigenous yardsticks and imposing something 'ideal' and 'globally-accepted', upper classes of the society aim to restrict people of certain caste communities under the label of raw, indecent, unacceptable and different from what is considered normal. The same people were accepted in the indigenous cultures of theirs, but the story changes in the globalized world, where everything is supposed to be seen and judged with a single perspective. The trend, in fact, is affecting the total diversity of society, especially in India, where the class divisions and caste-based divisions happen to be really evident and have impact on regular lives. This standardization of yardsticks has also affected how the world considers indigenous knowledge. While it is true that people from many societies have been provided with opportunities of employment and education, the statistics for the loss of indigenous knowledge is still inaccurate. Those who argue for globalization have also created a stereotype that indigenous knowledge, which cannot be evaluated through the Western viewpoint, is of no scientific acceptability and that the loss of such knowledge is something to be ignored.

Another area where the standardization procedure of globalization has affected is how certain types of jobs and employment methods are evaluated and considered in a society. There was a time farmers and industrial employees, however underpaid they were, had a respected position in the society, among indigenous cultures. These jobs were considered something central to the social pillars and there wasn't a hesitance towards becoming a farmer or taking up a non-white-collar job. Following the trend-setting by globalization, however, farmers and industrial workers have been pushed down to the basic strata of the society, thus denying social recognition and even social acceptability. It is undoubtedly a noticeable method how certain employment opportunities have been demolished by creating a pseudo-sense about them. On the other hand, white-collar jobs, as they are called, have been made to top the list of socially-relevant and power-controlling positions. As a result of such a reversal of situation, many indigenous cultures that relied on agriculture and industrial jobs have been brought down to the ignorable part of the society.

In short, despite its impact in bringing the world closer through advancements in the types of communication and technology, several cultures and their internal yardsticks have been ignored, stereotyped and destroyed in the course of time. Indigenous yardsticks of beauty are one of those most important values that got degraded by the proliferation of globalization — and when it put forward the concept of Ideal Beauty, which evidently promoted the concepts of fairness and white complexion, as the yardsticks advise in the Western world. This concept of globalized beauty has certain political connotations, especially considering how it is established and imposed in nations like India, which still suffers from the post-colonial impacts.

The Concept of Globalized Beauty

The concept of globalized beauty tries to set a global standard for what is considered quite beautiful and who are considered non-beautiful — or, to the extent of the so-called 'ugliness'. As it happens, the crux of globalized beauty lies in fairness and being white, and the fairer one person gets, the better they are accepted in the social hierarchy of systems. Of course, this concept wasn't established in a small period of time. From the first wave of globalization that happened in the 19th century, several manufacturers started promoting products that focused on being fair and creating a beauty standard that was based on being more 'White'. In the course of time, these manufacturers started exporting their products to countries, especially into post-colonized ones like India. So, till the flourishing of cosmetic industry, non-Western countries had their own yardsticks for beauty; in fact, the indigenous societies and cultures did not care about what the West thought about them or how their concepts of beauty were perceived by the colonizers. As a result of campaigns done by cosmetic firms like Dove, beauty ended up having an accepted meaning of "being white".

The role of beauty industry cannot be ignored in the years-long process of defining what is now called the Globalized beauty or ideal beauty. Several advertisement campaigns were launched throughout the world market, comparing this ideal beauty to individual confidence, success rates and individual self-esteem. In doing so, the campaigners also made sure that the colour supremacy is subtly presented through each of the frames. An example that can be taken are the advertisement campaigns for hair shampoos that were aired in Latin America. Advertisements featured models who had fair skin and blonde hair. The idea was to create the concept of ideal beauty that focused on fairness and blonde hair so that Latin American women, most of who have black hair and black skin colour, will be imposed to adhere to the new standard and also to use products that were being promoted. Similarly, several false and unrealistic ideals were introduced to target each market that were being targeted. For instance, the advertisements used in African countries had emphasized a slim body and extreme fairness. Despite those efforts, African countries are the ones to retain at least some of the indigenous concepts of ideal beauty. In countries like India, on the other hand, the campaigns have not only affected the masses but also impacted their psyche in a deeper level. After decades of stereotyping and repetition, the Indian society has grown accustomed to the ideal beauty concepts that emphasize fairness over everything else.

However unrealistic and impractical the portrayals were, the efforts to establish the concept of Globalized beauty was undoubtedly successful, not only on the surface level but also in a deeper sense. Most campaigns also tried to create modern myths, which forced the masses to purchase and use the products in question. Nevertheless, apart from the commercial aspects of ideal beauty, it is easy to observe an essential connection between political hegemony, class, caste and racism when it comes to the Indian market. In other words, Globalizing Beauty in Indian subcontinent had an immensely deeper politics than persuasion, market figures and better sales.

Sustaining Globalized Beauty in India — the Political Aspects

Indian society is not the only one that upholds the concepts of Global beauty, thus adhering to the social binary of fairness being acceptable and non-fairness being something to be ignored and looked down upon. Despite that, in India, such a binary is used by the so-called upper class of society to sustain the social hierarchy and inferential racism that has been in effect for centuries. In a democratic system, however, use of media to create race-based stereotypes and propagate them can be considered as a threat to the secular nature of society and how well equality is served. The classifications based on colour is not a new thing for Indian society.

