

Chapter Four

Women and National Identities:

Multiculturalism and Ethnicity in Bangladeshi and Australian Advertisements

In a project on race, the American Anthropological Association shows that race is a recent human invention; history and science played a role in shaping the idea and this idea is embedded in our institutions and everyday lives (AAA 2006, p. 1). In the quest to understand narratives of race and racism in Australian and Bangladeshi commercials, this chapter will interrogate how 'race' and 'ethnicity' are made visible in advertising representations as a historical and everyday life event; the signs used to signify ethnic 'difference' and how those differences are put to use in commercials; the ratio of indigenous and ethnic women's presence in commercials; and how whiteness comes to be closely associated with concepts of beauty. The chapter will determine how far commercials reproduce the dominant culture and construct racism by ignoring indigenous women and women from ethnic minorities in these two countries. These issues are important and raise the question of the visibility of identity, nationality, and multiculturalism. This chapter articulates the constructions of race and the nature of racism in Australian and Bangladeshi commercials, and the need for the presence of ethnic women in commercials.

Representing ‘Race’ and Racism

To foreground any theory of the representation of race and ethnicity in commercials, we need first to define what these concepts are. In America, “the superiority of White European settlers over the continent’s indigenous people, African slaves and Asian immigrant workers, was equal to the ideologies of manifest destiny and free enterprise in their impact on the developing nation” (Rhodes 1995, p. 34). ‘Race’ and its heavily influential effects are predicated on notions of superiority and inferiority. In contrast, ethnicity can be defined as “an affiliation of people who share similar cultural characteristics. Members of ethnic groups share common languages, religious beliefs, cultural traditions and customs, value systems, and normative orientations” (Aguirre and Baker, p .24). Ethnic and racialised groups are considered different from the dominant group. Concepts of “difference” operate by positioning groups within binary constructions of White/Black, or majority/minority as the signifier of this difference: for example, Indigenous Australian women and ethnic or minority Bangladeshi women are positioned as inferior to women of the dominant groups. The chapter will discuss how the presence of white and majority groups is made visible against absence of ‘other’ groups.

Derrida writes that there is a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition in which one pole is usually dominant (Derrida 1974 in Hall 1997, p. 235). Following Saussure, it can be said that we need ‘difference’ because without the logic of the ‘dialogue’ which distinguishes one from the other, meaning can not be constructed. To understand racialisation, then, both sides have to be deconstructed and reconstructed to get a more complete picture.

Case Studies of Multicultural presence in Australian Commercials

Indigenous women occasionally appear in Australian commercials in the company of a 'white-subject'. Indigenous women, however, are never subjects

Figure 32: David Jones (Aus).



Figure 33: Lux (Aus).



In one advertisement for David Jones (Figure 32), women from different cultures (but not Australian Indigenous women) who appear with the white models are not dressed in fashionable clothes. Rather, they appear in 'traditional' dress. This suggests that other cultures are static, frozen, or at best, exoticised. In the advertisement for Lux, a black woman is present, but she is not the star. She is a receptionist for the white star, Jennifer Hawkins (Figure 33).

Afro-American Representation in Australian Advertisements

Revlon Colour Stay make up, Proactive and Maybelline New York (Figures 34 and 35) use Afro-American women's faces. As corporate groups, their products are advertised in Australia. Multinational companies initiate to make an environment of multinationalism in television advertisement. These girls act as companions of the white girls. And none of them is Australian Indigenous woman.

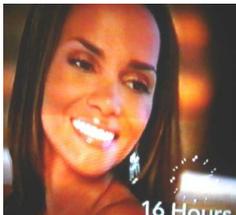
Figure 34: Maybelline New York lipstick (Aus)



Figure 35: Proactive (Aus)



Figure 36: Revlon (Aus)



In an Australian advertisement for Mazda (Figure 37), we see some Asian faces. Mazda markets its car to ‘women who understand the language of style’.

Figure 37: Mazda (Aus)



The car is driven by gorgeous Japanese women in Japan, and gorgeous white women in other countries. So the ‘cosmopolitan’ young Australian woman, the young Australian woman who has (or wants to) ‘see the world’ is invited to identify with this car. The Japanese face is contained by Japanese national boundaries: the Japanese woman is not represented as driving through the streets of Sydney or Renmark, but remains in (‘exotic’, ‘fashionable’, *Other*) Japan. In this way, the ‘typical’ female car-buyer being addressed by the advertisers is in fact white, even as she is invited to identify as a cosmopolitan citizen.

In an advertisement for Mixt juice (Figure 38), we see black women as ‘native’ labourers who carry baskets of pineapples, while black men are the consumers who drink the product.

Figure 38: Mixt Juice (Australia)



The men are sitting on the street idly while the street barbers shave other men nearby. This stereotypical representation in advertising demonstrates how racism is embedded in Australian advertising. Here, both genders are conceptualised as less developed and as representative of poor labour class people (which can be understood seeing colourful but unfashionable dresses) and as well as childish. Childish because, when a man cuts the pineapple that has fallen from the woman's basket, the juice of the pineapple fizzes up and drenches his face. He is surprised. The other man laughs at his stupidity. Stuart Hall shows that in the media black people are represented as primitive (culture), lazy, childish (Hall 1997, p. 245). This advertisement stands in contrast to the representation of white Australian women as exotically fashionable and urbane.

In Australia, racialisation is incorporated in the invisibility of whiteness and the otherness of indigenous identity and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a system which "affirms the worth of different types of culture and cultural groups claiming, for instance, that Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay and lesbian and other oppressed and marginal voices have their own validity and importance" (Kellner 1995, p. 8). However, one of the basic problems of multiculturalism is the notion that all members of a specific cultural collectivity are equally loyal to that majority culture—in this case, white Australian culture. Sahgal and Yuval-Davis explain that multiculturalism tends to construct the members of minority collectivities as homogenous so that minority groups speak with a 'unified cultural voice'. If the minority wants to be seen differently their voice must be distinguished from the dominant voice (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992 in Miller and Wilford 1998, p. 29). In

Australia, minorities and indigenous communities speak through a White Australian voice—and to white Australian ears.

Whiteness is important to the Australian multicultural system. In their research, Schech and Haggis show that an agenda on multiculturalism in 1989 “affirmed that multiculturalism did not ‘mean that Australia should dismantle or repudiate our institutions in order to start afresh. Our British heritage is extremely important to us.’ It helps us define an Australian” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet/ OMA 1989:50:51, cited in Davidson 1997b in Schech and Haggis 2001, p. 151). However, Ien Ang shows that “Australian society is moving increasingly towards a positive acceptance of cultural difference—a clear mainstreaming of multiculturalism” (Ang 2002, p. 17). This study sees the absence of Indigenous women in advertisements as a practice of the power of white Australia within this ‘unity-in-diversity’ (Ang 1996, p.36). The binary of existence/non-existence established the notion that the non-existence of Indigenous women sets up the existence of white women in advertising.

The location of ‘Aboriginal’/ethnic peoples is outside the nation, situated as objects rather than subjects. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (1999-29) argues, referring to everyday media representations, Aboriginal people remain positioned as “abnormal’ alongside the “normal’ representations of white people. Across the nation, it is white Anglo-Australians and (all) migrants alike who are the beneficiaries of colonial history, ‘sharing the situation of living on someone else’s land’ (Curthoys 2000, p. 32; Schech and Haggis 2001, pp.151-152).

Stuart Hall writes that the media is not only a powerful source of ideas but also the place where these ideas of racism are articulated, transformed and elaborated (Hall 1995, p. 20). In Australia, racism is embedded in advertisements. These can be read as racist in the sense that they exclude Indigenous people and other communities, reflecting the ethnocentrism of Australian life. Various scholarly writings reveal that Indigenous women are doubly jeopardised by “sexism” and “racism”. Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes that skin colour is one of the socially constructed markers of “race” and that the term “white” constructs its opposite - ‘Black Aboriginal woman’ (Moreton-Robinson 2000, p. xvi). A "myth of beauty" circulates around Eurocentric ideas and features, such as light-coloured skin, narrow noses and thin lips, which is perpetuated in Australian as much as (or perhaps even more than) in American advertising (Mayo and et.el 2005, p. 1).

Of the advertisements viewed for this thesis, it is observed that only 5.6% of Australian advertisements had a multicultural content, but *no* Australian Indigenous women were represented. The absence of Indigenous women in commercials is both a historical product and a product of the practice of everyday life. Frankenberg’s notion of the relationship between whiteness and race is that “Whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination” (Frankenberg 1993, p.6).

Bangladeshi Commercials

In Asia, “whiteness” is historically associated with the upper class and the lighter skinned Aryans (invaders), in contrast to the people of the dark skinned Dravidians (indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent). It is closely associated with colonial attitudes. One commonly held belief is that a lighter complexion is associated with wealth and higher education levels because those from lower social classes, labourers and farmers, are more exposed to the sun. Another theory is that lighter-skinned conquerors, the Moguls from Central Asia and the colonizers from Europe, were lighter skinned and they reset the standard for attractiveness (Fuller 2006, p.1).

In the tropical country of Bangladesh, the skin of the women is almost black, but in the advertisements I observed for this research project (a total of 280 advertisements) 100 percent of the Bengali women who appeared were ‘white’. This is undoubtedly the result of applying white make-up over their darker skin. This illusionary white skin reflects the desirability for young men of having a partner who is “white” – a virtual absurdity in the context of Bangladesh. Advertisements for various whitening creams such as Fair and Lovely fairness cream and Elite *bron* (pimple) pearl cream, prove both the themes that advertisements prompt an expectation that ‘whiteness is desirable’ and it (whiteness) is an existing demand of the society. The process is not then one-sided. The media produce and reproduce fictions and narratives of the desirability of ‘having’ whiteness. Women learn that by using whitening creams they can become fair and white. This kind of racial thinking is promoted by these advertisements.