From the ancient times itself, there has been a clear classification based on ethnicity and race. While Brahmins were on the top position of the social hierarchy, there were many communities that didn't find even find a place within the spectrum. They were essentially thrown out of the social system and were being treated as the group that was supposed to be looked down upon. Even during the time of British rule and colonization, people who belonged to the so-called upper caste had to suffer less than the people in lower strata in the society. Of course, India's independence and dawn as a republic had a huge impact on this system, and the marvellously-crafted Indian constitution offered equality for every Indian citizen, regardless of colour, race, caste and religion. In theory, India became a nation that treated all of its citizen equally and several interventions including caste-based reservation were introduced by Indian constitution to ensure equal social representation. Despite all such effort and revolutionary steps, there still exists an ongoing racist, communal and caste-based notions that make the Indian system unequal, communally-driven and rich with bigotry, and the such a system needs to continue for the so-called upper class to ensure its monopoly in the society.

In short, the Indian concept of ideal beauty rests upon the concept of fairness. Anything fair is considered socially-acceptable and beautiful while darkness is often symbolized with being barbaric, indecent and raw. The impact of colonization is clear in establishing and re-rooting such a concept of social binary, but the colonizers did not take the concept home with them. Therefore, even after decades of independence from the British, the Indian society is quite primitive when it comes to judging people based on colour and caste they belong to. The concept of a typical Aryan body is considered the globally-accepted yardstick in India, which is quite similar to the figures that were proposed by beauty industry during the early waves of globalization. It will not be wrong to say that the connection between the global ideal beauty and Indian ideal beauty are different. It must be noted that both try to propagate the binary idea of fairness and darkness. Even the beauty industry needs to maintain this racial order so that the products will be consumed in the Indian market.

As it turns out, imposition of globalized beauty in India have two major objectives — one is to keep the beauty industry moving on while the other one is to sustain the social set-up that normalizes the view that having a coloured skin is barbaric and non-acceptable while a fair skin is the epitome of honesty and social relevance. Indian media world, especially advertisements, have been keen in presenting these ideas in a subtle yet persuasive manner that the social psyche is being affected and conditioned to believe in the binary. Understanding those stereotyping techniques, subtle ways of persuasion and the political stance that advertisements take is essential for getting a clear idea about how ethical the implementation of globalized beauty in India can be. This does not mean that the entire media culture is supporting the colour supremacy. At the same time, the mass media like films and advertisements have a huge role in conditioning.

Analysing Media Images from Films and Advertisements

Fairness is not the only thing that the Indian media has been stereotyping for the past decades. As Raymond Williams once said, Advertisement is a magic system by which colonizers use for exploiting the already colonized people of the world. In the current scenario, however, it is not just the colonizers but also the so-called upper-caste society that exploits the magic system to create a social binary that is based on racist thoughts. In the Western world, cosmetic industry ads have become very subtle, mostly because direct racism is controversial and could affect the reputation of the brand. In the recent news, Dove — a most popular cosmetic manufacturer, who also started propagating the ideal global beauty that is based on fairness — was criticized for the direct racism in its advertisement, which showed a coloured woman using Dove and becoming a White woman. The controversy lead to the point where Dove had to apologise and take down the advertisement posted in one of its social media handles. Amidst all these, Indian ads keep showing both direct and inferential racism, in an attempt to give a cultural value to the products that can enhance beauty.

There are a few techniques used by Indian advertisement campaigns that promote the idea that fair is better. Such campaigns have become so common that a person expects those elements of racism to be present in everyday advertisements they see. One of such techniques is creating a connection between fairness and virtues like confidence and social acceptance. Almost every ad of beauty products shows a person becoming more confident after using a particular beauty product, which offers better skin-tone. Those who consume certain products and become fairer are also shown to have better acceptability in society. In one of its advertisements, Patanjali Face Wash even went to the extent of bringing the concept of 'glory' and 'luck' into the use of the product. It was shown that the person who used the product in question received better social acceptance when compared to the person who did not. Another example has to do with a company that made Beauty Soaps named 'Indulekha'. In that particular advertisement, a girl was shown getting rejected by the interview board because she had a dark skin-tone. The same girl happens to get the job as she uses the particular soap and gets a fairer skin-tone. All these advertisements have influenced the way the common man considers what is beautiful. The connection between fairness and values like confidence are some of the many methods used by advertisers to impose the global idea of beauty and thus to maintain the binary.

While discussing the cultural form of advertising system, Raymond Williams talked about how the actual product is compared to what the person becomes after purchasing the product. For instance, in the advertisements of Coco-Cola drinks, there is a subtle saying that anyone who does consume the drink will become happier. The same concept is used by Indian media culture when they have to fulfil the political function of racism and the imposition of global beauty in ads. Most of the fairness products are considered as a gateway to social acceptance. To do so, advertisements first create a feeling that being fair is better and that one's social acceptance is entirely dependent on skin-colour. After that, certain products are introduced as the only solution for getting purified and thus having better acceptance in social set-ups. There are even explicit statements that prove this connection between the use of certain products and the so-called purification. It basically puts the common man into the dilemma of bracing one's identity and becoming a part of standardized beauty.

Conclusively, imposition of global ideal beauty is not just an economic activity in India. It, on the other hand, aims to sustain a society that believes in a racist social binary of fairness and being dark. In fact, the sustenance of cosmetic product market is one of the other major objectives of this political process, by which the already marginalized parts of the society is restricted to the 'raw' and 'indecent' tags.

CONCLUSION

Establishment and imposition of a global ideal beauty in a country that hosts different cultures and ethnic groups is never simply an economic process to increase sales. It has various political and social connotations that show how the so-called equal society of India tries to compartmentalize certain social groups under the 'unacceptable' tag, by introducing and reassuring the white-is-better concept through advertisements and films. In a world that seeks ultimate equality and freedom for everyone, regardless the caste, creed, ethnicity and position in power structure, this is indeed one of the negative aspects how globalization and beauty affect the common lives.

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Abhijith "Analysing The Politics Of Globalised Beauty - A Study Of Select Images From Media Culture " (Quest Journals) *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 6.10 (2018): 19-22