Recently, in the academic sphere in Bangladesh, there has been a debate regarding commercials for Fair and Lovely Fairness cream. The protest began in India. The Indian Parliament (Loksova) banned an advertisement for Fair and Lovely cream due to strident protests by a women's organization, the All India Democratic Women's Association. The advertisement is known as "the air hostess ad" and shows a young, dark-skinned girl's father lamenting that he has no son to provide for him. The girl blames herself for having dark skin as this 'prevents' her having a good job or getting married. The girl then uses the cream, becomes fairer, and gets a better-paid job as an air hostess — which makes her father happy (BBC News 2003, p.1). This advertisement was also broadcast in Bangladesh.

Figure 39: 'Fair and Lovely' whitening cream (BD)



Another advertisement for 'Fair and Lovely' shows a girl dreaming of becoming a cricket commentator. One of her family members (another girl, possibly her sister) understands that she needs fair skin to be a cricket commentator. Her sister then replaces her fake microphone with a tube of Fair and Lovely cream. Then she is seen commentating at a cricket ground, where the camera focuses on her as an object of the gaze. It is implicit then from the advertisement that dark women are ugly and unsuccessful, both in their personal and professional lives. Fair is beautiful which ensures love, upper class husbands and good jobs.

Targeting woman from the poorer classes, Unilever offers this whitening cream for only two cents (US). White skin is said by some to be an ancient Indian obsession (Thekaekara 2006, p.8). Ms. Brinda Karat, general secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association, told BBC World Service's *Everywoman* program: "It's a highly racist campaign." Furthermore, she said, "Of course, there is a cultural base in India for this kind of market. [Fair and Lovely are] taking advantage of that and exploiting that very backward understanding," (BBC News 2003, p. 1). However, it is not only an ancient Indian obsession, but also an attitude of colonial attachment.

In this way, throughout Africa and in a number of majority world (sometimes called 'third world') countries, black women are using skin whitening cream to be 'white'. Many countries banned these skin-bleaching products because they cause health problems. Kenya's Bureau of Standards and Uganda in 2001 stopped the sale of skin-whitening products that contained harmful chemicals such as Hydroquinine, mercury and corticosteroids. Physicians warn that these toxic chemicals are harmful. Hydroquinine destroys cells that produce melanin, and without melanin the risk of skin cancer rises. Exposure to mercury can lead to severe nerve damage as well as kidney failure. Moreover, Hydroquinine has caused leukaemia in mice and other animals and The European Union banned it from cosmetics sales in 2001 although, it is still used in creams in the developing world (Fuller 2006, p.1). However, multinational companies continue to capitalize by selling these products in Africa and in other majority world countries (Browne 2004, p. 1).

In Bangladesh, being white is a symbol of upper class status suggesting a strong colonial and mental attachment. This can create tension and humiliation for women who do not have fair skin (like the girls in the Fair and Lovely commercials). However, not all white women in Bangladesh get the same priority on television. Ethnic minority women like Garo and Marma have a yellow complexion (SDNP 2004, p.1), (as ‘whiteness’—encompassing (but always disavowing) olive, beige, tan, pink, yellow, and grey skin. however, they do not get priority on television.) This can be read as a matter of domination. The ethnic homogeneity of Bengali people is larger (97.7%) than other language and cultural groups. The ethnic linguistic groups are a very small part (.9%) of the total population. This creates a gulf of difference between these two groups in the economic, political and cultural sectors. All this is demonstrated by the political conflict between the ethnic groups of CHT and majority Bengali people since its independence (Peiris 2004, pp. 1-74).

Whitening vs Bronzing

A reverse tension can be discussed here as the desire for bronzed skin is rehearsed in Australian advertising.

Figure 40: Dove summer glow lotion (Aus)





It is ironic to juxtapose tanning and whitening products. White Australian women want beautiful bronzed skin (Dove summer glow- Australia). On the other hand, Bangladeshi women want whitening creams for their skin. This suggests that women, both in the East and in the West, are not satisfied and *cannot* be satisfied in their skin. The interventions of advertisements and society remind them that the skin that they are born with is not right. Kilbourne writes of the woman consumer: “She is made to feel dissatisfied with and ashamed of herself” (Kilbourne 1995, p.122). Multinational companies promote this thinking. Thekaekara writes that ‘While they [L’Oreal and Garnier] strive to bronze white women in London, Rome, Paris, in India they promise to lighten you up with chemicals” (Thekaekara 2006, p.8).

The presence of various ethnic women and indigenous women in advertisements in the present study is negligible. Of a total of 780 advertisements, the presence of Australian Indigenous and Bangladeshi ethnic women was zero. The study reads the politics behind racial representation from three points of view. First of all, the erasure of non-white women is a product of colonial history and racial discrimination is a product of history. Indigenous women are the product of this history separated from women of the majority culture. Secondly, symbolizing ‘beauty’ as ‘white’ separates women of colour from white women, entrenching the social privileges of whiteness as corporeal, or ‘natural’. Thirdly, the irony

of promoting 'tanning/bronzing' products (for white women) and 'whitening' products (for black women) creates tension for all kinds of women. Advertisers target all women to think twice about their skin. So women are consumed by advertisers' racialised constructions, which create division among women. Consequently, these divisions create barriers for women unity against gender discrimination.

Having identified gender and racial discrimination, the next chapter will summarize the major findings of the present study and suggests areas for future study.